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Mitja Žagar

Legitimate Multilevel Crisis Management from the Perspective of Human Rights, Minorities, and Non-Discrimination

The COVID-19 pandemic has dominated media and scholarly literature since 2020. The impact(s) of crisis management on democracy, legitimacy, human rights, minorities, marginalized groups, and persons belonging to them are mentioned but seldom the main focus. From the perspective of human rights, protection of minorities, and the principle of non-discrimination in multilevel systems in Europe, the paper discusses certain conceptual, terminological, and methodological problems in studying such complex dynamic phenomena and argues that qualitative approaches might be the most suitable for studying the perceptions of persons belonging to diverse minorities on democracy and the legitimacy of crisis management and governance.

Keywords: crisis management, inclusion, multilevel governance, social minorities and persons belonging to them, human and minority rights, non-discrimination, LEGITIMULT project.

Legitimnost večnivojskega kriznega upravljanja z vidika človekovih pravic, manjšin in nediskriminacije

Mediji in znanstvena literatura od leta 2020 omenjajo vplive kriznega upravljanja med pandemijo covid-19 na demokracijo, legitimnost, človekove pravice, manjšine in marginalizirane skupine ter njihove pripadnike, a jih redko podrobneje obravnavajo. Članek obravnava nekatera konceptualna, terminološka in metodološka vprašanja proučevanja teh kompleksnih dinamičnih pojavov z vidika človekovih pravic, varstva manjšin in nediskriminacije v evropskih večnivojskih sistemih. Ugotavlja, da so kvalitativni pristopi najprimernejši za proučevanje percepcij pripadnikov manjšin glede demokratičnosti in legitimnosti kriznega upravljanja.

Ključne besede: krizno upravljanje, vključevanje, večnivojsko upravljanje, družbene manjšine in njihovi pripadniki, človekove pravice in pravice manjšin, nediskriminacija, projekt LEGITIMULT.

Correspondence address: Mitja Žagar, Inštitut za narodnostna vprašanja, Erjavčeva 26, SI-1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia, e-mail: mitja.zagar@inv.si.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the SARS-CoV-2 virus, the COVID-19 pandemic, and pandemic related crisis management have been omnipresent topics in media and public discourse. They also dominate scholarly literature and publications in almost all disciplines and fields, including the social sciences and humanities (e.g., Žagar 2020; 2023). This paper discusses specific issues, concepts, dimensions, and contexts that are often overlooked.

When observed from the perspective of multilevel governance (MLG) and considering the very nature and complexity of the process(es), crisis management is a complex multilevel process that requires cooperation and coordination in various levels of government and authorities effected by and involved in it. In global crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic that shook the very foundations of contemporary societies and our traditional way(s) of life, crisis management processes resulted in specific crisis strategies, policies, decisions and measures, as well as in their implementation that impacted populations, individuals, distinct groups, and (particularly minority and border) communities in various societies and environments. Restrictive and/or repressive crisis policies and measures and their implementation impacted them profoundly. Considering the responsibilities, competences, tasks, relations, and cooperation of governments and authorities at all levels, the LEGITIMULT project on the legitimacy of COVID-19 related crisis management and measures in diverse environments¹ studies and compares COVID-19 crisis management process(es), decision making and measures, and their effects and consequences in European countries, more precisely in 31 European democracies (EU-27, plus Switzerland, Norway, Iceland, and the UK) from the perspective of various actors, democracy, and the legitimacy of crisis management and governance.

In this context, the LEGITIMULT project² examines various impacts and consequences of COVID-19 related crisis management in diverse environments on the human rights, status, situation, rights, and protection of minorities, and the principle of non-discrimination. Based on the review of literature studying the impact of COVID-19 measures on different societal groups and the effects of those measures, multilevel governance institutions and their intergovernmental relations (MLG IGR) concerning human and minority rights, the project and paper address two research questions: Which conditions, circumstances, policies, measures, and actions can contribute to more democratic and legitimate crisis management and governance? How can the inclusion and participation of diverse social actors, including (social) minorities,³ in crisis management processes and decision-making be improved, thereby contributing to their legitimacy?

Taking these questions into account, this paper and the Work Package (WP4) on legitimate crisis governance in the context of human rights, minority rights, and the principle of non-discrimination test four (working) hypotheses.

Two general hypotheses are: (H1) In different ways, crisis management processes related to the COVID-19 pandemic, adopted and executed strategies, policies, and measures, particularly restrictive and/or repressive ones that limited and/or suspended certain human rights, impact all individuals, communities, groups, associations, organisations, and institutions in a respective environment. (H2) The inclusion and participation of relevant and interested actors (individuals and diverse forms of their association and organisation), including diverse social minorities, in the formulation and adoption, as well as in the implementation of (crisis) processes, policies, and measures improve their legitimacy.

Two specific hypotheses are: (H3) Crisis management processes, policies, and measures in diverse environments impact and hurt minorities more than the rest of the population. (H4) Formal and informal inclusion and participation of diverse minorities, persons belonging to them, and particularly their representatives in the formulation, adoption, and implementation of crisis management processes, strategies, policies, and measures can improve their legitimacy, acceptance, and effectivity within those communities and respective societies.

The following section briefly presents the literature review as the basis and framework for the section on conceptual and methodological discussion as well as for the conclusion. Through presenting some preliminary results of the LEGITIMULT project, the results of other projects, and the research programme of the Institute for Ethnic Studies (IES), these sections address some key concepts, as well as terminological, conceptual, and methodological questions relevant to the study of the legitimacy of crisis management processes, strategies, policies and measures in general, and particularly from the perspective of diverse minorities, as well as (the implementation of) the principle of non-discrimination.

2. Literature Review⁴

As mentioned, SARS-CoV-2 virus and COVID-19 pandemic related content has dominated local, national, and global media, as well as the academic press over the past few years, more precisely since the end of 2019. The volume of broadcasted radio and TV programs, published news, commentaries and reports (see, e.g., 24ur.com, BBC, CNBC, DW, MMC), popular and scholarly articles, papers and studies published in scientific journals (e.g., *Nature* with more than 18 thousand search results, *Science* with more than 650 search results, *The Lancet* with more than 9,690 search results by March 2023, etc.), and scholarly books in all sciences and almost all fields is enormous. It is almost impossible to imagine the number and volume of real and fake, individual and collective, relevant and irrelevant contributions, news, blogs, shared contents, b/vlogs, and comments on the web.⁵

Consequently, working on a comprehensive literature review of SARS-CoV-2 virus, pandemic and COVID-19 crisis management-related content is a

complex task, even when focused on specific topics and contexts. Searching in general search engines (e.g., Google, Yahoo), selected national and international media databases, and various digital databases⁶ for the relevant literature and sources published between the end of 2019 and February 2023 (in addition to those in English, also those in Croatian, German, Italian and Slovene), we used search terms related to human and minority rights, the protection of minorities, minority and border communities, and the principle of non-discrimination. While studying the legitimacy of COVID-19 pandemic related crisis management in diverse environments and at various levels of government in European countries, the LEGITIMULT project's literature review focuses on:

- legitimacy (e.g., Beetham 2012; Buchanan 2002; Caby & Frehen 2021; De Fine Licht et al. 2014; Esaiasson et al. 2012; Jackson et al. 2012),
- the approaches to and concepts, strategies, policies, and measures of crisis management in general and specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Ansel et al. 2010; Christensen et al. 2016; Christensen & Ma 2021; Rodríguez et al. 2018),
- the roles of all branches of government, and particularly of legislation in crisis management processes (e.g., Bolleyer & Salát 2021; Chaplin 2020; Petrov 2020),
- democracy, the inclusion, integration and participation of citizens, citizens' perspectives on pandemic-related crisis management, and particularly on crisis management policies, measures, and their impacts and consequences (e.g., Alsan et al. 2020/2023, Bohle et al. 2022; Cronert 2022; Edgell et al. 2021; Engler et al. 2021; Gidengil et al. 2022; Guasti & Bustikova 2022; Heinzl & Liese 2021; Lowande & Rogowski 2021; Lozano et al. 2021; Maerz et al. 2020; Mouter et al. 2021; Rump & Zwiener-Collins 2021; Stasavage 2020).

Considering their social relevance, logically, the issues of legitimacy, human rights, equality and minorities appeared in media reports and content rather early in the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in the context of the introduction of limitations, lockdowns and various restrictive measures, but also regarding access to adequate health and other public services for people in different environments (e.g., BBC, DW). More precisely, the following issues were addressed: the interference with human rights, constrains, restriction(s), limitation(s) and temporary suspension/derogation of human rights, the extent and reciprocity of introduced measures, as well as the fact that diverse, particularly marginalized groups and minorities, but also border communities, were over-proportionally affected by COVID-19 crisis policies, measures and restrictions. However, in most cases, media reports, discussions, concerns, and warnings, as well as various expressions of public concern and dissatisfaction did not seem to significantly influence the crisis management processes or the authorities, particularly the

executive in formulating, adopting, and executing their strategies, policies and measures in the respective environments. Explaining and justifying their position and actions, the authorities claimed that the crisis demanded urgent and immediate decisions and actions, including radical ones, such as lockdowns and other restrictive and repressive measures. They concluded that, consequently, there was no time for time-consuming, uncertain, and possibly ineffective (extensive) public consultations, inclusive democratic processes and decision making. When faced with a life or death situation, in their view, sacrificing some human rights and democracy by neglecting and limiting democratic inclusion and participation in decision-making was necessary and the price worth paying. After all, the experiences of “the war on terror(ism)” showed that people can accept certain limitations to human rights and might be willing to trade some rights for the promise, even a false one, of safety and security (Žagar 2020; 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic and related crises immediately attracted the attention of researchers in social sciences and humanities. The first studies, research reports, and scholarly publications appeared in 2020. Their number and volume increased substantially in subsequent years. Among the LEGITIMULT partners, for example, the Institute for Ethnic Studies immediately began to study the impact and consequences of COVID-19 related crisis management strategies on ethnic minorities, particularly in Slovenia and neighbouring countries. The first results (11 scholarly papers based upon various research approaches and methods) were published in the thematic issue (No. 85) of the *Treatises and Documents, Journal of Ethnic Studies* in December 2020, and an extensive scholarly monograph in Slovene followed in 2021 (Munda Hirnök & Novak Lukanović 2021). Research at Eurac Research contributed to the edited volume on comparative federalism and COVID-19 (Steytler 2021)⁷ and the study on the impact and consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on linguistic minorities and border communities in the South Tyrolean Political Science Association (Pallaver et al. 2021).

Our review of scholarly publications and literature (in social sciences and humanities, but also in other sciences and fields) in the beginning of 2023 shows that these frequently mention issues relevant to our topic. Among these, we could list human rights, their limitation, suspension and/or derogation, cases of possible discrimination, and the inclusion and participation of citizens (and the population in general) in decision making or – more precisely – the lack thereof (resulting in exclusion) that leads to the strengthening of the executive and could result in a democratic deficit and in the rise of illiberal policies. However, only a small share of publications and literature focus on these issues and address them in-depth or holistically. Focusing on human rights, cases of direct and indirect discrimination, border communities, the rights, position and protection of diverse minorities, their inclusion, integration, and participation in crisis management process, the impact(s) and consequences of (particularly restric-

tive and/or repressive) crisis management measures on those communities, as well as on their perceptions regarding those issues, the number of the relevant titles is smaller but still substantial.⁸

Our literature review shows that human rights, including the rights of minorities, are among the first victims of crises and crisis management. The Croatian Ombudswoman's report on the situation of human rights and equality in the country in 2021 (Pučka pravobraniteljica 2022a), and her recommendations for better resilience to future crises based on her assessments of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on human rights and equality (Pučka pravobraniteljica 2022b), confirm such a conclusion. These practices of authorities, particularly disproportional limitations or the suspension of human rights, restrictive and repressive measures, as well as other possible human rights violations that can provoke resistance in the people cannot be considered legitimate democratic crisis management (Huffstetler et al. 2021; Žagar 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed existing (often long-term) inequalities, including social, economic, ethnic, and racial inequality, in contemporary societies and created new ones (Katikireddi et al. 2021; Platt & Warwick 2020). As consequences of those inequalities, often economically and socially deprivileged individuals, members of diverse minorities, including ethnic and racial ones, migrants, refugees, and marginalized individuals and groups frequently experience(d) additional vulnerability and exposure to the virus, the worsening of pre-existing health conditions and illnesses (e.g., diabetes, obesity, hypertension, cardiovascular problems), and lesser access to (public) healthcare and other services. The data show that they often suffered excess mortality compared with the rest of the population (Kumar et al. 2021; OECD 2022).

The negative impacts of the pandemic and crisis require recovery and resilience plans and measures at all levels aimed at improving equal access to public services, reducing the digital divide, promoting gender equality and inclusion, and preventing all types of violence. They should consider women, children and young people, older people, people with disabilities, people in precarious working conditions, homeless people, diverse social minorities, including national, ethnic, language and religious minorities, the LGBTQIA+ community, and other diverse marginalized groups and individuals (FRA 2022; UN 2020).

Although the Roma are the largest ethnic minority in the European context, they could be considered the most marginalized minority that frequently experiences direct and indirect discrimination. The COVID-19 pandemic and related crisis management have widened long-standing exclusion, poverty and discrimination against the Roma, who often do not have access to potable tap water, adequate housing and the sanitary facilities needed to follow preventive public health measures, while their access to healthcare could be limited. There were reports on disproportionate or militarized COVID-19 crisis measures targeting Roma neighbourhoods or towns, racist and discriminatory approaches to public

health, racist narrative and discourse, as well as media reporting that cast the Roma as a collective health and safety threat in Bulgaria, Slovakia, Romania, and in other countries. In addition to the already poor inclusion and performance of Roma pupils in education in Slovenia and Europe, the suspension of regular school activities, remote learning during lockdown, and problems in establishing contact and collaboration between the teachers, Roma pupils and their parents because of technical conditions and lack of digital access are likely to have broader negative consequences for these pupils (Bešter & Pirc 2020; 2021; FRA 2020; Girard 2021; Matache & Bhabha 2020).

Systemic discrimination, socio-economic injustice, aggressive nationalism, exclusion, racism, and xenophobia frequently directed against minorities, migrants, foreigners, refugees, marginalized groups and individuals, defined as “the others”, existed long before the COVID-19 pandemic. These escalated with the growing populism and ideology of illiberal democracy. During the COVID-19 crisis, they escalated further and disproportionately affected these target populations. In the initial stages of the pandemic, when people were guessing about the possible origins of the virus, a growth in anti-Asian racism was detected. Inclusion, integration, multi- and intercultural policies, democratic participation, and ongoing inclusive open public dialogue could be useful approaches to deescalating and preventing social exclusion, populism, exclusivism, discrimination, aggressive nationalism, racism, and xenophobia (Elias et al. 2021; Žagar 2023).

The goal of the toolkit of the Council of Europe, which is based upon anti-discrimination, diversity, inclusion, and democratic participation, is to ensure that crisis management measures are proportionate to the evaluated risk and have clear time limits. Particularly important for border regions and minorities are information, communication, inclusion, and multi-level cooperation with all relevant actors, including civil society and specific communities (Cramer Marsal et al. 2020, 11–25; Engler et al. 2021; Jurić Pahor 2020).

As the case of the Slovene national minority in Austria shows, social interaction within the minority and broader, flexible (internal and external) communication, organisational capacity, and ability to adapt to the changed situation and COVID-19 crisis management measures, as well as cooperation with its kin-state, proved crucial for the vitality and development of minorities. Consequently, they were able to respond to restrictive crisis measures, the cancellation of traditional events, and the closure of bilingual schools by organizing online and hybrid activities. However, restrictive measures are likely to have a long-lasting impact on a minority’s ethnic vitality. These developments confirmed the importance of the use of minority and regional languages in such situations and in crisis management in general in diverse societies. The online survey, conducted between March and June 2020, which aimed to analyse the extent to which communication in one’s mother tongue was assured by different stakeholders

in the Member States of the EU, as well as among the members of the Federal Union of European Nationalities (FUEN), showed the importance of minority and regional languages in general, particularly during crisis situations. The availability of relevant information in one's mother tongue, the public use of one's mother tongue, mother tongue education, and other public services contribute to better social inclusion of minorities, as well as to more successful, inclusive, legitimate, and democratic crisis management (FUEN 2020; Grafenauer & Jesih 2020; 2021).

South Tyrol is an interesting case study that shows how this autonomous province experienced the COVID-19 pandemic that impacted its life and politics, as well as how it reacted to the crisis within the framework of Italy's pandemic management (Pallaver et al. 2021). It opted for a special path legitimized through a law that the provincial parliament adopted with a large majority in May 2020. Although it was flexible in adapting to new local circumstances, resulting in more or less strict measures compared to the national emergency decrees, the special path has ultimately not turned out to be successful from an epidemiological point of view. Nor was the province's governance style radically different from the national one. The pre-existing socio-political cleavages continued and resulted in criticism of the special path. However, this path, shared by other Italian regions, presented a reaction against the centralized pandemic management of the Conte II government (Alber & Zgaga 2021).

3. Studying Legitimate Crisis Management – Methodological and Conceptual Discussion

Considering that there is no perfect approach and method in studying complex phenomena and concepts, the literature review confirms the relevance of the research questions and shows that authors recognize the importance of democratic and legitimate crisis management and governance. From their specific perspectives, they indicate different and diverse (f)actors, conditions, circumstances, approaches, strategic policies, measures, and actions that can contribute to more democratic and legitimate crisis management. There seems to be a general agreement that exclusive, restrictive, and repressive crisis management usually dominated by the executive had a negative impact on democracy. In many environments (not only in countries considered illiberal democracies), such crisis management might have contributed to the strengthening of populism and the ideology and practice of illiberal democracy.

Simultaneously, our literature review, previous research, and the first interviews within the project carried out in the summer and fall of 2023 confirm the relevance of the LEGITIMULT research design, approaches, and methods in studying the legitimacy of the COVID-19 related crisis management. Studying complex, dynamic, and constantly evolving (social) phenomena and concepts

requires and stimulates constant, intense, open, and inclusive conceptual and methodological discussions. Focusing on crisis management, its legitimacy, as well as its consequences and impacts in respective environments upon individuals and distinct communities, particularly minorities, using, coordinating, combining, interpreting, constantly evaluating, and developing diverse (disciplinary, multi-, inter- and transdisciplinary) research approaches and methods as well as terminologies, concepts, definitions, theoretical models and theories seems to be the best research practice in this context. Additionally, intense and inclusive cooperation with relevant stockholders in diverse environments is needed, particularly in discussing the concept of legitimate democratic crisis governance, best practices and recommendations, as well as in developing and applying the toolbox highlighting the core elements of legitimate crisis governance. The approaches and practices of methodological pluralism (see e.g., della Porta & Keating 2008) used in studying socially relevant diversities, equality, inclusion, integration and participation of diverse minorities, distinct communities and persons belonging to them also prove useful in researching the democracy and legitimacy of crisis management and governance.

Considering specific research themes and tasks, various specific research approaches and methods are used and combined within the LEGITIMULT project. Applying quantitative approaches and methods, including statistical analysis adjusted to specific themes, the quantitative research applied by other Work Packages collects and analyses relevant data, while creating, developing and interpreting the databases on legitimate democratic crisis management in the MLG IGR context. As necessary inputs, these (quantitative) research results and findings are important for designing and executing successful qualitative research into the impacts and consequences of crisis management measures on human and minority rights, the protection and situation of diverse minorities and communities, as well as the principle of non-discrimination. Our qualitative research focuses particularly on the perceptions of those impacts and consequences by persons belonging to diverse minorities and distinct communities. Although the results of the qualitative research should not be generalized as they are contextually relevant and apply to specific case studies, they are important for the verification, evaluation, and interpretation of the data, results, and findings of quantitative research of other Work Packages.

Our qualitative research studies the attitudes and perceptions of persons belonging to social minorities (including marginalized groups and border communities) regarding the legitimacy and democratic nature of crisis management and governance, and the impact(s) of crisis management policies and measures. It focuses on the impacts of restrictive and repressive measures on human rights, the rights and position of minorities, the principle and policies of non-discrimination, and the consequences of those policies and measures. In addition to direct and indirect observation, informal conversations, and formal

events, such as meetings, panels, workshops and/or focus groups, it is based on open-ended in-depth interviews. The initial interviewees were selected from our existing contacts. These include persons (particularly activists and representatives) belonging to minorities and distinct and/or marginalized groups and communities, such as national, ethnic, religious and language minorities, (im)-migrants (in addition to documented also undocumented ones, if possible), refugees, homeless people, LGBTQIA+ communities and associations, etc. in Austria, Croatia, Italy, Slovenia and possibly other countries (e.g., Spain⁹). Additional interviewees will be determined using the snowball method.

We developed the concept and core questions for the open-ended in-depth interviews based on our previous research and the literature review. Proceeding from our existing contacts, cooperation and research,¹⁰ some informal conversations were held with a few members and representatives of various social minorities and institutions (e.g., national, ethnic and linguistic minorities, migrants, offices for migrant workers, gender and LGBTQIA+ activists in Slovenia, Austria, Croatia and Italy),¹¹ as well as selected researchers to test the concept and core questions of the open-ended in-depth interviews.¹² These conversations detected some difficulties and possible problems, particularly terminological and conceptual ones, that need to be addressed. Considering the varied social, economic, and educational background, status, and position of individual interviewees, there is a need to explain and clarify the terminology and concepts in detail in order for the interviewees to understand them fully. Namely, individual respondents understood the terminology and complex concepts used (such as democracy, inclusion, integration, participation, legitimacy, human rights, including rights and protection of diverse social minorities, the principle of non-discrimination, direct and indirect discrimination) in different ways. However, all respondents confirmed the importance of the informal and formal inclusion and the democratic participation of minorities and their representatives in decision-making processes for the legitimacy of crisis management and the adopted decisions and measures in a certain environment.

Given this experience, all interviewees shall be offered the option to anonymize their interviews. Often, the persons belonging to minorities express that they want to have their names, work, positions within their minority community, and their views visible in the research documents, as well as in the findings and results in media and publications. This practice of taking into account the expressed wishes and interests of the interviewees is consistent with research ethics and rules.

The complexities and dynamics of social phenomena often result in multiple, possibly conflicting definitions and concepts that do not fully capture the ongoing, complex, interconnected, and evolving nature of these phenomena with their specific spatial, temporal, and relational dimensions. The LEGITIMULT project recognizes that researchers, in addition to specific research

appro-aches and methods, also use their specific terminologies and definitions. These need to be presented, explained and coordinated. The participants in the informal conversations explained their understanding of key terms, concepts and definitions and assessed their importance from their specific perspectives, while considering the position, status, perceptions, worries, needs and interests of the respective minority communities. When discussing the interviews process, the members and representatives of various minority communities suggested that before the interviewer asks the core questions, the respondents should be asked to present their understanding and interpretation of certain terms. Their understanding of the concepts of legitimacy, legitimate democratic multilevel crisis management and governance in general and related to the COVID-19 pandemic, diverse social minorities, human and minority rights, inclusion, integration and participation would be of particular importance. The recommendation was that before the interviewees start answering the core interview questions, they should be given an explanation of how the researchers understand these terms, as well as which are the main goals, expected results and impacts of the study. The interviewers need to pay particular attention to the explanations of the concepts and definitions of legitimacy and multilevel democratic crisis governance, since these are not as well known or clear even to those with a social science or humanities background.

We recognize several definitions and concepts of social and political legitimacy that can be found in scholarly literature, including the ones by Locke and Weber.¹³ For the purpose of our study we can define legitimacy in the context of crisis management and governance simply as the popular acceptance of and agreement with the approaches, decision-making and practices of authorities at all levels. This also applies to specific strategies, policies, decisions, measures and activities within crisis management and particularly their execution, impacts and consequences in the respective social environments. Considering the attitudes of the people in a certain social environment, one could conclude that the higher the acceptance and agreement, the more legitimate the crisis management.

Legitimate democratic (multilevel) crisis management and governance presumes democratic inclusion, integration and participation of the people in accordance with democratic principles, rules and procedures in the development and formulation of crisis strategies and policies, in decision-making on crisis policies and measures at all levels of authority, as well as, ideally, in their execution. Confirming observations within the research project on political participation of minorities, our informal conversations pointed out that social activists, members and representatives of diverse social minorities consider the inclusion and participation of persons belonging to respective minorities, as well as those minorities as collective entities, key indicators of the legitimacy and democracy of crisis management and governance. In this context, they stressed the importance of the social and political participation of diverse minorities for

legitimacy and democracy in diverse and plural contemporary societies. There was a general agreement that democracy is a cherished social practice, value, principle and goal worth striving and fighting for.

Since there is no single, universally accepted definition of minorities, it was stressed that as a rule they are unequal and unprivileged, usually in a less favourable situation and status in comparison with the rest of the population, even if in some specific cases (e.g., women) they might be a numerical majority. It is important to recognize that all majorities are internally diverse and plural. They are not homogenous and uniform. Consequently, both majorities and minorities could be observed as coalitions of diverse coalitions.

Our informal conversations and initial interviews within the LEGITIMULT project confirmed the research findings of the Institute for Ethnic Studies (IES). In particular, the basic research project, titled Political Participation of National Minorities and Persons Belonging to Them: Comparative Study of Political Participation of Slovene Minorities in the Neighbouring Countries of the Republic of Slovenia, the results of which were that as a consequence of the inclusion of diverse (social, specifically national and ethnic) minorities in all spheres of life, their social and political participation should be considered one of the most important criteria of democracy and democratic governance in respective environments. In this context, the theoretical model of social and political participation and representation of (national) minorities (Žagar 2017, 16–18), developed as a tool and yardstick for the IES study, proves useful in studying legitimacy. This theoretical model that evolves constantly specifies general approaches to political participation of (diverse social, particularly national) minorities, as well as concepts and types of and mechanisms for the political participation of minorities.

Among the **general approaches** to social and political participation of (national and other) minorities and persons belonging to them, the theoretical model lists: (I) constitutionally and/or legally regulated **formal participation** in legislation and in executive and consultative bodies; (II) **informal participation** in political processes and decision-making, as well as lobbying; (III) inclusion, membership and activism in **political parties** (both mainstream and minority), **movements, organisations and associations**; (IV) **(Neo)Corporatist approaches, arrangements, bodies, processes and mechanisms** (such as various forms of consultations and consultative bodies); (V) **consociative arrangements**, particularly elite power-sharing; (VI) inclusion and participation through **basic principles** of constitutional and international law, including human rights, rule of law, democracy and democratic participation, equal rights and equality, justice, non-discrimination, limited majority rule, special rights and protection of minorities; (VII) inclusion and participation through **inclusion and integration policies**; and (VIII) inclusion and **participation through specific systems and mechanisms of minority protection** (at all levels), based on the special rights of minorities (Žagar 2017).

Among the **concepts, types and mechanisms** of social and political participation of minorities that can provide for and promote their better inclusion and participation, the theoretical model includes: (I) **elections and electoral systems** that can provide (A) for formally guaranteed, direct representation of minorities in the legislative (1) through reserved minority seats, (2) special minority thresholds for minority political parties and/or candidates, (3) over-proportional representation of minorities and/or minimal quotas of minority representatives on the lists of mainstream parties, or (B) for informal political arrangements and declarations, suggesting the mainstream political parties include a certain proportion of minority candidates on their electoral lists; (II) **informal agreements in political processes** and principles declared by statutes, programmes and other documents of **political parties** that should ensure (1) the inclusion and participation of minority politicians and representatives in mainstream political parties, including quotas for diverse minorities, (2) inter-party cooperation and consensus building on minority (related) issues, (3) the participation of minority political parties in political processes, including elections; (III) **special procedures of decision making** regulated by law or political agreements, including minority veto and obligatory or consultative opinions of minority institutions, organisations and/or representatives or joint consultative bodies that can ensure the adequate participation of minorities and realization of their specific interests; (IV) inclusion of minority representatives and elites in policy formulation and decision-making through various **(Neo)Corporatist and consociative arrangements** and/or (formal and informal) bodies and institutions at all levels of government that bring in the process-specific views and interests of diverse minorities; (V) **affirmative action and other affirmative measures** (sometimes called positive discrimination) that promote the inclusion, integration and participation of minorities; (VI) at least the proportional, if possible over-proportional, **employment (quotas) of persons belonging to minorities** in the public and private sectors that shall ensure an adequate number and proportion of persons belonging to minorities among public/civil servants in state administration and public institutions; (VII) **monitoring the situation, position and status of minorities and persons belonging to them** for which adequate internal and external mechanisms shall be established; (VIII) and **autonomies**, particularly minority autonomy that can be realized through diverse arrangements of self-rule and management at various levels (from local to national), such as formal (constitutional, legal, political) and informal autonomies, and territorial (federalism, regionalism) and non-territorial autonomies (such as cultural, functional and personal autonomy) (Žagar 2017).

Our informal conversations covered issues of human rights, minority rights, position and protection, possible cases of discrimination, (the realization of) anti-discrimination policies, and the principle of non-discrimination, all of which everybody considered to be of great importance. These conversations and

the interviews within the LEGITIMULT project confirmed that the core interview questions appropriately addressed the relevant issues. There was a general agreement that the adopted and implemented crisis policies and measures, particularly restrictive and repressive ones, did impact human and minority rights and, at least in some cases, resulted in inequality and discrimination. Usually, they impacted diverse minorities more than the rest of the population. For example, in addition to the unpleasant consequences of lockdowns, which were felt by everyone, owing to the closure of international borders, including the borders between the Schengen countries, regular contact, and the intense economic and particularly cultural cooperation with their kin countries involving the daily mobility of national minorities were interrupted and/or prevented. The contacts, cooperation and mobility of these minorities are essential for their vitality and preservation of their specific cultures, ways of life, and identities, considering that contacts, cooperation with and support of respective kin states represent their traditional cultural background. From the perspective of border regions, all populations within those regions and their specific ways of life, we could conclude that they were also over-proportionally affected by the closures of international borders, which made cross-border cooperation and exchange, international (daily) mobility and migration almost impossible (Grafenauer & Jesih 2020; 2021).

Although everybody was affected by lockdowns that limited or even prevented internal mobility and cut personal, cultural, social and economic links, contacts and cooperation, diverse minorities, particularly migrants, marginalized groups and individuals, felt the impacts and consequences of the lockdowns even more. Consequently, their marginalization and (social) exclusion, as well as the risk of being discriminated against increased, while their (social) inclusion and integration became still more difficult. Our literature review and research so far confirm that those in socially less favourable situations, particularly marginalized individuals and groups, did not have equal access to health and social care or to various (administrative and public) services, including medical services and education.

The reviewed literature, our previous research, the informal conversations, and the LEGITIMULT interviews confirm that developing and using more inclusive and democratic crisis management, and the inclusion and participation of interested social actors, including diverse minorities, in decision making, would contribute to more democratic and legitimate crisis management. The inclusion and participation of diverse minorities in democratic decision-making are important indicators of democracy and legitimacy in diverse societies that also apply in crisis situations.

Additionally, our literature review, previous research, the informal conversations, and the LEGITIMULT interviews indicate the relevance of our research questions and working hypotheses. They confirm that in diverse environments, formal and informal inclusion and participation of (ideally, all) minority

communities, persons belonging to those minorities, particularly their leaders, activists, and (s)electd representatives in crisis management processes, the formulation and adoption of strategies, policies and measures, as well as their implementation/execution could improve their legitimacy (within minority communities and societies as a whole) and the democratic nature of crisis management and governance. This is true even if their inclusion and participation are only symbolic. Based on our literature review, previous research and the attitudes expressed in the informal conversations, we could conclude that crisis management processes, policies and measures (particularly restrictive and repressive ones) usually impact and hurt various minorities more than the rest of the population.

4. Conclusion

Our literature review, previous and preliminary research, our methodological, terminological and conceptual discussions, as well as the informal conversations and the LEGITIMULT interviews presented in the previous sections confirm the relevance of the LEGITIMULT project, its design and planned research. They provide an adequate basis and framework for future research into the perceptions and attitudes of persons belonging to various social minorities with regard to democracy and the legitimacy of crisis management at different levels of authority. The predominantly qualitative field research on the perceptions and attitudes of (selected) persons belonging to various social minorities regarding the legitimacy of COVID-19 related crisis management will focus on the inclusion and participation of minorities in the formulation of crisis management strategies, policies and measures, as well as their implementation, on the impacts and consequences of those strategies, policies and measures regarding human rights, position, status, rights and protection of minorities, and the principle of non-discrimination.

We expect that the qualitative field research into selected minorities as specific case studies, and particularly open-ended in-depth interviews, will provide an insight into the perceptions and attitudes of persons belonging to these minorities with regard to the legitimacy and democracy of COVID-19 related crisis management and measures in respective environments. Additionally, the findings will be instrumental in evaluating and interpreting the results of the LEGITIMULT project, particularly those produced by quantitative approaches and methods within other Work Packages. This approach will contribute to the formulation of relevant recommendations and the development of a toolkit to ensure a better inclusion and democratic participation of relevant actors in decision-making in crisis management processes. This toolkit could be used by all stakeholders in respective environments at all levels and could help to improve the democracy and legitimacy of crisis management and governance in future crisis situations.

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Notes

- ¹ See the LEGITIMULT project on legitimate crisis governance in multilevel systems: <http://legitimult.eu/> as well as: <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100089222897068>, <https://www.linkedin.com/company/legitimultproject> and <https://twitter.com/legitimult>.
- ² For a brief presentation of the LEGITIMULT Project's Work Package (WP4) on legitimate crisis governance in the context of human rights, minority rights, and the principle of non-discrimination, coordinated by the Institute for Ethnic Studies, see: <http://www.inv.si/DocDir/projekti/A%20brief%20presentation%20of%20the%20LEGITIMULT%20PROJECT.doc>.
- ³ When used in this article, the term minority refers to a minority community as a collective (collective entity) as well as to individuals, i.e., persons belonging to this minority community. Although the minority rights, including the rights of national minorities, are mostly viewed as individual rights of persons belonging to those minorities, their collective dimension should also be considered.
- ⁴ The team that developed the specific WP4 bibliography and literature review on the legitimacy of crisis management with regard to human rights, rights and protection of minorities and persons

belonging to minorities, and the principle of non-discrimination of the LEGITIMULT project (available on the project's webpage) consists of Dr. Romana Bešter, Dr. Danijel Grafenauer, Dr. Boris Jesih, Dr. Janez Pirc, Dr. Sofija Zver and Prof. Dr. Mitja Žagar from the Institute for Ethnic Studies that coordinates the WP4, Prof. Dr. Ružica Jakešević, Prof. Dr. Đana Luša, Prof. Dr. Siniša Tatalović and Prof. Dr. Marta Zorko from the Faculty of Political Science, University of Zagreb, and Dr. Elisabeth Alber and Martina Gianola from the EURAC Research.

- ⁵ For example, the COVID-DEM Global Democracy & Pandemic Tracker (DEM-DEC, n. d.) that ran from April 2020 to April 2022 contains over 3,000 items.
- ⁶ E.g., national, regional and global ones, such as, *COBISS*, *Scopus*, *Web of Science*, on-line library catalogues, such as *Wiley Online Library*, as well as specialized data bases, such as *International Political Science Abstracts (IPSA)*, and on-line data bases of scholarly journals – in addition to those mentioned above, e.g., *East European Politics*, *Public Organization Review*, *Treatises and Documents*, *West European Politics*, etc.
- ⁷ The publishing of this volume in open access was enabled by a partner consortium in which Eurac Research participated as a member of the International Association of Centers for Federal Studies (IACFS).
- ⁸ A selected bibliography of those publications is available at the webpage of LEGITIMULT project (as an appendix to the Deliverable 1 of WP 4): <http://legitimult.eu/>.
- ⁹ In Spain, through existing channels, there might be an opportunity to interview some undocumented migrants, thereby gaining access to their perceptions.
- ¹⁰ E.g., interviews on political participation of minorities carried out within the project titled Political participation of national minorities and persons belonging to them: Comparative study of political participation of Slovene minorities in the neighboring countries of the Republic of Slovenia, which – although not planned initially – also addressed the consequences and impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and pandemic-related crisis management.
- ¹¹ Some of them might be included in further research as interviewees.
- ¹² These informal conversations took place in various forms at different locations, mostly as person-to-person conversations at an agreed-upon or chance encounter/meeting and occasionally in the form of informal group discussion with a few participants. We chose these informal conversations in informal settings to test the core interview questions based on our previous experience with interviewees perceiving the interviews as formal settings to which they react accordingly. Namely, in formal settings people tend to adjust their behaviour, attitude, reactions, language and answers to their specific perception of the formal event.
- ¹³ Often presented in basic social science textbooks in secondary and higher education and all encyclopaedias.

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Barbara Riman, Natko Štiglić

The Socioeconomic Position of National Minorities with a Special Emphasis on Slovenes in Croatia over the Past Thirty Years

The article presents the situation of members of the Slovene community in Croatia, focusing on selected aspects of their socioeconomic participation (inclusion) in Croatian society. This topic has not been thoroughly studied yet, firstly due to the low interest of researchers in the position and activities of members of the Slovene community in Croatia, and secondly due to a continuous lack of data on the socioeconomic participation of members of not only the Slovene community but of all minorities in Croatia in general. Based on the analysis of data mainly collected from Croatian official reports, the situation of members of the Slovene minority in Croatia is presented mainly in relation to the exercise of their rights to education and employment.

Keywords: national minorities in Croatia, Slovene minority in Croatia, socioeconomic participation of national minority, education of national minority, labour market.

Socialno-ekonomski položaj narodnih manjšin s posebnim poudarkom na Slovencih na Hrvaškem v zadnjih tridesetih letih

V članku je predstavljen položaj pripadnikov slovenske skupnosti na Hrvaškem s poudarkom na izbranih vidikih njihove socialno-ekonomske vključenosti v hrvaško družbo. Gre za tematiko, ki zaradi skromnega raziskovalnega interesa za položaj in delovanje slovenske skupnosti na Hrvaškem ter pomanjkljivih podatkov o socialno-ekonomski vključenosti ne le slovenske, temveč vseh manjšin na Hrvaškem, še ni bila temeljito raziskana. Na podlagi analize podatkov, večinoma zbranih iz hrvaških uradnih evidenc, je položaj pripadnikov slovenske skupnosti na Hrvaškem predstavljen predvsem iz vidika uresničevanja njihovih pravic do izobraževanja in zaposlitve.

Ključne besede: narodne manjšine na Hrvaškem, slovenska manjšina na Hrvaškem, socialno-ekonomska vključenost narodne manjšine, izobraževanje narodne manjšine, trg dela.

Correspondence address: Barbara Riman, Inštitut za narodnostna vprašanja, Erjavčeva 26, SI-1000 Ljubljana, e-mail: barbara.riman@guest.arnes.si; Natko Štiglić, Inštitut za narodnostna vprašanja, Erjavčeva 26, SI-1000 Ljubljana, e-mail: natko.stiglic@inv.si.

1. Introduction

Two types of ethnic minorities can be distinguished in Croatia: national minorities – i.e., the ethnic groups traditionally living in Croatia and recognised by the Croatian Constitution (22 in total, which is a Croatian peculiarity) – and various groups of immigrants living in Croatia. This article presents selected data and conclusions on the national minorities in Croatia with a special emphasis on the Slovene national minority.

Croatia has a population of 3,871,833, of which 240,079 are members of constitutionally recognised national minorities. 91.63 % of the total population are Croats, and only 6.20 % are members of (the 22) national minorities (CBS 2021). In 2011, national minorities accounted for 7.67 % of the population (CBS 2013), while in 2001 their share was 7.47 % (Tatalović 2006, 47). This demonstrates that over the past few decades, the Croatian society has become increasingly ethnically homogenous.

The status of national minorities as we know it today was established in 1990 when the first Croatian Constitution was adopted. It guaranteed non-discrimination and equality for all, including minorities (Tatalović 2006, 47). By 2000, the status of the members of national minorities did not change much and the legislation on national minorities in Croatia continued to evolve up until present day.

The aim of this article is to illustrate the status of the members of the Slovene national minority in Croatia with a special emphasis on some elements relating to their socioeconomic position. The following research questions have been formulated: (1) Is it possible to provide a general insight into the socioeconomic situation among the Slovene national minority in Croatia? (2) What are the main characteristics that can be derived from Croatia's official data on minority issues?

As the topic suggested is very broad and manifold, the article will focus on selected social (education) and economic (labour market) aspects.

Some of the aspects studied to measure the situation in Croatian society are overlapping. Combining them can give us a more comprehensive picture of the socioeconomic situation among the members of national minorities in Croatia.

In such context, it is also important to emphasise that the main problem in doing research for this article was the lack of data. That is not specific only for members of national minorities in Croatia but is symptomatic of other Europeans countries as well. In some countries, the monitoring of socioeconomic participation appears almost absent, while in others only specific aspects are highlighted (Cârstocea 2018, 7), which makes it possible to conclude that the situation is similar also for members of the Slovene minority in Croatia. It would be hard pressed to find comprehensive and regularly collected data about many national minorities (e.g. the Turkish minority in Romania, the Frisian minor-

ity in Germany (Cârstocea & Willis 2021)). An exception thereto is the Roma community whose socioeconomic situation has earned considerable attention (Cârstocea & Willis 2021). In Croatia, it is possible to find some data for the members of the Roma minority and the Serbian minority (MRGI 2003; Bakalović et al. 2013; Lapat & Miljević-Riđički 2019; Klasnić et al. 2020; Paravina 2022), but for other minorities data is scarce.

As regards the members of the Slovene minority in Croatia, there is a lack of data in all areas. Thus, there is no data on citizenship, their position on the labour market, healthcare issues, etc. It is, however, possible to find some data on employment (but just in state bodies, not in the private sector) and the teaching of the Slovene language.

The article draws on the conclusions of various research projects (Medvešek 2017; Medvešek & Novak Lukanović 2016; Medvešek & Riman 2017; Medvešek & Riman 2018a; Medvešek & Riman 2018b). The comparison and analysis of available and collected data allow us to answer the above research questions and fulfil the aim of the article.

Most of the data presented herein has been retrieved from Croatian state reports (Report on the implementation of the Constitutional Law on the Rights of National Minorities in the Republic of Croatia and the expenditure of funds provided in the State Budget for the needs of national minorities from year 2003 to 2022), reports of different minority groups in Croatia, and results of previous research on Slovene minority issues in Croatia.

2. Legislation

After the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia, many people belonging to the constitutionally recognised majority groups (nations and nationalities) in former republics and provinces became members of linguistic, national, or ethnic minorities (Vukas 1978, 53–54). The regime of minority rights protection that Croatia inherited from the former Yugoslavia only covered the old minorities.¹ Thus, a problem arose with the protection of the rights of the new minorities, namely members of the other six constituent nations of the former common state (Serbs, Slovenes, Bosniaks, Macedonians, and Montenegrins). Therefore, in December 1991, the Croatian Parliament adopted the Constitutional Law on Human Rights and Freedoms of National and Ethnic Communities, which was also a precondition for Croatia's recognition as an independent state in January 1992 (Tatalović 2006, 53).

Legislation and the practical implementation of ethnic minorities' rights became not only an important test for Croatia, but also a benchmark by which to measure its democratic achievements; it was also an essential precondition of economic and political integration into Europe. One of the preconditions for Croatia's international recognition was legislation to protect all ethnic minori-

ties. A particular challenge in terms of regulation and practical exercise of the rights of national minorities was the large Serbian national minority.

By adopting international standards, Croatia achieved a high level of protection for minorities in its legislation. However, this was not a reflection of a genuine internal political will to resolve minority issues, but rather the result of international pressures. The change in the protection of the rights of national minorities in Croatia coincided with the change of the political party in power that occurred in 2000 (Tatalović 2006). That year, two laws, one on the official use of minority languages and scripts and the other one on education in national minority languages, were adopted.

The Constitutional Law of the Rights of National Minorities adopted in 2002 is an upgrade of the 1991 Constitutional Law on Human Rights and Freedoms of National and Ethnic Communities. Its key elements included the promotion of the following minority rights:

- the use of minorities' language and script, privately and in public and official use;
- education in the minority language and script;
- the use of minorities' signs and symbols;
- cultural autonomy to preserve, develop and express one's culture, and preservation and protection of one's cultural assets and traditions;
- the right to profess one's religion and to establish religious communities together with other members of that religion;
- access to the media and to receive and forward information in minorities' language and script;
- self-organisation and association for the purpose of exercising mutual interests;
- representation in the representative bodies at the state and local level, and in administrative and judicial bodies;
- participation in public life and in management of local affairs through councils and representatives of national minorities; and
- protection from any activity which endangers or may endanger minorities' existence, and the exercise of rights and freedoms (Constitutional Law on the Rights of National Minorities 2002).

Minority rights have substantially advanced over the past decade. All of the 22 national minorities have almost equal rights. The difference lies in the possibilities of political participation, which depends on the number of their members.

3. Slovenes in Croatia

Slovenes in Croatia acquired the status of a minority in December 1990 when they were included in the new Croatian Constitution (Croatian Parliament n. d.).

Ever since the beginning of their formation as a national minority, they have primarily engaged in the protection of their cultural and linguistic identity (Tatalović 1997, 97). The members of the Slovene minority are apolitical and confine themselves to participation in Slovene associations where they foster Slovene language and culture. The fact that there are no Slovene cultural or research centres also strongly affects their position in Croatia. Their organisation is limited to cultural associations, they have not been able to fully exercise their right to learn their mother tongue at school, and have not taken advantage of the opportunities for active political involvement in local and regional government (Riman & Zver 2020).

Compared to Croatia where Slovenes became a minority and acquired rights similar to all other old and new minorities, Slovenia's attitude towards Slovenes in Croatia is relatively undefined. Moreover, the diversity within the Slovene minority itself fosters a spectrum of perspectives on Slovenia's role. Hence, each individual within this minority ascribes a distinct significance to Slovenia, a perception moulded by their personal experiences and connections, viewing it either as their kin-state, their country of origin, or a neighbouring country.

A review of official documents and proceedings of roundtables organised in the aftermath of gaining independence reveals that Slovenia was not willing to support and accept the newly formed Slovene minority in Croatia (Kržišnik-Bukić 1998). Until 1995, Slovenia did not even take a stance on the status of Slovenes in Croatia. Politicians and researchers were well aware, though, that the new Slovene minority was somewhat special due to the long common history of the two newly formed countries and that the newly demarcated border changed any hitherto relations. This was probably one of the reasons why the status of Slovenes in Croatia after 1990 remained an open issue and has not yet been fully resolved to date. Even more so, reservations about this minority were expressed, e.g. by the Foreign Minister stating in 1996 that Slovenes in Croatia had not formally applied for recognition as a minority nor had they organised themselves politically, and that this was a political issue that raised similar questions about Croats in Slovenia (Zelnik 2013).

It is important to stress that, like other minorities in Croatia, the Slovene minority is seen as a homogeneous group, but it is extremely heterogeneous and dispersed throughout the country. In addition to co-native members, the Slovene minority also includes a considerably large number of immigrants who moved to Croatia for economic reasons in the 1950s, as well as other immigrants who arrived from the kin-state in the time frame under discussion. These mainly include independent women, highly educated individuals and professionals, students, and pensioners. It is also important to mention that the sense of belonging to the Slovene minority differs depending on the age of its members who tend to perceive their identity, the border, and the political system differently.

The Slovenes' sociodemographic position in society is best illustrated by the existing sociodemographic data. Censuses are indeed interesting for both Croatian and foreign researchers, because Croatia still collects data on the nationality of its population. That is not the case in other European countries.

Data about national minorities from the 2011 and 2021 censuses are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Number of national minorities in 2011 and 2021

National minority	Census 2011		Census 2021	
	Number	%	Number	%
Serbs	186,633	4.36	123,892	3.20
Bosniaks	31,479	0.73	24,131	0.62
Roma	16,975	0.40	17,980	0.46
Albanians	17,513	0.41	13,871	0.36
Italians	17,807	0.42	13,763	0.36
Hungarians	14,048	0.33	10,315	0.27
Czechs	9,641	0.22	7,862	0.2
Slovenes	10,517	0.25	7,729	0.2
Slovaks	4,753	0.11	3,688	0.1
Macedonians	4,138	0.10	3,555	0.09
Montenegrins	4,517	0.11	3,127	0.08
Germans	2,965	0.07	3,034	0.08
Ukrainians	1,878	0.04	1,905	0.05
Russians	1,279	0.03	1,481	0.04
Ruthenians	1,936	0.05	1,343	0.03
Poles	672	0.02	657	0.02
Jewesses (Jews)	509	0.01	410	0.01
Turks	367	0.01	404	0.01
Romanians	435	0.01	337	0.01
Austrians	279	0.01	265	0.01
Bulgarians	350	0.01	262	0.01
Vlachs	29	0.0	22	0.0

Source: CBS 2013; CBS 2021.

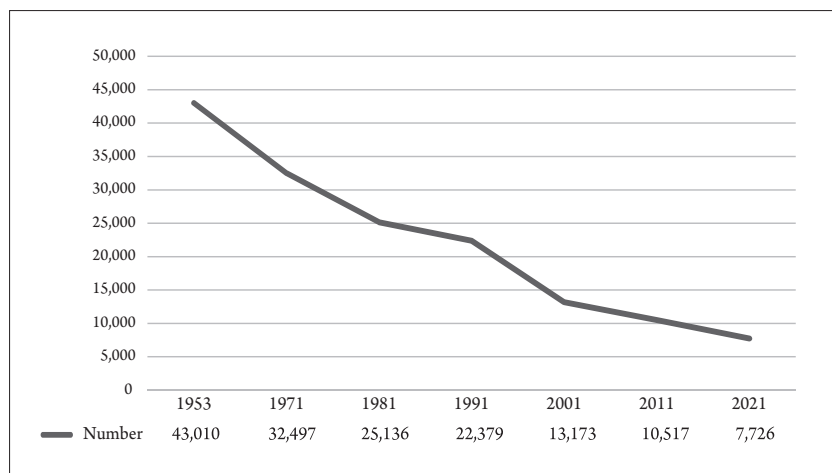
For most national minorities, the number of their members decreased. Exceptions include Germans,² Roma, Russians, Turks, and Ukrainians. However, the examples reported in Table 1 are not the largest decreases among members of national minorities in Croatia. The largest decrease was recorded after 1991. Between 1991 and 2001, the minority population in Croatia dropped from 22 % to under 8 %. The reasons for such include: (1) a nationalist policy; (2) migra-

tion towards urban areas which resulted in the weakening of rural communities, discontinuing traditional trades and links with the minority cultural heritage; (3) migration within the regions and overseas, particularly during and after the 1991–95 Croatian war; (4) improved education resulting in greater social mobility for members of ethnic minorities; (5) a rise in ethnically-mixed marriages; (6) the weakening of cohesive elements of ethnicity, which are being replaced by professional or social group identity, or even by regional identities (Tatalović 2002, 66–67).

The above reasons are important also for the Slovene minority, but it is possible to add some more that are characteristic of it. Every minority in Croatia has its reasons why their number is decreasing, but not all reasons have been identified yet. Some of the reasons relating to the Slovene minority are: (1) decline in immigration from Slovenia; (2) dying of members of the Slovene minority (most members are old aged) ever since World War II; (3) returning to Slovenia (Pajnič 2018, 72).

The changes in the number of Slovenes in Croatia are shown in Graph 1. In 2011, they were the oldest national minority in Croatia, with an average age of 59.7 years compared to the national average of 41.7 years (Medvešek & Riman 2017, 185, 216). Slovenes in Croatia are an urban population, with an unequal gender structure meaning there are more women than men (Kržišnik-Bukić 2006, 50; Pajnič 2018, 70).

Graph 1: Number of members of the Slovene national minority 1953–2021



Source: Kržišnik-Bukić 2006; CBS 2013; CBS 2021.

The (self)organisation of members of the Slovene national minority is low and concentrated in cultural associations, 16 in total. They are located in different parts of Croatia and are the most important entities for the implementation

of the rights of the Slovene minority (Riman 2022a). Another problem of this community is the (old) age of its active members and the fact that most of its efforts are focused on the preservation of the Slovene language and culture in Croatia. Other important aspects (e.g., economics, political participation, etc.) are neglected as there is no interest in such (Riman 2021a, 297–300).

The members of the Slovene minority often go unnoticed in Croatian society. They are apolitical and do not have their own parliamentary representative.³ In the Croatian parliament, the Slovene community is represented by a woman from the Albanian national minority and collaboration is minimum. The Slovene minority also does not have a political party of its own. Some members are active in Croatian political life but are not active within the Slovene community. Therefore, the latter does not recognise them as members and equals.

There have been attempts from some members of the Slovene national minority to participate in Croatian parliamentary elections, but the number of votes was too low to enter the parliament. In 2003, the Slovene candidate only obtained 630 votes compared to the winning candidate from the Bosniak national minority with 2711 votes. In 2015, the Slovene candidate got a mere 143 votes, and the seat went to the candidate who represents the Slovene community still today (Riman & Zver 2020, 87).

The Slovene minority does not have daily, weekly, or monthly newspapers nor special radio or TV channels, and it does not have preschool education in Slovene. There is no public space where it would be possible to use the Slovene language regularly, which means that its use is limited to Slovene cultural associations and family and the rare primary and secondary schools where Slovene is taught as mother tongue. According to some studies, there is no intergenerational transmission of the Slovene language in Croatia and students who learn Slovene at school or in the Slovene cultural associations often learn it as second language (Riman 2022b, 300).

Slovenes live in geographical areas where the risk of poverty is relatively small. In general, members of the Slovene national minority have an above-average level of education. Often, they send their children to study abroad, mostly to Slovenia, where it is possible to receive a scholarship from the Republic of Slovenia. Many of them, and their children too, have dual citizenship (Croatian and Slovene) (Medvešek & Riman 2017, 217). Dual citizenship also allows them to enter both labour markets (in Slovenia and Croatia) and, depending on the situation, they can declare themselves members of either one or the other nationality.

Croatia signed international agreements on bilateral protection of national minorities with Italy, Hungary, Serbia, and Montenegro but no such agreement has been signed with Slovenia, which significantly prejudices the status of the Slovene national minority in Croatia. No agreement has been reached because Slovenia does not recognise Croats in Slovenia (just like Bosniaks, Macedonians,

Serbs, and Montenegrins) as a national minority. They enjoy some rights (e.g., learning their mother tongue) but they do not have equal rights like Italians or Hungarians who enjoy bilateral protection and thus have better opportunities to exercise their rights.

While there is some data on the sociodemographic status of national minorities in Croatia, recent data on the socioeconomic situation is difficult to find. Some factors relating to the socioeconomic situation are measurable while others are quite difficult to recognise.

The socioeconomic participation of national minorities can be assessed through two key dimensions. The first dimension pertains to economic horizontal inequality, which involves disparities in access to and ownership of assets, employment opportunities, incomes, and the labour market. The second dimension relates to social horizontal inequality, encompassing aspects such as education, healthcare, and housing. It is worth noting that the dimension of economic horizontal inequality has been studied more extensively than other forms of horizontal inequality.

A general lack of statistical data regarding the socioeconomic situation of national minorities could be one of the reasons for the lack of consistency and structure. Research shows that ethnic groups often face economic discrimination, resulting in unequal access to and ownership of assets, employment opportunities, and incomes (Gurr 2000). Many national minorities record higher unemployment, but the collected data are disaggregated. Some studies show that young people from ethnic minorities and immigrant backgrounds are more likely to be unemployed than native youth (Froy & Pyne 2011, 10). National minorities are disproportionately reliant on the private sector for employment. Moreover, issues related to intersectionality are also present, with minority women (Merhaut 2019) often facing discrimination on two demographic fronts (Cârstocea & Willis 2021).

Social horizontal inequality has received less research attention. There are documented examples of the exclusion and discrimination Roma children face in education (Farkas 2014; Brüggemann & D'Arcy 2017; Eliason 2017;), as well as issues involving children belonging to other minority groups which, however, are less studied (Lendák-Kabók et al. 2020; Paravina 2022; Doleschal 2023). Some other important issues include barriers to accessing healthcare for national minorities, issues related to their insurance status, health literacy, communication issues due to linguistic differences, discrimination, and lack of trust.

It is important to note that sectoral inequalities do not exist independently of one another but are usually interlinked. Poor housing conditions have been demonstrably linked to poor mental and physical health, lower levels of education, and lower income levels. Social inequality is highly associated with economic horizontal inequality.

As mentioned above, there is a lack of interest and data concerning the Slovene minority in Croatia. With no public discrimination, name-calling and

labelling in the media, there is no interest in research, but there are indeed some hidden challenges that the community has to face. Therefore, the article will focus on those aspects of socioeconomic participation for which at least some data are available. The article can be considered as a first attempt to study the socioeconomic participation of members of the Slovene minority in Croatia.

Here, we will analyse two important aspects of the social horizontal dimension: labour market and education, with a special emphasis on the Slovene national minority. These are also the categories according to which we can estimate the position of some other national minorities in the Croatian society for whom it is possible to retrieve data that are collected by state offices and ministers.

3.1 Members of the Slovene National Minority on the Croatian Labour Market

The conclusions of some studies show that minority employees repeatedly experience unfavourable treatment when applying for a job and are often remunerated worse than their majority counterparts (Altonji & Pierret 2001; Baert 2018; Barr & Oduro 2002; Lippens et al. 2021). As a consequence, they are less likely to be satisfied with their job or committed to the organisation they work for and are more prone to experiencing mental and physical health issues (Paradies et al. 2015).

In Croatia, members of various national minorities are not treated equally on the labour market. Thus, for example, the position of the Serbs or the Roma is (probably) more difficult than that of other minorities (Bakalović et al. 2013). In fact, the Roma and the Serbs have been experiencing discrimination, the latter mainly as a result of the war that ravaged Croatia between 1991 and 1995 (Freedom House 2022). Some scarce studies about the position of the members of national minorities in Croatia reveal that there are no official quantitative data about the specific national minorities that are most discriminated (or discriminated at all) (Petr Balog 2004; Bakalović et al. 2013; Kunac et al. 2018). Discrimination of certain ethnic groups is less visible in larger cities, e.g. Zagreb or Rijeka, but more so in smaller cities that still experience the legacy of war and the divisions emerging therefrom. In larger cities, the members of national minorities are integrated in society but in rural areas they are more exposed and vulnerable (Bakalović et al. 2013). There is no consensus about this issue (except urban-rural relation). For each national minority in Croatia the situation is different and determined by geographical factors and factors of ethnic (non) favouritism.

Serbs, for instance, experience difficulties in geographical areas that were affected by the war. For other national minorities, there are other geographical areas where they live but feel they are not always welcome.

Factors of ethnic (non)favouritism are present among the Roma, with stereotypes among the population that the Roma are lazy and taking advantage of the system. Serbs experienced discrimination in the armed forces and the police and were dismissed for “security reasons” (Bakalović et al. 2013).

The labour market presence of national minorities in public administration can be illustrated based on data collected from various Reports.⁴ A minority right is also representation in the bodies at the state and local level and in administrative and judicial bodies of the Government, and it is thus possible to see how many of them are involved in different state bodies. It is important to emphasise that this is a minority right, which means that the state is, in a way, forced to also employ members of national minorities in the state administration. Data for the period 2014–2021 are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Share of members of national minorities employed in state administration and professional services and offices of the Government of the Republic of Croatia, 2014–2021

National minority	Year							
	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Albanians	0.03 %	0.03 %	0.03 %	0.03%	0.04 %	0.05 %	0.05%	0.06 %
Bosniaks	0.22 %	0.21 %	0.21 %	0.2 %	0.18 %	0.17 %	0.17 %	0.17 %
Czechs	0.16 %	0.15 %	0.16 %	0.17 %	0.16 %	0.16 %	0.15 %	0.17 %
Hungarians	0.17 %	0.17 %	0.18 %	0.19 %	0.19 %	0.17 %	0.17 %	0.16 %
Roma	0.01 %	0.01 %	0.02 %	0.02 %	0.02 %	0.02 %	0.02 %	0.03 %
Slovenes	0.09 %	0.09 %	0.08 %	0.08 %	0.08 %	0.08 %	0.08 %	0.07 %
Serbs	2.31 %	2.23 %	2.22 %	2.19 %	2.11 %	2.05 %	0.97 %	1.94 %
Italians	0.17 %	0.17 %	0.19 %	0.18 %	0.17 %	0.18 %	0.17 %	0.16 %
Others	0.29 %	0.29 %	0.3 %	0.29 %	0.28 %	0.27 %	0.28 %	0.28 %
Total	3.49 %	3.4 %	3.4 %	3.34 %	3.24 %	3.16 %	3.07 %	3.03 %

Source: GRC 2015; GRC 2018; GRC 2019a; GRC 2019b; GRC 2021a; GRC 2021b; GRC 2022.

Table 2 reveals that the share of employees with minority background is decreasing. The Report did not provide information for all national minorities but just for some of them. Likewise, it is impossible to make an overview of all the years from the introduction of the Law (2003) till 2021 (we are still expecting the 2022 Report to be published). For the first few years of reporting, data on national minorities are not disaggregated.

It was assumed that the number of minority employees would increase, but instead it decreased. One of the reasons is that also the overall number of members of national minorities on the state level decreased.

No other data about the national minorities' disadvantaged position and inequalities on the labour market can be found. The data displayed here are not data on discrimination but rather data illustrating the position of minorities in the Croatian society. Some national minorities have more members employed in state administration and some have less. Their number is in correlation with their share in the Croatian society. For the Roma and the Albanians, the number of employees is much lower than for the members of some other national minorities that are less in number than the Roma and the Albanians. The reason lies in the already traditional economically disadvantaged position and education of the Roma, but significant issues are also faced by the members of Albanian national minority. One of the greatest obstacles is the lack of knowledge of the Croatian language as well as various prejudices (Sinoruka & Knezevic 2020).

The Reports suggest that in state administration and professional services and offices of the Government, the number of members of the Slovene minority also decreased (Table 3).

Table 3: Number of Slovenes employed in state administration and professional services and offices of the Government, 2014–2021

Year	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Number of Slovenes employees	54	51	54	49	49	45	39	39	39	38	32
Total of national minorities employees	1,783	1,752	1,853	1,762	1,713	1,689	1,658	1,605	1,579	1,471	1,439

Source: GRC 2012; GRC 2013; GRC 2014; GRC 2015; GRC 2018; GRC 2019a; GRC 2019b; GRC 2021a; GRC 2021b; GRC 2022.

As shown by Table 3, there were 32 members of the Slovene minority employed in state administration in 2021. That number as well as the number shown in Table 2 are, however, questionable, as also the Report states that when applying for the job, some members of national minorities may not indicate their origin (GRC 2022, 48). Certain local self-governments (Pula, Zagreb) do not have any information about national minority employees (GRC 2022, 49). Evidently, some institutions cannot monitor the situation because there is no obligation to indicate nationality, which means that local and state institutions do not have a realistic picture about the members of national minorities they employ.

In some cases, also the members of the Slovene national minority employed in a state institution fail to indicate their nationality.⁵ It is possible to conclude that the number of employees belonging to the Slovene minority is larger than shown here.

Some studies show that there are very specific prejudices that affect minorities on the labour market. There is a widespread perception that national minori-

ties enjoy certain advantages in employment and therefore the public thinks that discrimination of national minorities is not even an issue, especially because some important government positions are held by members of national minorities (Bakalović et al. 2013). In many cases, however, the members of national minorities are not aware of their guaranteed priority over other candidates of Croatian nationality when it comes to employment in state institutions.

The Croatian Employment Agency and the national Bureau of Statistics keep statistics on the state labour market but do not disaggregate them by ethnicity, even though they do so by other standards (age, level of education, gender). Although the Croatian Employment Agency does not request it, it has some data about citizenship of the unemployment persons. Below are the data as of 22 February 2023 (Table 4).

Table 4: Number of the unemployed with Slovene citizenship

Regional service	No.	Regional service	No.	Regional service	No.
Osijek	6	Čakovec	2	Pula	5
Rijeka	5	Dubrovnik	2	Sisak	2
Split	4	Kaloveac	1	Šibenik	3
Zagreb	4	Križevci	1	Virovitica	2
Bjelovar	2	Požega	1	Zadar	2
Total					42

Source: Communication by e-mail with T. Dragičević, Croatian Employment Service, 22 February 2023.⁶

These numbers are questionable because job applicants do not need to indicate whether they have Slovene or Croatian citizenship. Moreover, citizenship is not an indicator of their ethnic background as it is possible not to be members of the Slovene minority but still have Slovene citizenship.

Those Slovenes in Croatia who have dual citizenship are in a better position than other members of the Slovene minority in Croatia as well as other citizens of Croatia. They can be active on the labour market in both countries without any limits. Today, the situation is better than prior to Croatia entering the EU or before 2018 when Slovenia lifted the restrictions on employment (there is no need for work permits anymore) for Croats. During that period, Slovene citizenship was valuable for persons who lived near the border. Daily migrants had (and still have) better salaries. Some of them also had healthcare in Slovenia, which was good because the standard of healthcare in Slovenia was and still is higher than in Croatia, yet there is also the issue of remoteness – people do not have their physician in their place of residence but have to travel (sometimes for more than an hour). This was a significant issue during the COVID-19 pandemic when borders were closed and they could not go and see their physicians (Riman 2020b).

There is no data for other employment sectors (private) so it would be necessary to do research among the members of the Slovene national minority about their inclusion in the private labour market.

The research carried out among Slovene women in Croatia, mostly on the state labour market, shows that the factor of ethnic favouritism has an important impact. Women included in the research claimed that they had experienced no problems as their employers perceived them as valuable and effective workers – that perception is mainly based on generalisation and historical processes when many workers came to Croatia in search of work at the beginning and in the first half of the 20th century (Riman 2020a).

On the other hand, some had problems at the time of the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia because they lost the possibility to work: they needed work permits but did not have all the necessary documents, some of them worked illegally. That is also related to the acquisition of Croatian citizenship. During the first few years after Croatia became independent, members of the Slovene national minority had to waive their Slovene citizenship. The Republic of Croatia never sent to Slovenia the documents they had signed, but those who had done so think that they do not have Slovene citizenship anymore. Hence, many of them decided to give up their Slovene background, stopped using the Slovene language and did not teach their children to speak Slovene. They are ashamed of their actions.⁷ No specific research has been made on that issue. There are no data about how many people were affected by this phenomenon.

There is a lack of information and data about the position of the national minorities on the labour market. It is quite difficult to draw any conclusions and it is therefore necessary to do research among the members of national minorities, the Slovene national minority included. This raises some other issues, such as what methodology to use to collect adequate data for the topic presented here.

3.2 Education of Members of the Slovene National Minority

The rights pertaining to national minorities in Croatia include the preservation and learning of their mother tongue (minority language). The Croatian legislation in such regard is well developed. Minority language is taught in three basic models known as model A,⁸ model B,⁹ and model C,¹⁰ in accordance with the constitutional and legal right to minority education.

Čorkalo Biruški et al. (2019) claim that minority education is not predominantly monoethnic, except for the Serb minority. In Istria, for example, Italian schools are also open to members of other minorities and the Croat majority (Paravina 2022). This confirms the findings of the research carried out among the members of the Slovene national minority in Croatia (Riman 2021b). In some parts of Croatia, attending a minority school, especially the one intended for the Italian minority, is a matter of prestige, which is related to the economic value of language. Not just Italian, there are also some other minority languages

in which the children's parents see economic value (Slovene, German). Hence, minority education in Croatia is not reserved solely for children belonging to a specific national minority.

According to the Reports, in the first few years following the adoption of the Constitutional Law on the Rights of National Minorities (2002), the number of children enrolled in some model of minority language learning increased (see Table 5).

However, even after twenty years, minority education is faced with challenges. When activities to assert the minorities' rights to education in their languages began, the Croatian government required that parents sign a statement demonstrating that their children were members of a national minority. That was one of the reasons why parents did not enrol children in the minority educational system.

Table 5: Number of students included in the minority educational system between 2006/2007 and 2021/2022

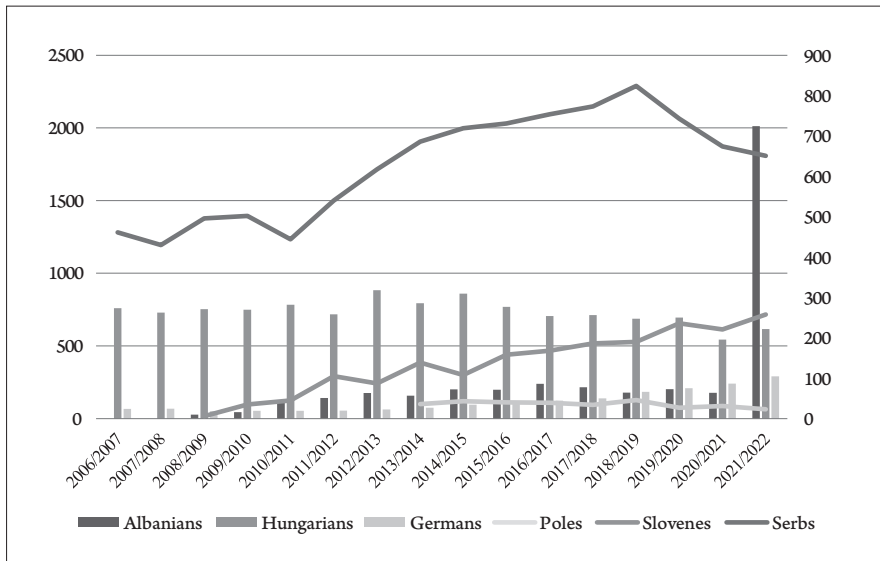
School Year	Model A	Model B	Model C	Total
2006/2007	4,411	13	2,317	6,741
2007/2008	4,425	14	2,289	6,728
2008/2009	4,417	14	2,387	6,818
2009/2010	4,271	11	2,453	6,735
2010/2011	3,832	8	2,527	6,367
2011/2012	5,722	67	2,788	8,527
2012/2013	5,437	67	3,235	8,739
2013/2014	5,296	88	3,351	8,735
2014/2015	5,225	95	3,556	8,896
2015/2016	5,093	72	3,498	8,663
2016/2017	5,076	90	3,590	8,753
2017/2018	4,961	92	3,652	8,706
2018/2019	4,652	89	3,731	8,241
2019/2020	4,659	87	3,796	8,543
2020/2021	4,675	73	3,482	8,215
2021/2022	4,644	51	3,654	8,349

Source: GRC 2007; GRC 2008; GRC 2009; GRC 2010; GRC 2011; GRC 2012; GRC 2013; GRC 2014; GRC 2015; GRC 2018; GRC 2019a; GRC 2019b; GRC 2021a; GRC 2021b; GRC 2022.

Table 5 reveals that the number of students in the first two models (model A and model B) decreased, while the number of those included in model C increased and remained at almost the same level. The reason for that is that model C evolved to include some new national minorities (Poles, Bosniaks). Because of a really small number of students in model B, the Ministry is considering re-voking that model.

The inclusion of selected national minorities in model C can be seen in Graph 2.

Graph 2: Number of students included in model C between 2006/2007 and 2021/2022



Source: GRC 2007; GRC 2008; GRC 2009; GRC 2010; GRC 2011; GRC 2012; GRC 2013; GRC 2014; GRC 2015; GRC 2018; GRC 2019a; GRC 2019b; GRC 2021a; GRC 2021b; GRC 2022.

The numbers of students vary for each national minority, depending on the reasons and issues that a national minority is faced with. Some of them are known from newspapers or conclusions of conducted research, while others are not immediately apparent. Therefore, it would be important to study those reasons and issues and collect (quantitative and qualitative) data. In some cases, it is also important to record the processes that cannot be recorded with quantitative methods of research.

The number of students mainly depends on the national minority itself – its efforts to promote minority language learning, its overall situation, as well as the majority’s opinion on that particular minority.

One of the issues that are also relevant for the Slovene national minority is the obsolete curriculum. In late 2022, the Croatian Ministry of Education published a call for the renewal of the curriculum for minority languages (the curriculum for the Slovene language has not change since its adoption in 2006) (MSE 2023). Another problem is the lack of educational materials for some national minorities (textbook shortages). Serbs and Italians have educational materials in their languages whereas Slovenes do not and are dependent on the Republic of Slovenia to assist them with free textbooks (Riman 2021b, 17). Once the curric-

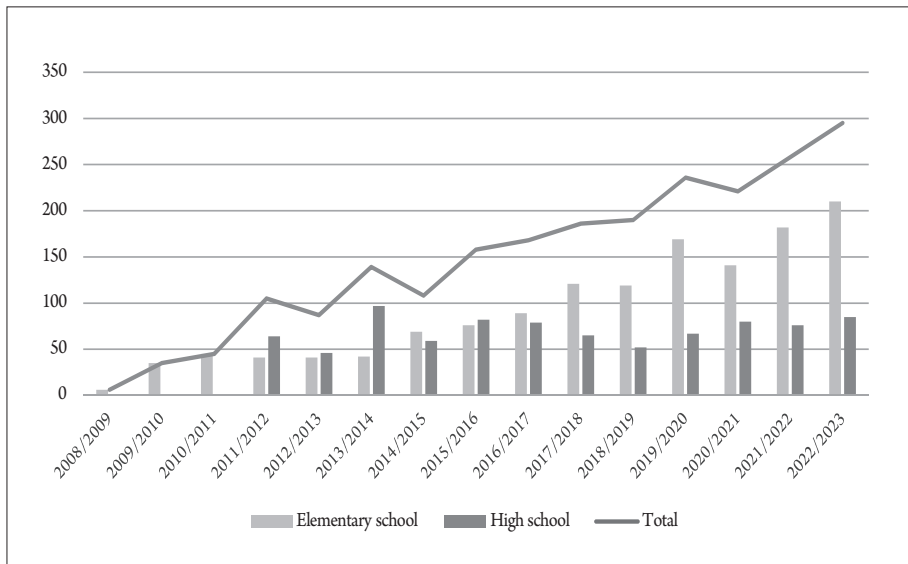
ulum is improved (2023/2024), it is likely that there will be some improvement also in the supply of educational materials. The third issue is segregation (Roma and Serbs), i.e. labelling on the basis of nationality. Some students who learn Slovene in schools are, for instance, called *Janezi*, which is a derogatory name for Slovenes. That term is used for students who attend Slovene language classes (Riman 2023). Finally, there is a lack of teachers. Some Slovene teachers are not properly qualified for that job. In two primary schools, Slovene is taught by a person with a major in maritime studies. The Bregana Primary School had been trying to find a teacher of Slovene for four months. Eventually, one was found among the private contacts of one of the members of the Slovene community (STA 2022; Bernik 2022). Another issue is the additional training opportunities for teachers of Slovene, which was mentioned also by the Committee of Experts in its sixth evaluation report on Croatia (Council of Europe 2022, 14). The report included a Recommendation for immediate action for pre-school education available in Slovene (Council of Europe 2022, 13).

In rural areas (Varaždin County and Gorski Kotar), the problem is weak public transportation coverage. In some cases, the problem is also the lack of schools where children could learn their mother tongue. This is the case of Rijeka, where there are many children who do not have the opportunity to learn Slovene in the school they attend because courses are offered in other schools and, given the busy schedule, they cannot afford to go to another school to attend a Slovene language class (Riman 2023).

The number of children learning Slovene in elementary and high school is shown in Graph 3. Graph 3 shows that the number of children learning Slovene increased. That is because the Slovene national minority has been trying to popularise the Slovene language and open classes in schools where Slovene is not yet taught. However, there are many bureaucratic procedures which additionally hamper school principals. The Slovene Ministry of Education has a key role in such regard by providing educational materials so that the parents do not have to bear additional costs.

The problem is that Croatia is a decentralised country when it comes to legislation and in many cases local authorities and principals of some schools (primary and secondary) need to approve the introduction of a certain minority right, for example learning the minority language. That is not always easy. In many cases there is no good will to accommodate the minorities' requests for the rights to which they are entitled. The school principals refuse to open a class for learning the minority language and culture, and the local political authority does not do anything to help the minority which is then left to figure things out on its own (Riman 2023). Minorities indeed have at least a theoretical possibility for their children to learn minority language, but such is not implemented in practice.

Graph 3: Number of Slovene students in model C between 2008/2009 and 2021/2022



Source: GRC 2007; GRC 2008; GRC 2009; GRC 2010; GRC 2011; GRC 2012; GRC 2013; GRC 2014; GRC 2015; GRC 2018; GRC 2019a; GRC 2019b; GRC 2021a; GRC 2021b; GRC 2022.

There have been some cases where school principals refused to conduct a survey to verify the interest in learning Slovene. In a small town near Rijeka (Lovran), the principal ignored the administrative letter of the Slovene community and its proposal to conduct a survey. After consulting the Ministry of Education, the representatives of the Slovene national minority in the Primorsko-Goranska County reported the case to the County authorities. The County's Department for Education did not help, they just asked the principal why she refused to do the survey. The principal's answer was that the survey was carried out orally among the children and that there was no interest in learning the Slovene language. This happened in 2019 and the situation has remained unchanged ever since (Riman 2022c). The Slovene national minority informed the Ministry of Education, the Department of Education of the Primorsko-Goranska County, the Ministry for Slovenes Abroad, but to no effect. Violations of the right to learning Slovene as a mother tongue and some other rights are frequent, but there is not a single institution willing to react and able to change the situation.

The national minority has tried to introduce Slovene language classes in some other schools, but sometimes there is no will and the minority is helpless. Principals fail to respond to its requests, there is no help from the local government.

4. Conclusion

The article illustrated some notable issues affecting the overall situation in the field of socioeconomic participation (inclusion) in Croatian society. As pointed out in previous studies, there is a lack of data that are relevant to better understand the socioeconomic position of the members of the Slovene national minority in Croatia. The lack of data is not symptomatic just for Slovene minority, but also for other minorities in Croatia and Europe alike.

The topic addressed herein does not seem to be of interest to researchers from Croatia, Slovenia (for the Slovene national minority in Croatia), or other European countries. Hitherto research only covers some national minorities in Croatia, like Roma and Serbs. For Roma, there is some socioeconomic data in Croatia and in various European countries. In Croatia, there is also some socioeconomic data for Serbs, because of the animosity arisen during the war between 1991 and 1995. For the other 20 national minorities in Croatia, there is very little data or none at all. One such minority is certainly the Slovene national minority.

The Slovene minority in Croatia is specific: no political involvement, no political parties, low media coverage, failure to exercise rights, no discrimination, no social vulnerability. Therefore, data is hard to find. The data presented herein is official government data. It was available only for the state labour market and not for the private sector, and for minority education. Other data is missing, there is no database, and it would be necessary – not only for the Slovene minority but also for others – to do some extensive research.

The data concerning the situation of members of the Slovene national minority in the Croatian labour market is scarce. As there is no obligation to indicate nationality, such data cannot be realistically confirmed. In fact, the number of employees with a Slovene background is quite likely to be higher.

Data relating to the number of students involved in Slovene language learning is real, but it is not known whether all of them are also members of the Slovene national minority. Some learn Slovene out of a purely economic interest (Riman 2021b) and have no other (family) relations to the Slovene community in Croatia or the State of Slovenia.

The Croatian legislation is well-designed, but it is difficult to implement it in practice. Some national minorities (Roma, Serbs) seem to face more (negative) inequalities than others, but only because other minorities are less visible and the majority population does not know that they, too, live in Croatia. For some of them, being invisible is an option because they are afraid of possible political inconveniences and complications that may affect their present status. This certainly holds true of the Slovene national minority, which seems to be fading.

There is no or little data about the overall position of national minorities. Hitherto studies suggest that members of national minorities are subject to various forms of prejudice. The members of the Slovene national minority rarely experience hate speech in public areas but are sometimes confronted with it in

private situations and at the individual level. Existing research also shows that the members of the Slovene minority often experience misunderstanding and non-implementation of their rights because of the fear of othering or just because of the ignorance of the people who are in the position to introduce certain rights. The area where progress is visible is education, namely the increase in the number of students learning Slovene and schools where Slovene is taught as a minority language.

For the future, it would be important to research and analyse the political, economic and social inequalities among national minorities in Croatia, with a special emphasis on the Slovene minority. Data in such regard is lacking, which makes research in this field relevant and necessary.

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Notes

- ¹ The old minorities were: Hungarians, Italian, Czechs, Slovaks, Ruthenians, and Ukrainians (Tatalović 2001, 96).
- ² Some of the Germans decided, upon retiring, to move to Croatia where they have their houses/vacation houses. The climate was also a factor, as well as the cost of living, which can be cheaper (Danas.hr 2022).
- ³ National minorities have eight representatives in the Croatian parliament, three for the Serbian national minority, one for the Hungarians, one for the Italians, one for the Slovaks and Czechs,

one for the Slovenes, Montenegrins, Macedonians, Bosnians and Albanians, and one is for the remaining minorities. Because of the small number of votes they obtain, there is also the problem of legitimacy (Stojanović 2017).

- ⁴ The first Report refers to 2003.
- ⁵ This information was provided by Slovene language teachers who, formally, are employees of the Croatian Ministry of Education, Science and Sports, as well as selected professors from Croatian faculties.
- ⁶ The source is kept by the author.
- ⁷ The information was provided by a woman who had some negative experience in acquiring Croatian citizenship.
- ⁸ In Model A, all lessons are taught in the language and script of the national minority with compulsory learning of Croatian.
- ⁹ Model B is a bilingual system in which social science subjects as well as minority-related subjects are taught in separate classes in the minority language and script.
- ¹⁰ Model C in principle covers five hours of language learning a week, along with literature, history, geography, music, and art pertaining to the minority language. This is the most widely applied model.

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Anja Zorman, Monica Bertok Vatovec

Linguistic Development in Italian L1 and L2 in Italian Nursery Schools in Slovenia

Schools with Italian as the medium of instruction in Slovenia are open to all children and young people, regardless of their ethnic affiliation. The article addresses the impact of linguistically diverse classes on the linguistic development of children attending Italian nursery schools. The children's parents provided basic background information on the child's language use outside nursery school. The level of the children's communicative competence in Italian, in terms of listening comprehension and oral production, was measured by means of a standardised test. Although results may not always be statistically relevant due to the small number of participants, they show that the prevailing presence of children that only speak Slovene at home does not hinder the linguistic development of children that only speak Italian at home, and that the Slovene-only cohort clearly benefits from attending Italian nursery school.

Keywords: Italian national community, preschool education, linguistic development, LSGR – LJ, ethnolinguistic vitality.

Jezikovni razvoj v italijanščini kot J1 in J2 v vrtcih z italijanskim učnim jezikom v Sloveniji

V vrtce in šole z italijanskim učnim jezikom v Sloveniji se lahko vpišejo vsi otroci, učenci in dijaki, ne glede na etnično pripadnost. Prispevek se ukvarja z vplivom jezikovno heterogenih skupin na jezikovni razvoj otrok, ki obiskujejo italijanske vrtce. Starši otrok so posredovali osnovne informacije o jeziku oziroma jezikih, ki jih otroci uporabljajo izven vrtca. Raven sporazumevalne zmožnosti otrok v italijanščini, t. j. slušnega razumevanja in govornega izražanja, smo merili s pomočjo standardiziranega testa. Zaradi nizkega števila otrok, ki so bili vključeni v raziskavo, rezultati sicer niso vedno statistično relevantni, pa vendar kažejo, da večinska prisotnost otrok, ki prihajajo iz slovensko govorečih družin, ne ovira govornega razvoja otrok, ki prihajajo iz italijansko govorečih družin, in da pri otrocih iz slovensko govorečih družin obiskovanje italijanskega vrtca nedvomno bistveno pripomore k razvoju njihove sporazumevalne zmožnosti v italijanščini.

Ključne besede: italijanska narodna skupnost, predšolska vzgoja, jezikovni razvoj, LSGR – LJ, etnično-jezikovna vitalnost.

Correspondence address: Anja Zorman, Univerza na Primorskem, Fakulteta za humanistične študije, Titov trg 5, SI-6000 Koper/Capodistria, e-mail: anja.zorman@fhs.upr.si; Monica Bertok Vatovec, Giardino d'infanzia Delfino blu / Vrtec Delfino blu, Kolarska ulica 8, SI-6000, Koper/Capodistria, e-mail: monica.bertok@delfino-blu.si.

1. Introduction

Italian is an officially recognized minority language in the Slovene Littoral region where it is spoken as L1 by an estimated 3 % of the population (SORS 2002). Italian has national community language status for historical and cultural reasons. The official language status in the four municipalities in the Slovene Littoral grants children and young people the right to receive education in Italian from preschool to upper-secondary education. The right to receive education in one's first language is one of the core human rights defined by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and one of the key factors in maintaining and fostering the ethnolinguistic vitality of minorities (Giles et al. 1977; Harwood et al. 1994; UNESCO 2003; Ehala 2009; Bourhis & Landry 2012). In the Republic of Slovenia, Italian and Hungarian national communities are guaranteed the possibility of preserving and developing their language by the Constitution (1991, Article 46) and legislation. When ensuring the protection of national community languages, Slovenia follows the principle of autochthony, and therefore the rights of the two autochthonous ethnic groups do not depend on the number of their members (Zudič Antonič & Cerkvėnik 2019). Education in the national communities' language is regulated by the Act Regulating Special Rights of Members of the Italian and Hungarian Ethnic Communities in the Field of Education (2001) that sets out the specific educational and instruction goals for national communities, their organisation, the construction of the schools' network, and the way national educational and instruction programs are adapted. Schools in the Slovene Littoral that have Italian as the medium of instruction teach national curricular programs that are adapted to the educational and instruction needs of the Italian national community, including content on the Italian national community in Slovenia, Italian language and culture, and Italy in general.

Three nursery schools in the Slovene Littoral use Italian as medium of communication and instruction. They follow the objectives of the national Curriculum for Nursery Schools (*Kurikulum za vrtce*) (Bahovec et al. 1999). It emphasises the objectives concerning language acquisition and education that are to be achieved through children's active participation in the communicative process. Referring to nationally mixed areas in the Slovene Littoral and Prekmurje, the Curriculum stresses the importance of helping children establish good practices in to both the collective bilingualism of the area they live as well as individual bilingualism, where the decision taken by parents and children to receive education in L2 must be respected, while also fostering conditions for the development of both languages.

2. Preschool Education in Italian as a National Community Language in the Cross-Cultural Context of the Slovene Littoral

2.1 Legal Framework

The legal regulation of the status of Italian national community education in Slovenia is based on the London Memorandum, signed on 5 October 1954 and ratified by the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia on 25 October 1954. Provisions of the London Memorandum were agreed upon bilaterally in the Treaty of Osimo (1975), signed by the Republic of Italy and Yugoslavia. After achieving independence in 1991, the Republic of Slovenia became the legal successor of Yugoslavia to these agreements. Slovenia additionally signed (3 July 1997), ratified (4 October 2000) and enforced (1 January 2001) the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (Council of Europe 1992).

At present, the right of historic minorities in the Republic of Slovenia to receive education in their first language is enshrined in the Constitution and is regulated by laws, in particular by the Act Regulating Special Rights of Members of the Italian and Hungarian Ethnic Communities in the Field of Education, passed in 2001, and by the Kindergartens Act, the Basic School Act, the Gimnazija Act, and the Vocational Education Act, all passed in 1996.

The use of Italian as the medium of instruction is stipulated by Article 3 of Organisation and Financing of Education Act, passed in 1996, and it is required by Article 6 of the Basic School Act, Article 8 of the Gimnazija Act, and Article 8 of the Vocational Education Act. These articles also set out the compulsory learning of Italian in schools with Slovene as the medium of instruction that are situated in bilingual areas of the Slovene Littoral.

2.2 Background to Italian and National Community Preschool Education

Educational institutions with Italian as the medium of instruction were founded to offer education in L1 to Italian national community children living in Istria, both in Slovenia and Croatia. At the same time, these institutions have been open to all citizens, regardless of their ethnic affiliation.

The Report on the Realisation of Special Rights of Italian and Hungarian Ethnic Communities and their Members in the Republic of Slovenia, published in 1979 by the Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Slovenia, shows a continuous increase of children enrolled in Italian nursery schools in Slovenia between 1970, when 52 children were enrolled, and 1976 – with 99 children enrolled. This increase is partly correlated to growing interest of Slovene families and

families that migrated to Slovenia from ex-Yugoslav republics in enrolling their children in Italian nursery schools.

The research, conducted during the 1988/1989 school year by Monica (1991), involved 197 pupils attending grades five through eight in the three Slovene Littoral elementary schools with Italian as the medium of instruction. The research results show that most pupils involved in the study came from Slovene-only homes (44.5 %), followed by Slovene-Italian bilingual homes (38.9 %) and Italian-only homes (16.6 %). 42.1 % of respondents stated they spoke Italian with their mother and 50.3 % with their father. 44 % of pupils spoke Slovene with the mother and 39.2 % with the father. However, when asked in which language they were most proficient, 76.1 % said it was Italian, 20.8 % chose Slovene and 3.1 % indicated a language other than Italian or Slovene.

As part of the research on communicative competence in Italian L1, conducted by Žudič Antonič (2009) during the 2006/2007 school year, 35 eight-grade pupils were asked to state their L1. Almost half of the pupils (48 %) said they used both languages and a quarter (25 %) said their L1 was Slovene. Only 14 % of pupils answered they communicate in Italian with both parents. 17 % spoke both languages with their mother and 14 % with their father. More than half of the eight-graders involved in the research spoke only Slovene with both parents (54 % with their mothers and 51 % with their fathers). Pupils were given a written test to ascertain whether they had achieved the learning objectives stated in the curriculum. Results show that the majority of students (62.9 %) fully achieved the objectives of the written part, while 17 % did so partially and a fifth (20 %) did not. The linguistic competence results showed that 48.6 % of pupils fully achieved the curricular objectives, 37.1 % partially, while 14.3 % failed. The comparison with Slovene L1 showed a similar share of pupils that achieved learning goals fully in both tests, while there is a significant difference in the distribution of those who were successful partially and those who were not, to the advantage of Slovene L1 pupils. The difference may be attributed to a different level of the linguistic heterogeneity of the school population and most of all to the disparity in language used out of school, particularly at home. Since data were not cross-referenced with the pupils' L1, we cannot draw conclusions on the impact of linguistic heterogeneity on the competence of Italian L1 and bilingual speakers.

Linguistic heterogeneity in Italian schools has always been of great concern within the Italian national community and research results show an increase in the number of Slovene L1 speakers in schools with Italian as the medium of instruction in the fifteen-year period between the two studies. At the time the 1988/89 research was conducted, the debate on schools with Italian as the medium of instruction in Istria was split between their role as the institution responsible for maintaining and enhancing Italian national community ethnolinguistic vitality, which as such should be offered exclusively to Italian nationals, and their role as

the space of linguistic and cultural openness in the context of Slovenia's (then) future membership in the European Union, and should therefore continue to be open to all nationalities (Monica 1991). A decade and a half later, when Slovenia was already a member of the European Union, Zudič Antonič (2009) wrote that a strong presence of pupils and students, who are not members of the Italian national community, attending Italian schools in the Slovene Littoral could be seen as "problematic" if schools with Italian as the medium of instruction were considered guardians of Italian linguistic and cultural heritage in the area. The author argues that Italian schools in Slovenia follow their purpose fully, because they create conditions for the preservation of Italian linguistic and cultural heritage, as well as promote intercultural communication and positive attitude towards the other and those who are different. They do not focus on maintaining an exclusive and permanent affiliation to a single culture, instead contributing to developing pupils' and students' critical mind, openness, and tolerance in interactions between members of different ethnicities and cultures. Or as Sorgo et al. (2022, 74) point out, "schools with Italian as the language of instruction play a key role for both the Italian national community and the Slovene national community population, as they attach great importance to language learning and to the development of multilingualism and multiculturalism" in the bilingual and nationally mixed area of the Slovene Littoral.

Research conducted so far provides important insight into the development of education and educational institutions with Italian as the medium of instruction, which operate in the Slovene Littoral. However, all past research has focused on primary and secondary education. For preschool education, statistical data are available in terms of the number of children enrolled, but no further analyses were conducted on the ethnic affiliation of children, the languages they spoke outside nursery school, and their Italian language skills. We argue that data on primary and secondary education cannot simply be generalised to preschool education, since the nursery school population does not necessarily correspond, in terms of ethnic affiliation, to the primary and/or secondary school population. Children enrolled in Italian nursery schools do not necessarily enrol in Italian primary schools and vice versa.

The research conducted so far shows that Italian schools in Slovenia are faced with several problems. We argue that to understand how these problems manifest in preschool institutions and impact the educational process within those institutions requires (constant) research, as does finding appropriate solutions.

The paper addresses the following research questions:

- RQ 1: What is, at present, the linguistic composition in nursery schools with Italian as the medium of communication and instruction?
- RQ 2: How do contextual variables impact the linguistic development in Italian L1 and L2. The variables are:
 - a) The enrolment in Italian nursery schools (reason, length of attendance).

- b) The use of Italian outside of nursery school (quality use at home, extra-curricular activities, and other interactions).

3. Research Method

3.1 Design and Procedure

To identify if and to what extent linguistically diverse classes in Italian nursery schools in the Slovene Littoral impact linguistic development in Italian L1, L2, we collected data by means of a questionnaire, submitted to parents, and by a standardized language test, which measures levels of listening comprehension and oral production (*Lestvice splošnega govornega razvoja* LSGR – LJ). The LSGR – LJ scales (Marjanovič Umek et al. 2008), originally developed for Slovene, were adapted for the purpose of our research to Italian in terms of contents, culture-specific elements, and linguistic structures.

Data were collected in Italian nursery schools during the 2021/2022 school year. Parents were informed as part of parent-teacher meetings, conducted online, at the beginning of the school year, when the study objective and procedure were presented, and questionnaires filled in. Parents were also asked to sign a consent form.

3.2 Participants

The COVID-19 pandemic affected all human activity, including research (Sorgo & Novak Lukanovič 2020), which is why it was impossible to involve all children enrolled in Slovene Littoral nursery schools in the research. The study involved a total of 68 children, aged 4 to 6, meaning 67 % of children attending nursery schools in Koper and Ankarani were invited to participate in the research. Due to the pandemic, communication with parents took place via Zoom meetings, phone calls, and e-mail. Based on past experience, we can assume that even more parents would have consented to the participation if the project had been presented in person.

In the research 31 participants (45.6 %) involved were male and 37 (54.4 %) were female. With regards to age, 23 participants (33.8 %) were aged 48 to 59 months, 40 (58.8 %) 60 to 71 months and 5 (7.4 %) were aged 72 to 83 months. The division in age groups followed the LSGR – LJ scales (Marjanovič Umek et al. 2008, 75).

3.3 Data Analysis

Quantitative data analysis was performed through basic statistic and correlation coefficient calculations. Due to the very low number of participants, in particular

when these are broken up in terms of the L1 and age group, some statistical data have low evidentiary value. Nevertheless, they offer important insight into the current situation in Italian nursery schools, their associated problems, origin, and consequences.

4. Results and Discussion

4.2 The Linguistic Composition of the Italian Nursery School Population

The children attending Italian nursery schools can be L1 speakers of Italian, L2 learners of Italian, or may come from homes where Italian is spoken to varying degrees. To collect data on the children's home language, parents were asked to state their children's L1. The results, expressed in frequency and percentage of responses, are shown in Table 1. Data in columns indicate the number of children in individual age groups that are L1 speakers of the languages listed in rows.

Table 1: Children (f%) as L1 speakers in individual age groups per language

		Age groups							
		48–59		60–71		72–83		Total	
		f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Language	Italian	1	12.5	6	75.0	1	12.5	8	100.0
	Slovene	14	31.8	28	63.7	2	4.5	44	100.0
	Italian-Slovene	2	33.4	4	66.6	0	0.0	6	100.0
	Russian	3	75.0	0	0.0	1	25.0	4	100.0
	Ukrainian	0	0.0	1	100.0	0	0.0	1	100.0
	Bosnian	1	100.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	100.0
	Romany	0	0.0	1	50.0	1	50.0	2	100.0
	Serbian	2	100.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	100.0
	Total	23	33.8	40	58.8	5	7.4	68	100.0

Source: Own data.

From the data in Table 1, we can infer a substantial unbalance between the age groups, with 33.8 % of children falling into the youngest, 58.8 % into the middle, and 7.8 % into the oldest age group. This kind of unbalance compromises the comparison between age groups, as well as the significance of the results for the oldest age group, due to the extremely low number of children present. The inbalance between age groups does not accurately reflect the nursery schools' group composition, it merely shows the age distribution at the time of the testing, conducted in January 2022. Had it been postponed to the end of the school year, the distribution among age groups would have been significantly more homogeneous.

The linguistic composition of the sample in Table 1 shows that most children involved in the research ($N = 44$; $f = 64.7\%$) were L1 speakers of Slovene. There were 8 ($f = 11.8\%$) Italian L1 speaking children and 6 ($f = 8.8\%$) bilingual Italian-Slovene children. 4 children were L1 speakers of Russian ($f = 5.9\%$), 2 were Serbian ($f = 2.9\%$) and Romany speakers ($f = 2.9\%$), 1 was Ukrainian ($f = 1.5\%$) and Bosnian ($f = 1.5\%$). Compared to the primary school population data collected by Monica (1991) and Zudič Antonič (2009), the share of Slovene speaking children is significantly higher, the most significant decrease being in the group of children from bilingual Italian-Slovene families. Given that not all children enrolled in Italian nursery schools continue their education in primary schools with Italian as the medium of instruction, the comparison with past data may not be relevant. The collected data should therefore be interpreted by considering the parents' intention of enrolling their children in Italian primary schools.

4.2 Prospects to Continue Education in the Italian Elementary School

Parents were asked to state whether their children would continue their education at a school with Italian as the medium of instruction. Results, expressed in frequency and percentage of responses, are shown in Table 3 where the columns indicate the data on parents' intention to enrol their children in the Italian primary school, while the rows indicate the children's L1.

Table 2: Parents' intention (f%) to enrol their children in an Italian elementary school according to children's L1

		Prospects of enrolment in an Italian elementary school							
		Yes		No		Unsure		Total	
		f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Language	Italian	7	87.5	1	12.5	0	0.0	8	100.0
	Slovene	17	38.7	25	56.8	2	4.5	44	100.0
	Italian-Slovene	4	66.7	2	33.3	0	0.0	6	100.0
	Russian	4	100.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	4	100.0
	Ukrainian	0	0.0	1	100.0	0	0.0	1	100.0
	Bosnian	1	100.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	100.0
	Romany	2	100.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	100.0
	Serbian	2	100.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	100.0
	Total	37	54.5	29	42.6	2	2.9	68	100.0

Source: Own data.

Results in Table 3 show that 54.5 % of parents expressed the intention of enrolling their children in a primary school with Italian as the medium of instruction. The percentage is particularly high for Italian (87.5 %) and bilingual Italian-Slovene speaking children (66.7 %). Likewise, all children from linguistic backgrounds, other than Italian and/or Slovene, except the Ukrainian child, will presumably continue their education in Italian schools. With 38.7 % of affirmative answers, the percentage is also relatively high for Slovene speaking children. However, more than half of the parents of Slovene speaking children (56.8 %) do not intend to enrol their children in the Italian school. The enrolment of these children in Italian nursery schools must be based on some other reason, rather than on the desire to receive education in Italian. The rationale behind the parents' decisions is discussed below (see Chapter 4.4).

The data on the parents' intention to enrol their children in Italian schools confirm that comparison of data on the linguistic and/or ethnic composition of the nursery school population to data collected on primary school population (Monica 1991; Zudič Antonič 2009) is inconsequential and reinforces our argument that data on nursery schools need and should continue to be collected.

4.3 Length of Children's Attendance in Italian Nursery Schools

Besides the linguistic heterogeneity and discontinuity of education in the vertical, Italian nursery schools also face discontinuity at the preschool level. The phenomenon is partly related to migrations, but partly also to the parents' choice to switch between Italian and Slovene nursery schools. Table 3 shows how long (M) children involved in the research had been attending Italian nursery schools by the time the study started being conducted. Data are shown according to age groups (columns) and children's L1 (rows). Data on migrant children are not presented.

Table 3: Length of attendance (M) in Italian nursery schools according to individual age groups and L1

		Attendance										
		Age group										
		48–59			60–71			72–83			TOTAL	
		N	M	SD	N	M	SD	N	M	SD	N	M
Language	Italian	1	3.0	0	6	3.2	1.3	1	4.0	0	8	3.4
	Slovene	14	3.0	0.9	28	4.0	0.7	2	1.5	0.71	44	2.8
	Italian-Slovene	2	2.0	1.4	4	3.0	1.4	0	/	/	6	2.5
	TOTAL	17	2.7	0.9	38	3.4	1.0	3	2.7	1.53	58	2.9

Source: Own data.

Although statistically insignificant, the figures in Table 3 show a tendency for a gradual increase in the length of attendance correlated to the children’s age in the group of Italian speaking and bilingual children. In the group of Slovene speaking children, the expected increase in the length of attendance is present for the first and second age group, while there is a significant drop in the 72- to 83-month age group, with merely a year-and-a-half-long medium attendance that is even lower than the medium attendance in the youngest age group (48 to 59 months, $M = 3.0$). The results for the oldest age group of children that only speak Slovene at home children have no statistical significance ($N = < 5$) and as such do not allow for a valid interpretation.

4.4 Enrolment Reason

To understand why almost half of the children involved in the research (42.6 %) were likely not going to continue education in Italian primary schools, as shown in Table 2, parents were asked to state the main reason for the decision to enrol their child in an Italian nursery school. The results, expressed in the frequency and percentage of answers, are shown in Table 4: the rows show data for the children’s L1 and the columns present data on why parents decided to enrol their children in a nursery school with Italian as the medium of communication and instruction.

Table 4: Enrolment reason (f%) for Italian nursery schools according to children’s L1

		Enrolment reason													
		Italian national community		Multi-lingualism		Italian acquisition		Slovene schools full		Proximity to home		Didactic approach ¹		Total	
		f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Language	Italian	4	50.0	0	0.0	2	25.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	25.0	8	100.0
	Slovene	7	15.9	16	36.4	20	45.5	1	2.2	0	0.0	0	0.0	44	100.0
	Italian-Slovene	4	66.6	1	16.7	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	16.7	0	0.0	6	100.0
	Russian	0	0.0	3	75.0	1	25.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	4	100.0
	Ukrainian	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	100.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	100.0
	Bosnian	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	100.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	100.0
	Romany	2	100.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	100.0
	Serbian	0	0.0	1	50.0	1	50.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	100.0
	Total	17	25.0	21	30.9	26	38.2	1	1.5	1	1.5	2	2.9	68	100.0

Source: Own data.

Results in Table 4 show that the main reasons given by parents for choosing an Italian nursery school include the development of their children's communicative competence in Italian (38.2 %), the importance of multilingualism (30.9 %), and Italian national community affiliation (25.0 %). Didactic approach (2.9 %), proximity to school (1.5 %), and the lack of possibility to enrol their children in a Slovene nursery school (1.5 %) appear to have little bearing on the parents' choice of nursery school.

For parents of Italian speaking children and bilingual Italian-Slovene children, the most important reason to enrol their children in an Italian nursery school was reportedly their ethnic identity (50.0 % and 66.6 % respectively), while the parents of Slovene speaking children said it offers the possibility to develop communicative competence in Italian (45.5 %), with the importance of multilingualism (36.4 %) coming second, which is characteristic of the geographic area and the times. The two reasons also figured prominently among parents of Russian, Ukrainian, Bosnian, and Serbian speaking children. The two Romany speaking children involved in the research were adopted into an Italian national community family with their adoptive parents attributing their decision to enrol the children in an Italian nursery school to the family's ethnic origin.

By examining the data on children's L1 and the reason they were enrolled in Italian nursery schools, we can see that these appear to be primarily institutions aimed at developing communicative competence in Italian, predominantly as L2, and the development of children's multilingual practices and intercultural competence. This information is certainly at the root of the apprehension experienced by the Italian ethnic community, namely that educational institutions with Italian as the medium of instruction may not be able to continue guaranteeing the quality linguistic development of Italian speaking children and therefore fulfilling their institutional role in maintaining the linguistic and ethnic vitality of the Italian national community. To verify if such apprehension is justified, children were tested using a listening comprehension and oral production test. Testing results are presented in sections 4.7 and 4.8.

4.5 Quality Use of Italian in Family Interactions

Research shows that the highest levels of bilingualism are developed by speakers who live in areas with strong institutional support for the minority language and who have a complex network of linguistic contacts in both languages, particularly in the minority language (Landry & Allard 1992). Parents were asked to answer how often their children interact in Italian with parents and siblings in activities that involve written language, such as reading, riddles, matching, cross-words, and similar. Results, expressed in frequency and percentage of responses, are shown in Table 5 where the columns indicate data on the frequency of shared quality use of Italian, while rows indicate the children's L1.

Table 5: Time (f%) spent in language development activities at home

		Family quality use of Italian									
		Never		Rarely		Often		Almost every day		Total	
		f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Language	Italian	0	0.0	0	0.0	3	37.5	5	62.5	8	100.0
	Slovene	6	13.6	14	31.8	19	43.2	5	11.4	44	100.0
	Italian-Slovene	0	0.0	1	16.7	2	33.3	3	50.0	6	100.0
	Russian	2	50.0	1	25.0	1	25.0	0	0.0	4	100.0
	Ukrainian	1	100.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	100.0
	Bosnian	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	100.0	0	0.0	1	100.0
	Romany	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	100.0	2	100.0
	Serbian	1	50.0	1	50.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	100.0
	Total	10	14.7	17	25.0	26	38.2	15	22.1	68	100.0

Source: Own data.

As expected, Italian and bilingual Italian-Slovene speaking children precede other children involved in the research in terms of family time spent in activities that foster language development, with 62.5 % and 50.0 % respectively of parents stating that this takes place almost every day, with 37.5 % and 33.3 % of parents respectively saying it takes place often. For reasons stated above, Romany speaking children are likewise involved in quality family interactions almost every day.

Within the group of Slovene speaking children, the majority of parents (43.2 %) report that family members often communicate with children in Italian as part of written-language activities, while 11.4 % of parents say this takes place almost every day. A large share of parents, almost a third (31.8 %), rarely spend quality time with their children in Italian, and 13.6 % never.

The frequency of time dedicated to written-language activities in Italian is relatively low for Russian, Bosnian, Serbian and Ukrainian speaking children.

4.6 Italian Use in Out-of-School Interactions

Parents were also asked whether their children used Italian in their spare time with friends and in extracurricular activities such as sports, music lessons, and similar. The data in the columns shows the use of language according to the individual children's L1 languages (rows).

Results in Table 6 show that all Italian speaking and most bilingual Italian-Slovene children (83.3 %) participate in conversations in Italian in their spare time and in extracurricular activities. The same appears to be the case for over a third of Slovene speaking children (36.4 %), while a large share (63.6 %) does not. Results for the Slovene group are comparable to data on parents' intention to enrol their children in Italian primary school with 38.7 % of affirmative and 56.8 % of negative answers. Correlation between the two variables proved to

be significant: $r = .425$, p (two-tailed) < 0.01 . Data on the frequency of out-of-school use also correlate significantly with data on the quality use of Italian within family interactions: $r = .478$, p (two-tailed) < 0.01 . Children who, according to their parents' declared intentions, are more likely to attend an Italian primary school, are reportedly engaged both in language development activities with their family members and in communicative interactions in Italian in their spare time and as part of the extracurricular activities they attend.

Table 6: Use of Italian (f%) in out-of-school interactions

		Use of Italian out of nursery school							
		Yes		No		Total		Total	
		f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Language	Italian	8	100.0	0	0.0	8	100.0	8	100.0
	Slovene	16	36.4	22	63.6	44	100.0	44	100.0
	Italian-Slovene	5	83.3	1	16.7	6	100.0	6	100.0
	Russian	2	50.0	2	50.0	4	100.0	4	100.0
	Ukrainian	0	0.0	1	100.0	1	100.0	1	100.0
	Bosnian	0	0.0	1	100.0	1	100.0	1	100.0
	Romany	2	100.0	0	0.0	2	100.0	2	100.0
	Serbian	0	0.0	2	100.0	2	100.0	2	100.0
	Total	37	54.5	29	42.6	68	100.0	68	100.0

Source: Own data.

4.7 Level of Listening Comprehension Ability

Research on language immersion in bilingual educational programs show there are numerous advantages for minority L2 learners, but some difficulties have been reported for minority L1 learners, such as slowing down the academic progress of minority L1 learners and influencing aspects of their language use (see Hickey & Ó Cainín 2001). Table 7 shows results (M) of listening comprehension testing, according to the children's L1 (rows) and age (columns).

Table 7 shows that Italian speaking children develop their listening comprehension ability gradually with age. Data show that having a prevailing number of children, who are speakers of a language other than Italian and/or are raised in a bilingual family, does not at all compromise the development of listening comprehension in Italian speaking children. The results achieved for the listening comprehension test are comparable to results achieved by monolingual Slovene children, as studied by Marjanovič Umek et al. (2008) as part of the development of the LSGR – LJ scales, namely $M = 73.6$ in the 48 to 59 months age group ($N = 86$), $M = 85.5$ in the 60 to 71 months age group ($N = 90$), and $M = 95.1$ in the 72 to 83 months age group ($N = 97$).

Table 7: Average (M) result on the listening comprehension test in individual age groups according to the children's L1

		Listening comprehension							
		Age group							
		48-59		60-71		72-83		TOTAL	
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	N
Language	Italian	90.0	0	90.8	4.8	93.0	0	91.2	8
	Slovene	64.9	12.3	81.2	9.1	64.0	11.3	70.0	44
	Italian-Slovene	88.5	2.1	88.5	5.5	/	/	88.5	6
	TOTAL	81.1	14.6	86.8	9.1	78.5	18.5	83.3	58

Source: Own data.

The listening comprehension testing results do not substantiate the evidence reported by Hickey and Ó Cainín (2001) on hindering linguistic development in L1 for L1 learners, while the benefits for L2 Slovene speaking learners are well observed, in particular when passing from the youngest to the medium age group. The research results show a significant drop in the oldest age group, consistent with the drop in the length of attendance in the Italian nursery school (Table 3). In any case, the number of participants in this age group (N = 2) has no (statistical) significance.

Research conducted by Hickey and Ó Cainín (2001) studied the effects of linguistic composition of nursery school groups (predominant minority L1 vs predominant minority L2 vs predominant bilingual) on the percentage and mean of utterances in the minority language, showing that the bilingual children were most sensitive to the group mix, with significantly lower percentage of utterances in the minority language in the majority-language-dominant group. They adapted to the communicative situation similarly as in life. Table 7 shows no difference in the level of listening comprehension for the youngest and the middle age group. No reliable conclusion can be drawn on whether this is consistent with their ability to interact according to the communicative situation or whether this is related to some other factor, due to the statistical insignificance of the collected results.

4.8 Level of Oral Communication Ability

Table 8 shows data on oral production that are consistent with data on listening comprehension presented in Table 5. The correlation between the two test results proved to be strong and significant: $r = .688$, p (two-tailed) < 0.01 .

For comparison, monolingual Slovene children (Marjanovič Umek et al. 2008, 75) achieved $M = 59.7$ points in the 48 to 59 months age group (N = 82), $M = 75.7$ in the 60 to 71 months age group (N = 87), and $M = 88.9$ in the 72 to 83 months age group (N = 98). The overall results of our research are lower

than those achieved by monolingual Slovene children. This is true particularly for Slovene speaking children and bilingual children in the middle age group appear to be significantly behind the Italian speaking children. The latter appear to advance in their linguistic development at a similar pace than monolingual Slovene children who had participated in the study by Marjanovič Umek et al. (2008).

Table 8: Average (M) result on the oral communication test in individual age groups according to children's LI

		Oral production							
		Age group							
		48-59		60-71		72-83		TOTAL	
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	N
Language	Italian	78.0	0	79.0	21.6	82.0	0	79.7	8
	Slovene	29.6	17.6	52.7	23.9	45.5	23.3	42.6	44
	Italian-Slovene	56.5	37.4	68.5	9.0	/	/	62.5	6
	TOTAL	54.7	23.2	66.7	24.3	63.7	26.8	61.7	58

Source: Own data.

We calculated correlations between listening comprehension results and oral production on the one hand and the likelihood of continuing education in Italian, the quality of Italian used at home, and interactions in Italian out-of-school. Testing results proved to be correlated significantly only with the time families share in language developing activities $r = -.255$, p (two-tailed) < 0.01 for listening comprehension and $r = -.249$, p (two-tailed) < 0.01 for oral production. The correlation is negative due to inverted values attributed to answers pertaining to quality family time. Results indicate that the more time a child was engaged in interactions with family members in activities that foster language development, the higher the results they achieved in both listening comprehension and oral production tests. Although testing results did not prove to be significantly statistically correlated with the prospective attendance of Italian primary schools and out-of-school peer interaction in Italian, we observed a tendency towards a positive effect on language development, measured with listening comprehension and oral production scales, for both. Results confirm that massive and quality linguistic input in education institutions (Zudič Antonič 2018) and in family and other out-of-school interactions (Landry & Allard 1992) is critical to the optimal linguistic development of children and young people in bilingual settings.

From a didactic point of view, the significant diversity in levels of communicative competence of children enrolled in nursery schools with Italian as the medium of instruction in Slovenia, in particular in oral production, that emerges from average (M) and standard deviation (SD) values (Table 8), calls for differ-

entiated approaches when working with children who do not speak Italian outside the nursery school and to ensure the quality linguistic education of children who are members of the Italian national community and/or are Italian or bilingual Slovene-Italian speakers at home.

5. Conclusions

Even though Italian L1 speaking children in the Slovene Littoral have a right to receive education in their language, living up to the objective to maintain and foster Italian national community ethnolinguistic vitality has proven to be a challenge for preschool educational institutions. The linguistic heterogeneity in Italian schools has always been of great concern within the Italian national community, fearing that schools with Italian as the medium of instruction might not be able to offer the necessary institutional support for the safeguarding and fostering of Italian ethnic community vitality. Although not altogether comparable, the research results show that with time, the share of Italian speaking children, enrolled in schools with Italian as the medium of instruction, has remained stable, while there has been a significant drop in the number of bilingual children and a considerable increase in the number of Slovene L1 children.

The fear that educational institutions with Italian as the medium of instruction might not be able to fulfil their institutional role in maintaining the linguistic and ethnic vitality of the Italian national community is even stronger at the level of preschool education, since Italian nursery schools are not granted the same concession, namely, a reduced number of children per class, as is true for primary and upper-secondary schools. Smaller groups allow to differentiate teaching more efficiently and as such are an important factor in the learners' academic achievement. A significant number of children enrolled in Italian nursery schools in Slovenia, who are not members of the Italian community, strongly contributes to the complexity of the didactic process, while the large number of children per class means that differentiation and individualisation of didactic approaches cannot always be successfully applied.

Although our research shows that the linguistic development of Italian speaking children is not hindered by the significant presence of children whose L1 is not Italian or who are not bilingual Italian-Slovene speakers, we are confident that Italian nursery schools in Slovenia need more institutional and didactic support, which can be identified through research.

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Notes

- ¹ Nursery schools with Slovene as the medium of instruction carry out activities aimed at exposing children to the Italian language and its presence in the area, while in nursery schools with Italian as the medium of instruction, immersion into Italian culture – and language – through curricular contents, excursions, and workshops conducted by visiting professionals etc. is more extensive and intensive. The didactic approach towards plurilingualism and intercultural dialogue is essentially the same, but the context, the activities and the role of Italian are different.

Laura Kovač, Joca Zurc, Mateja Pšunder

Teachers' Attitudes towards Roma Pupils from the Perspective of Roma Pupils and Their Mothers

In this article, we will discuss the case of fair and inclusive schools that are considerate of the specific and unique needs of their pupils and offer quality education for all. We will highlight the most important indicators of inclusive education and focus on research that confirms the importance of the teachers' willingness to establish good interpersonal relationships with their pupils. In the empirical section, we will introduce the results of our qualitative study. Based on interviews conducted with 20 mothers and 20 primary school pupils in two Slovene Roma settlements, we explored how pupils and their mothers perceive teachers' attitudes towards Roma children. Our findings were very promising, for they showed that the interviewed pupils and their mothers had a positive experience with the teachers and their pedagogical work with Roma children. However, we should not ignore the few cases that pointed to ethnic discrimination towards Roma pupils.

Keywords: Roma pupils, relationships with teachers, inclusive education, ethnic discrimination, qualitative research.

Odnosi učiteljev do romskih učencev z vidika romskih učencev in njihovih mater

V prispevku obravnavamo pravično in inkluzivno šolo, ki upošteva različne potrebe učencev in vsem omogoča kakovostno šolanje. Izpostavimo pomembnejše indikatorje uresničevanja inkluzije ter se posvetimo raziskavam, ki izpostavljajo pomen učiteljeve skrbi za vzpostavljanje dobrih medosebnih odnosov z učenci. V empiričnem delu prispevka prikazujemo rezultate kvalitativne raziskave. Na podlagi intervjujev z 20 romskimi osnovnošolci ter 20 romskimi materami, opravljenih v romskih naseljih v Sloveniji, smo raziskali, kako slednji zaznavajo odnos učiteljev do romskih učencev. Izsledki naše raziskave so spodbudni, saj kažejo, da intervjuvani romski učenci in matere doživljajo odnos učiteljev in njihovo pedagoško delo z romskimi učenci pretežno pozitivno. Vendar pa ob tem ne gre prezreti tudi primerov, ki kažejo, da se romski učenci v šoli še vedno srečujejo z diskriminacijo, ki temelji na etnični pripadnosti.

Ključne besede: romski učenci, odnosi z učitelji, inkluzija v šoli, etnična diskriminacija, kvalitativna raziskava.

Correspondence address: Laura Kovač, Ljudska univerza Lendava, Kidričeva ulica 1, SI-9220 Lendava, Slovenija, e-mail: laura.kovac@student.um.si; Joca Zurc, Univerza v Mariboru, Filozofska fakulteta, Oddelek za pedagogiko, Koroška cesta 160, SI-2000 Maribor, Slovenija, e-mail: joca.zurc@um.si; Mateja Pšunder, Univerza v Mariboru, Filozofska fakulteta, Oddelek za pedagogiko, Koroška cesta 160, SI-2000 Maribor, Slovenija, e-mail: mateja.pšunder@um.si.

1. Introduction

The Slovene Roma are usually classified as members of the lowest social classes. Even though their social status varies from region to region, it is still significantly lower than that of the rest of the population, which also affects, among other things, their low level of education (Ministry of Education and Sport 2004). Roma pupils' academic success depends on many factors, i.e., their linguistic and cultural differences, teaching content that does not take into account the characteristics of the Roma community, poor pre-existing knowledge before entering school, differing behavioural and thought patterns, different habits (Peček Čuk & Lesar 2006, 164), an undisputed environment, poor work habits (Lesar & Dežman 2012, 209), inadequate living conditions for homework assignments, uneducated parents, pupils skipping and leaving class (Krek & Vogrinc 2005, 8; Vonta & Jager 2013, 110), the absence of trained professionals who have experience in working with Roma children, low expectations regarding their school performance, lack of confidence in the school system, and Roma parents' poor involvement in the educational process and their lack of cooperation with the school (Bešter & Medvešek 2007, 139).

Pupils' performance and academic success are also significantly influenced by the school itself, especially its dominant culture, the school atmosphere, and interpersonal relationships. School is not only a place for obtaining knowledge, but also a space in which pupils can encounter other individuals with whom to shape important relationships. Numerous studies (e.g., Cornelius-White 2007, 127; Furrer & Skinner 2003, 159; Hamre & Pianta 2001, 634) have confirmed that pupils' relationships with their peers and teachers are significantly linked to the well-being and acceptance of the pupils into the school environment, their learning performance, and their academic success. Vonta and Jager (2013, 21) state that schools cannot resolve all the factors that affect the educational success of Roma pupils, but that they can change or have a significant impact on at least some of them, thereby increasing the pupils' chances for academic success.

Based on this, we decided to explore how Roma pupils and their mothers from Roma settlements in Prekmurje and Dolenjska perceive the pedagogical work and attitude of teachers towards Roma pupils in Slovene elementary schools and whether their attitudes and relationships with the children contribute to the poor academic performance of Roma pupils. We wished to determine whether the teachers' attitudes towards Roma pupils were encouraging, supportive, understanding, and non-discriminatory. Through this study, we aimed to give a voice and an opportunity to the members of the Roma community and thereby raise awareness of the current challenges in the primary school education system.

The article consists of a theoretical section and an empirical section. The first focuses on a fair and inclusive school that considers the varying needs of its

pupils and thereby offers quality education for all. We considered social acceptance, respect, and a sense of belonging as important indicators of social inclusion and emphasized that with the realization of all cultures within the school community we could help to create a tolerant coexistence. At the same time, this type of school community could help the pupils that belong to vulnerable groups to have different and more pleasant interpersonal experiences than in wider society. Next, we focused on the importance of the teacher's willingness to establish good interpersonal relationships with their pupils, which significantly influences the involvement and activity of those pupils in the classroom. We also introduced the results of our study to confirm that positive relationships between teachers and pupils are not only related to the well-being of the pupils at school, but also to their learning success and behaviour. In the empirical section, however, we will introduce the results of our qualitative study that focused on Roma pupils' and mothers' perceptions of teachers' pedagogical work and their attitudes towards Roma pupils. We aimed to determine whether their relationships affected the inclusive orientation of the studied elementary schools and whether the teachers' attitudes towards Roma pupils were an important factor that contributed to the lesser academic success of Roma pupils.

2. Creating a Fair and Inclusive School

Pupils enter school with varying prior knowledge, experiences, skills, abilities, interests, as well as wishes and plans for the future. Thus, it is the school's job to take into consideration all of the children's unique traits and desires and offer them a fair, successful, satisfying, and quality education (according to Lesar 2013a). In modern democratic societies, fair education is one of the most important characteristics of national education systems. When we talk about justice within the educational system, we also refer to social justice in general (Medveš et al. 2008, 75).

A fair school, according to Peček and Lesar (2006, 12), is one in which the processes and activities are equally accessible to all pupils. In this case, it is allowed or even necessary for underprivileged and privileged pupils not to be treated equally, so that the underprivileged can also benefit from the learning process. Among the latter, Rawls (1999, cited in Peček & Lesar 2006, 13) mentions those with lower social status (often typical for the Roma community) and the less naturally gifted. It is important to add that the privileged are not supposed to be punished because of their initial advantages, which are neither fair nor unjust. Only the ways in which the fundamental social institutions deal with the pupils' basic differences can be considered fair or unfair.

In the past, Slovene primary schools had to deal with various cases of group exclusion, which confirm that the school system was unfair, as these groups did not have the opportunity to develop to their full potential. According to Lesar

(2009, 10) these groups included pupils with special needs and ethnic minorities (Roma and children of immigrants from the former Republic of Yugoslavia). In contrast, it is necessary to advocate for an inclusive school, which tends to “reduce all exclusionary procedures and devaluation of pupils based on disabilities, race, gender, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion and other factors that make school life even more difficult” (Peček & Lesar 2006, 28).

Inclusive schools are meant to introduce a series of adjustments that take into account the unique and varying needs of its pupils. Lesar (2013a) highlights social acceptance, respect, and a sense of belonging as important indicators of inclusion. Namely, inclusive schools are supposed to create a culture that does not give priority to the values of certain dominant groups, but rather focuses on including all the cultures of its pupils and promotes tolerant coexistence. At the same time, Lesar (2013b) highlights that teachers and schools, the latter embedded in the socio-economic and cultural relations within an individual society, can help their pupils have more positive experiences in society. With their knowledge and engagement, as well as the awareness that they can influence their pupils, teachers can prevent the migration of existing relationships from wider society to the school environment as well as stop enlarging the differences between individuals, especially between the nation's members of the majority and the members of marginalized groups.

3. The Importance of Establishing Good Relationships between Teachers and Pupils

Teacher-pupil relationships can significantly influence pupils' development and their success in various areas of life (Peklaj & Pečjak 2015, 71). According to the PISA survey (OECD 2015, 2), positive and constructive relationships between teachers and pupils are key to promoting the pupils' social and emotional well-being. The results of this survey showed that, on average, in OECD countries, pupils who reported having good relationships with their teachers also made friends more easily, were more satisfied with their school, and had a stronger sense of belonging. A study by Chiu et al. (2016, 191) also confirmed that teacher-pupil relationships have a significant impact on pupils' well-being and their sense of belonging to their class or school. The same study demonstrated that pupils' sense of belonging to the school depends not only on relationships with their peers but also on those with their teachers. In another study, Uslu and Gizir (2016, 74) concluded that relationships between teachers and pupils can strongly influence pupils' sense of belonging and feeling that they are a part of the school. Other authors (Hamre & Pianta 2001, 634; Ottová-Jordan et al. 2015, 88) have even stated that pupils' well-being at school depends on their relationships with their teachers and peers. Hamre and Pianta (2001, 634) similarly determined that having a positive relationship with teachers is crucial, as they can help chil-

dren feel more comfortable at school, build more meaningful relationships with peers, and have a greater sense of safety.

Furrer and Skinner (2003, 159) pointed out that a teacher's relationship with their pupils is not only related to the pupils' well-being in the classroom, but also to their perception of learning. In this study, pupils who felt valued by their teachers were more likely to report feeling happy in the classroom. They even found school activities more interesting and fun. On the other hand, pupils who felt unimportant or ignored by their teachers reported to be bored and angry when they had to participate in learning activities. Based on previous research, Juvonen (2006, 659) pointed out that relationships between teachers and pupils that are based on support and characterized by a low level of dependence and conflict make it much easier for children to function at school. Such relationships are especially important for pupils who lack social support in their home environment. Moritz Rudasill et al. (2010, 406) came to similar conclusions, confirming that high-quality relationships between teachers and pupils have a positive effect on children, especially on pupils who come from less stimulating environments.

Hamre and Pianta (2001, 634) determined that negative attitudes reflected in conflicts and dependence on teachers can be an important predictor of pupils' grades and achievements on standardized knowledge tests. They can also predict the work habits of pupils in elementary schools. Cornelius-White (2007, 127) studied the relational characteristics of teachers (warmth, empathy, authenticity, non-directiveness, stimulation of higher thought processes, stimulation with challenges, adaptation to individual and social differences) in connection with pupils' achievements. He found that the associations of these variables with cognitive variables were above average, especially critical/creative thinking and academic achievements, while associations with IQ, grades, and perceived achievements were at a medium level. Associations with scientific achievement and performance in the field of social sciences, however, were very low. Another study also confirmed that teacher-pupil relationships significantly impact pupils' academic achievements. McCormick and O'Connor (2014, 10) stated that conflicts between teachers and pupils are more frequent at schools associated with lower reading achievement of elementary school pupils. We can also draw conclusions about the connection between teacher support and pupils' academic achievements from another Slovene study conducted by Puklek Levpušček and Zupančič (2009). The authors found that younger adolescents who perceive their teachers positively express more positive motivational beliefs and achieve better results in mathematics. Pupils who rated their mathematics teachers as responsive and helpful, and who evaluated their work positively, were more successful at mathematics compared to their classmates with negative teacher experiences (Puklek Levpušček & Zupančič 2009, 562).

Research further showed a connection between teacher-pupil relationships and pupil behaviour. O'Connor et al. (2011, 120) determined that quality relationships between teachers and pupils predict fewer behavioural problems and help prevent behavioural issues in the later stages of pupils' development. Obsuth et al. (2021, 17) concluded that a positive relationship between teachers and pupils serves as a protective factor against behavioural problems (aggression and delinquency) in adolescents. Children aged 10 who reported having better relationships with their teachers were less likely to be involved in delinquent behaviour later on at the age of 12, 15 and 17. Similarly, Archambault et al. (2017, 1707) found that pupils who had close relationships with their teachers reported greater behavioural adjustments compared to those who had less positive relationships with their teachers. Conflicting relationships between teachers and pupils have proved to be especially harmful for boys. Research has also confirmed that relationships between teachers and pupils are strongly related to the occurrence of peer violence. Thus, Marengo et al. (2018, 1211) found that pupils who were victims of violence or bullies perceived their relationships with teachers as more conflictual compared to other pupils who were not involved in any form of violent behaviour. Pupils who were both bullies and victims reported having more conflictual relationships with teachers than those who were just bullies. On the other hand, pupils who were only victims of violence reported having a similarly conflictual relationship with their teachers as the pupils who were both victims and bullies. The latter turned out to be the group that had the worst relationship with their teachers.

The research presented above shows a significant connection between teacher-pupil relationships and the pupils' academic success, behaviour, and well-being at school. These findings further point to the importance of good and healthy teacher-pupil relationships. Peček and Munda (2015, 174) investigated the attitude of teachers towards Roma pupils on a sample of 77 Roma elementary school pupils from Maribor. The results of their study showed that the majority of pupils who were included in the study had positive experiences with their teachers, while 4 pupils gave negative descriptions of their teachers and mentioned cases of discrimination. Of the pupils, 14 gave a mixed description of their teachers. However, we should not forget that the study also confirmed that teachers are not fully aware of the importance of their influence on the learning performance of Roma pupils (Lesar & Dežman 2012, 218; Peček et al. 2006, 161).

4. Empirical Research

In the following section, we present the results of our empirical research, in which we tried to find out how Roma pupils and their mothers perceive teachers' pedagogical work and their attitudes towards Roma pupils. The paper introduces some of the results of a more extensive empirical study, which was conducted as

the basis of a master's thesis at the Department of Pedagogy at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Maribor (Kovač 2021).

4.1 Research Method and Sample

We used an empirical qualitative research method and included a non-random occasional sample of 20 Roma pupils (from Slovene Roma settlements) in the third educational period of primary school in the 2019/2020 school year. We decided to conduct the interviews in Prekmurje and Dolenjska because these two regions are known to have the largest number of community members with the most noticeable social differences (Government of the Republic of Slovenia 2017, 7–11). The interviews in Prekmurje were arranged directly with the interviewed subjects, most of whom, just like the first author of the article, originate from the Roma settlement in Dolga vas and have children in the third educational period of primary school. Some interviews, however, were conducted with the residents of another Roma settlement in Prekmurje (Pušča) – the interviewees were not the author's acquaintances but were recommended by them. For the interviews in Dolenjska, we contacted the Roma activator employed at the Novo Mesto Developmental Education Centre, who made appointments with the interviewees and accompanied us to the Roma settlements during the interviews. These were conducted in the months after the distance education period, right after the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Slovenia. The pupils had just returned to school and had only spent a month back in the classroom. We interviewed 10 Roma pupils from Prekmurje and 10 from Dolenjska, of which 12 were girls and 8 were boys. One of the interviewed pupils (from Dolenjska), had failed that year, nine had finished school with a 2, sufficient knowledge (two from Prekmurje and seven from Dolenjska), seven pupils had finished with a 3, good knowledge (five from Prekmurje and two from Dolenjska), and two girls had finished with a 2, very good knowledge (both from Prekmurje). One of the interviewed pupils from Prekmurje could not provide information on her grades. The interviewed Roma pupils from Prekmurje lived in two Roma settlements and attended four different primary schools, while the pupils in Dolenjska, who also came from two separate Roma settlements, attended three different primary schools.

Besides Roma pupils, the study also included the mothers of Roma children. Of these, ten were from Dolenjska and ten from Prekmurje. To be precise, our sample included 16 mothers of the interviewed Roma children and four other mothers, whose children we did not interview. On average, each of the interviewed mothers had 3.2 children. Ten of them had not completed primary school, seven had a primary school education, and three a secondary vocational education. Of the mothers, eleven had work experience, the remaining nine had never been employed, nor had they taken on any occasional jobs.

4.2 Research Instruments and Data Collection Procedures

We collected our data from a semi-structured interview with predefined basic open-ended questions, which, in some cases, were followed by sub-questions that arose naturally during the interviews.

The data was collected between July 2020 and August 2020, which is when the interviews in the Roma settlements in Prekmurje (Dolga vas and Pušča) and in Dolenjska (Žabjak-Brezje and Šmihel) were conducted. In Prekmurje, the majority of the participants were interviewed on the premises of the Multi-purpose Roma Centre Dolinsko-Dolga vas, while the rest of the interviews were conducted in the subjects' homes. All interviews in Prekmurje were conducted in a calm environment without any disruptions. In Dolenjska, the subjects were interviewed at home, mostly in their backyards, some of which were located next to the road or in family yards and louder environments where it was not possible to ensure enough peace and quiet. Some of the interviews were disrupted by small children.

The interviews were conducted by the first author of the article, who explained the purpose of the study to all the interviewed subjects and asked them to answer the questions honestly. In Dolenjska, where the author did not know the interviewees, she also had to introduce herself and inform them of her origin. During the relaxed informal gatherings in Dolenjska, we had the opportunity to get to know the subjects and explain the purpose of our visit. Nevertheless, some of the mothers were slightly tense and less relaxed during the conversations, since they were not actively involved or included in their children's educational process. We also encountered quite a few organizational obstacles, as we had to wait for or even go in search of the interviewees who forgot about our appointment. We did not encounter such problems in Prekmurje.

All interviews were conducted individually and in private. The conversations during the interviews were held in the Slovene language. Before each interview, the parents of the interviewed children had to sign a written consent form in which they were informed about the purpose and course of the study. By signing this form, they also confirmed that their children would participate in the interviews in accordance with the ethical principles of voluntariness and that their answers would remain anonymous. This consent also gave them the right to change their mind and withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. All interviewed subjects consented to being audio recorded. The average interview lasted about 20 minutes, the shortest 12, and the longest 32 minutes.

4.3 Data Processing Procedures

The audio recordings were transcribed into written form and changed into Word format after repeated listening. In order to analyse the results for the purpose of

this article, we separated the interviewees into two groups (mothers and children) and marked them with consecutive interview numbers (the pupils' interviews were marked with Interview 1 to Interview 20 and the mothers' interviews with Interview 21 to Interview 40). After the transcription was done, we listened to the tracks again to make sure that everything had been transcribed correctly.

To process the collected data, we first carried out a qualitative content analysis and then marked the parts of the transcribed text which we thought were relevant to and important for our research. Next, the text was broken down into its smallest meaningful components, thus obtaining coding units with information relevant to the purpose of this study. Following this, we gave code names to the latter coding units and divided them into categories based on similarity. During the last step, we sorted the categories according to their meaning and determined the central themes of the study (Adam et al. 2012, 123–162).

5. Results and Interpretation

Following this, we introduced the way in which pupils and their mothers perceive the attitude of teachers towards Roma pupils. In the context of the previous chapter, we were initially interested in how Roma pupils perceive their teachers, and what they think about their pedagogical work and knowledge assessment. In the second part of the introduced results, we focused on how Roma mothers perceive the teachers' pedagogical work and attitudes towards Roma children.

5.1 The Pupils' Perception of the Teachers' Attitudes towards Roma Pupils

First, we presented the teachers' attitudes towards Roma pupils from the perspective of Roma pupils, which, as seen in Table 1, were divided into two categories.

Table 1: The pupils' perception of the teachers' attitudes towards Roma pupils

Theme	Category	Code
The pupils' perception of the teachers' attitudes towards Roma pupils	The teachers' attitudes towards Roma pupils	Kind. Helpful. Good explanations. Equal treatment. Depends on the attitude and effort of the pupil. Discrimination.
	Knowledge assessment of Roma pupils	Righteous grading. Discriminatory grading – considering ethnicity. Grading adjustments.

Source: Own Data.

5.1.1 Perception of the Teachers' Attitudes towards Roma Pupils

The Roma pupils mostly described their teachers in a positive way. They stated that they are kind, helpful, and really make an effort. One of the pupils said: "They were friendly and liked to help. If you did not know things, they tried to help, so you could finish the class with a positive grade" (Interview 8). The pupils also stated that the teachers explain things well, are very understanding, and are open to negotiation and common agreements. Some of the pupils pointed out that the positive attitude of the teachers is the main reason why they like coming to school.

Some of the pupils stated that not all teachers are the same – some are friendly, while others are not. This was also confirmed by the following statement made by one of the interviewed pupils: "The best teacher is the math teacher, but the class teacher and the physical education teacher are also very good. They are very nice, they listen to what we want to say, while the others just shout at us" (Interview 11). The same pupil used the Slovene teacher as a negative example. In his opinion, the Slovene teacher is a bad teacher, because she screams all the time. However, he did not say that she only screams at Roma pupils. Similarly, other Roma pupils, who gave a negative assessment of their teachers, stated that teachers often yell at pupils, but none of them said that this only applies to Roma pupils.

Most of the Roma pupils said that their teachers treat them the same as they treat their non-Roma schoolmates and that sometimes they even defend Roma children in front of other pupils. The following is the statement by one of the pupils that confirms this: "At this school the teachers stood up for us Roma pupils and told the other children that we are the same as anybody else. They even told them not to behave like this [note: be discriminatory]" (Interview 9).

The interviewed pupils stated that the teachers' attitudes towards Roma pupils depends on the Roma pupils' attitude towards the teachers and other children in the class. When asked if the teachers were equally kind to all students, one of the pupils replied: "They are equally nice to everyone, however, if the Roma pupils are not nice to the teachers or their peers the teachers react in the same way" (Interview 14). The interviewed pupils also believe that the attitude of the teachers towards Roma pupils depends on the actual effort made by the Roma children. One of the interviewed pupils even said: "I consider the teachers nice. They are nice to me [note: teachers], because I am trying harder than the others" (Interview 13). The opinion that the teachers' attitudes towards Roma pupils depends mainly on the Roma pupils' attitude towards their teachers was more common among the interviewed subjects from Dolenjska. They admitted that Roma pupils often disrupt class, which then affects the teachers' attitude towards them.

The interviewed pupils had negative experiences and admitted to having discriminatory teachers as well. This can be confirmed by the following answer given by one of the pupils:

We were doing something, I don't remember what exactly, and she [note: teacher] told me that I don't have the same rights as the other children. She kept telling me I will never be like my mother because I am lazy. She was also rude to others, but she told me that I don't have the same rights as others. She said that, because I am a Roma. (Interview 10)

Another pupil described a discriminatory experience with a teacher as follows: "There was this one time when me and him [note: a classmate] quarrelled. I was yelled at, he was not, because he has problems with his nerves" (Interview 5). At the same time, the pupil pointed out that this does not happen very often.

5.1.2 Perception of the Roma Pupils' Knowledge Assessment

Most pupils believed the teachers were fair in assessing their knowledge, as they always got the grade they deserved, sometimes even a higher one. One of pupils stated: "I always got the grade I deserved, sometimes an even higher one" (Interview 10).

Some of the interviewed pupils pointed out that teachers are unfair and strict in assessing their knowledge and that they give unjustified negative grades. One of them said: "Yes, the history teacher is like that. Some pupils don't do what they are asked during class, and she starts screaming and then gives them a negative grade. She should first warn them before giving out negative grades" (Interview 20). Some of the interviewed pupils also thought that teachers, when assessing knowledge, are more considerate of the academically more successful students, which was confirmed by the following answer: "Yes, for example the [...] teacher [...]. When writing a test, I was only missing one single point for a positive grade – just one point – and he immediately gave me a 1 (insufficient). To others, who were one point short, he gave a 3 (good), not a 2 (sufficient)" (Interview 7).

When asked why she thought she didn't get that extra point like the others, she said: "Because I was apparently stupider" (Interview 7). When the interviewed pupils talked about why their teachers were unjust, none of them, with the exception of one student from Dolenjska, stated that the reason for it was their ethnicity.

Some of the answers regarding the teachers' assessment of knowledge insinuated that teachers treat Roma pupils differently. The latter is clearly highlighted in the following answer: "If we know everything, they still do not give us an 5 (excellent). If I know everything, they only give me a 2 (sufficient), while the civilians [note: students from the majority population], even if they know a bit, they get an 5 (excellent) or a 4 (very good)" (Interview 12).

During the interviews, Roma pupils repeatedly pointed out that teachers adapt the teaching process to their capabilities. They explained that during exams and oral assessments of knowledge, teachers adjust the tasks or questions, so that they can get a positive grade, or that they only ask them questions or give tasks for a positive grade. One of the pupils summed up her thoughts as follows: “In some subjects, not everyone is treated the same way” (Interview 19) and emphasized that the teachers ask her easier questions or give her less challenging assignments. The pupils from Dolenjska talked about the adaptation of tasks and assessment, while the pupils from Prekmurje did not mention any of that.

5.2 The Teachers’ Attitudes Towards Roma Pupils from the Perspective of Roma Mothers

This topic was divided into two categories, both of which are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: The teachers’ attitudes towards Roma pupils from the perspective of Roma mothers

Theme	Category	Code
The teachers’ attitudes towards Roma pupils from the perspective of Roma mothers	The teachers’ attitudes towards Roma pupils	Equal treatment. Depends on the attitude and effort of the pupil. Kind. Helpful. Available. Discrimination. Cases of violent behaviour towards pupils.
	Knowledge assessment of Roma pupils	Fair. Discriminatory grading – considering ethnicity. Giving preference to certain pupils. Unprofessional. Grading adjustments.

Source: Own Data

5.2.1 Perception of the Teachers’ Attitudes towards Roma Pupils

The interviewed mothers perceived the attitudes of the primary school teachers towards their children as friendly and equal. They evaluated that the teachers’ attitudes towards Roma pupils depends mainly on the children’s attitude towards the teachers and their peers, as well as on the work and effort the Roma pupils are willing to put into their school obligations. One of the interviewed mothers stood out with her statement, as she said that teachers go easy on Roma pupils, continuing with: “[...] as far as I can tell, it is harder and stricter for those other kids, the Slovene ones” (Interview 26).

The Roma mothers referred to their kids’ teachers in a rather positive way. They believed that the teachers are friendly, helpful, and always available if the

children or parents need them. We detected a slightly more positive description of the teachers in Dolenjska, some of which even conducted home visits, especially during school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the interviewed Roma mothers, who does not attend school meetings because she communicates with the teachers over the phone or through a Roma assistant, described the teachers as follows: “As far as I can see – they have come here a couple of times during this corona period – they are very friendly, also the class teacher. I have nothing bad to say about them. They are normal, they help if we need them” (Interview 23).

When Roma mothers described the teachers’ attitudes negatively, they mostly referred to unequal treatment of the pupils, but the reason behind it was not always ethnicity. Some of the interviewed mothers, however, warned that the teachers’ attitudes towards Roma pupils is discriminatory. They believed that teachers are not fair to Roma children, especially in conflicts with non-Roma children. One of the mothers shed light on the problem, saying: “Well, maybe sometimes there are conflicts. If they fight, it’s almost certain that the Roma child will be to blame” (Interview 36). Another mother shared examples of verbal abuse – a teacher insulted her daughter by saying she is a “Gypsy” (Interview 32). Another interviewed subject even mentioned a case of physical violence:

Yes, the class teacher. He threw chalk at him. [...]. They were loud in the class, and he threw a piece of chalk at him. Then he and I [note: husband] went, but he did not tell us [note: son]. The other children told us that he threw chalk at him, so we went to school and had a meeting. He [note: husband] warned that this can never happen again. We had peace for a while, but after two months the teacher hit him on the head again. (Interview 31)

From the statements of the interviewed mother, it is hard to tell whether the teacher’s actions were committed because of the child’s ethnicity or for other reasons. The same mother also said that the teacher probably hit the other child – her son’s classmate – who was also involved in the same conflict.

5.2.2 Roma Pupils’ Knowledge Assessment from the Perspective of Roma Mothers

The Roma mothers pointed out that their children’s teachers are fair when it comes to assessing knowledge and added that teachers used to be more unfair when they themselves attended elementary school. One of the interviewed mothers explained the situation as follows:

Because when I was at school, we were learning the same stuff, well actually we weren’t. They gave us something else to learn. But even if we knew a lot, they would only give us a D. Now, it is different. When school started, and the teachers came to talk to us,

I wanted to know how she was doing at school. I said that I would like to see how much she [note: daughter] knows. She should get a grade that reflects her knowledge. Grading nowadays should be different than when I was at school – I only got Ds, even if I knew more. But now with her it's not like that. Now they grade her according to how much she knows. (Interview 29)

Four Roma mothers from Prekmurje perceived their children's knowledge assessment as unfair, two of them even pointed out that the reason behind it is the children's ethnicity. One of the mothers stated: "I think they are treating them differently, the Roma children and those others. Some deserve it [note: a bad grade], but the Slovene children get fewer bad grades than the Roma children" (Interview 32). The other two mothers said that it is the teachers from smaller schools who are problematic. They explained that the teachers and parents from smaller schools know each other and as a result the teachers prefer the children of certain parents. One of the interviewed mothers added:

Acquaintances are a problem. Some come from the same village, live nearby and know each other. He will deserve a B, make mistakes, and still get an A. Some [note: children who's parents do not know the teachers privately, outside of school] try really hard and have it [note: knowledge], yet the teachers will not acknowledge it – they will even give them a lower one [note: grade]. There are huge differences, but that's acquaintances. (Interview 35)

Another critical description came from a mother who stated that the teachers are not experts in their field, do not take into consideration the differences between pupils or know how to adjust their work to kids with special needs:

Ugh, the teachers at this school are really terrible. Well, not to be rude to all of them; there is one young teacher who is new, and she is great, but the others, especially the older ones – they don't behave like teachers at all. You know that my older one [note: son] got a written confirmation, he is dyslexic. Still, they always bothered him with handwriting and were telling him he should write bigger or smaller. When he received the official diagnosis, they still didn't take this into account, even though everything was official and written on paper. He could have taken the tests orally, that was his right, but they did not care. And it is not just my son [...]. They don't understand that pupils are different, mine can't be like the others, and the others aren't all good either. They don't know how to adapt to anyone. (Interview 40)

On the contrary, some of the interviewed children and mothers from Dolenjska pointed out that the teachers adapt their teaching methods and content to Roma pupils, which means that they prepare easier questions and tasks for them. All of these mothers, with one exception, perceived this as a positive thing. The mother that was critical on this matter pointed out that this is not correct and that Roma pupils should be treated the same way as any other pupil in the class:

No, they don't treat everyone the same way [...]. Because, for example, sometimes mine [note: my son] learned everything that was on the question paper, yet he only got a B. I believe that it is the question paper's fault. It only allows for a B. If he hadn't studied from the paper, he would have received a higher grade. Because other pupils, non-Roma pupils, do not get this question paper – only Roma pupils get it – the questions and answers. (Interview 21)

6. Discussion

The purpose of this article was to investigate how Roma pupils and their mothers perceive teachers' pedagogical work and attitudes towards Roma pupils. Namely, the teacher-pupil relationship can have a positive impact on the pupils' well-being, sense of acceptance, and academic performance. In the case of Roma pupils, this relationship is even more important, since Roma are considered one of the most marginalized groups in Slovenia. This group faces many challenges both in the educational system and in other social realms. Although school is embedded in the socio-economic-cultural side of society, explains Lesar (2013b), it can give pupils a different, perhaps more positive experience than what they are experiencing outside of school in wider society. We use the term positive experiences to encompass interpersonal relationships, social acceptance, respect, and a sense of belonging to the school, which are all important indicators of an inclusive school.

Based on the obtained results, we could not connect the poor performance of Roma pupils with bad teacher-pupil relationships. At least in our study, the latter did not contribute to poorer academic performance in Roma pupils – namely, the interviewed pupils rated their relationships with their teachers as quite good. Therefore, we believe that in the future, our research should focus on other potential factors that may have an impact on lower academic performance of Roma pupils. These other factors were discussed in the introductory part of the article.

The results of our study, collected from the answers of Roma pupils and mothers, showed that Roma pupils from Prekmurje and Dolenjska generally perceive their teachers as kind and fair. They even pointed out that the teachers are helpful and good at their job – explaining and passing on knowledge. Good social relations with teachers proved to be important to Roma pupils. Their teachers, according to the pupils' statements, are the reason why they like attending school. Both the pupils and mothers assessed that the attitudes of teachers towards Roma pupils often reflects the attitude of Roma pupils towards teachers. Another study that refers to Roma elementary school pupils in Grosuplje, which was conducted by Koščak (2015, 55), showed similar results and confirmed that Roma pupils look for shelter and attention in their teachers, which is primarily a result of non-acceptance by their non-Roma peers. Based on this, we can conclude that the Roma pupils included in the study feel accepted and respected by their

teachers. Both the interviewed pupils and their mothers stated that teachers in primary schools treat Roma pupils the same as other pupils, which is definitely encouraging and confirms the inclusive attitude of primary schools. According to one of the interviewed subjects, teachers are warning non-Roma pupils not to discriminate against their Roma peers. However, the personal attitudes of the teachers towards Roma pupils sets an example for other non-Roma pupils and has a significant influence on the extent of the Roma pupils' being accepted by their non-Roma peers. The relationship between teachers and pupils is therefore essential for the social inclusion of pupils in the classroom (Paccione 2000; King 2005 cited in Peček & Lesar; 2006, 6).

Even though Roma pupils and their mothers perceive teachers mainly in a positive way, the study also revealed a few cases which are less encouraging. The teachers' negative assessments pointed towards an unfair assessment of knowledge and an unfair attitude towards the children, however, there was no confirmation of this attitude deriving from ethnic discrimination towards Roma pupils. The described examples and issues with the teachers could also apply to non-Roma pupils. Only one interviewed pupil from Dolenjska referred to teachers as being ethnically discriminatory when assessing knowledge and grading Roma pupils. In comparison to the interviewed pupils, more Roma mothers gave negative assessments of the teachers. The mothers from Prekmurje also gave more negative teacher assessments than the mothers from Dolenjska. At this stage, we should point out that in most cases the negative teacher assessments did not stem from discrimination against Roma pupils. The Roma mothers from Dolenjska stated that teachers adjust schoolwork for their children by giving them simpler tasks or evaluating them on the basis of pre-prepared questions and answers, which enable them to achieve the lowest positive grade. Some mothers perceived this as a discriminatory act – this way, their children, unlike non-Roma pupils, are not given the opportunity to attain a higher grade. Such adjustments for Roma pupils show that teachers demand less from them compared to other pupils. The latter was also confirmed in other, previously conducted studies (Chakir & Peček 2014, 30; Peček et al. 2006, 162). This kind of attitude towards Roma pupils is problematic, not only because it is discriminatory, but also because the teachers' low expectations lead to the Roma pupils' low academic results (Peček et al. 2006, 162). At the same time, it shows disrespect towards Roma pupils, who are being deprived of the same opportunities, knowledge, and progress other pupils are granted.

The unfair teaching methods and knowledge assessment could be related to the ingrained stereotypes about the Roma, which e.g., say that they are not interested in education. This stereotype probably derives from a lack of knowledge regarding the home environment of Roma children. Bešter and Medvešek (2016, 41) found that most teachers in Slovene primary schools try to encourage Roma children in their educational process and help them achieve the best possible results, however, they still lack knowledge and understanding of inter-

cultural differences. At the same time, the teachers do not go beyond an ethnocentric attitude and worldview, and they are also not too engaged in overcoming the existing social relationships of inequality between the majority population and minority groups. The authors pointed out that there are a few exceptions among teachers, who have well-developed intercultural competences. These result from training, openness, and the teachers' individual efforts, rather than from systemic incentives and support, which teachers could really use.

We believe that all the aforementioned difficulties could be at least partially omitted if the educational programs of future pedagogical workers as well as the programs for continuous professional development included more inclusive and Roma-related topics. Therefore, it would be wise to assess the curricula of university programs that train future teachers and if necessary enrich them with additional content on the typical characteristics of Roma culture and Roma communities in Slovenia, as well as national and other documents related to the Roma community and the education of Roma pupils. The universities that educate future teachers could connect their students with representatives of the Roma community who could directly introduce them to Roma culture and the Roma community itself or give the students an opportunity to visit Roma settlements and explain to them the specifics of living in such communities. These are just a few ideas with which students and future teachers could become familiar with the specifics of Roma culture in the course of their studies, get a better understanding of Roma pupils, gather knowledge on how to approach Roma pupils properly, and learn how to introduce Roma pupils' nature and characteristics to other non-Roma pupils in the class and at school. The latter is extremely important in light of the reasoning pointed out by Vonta and Jager (2013, 106) who said that professionals in Slovene elementary schools seem to be aware of the importance of including Roma culture in the educational process, but that they are currently pursuing this step only by encouraging Roma pupils to perform and introduce their culture at school events.

To fully understand and properly interpret the results, we have taken into consideration that the interviews were conducted during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Slovenia, in the months after home schooling, when the pupils had only spent a month back in the classroom. After the long period of home schooling, most pupils could not wait to go back to school, which of course could have affected their perception regarding the teachers' attitude towards them. The long-term distance education is also likely to have been reflected in the children's schoolwork. Bešter and Pirc (2020) investigated this topic further and wanted to determine how distance education affected Roma pupils in Slovenia during the quarantine period. Based on the data they collected from Roma assistants and teachers, the authors of the study concluded that approximately half of Roma primary school pupils were in regular contact with their teachers during quarantine, while the proportion of non-Roma students who were in regular contact with teachers was much higher. Almost half of the Roma pupils

in primary schools maintained contact with the school through Roma assistants. The same survey showed that in schools with Roma assistants, a quarter of all interviewed teachers estimated that during the quarantine period most Roma parents were not in contact with the school at all, while another quarter of teachers pointed out that the parents were in regular contact with the Roma assistants, but not directly with the teachers. Only a fifth of the interviewed teachers stated that Roma parents were in contact with them directly. Most of the teachers in schools with Roma assistants also reported that cooperation between Roma parents and the school remained the same as before the pandemic, slightly more than a tenth noticed an improvement, and about a fifth a deterioration in this area. In schools without Roma assistants, the situation was pretty much the same. The authors also determined that some teachers made home visits and brought Roma pupils class materials as well as gave instructions for schoolwork. In our study, two interviewed mothers from Dolenjska also reported having home visits from teachers. One of these two mothers had no contact with the teachers prior to the pandemic, but during the home-schooling period, thanks to home visits, she came to regard the teachers in a very positive way.

We must also point out some of the limitations we faced during the study. One of the major limitations were the interviews in Dolenjska, where it was not always possible to ensure a calm and relaxed environment. The interviews were often interrupted by the interviewed mothers' young children or by the brothers and sisters of the interviewed children, as well as by the noise coming from outside. We could have avoided this issue if the interviews had been conducted in a common space within the Roma settlements (like in Prekmurje), but the interviewed subjects wanted to talk to us in their homes, so we did as they asked. Some of the interviewed mothers in Dolenjska were very nervous – we even detected slight mistrust, which may have influenced their answers.

Even though the results do not apply to the entire population of Roma pupils and their mothers in Slovenia, they still present a valuable insight into the experiences of Roma pupils with teachers and their pedagogical work. The extra value of this research lies in giving voice to the ignored Roma community. By including Roma pupils and their mothers in this study and giving them the opportunity to speak up and share their perception of teacher-pupil relationships and the pedagogical work of the teachers, we can better understand the communities' experiences and perspectives. The findings are also important for raising awareness among teachers and school management not only about the impact of teacher-pupil relationships on the pupils' well-being and academic performance, but also about the fact that all pupils, regardless of nationality or special needs, deserve equal opportunities. The results can potentially contribute to a more subtle perception and understanding of the well-being and the situation of Roma children in Slovene schools and, as a result, help raise the quality of pedagogical practice in the field of Roma education in Slovenia.

The study also opened up a number of new research questions. Namely, the interviews were conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, which could have affected the results, so it would be wise to repeat the entire procedure in the upcoming school year. In the study, we focused on two locations – Dolenjska and Prekmurje – however, for an even better understanding of the relationship between teachers and Roma pupils, it would be wise to include Roma pupils and parents from other regions as well. Another interesting thing to investigate would be how teachers perceive their relationships and work with Roma pupils. Our study confirmed that the relationships between teachers and Roma pupils are mostly encouraging, but it also revealed some discriminatory behaviour in teachers that prevents Roma pupils from achieving the same learning results as the rest of the population. We should focus on these practices during future research and study the remaining factors that could have an impact on the learning success of Roma pupils in Slovene schools. We should also focus on exploring examples of good teaching practice in the field of Roma education.

7. Conclusion

In the empirical qualitative study based on the answers of Roma pupils and their mothers, we focused on the experience and perception of teaching methods as well as teachers' attitudes towards Roma pupils. Based on the interviews conducted with the members of the Roma community in Prekmurje and Dolenjska, we can conclude that the elementary school teachers in the two mentioned regions are successful in providing a safe and inclusive environment for Roma pupils. Even though the results are mostly encouraging, we should not ignore those few examples that indicate a discriminatory attitude in teachers towards Roma children. Such cases should not be swept under the rug. They call for further efforts to eliminate discrimination, reduce differences, and promote the inclusion of minority groups in Slovene schools. Considering both the positive and the negative experiences of Roma pupils and their mothers, the results indicate that we need to continue with measures that will help not only improve relationships between teachers and pupils, but also provide adequate support and resources for equal opportunities, learning, and progress of Roma pupils. However, we should also explore other factors that affect Roma pupils' well-being in school, their learning performance, and advancement in the educational system.

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Sabina Zorčič, Sonja Novak Lukanović

Cross-Border Education: Students from Slovenia in Austrian Minority Schools

The article deals with increasing cross-border education, namely students from Slovenia attending upper-secondary level minority schools in Austrian Carinthia. We conducted interviews with school management and focus groups with students, who also completed a short questionnaire. Based on qualitative and quantitative data, we drew conclusions about the motives of students from Slovenia for enrolment in Slovene minority schools in Austria and about the consequences of their decision – their well-being, their knowledge and use of languages, their plans for the future – as well as in relation to their sense of Europeanness and their varying identities. Cross-border schooling turns out to be a success story. The outcome seems to be particularly favourable for the Slovene minority in Austrian Carinthia as it maintains the scope and quality of minority education, while also having the positive consequence of giving the members of the Slovene minority much greater exposure to the Slovene language, especially spoken language, with which they otherwise have less direct contact.

Keywords: cross-border education, minority education, students from Slovenia in Austria, recording the consequences, linguistic consequences.

Čezmejno izobraževanje: dijaki iz Slovenije na avstrijskih manjšinskih šolah

Članek obravnava primer vse pogostejšega čezmejnega izobraževanja, in sicer dijake iz Slovenije, ki se šolajo na višem sekundarnem nivoju manjšinskih šol na avstrijskem Koroškem. Z vodstvi šol so bili izvedeni intervjuji, z dijaki pa fokusne skupine ter vprašalnik. Na podlagi kvalitativnih in kvantitativnih podatkov odgovorimo na vprašanja o motivih dijakov iz Slovenije za vpis na slovenske manjšinske šole v Avstriji ter o vseh posledicah njihove odločitve: njihovem počutju, znanju in rabi jezikov, njihovih načrtih za prihodnost. Konkretni kontekst čezmejnega šolstva se izkaže za zgodbo o uspehu. Se posebej se zdi razplet ugoden za slovensko manjšino na avstrijskem Koroškem, saj se na ta način ohranja obseg in kvaliteta manjšinskega šolstva, obenem pa je za pripadnike slovenske manjšine pozitivna posledica tudi veliko večja izpostavljenost slovenskemu jeziku, še posebej slovenski pogovorni različici, s katero imajo sicer manj neposrednega stika.

Ključne besede: čezmejno izobraževanje, manjšinsko šolstvo, dijaki iz Slovenije v Avstriji, evidentiranje posledic, jezikovne posledice.

Correspondence address: Sabina Zorčič, Inštitut za narodnostna vprašanja, Erjavčeva 26, SI-1000 Ljubljana, Slovenija, e-mail: sabina.zorcic@guest.arnes.si; Sonja Novak Lukanović, Inštitut za narodnostna vprašanja, Erjavčeva 26, SI-1000 Ljubljana, Slovenija, e-mail: sonja.novak@guest.arnes.si.

1. Introduction

Recently, the various forms of minority education (and other educational opportunities available to immigrants and new minorities) have been used by the wider community, not only by minorities and immigrants (and their descendants). Although this trend is not new, it has gained momentum following the enlargement of the EU and the accession of new countries into the Schengen area. The current situation is therefore a natural consequence of long-standing inclusive and non-discriminatory European policies and globalisation; the free movement of people, goods, and services. Although we can find some successful examples of cross-border educational projects (e.g., see European School Education Platform 2019), at primary and secondary levels of education, these are usually well thought-out endeavours of individuals. Students' and parents' motives for including speakers of majority languages in minority education programmes vary, ranging from the search for one's own roots to seizing the opportunity to increase one's cultural capital – with a view to possibly increasing economic capital through additional (linguistic) competences. Certainly, their presence in minority schools introduces a new dynamic that has both positive and negative consequences. The most obvious and far-reaching are those affecting linguistic competence and multicultural awareness.

In this article, we look at data from the only three Slovene minority schools in Austria at the upper secondary level (age 15–19) where the language of instruction is (also) Slovene. Students from Slovenia have become an important part of minority classes. The proportion varies depending on the school: the smallest number attends the Slovene Grammar School, a much higher number attends the Bilingual Commercial College, and the largest number is enrolled at the College for Commercial Vocations in St. Peter (cf. Zorčič 2020a;b). The impact of students from Slovenia in these schools is visible in two direct ways: (1) places are filled in Slovene minority schools that would otherwise have remained unfilled or filled by students with a poorer knowledge of Slovene; (2) with their presence, the Slovene language is also much more present in the schools, in all its variations. In particular, it makes (colloquial) Slovene, which is not a dialect of Carinthian, much more present (see also Lengar Verovnik 2023), as the majority (86 %) of students choose one of the non-Carinthian dialects of Slovene for communication with students from Slovenia, most often the standard colloquial language (Zorčič 2020a, 145). As the choice of Slovene as a means of communication becomes more frequent, the students from Austria experience an increase in their communicative competence in Slovene, as the cause-effect relationship between language use and (active) language competence (i.e., speaking and writing) is well established and is also reflected in the self-assessment of their language competence in this language (Zorčič 2020a).

The article will present the results of a study in which we answered questions about the motives of students from Slovenia for enrolment in Slovene minority

schools in Austria and about all the implications of their decision: their experiences, their knowledge and use of languages, their schooling during the pandemic, their feelings about their European and other identities, and their plans for the future (more on that in Zorčič 2023). The paper concludes with a final analysis of the cross-border educational context under discussion.

2. Methodology

The research data were collected through interviews with the management of all three schools and focus groups with students from each school. A focus group is a group of individuals with certain characteristics who generate narrative data in the context of a focused discussion (Morgan 1996). In addition to the narrative that interviews usually provide, in a focus group the interaction between individuals can lead to new, even crucial information as the breadth of responses increases, certain forgotten details can be activated, and the positive dynamics release speakers who might otherwise remain reticent. Focus groups are a particularly good way to gather information on potentially sensitive topics. The method proved to be very effective with the students, who at the end of the focus group talk compared it to a kind of psychotherapy. This is in line with Morgan's principle of focus groups being suitable for "sharing and comparing" (Morgan 1996), as the students were able to compare their perspectives and experiences in relation to their schooling in Austria. In most cases, we were able to design the size and number of the groups according to Morgan's recommendations (Morgan 1996) i.e., between 5 and 10 participants, which allows for the best conversation dynamics, and the number of groups per survey, i.e., 3 to 5. All students also completed a short questionnaire on their self-assessed language proficiency in Slovene, German and English, on their grades and performance at school, and on their family socio-economic status, which also provided us with some quantitative data.

The focus groups and the interviews with school management (I1, I2, I3) were conducted in April and May 2022. Two focus groups were conducted at the Bilingual Commercial College: the first group (FS1) consisted of four students (two boys and two girls) and the second group (FS2) consisted of nine students (eight boys and one girl). At the Slovene Grammar School, we conducted a focus group with eight students (FS3: four boys, four girls). At the College for Commercial Vocations in St. Peter, two focus groups were conducted: the first group (FS4) had nine girls, and the second group (FS5) had six girls and two boys. In total, 38 students (22 girls and 16 boys) took part in the study, all of whom were 18 or older, participated voluntarily, and had been selected for the study by school management on the basis of the broad categorisation of "Slovenes attending this school" (discussion below). The Office for Minority Education in Klagenfurt (Ger. *Bildungsdirektion für Kärnten, Pädagogischer Dienst, Abteilung III – Minderheitenschulwesen*) provided the replies by e-mail (I4).

This was followed by data processing and analysis, starting with data transcription and anonymisation and the indexation of the data according to subject headings, which will be discussed in the following chapters. For the statistical analysis and visualisation of the questionnaire data, we used the Orange Data Mining 3.34 data mining software (Demšar et al. 2013).

3. Minority Schools in Austria: The Legal Base for Transborder Education and Number of Enrolments from Slovenia

The survey was conducted in the only three Slovene minority secondary schools in Austria where the language of instruction is (also) Slovene. The Slovene Grammar School is historically the most important school for the Slovene minority in Austria. It was founded in 1957 on the basis of Article 7 of the Austrian State Treaty of 1955 to provide secondary education for young Slovenes. It is the only school where the language of instruction is exclusively Slovene. The Bilingual Commercial College in Klagenfurt was founded in 1990 as an additional secondary education option for the Slovene minority. There, Slovene and German are equal languages of instruction and are exchanged on a monthly basis. The same language regime is also applied at the College for Commercial Vocations in St. Peter, a private Catholic school for gastronomic and commercial professions, which is almost 125 years old.

Although originally founded to meet the needs of the Slovene ethnic community in Austria, today these schools could not survive with students from the minority base alone and therefore operate under the motto: “a school with a (supra-)regional focus” (see, for example, their online presentation (SLOGAT)). This is especially true for the public minority schools – the Bilingual Commercial College and the Slovene Grammar School – while the College for Commercial Vocations in St. Peter is a private institution, located closer to the Slovene border, which has always had a significant enrolment of students from Slovenia.

The historical shifts that allowed cross-border education to flourish were gradual, but the main turning point was 1989 (the fall of the Berlin Wall) and the events that followed. In 1995, Austria became a member of the EU. Slovenia became a member nine years later, opening the way for closer links between border regions, towns and people, and Slovene became an official language of the EU. European legislation began to apply, allowing Slovene citizens to study in Austria.¹ In terms of cross-border education, the period in between, when Austria was already a member of the EU and Slovenia was joining it, is interesting; at that time, the Bilingual Commercial College in Klagenfurt had a quota regime limiting the number of foreign nationals enrolling (mainly from Slovenia, but also from Italy), while the Grammar School had a complete ban on

students from Slovenia.² Here, the restriction was eased with the introduction of Kugy classes (1999/2000), a special grammar school programme with a broad regional linguistic education (in Slovene, German, Italian and English). The programme was cross-border-oriented and specifically intended for students from the neighbouring regions of Carinthia, Friuli (Italy) and Slovenia, or for those exploring the neighbourhoods of these regions.³

The possibility of students from Slovenia enrolling at these schools also depends on the vacancies in the schools and dormitories. In schools with Slovene or Slovene and German as the language of instruction, students can be admitted as full-time students because they have mastered (one) language of instruction. In other schools, they would be admitted as part-time students with a special curriculum to obtain proficiency in German (I4).

The attitude towards minority schools has always been socially and politically linked to the attitude towards the Slovene minority in Austria, which has certainly been more open and positive in recent times than it was in the last century. At the same time, the regional policy is also much more economically oriented and promotes economic development (which always presupposes an increase in immigration) as well as social development, which is closely linked to economic development (e.g., the well-being and proper education of the children of immigrants). The minority schools (especially the two in Klagenfurt) have made good use of the niche that has emerged and have taken educational initiatives: they have become regional (language) schools that cover the social and economic needs of the Alps-Adria region. Enrolment of foreign nationals (especially from Slovenia) is on the rise at all the schools in question, and the number of students who enrolled because of their families moving to Austria is also rising (more on this distinction below). Table 1 shows the number of students from Slovenia enrolled in the last five school years, from which it is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic has not had a major impact (at least in relative terms) on enrolment at the two schools in Klagenfurt (although there have been some isolated cases; e.g., at the grammar school 5 students dropped out). However, the fact that both countries quickly took care of the status of commuters legally and formally and ensured that schools would not be closed in the future probably had an impact on the enrolment from Slovenia in the 22/23 school year not being lower compared to the previous school years (Table 1). The situation is different for enrolment at the College for Commercial Vocations in St. Peter, where the decline in enrolment was both nominal and relative (Table 1). The management of the school attributed this to the fact that the gastronomic industry (partly influenced by the pandemic) was experiencing a downward trend, which they believed was also reflected in the enrolment at other gastronomic schools in the region and beyond (I3).

Table 1: The number and share of students with permanent residence in Slovenia enrolled at Slovene minority schools at the upper secondary level in the last five school years

	Number of students from Slovenia (share) in the 2018/19 school year	Number of students from Slovenia (share) in the 2019/20 school year	Number of students from Slovenia (share) in the 2020/21 school year	Number of students from Slovenia (share) in the 2021/22 school year	Number of students from Slovenia (share) in the 2022/23 school year
Slovene Grammar School (upper level)	26 (11.98 %)	31 (14.42 %)	31 (13.90 %)	30 (14.15 %)	26 (13.07 %)
Bilingual Commercial College*	121 (49 %)	117 (50 %)	110 (50 %)	108 (51 %)	107 (50 %)
College for Commercial Vocations in St. Peter	110 (79.71 %)	107 (74.31 %)	106 (76.26 %)	94 (67.63 %)	76 (64.96 %)
Total	257	255	247	232	209

Source: Own data.

*The number of students with Slovene citizenship (including those whose parents work and/or live in Austria).

Data for the larger group of students who had already immigrated to Austria were not available for all schools because of the difficulty in capturing data. In Table 1, they are only included in the statistics of the Bilingual Commercial College, where the management estimated that about 20 % of those with Slovene citizenship had “some life interest (Ger. *Lebensmittelpunkt*) in working and living in Austria” (I1). The rest had a business at home and were trying to expand their activities and interests to the child, and consequently to expand in the region. “An interlacement of economic education and multilingualism, that is our quality” (I1), states the management of the Bilingual Commercial College. According to the management of the Slovene Grammar School, the group that had moved to Austria was larger at their school, around 25 %. We should keep in mind that the proportion is constantly rising, owing to the lower birth rate and the migration of Carinthian Slovenes to larger cities that lead to a decline in the number of minority members, while immigration from Slovenia is increasing.⁴ The fact is that the group of students who immigrate to Austria together with their parents is quite different from the group who live in Slovenia. For the latter, attending a school in Austria is a personal (or family) decision, and therefore – also according to school management – there is a sense of “a certain relaxedness” (I2), whereas those who have immigrated to Austria tend to be a group with less economic capital and fewer choices (similarly, Zorčič 2020a). Nevertheless, according to the Grammar School management:

Slovene students from Slovenia strengthen Slovene education in Austria. Absolutely. And we all benefit: our children, but also the teachers, benefit from the influx of these people, Slovenes, and that's why we say that a certain language education in favour of Slovene is already happening in the classroom, which is very beneficial. (I2)

The provincial government Office for Minority Education also considers cross-border education and students from Slovenia in minority schools in Austria to be “a unique opportunity in the area in which we live, because Slovene is a common language in this area” (I4).

4. Students' Motives for Enrolment

Students from Slovenia have various motives for enrolling in minority schools in Carinthia, but what unites them all is that they have reached out for an offer that is different and foreign. Roughly speaking, they can be divided into students who have a rather elaborate idea of what their goals and interests are in the (long- or short-term) future, i.e., students who have a rather elaborate identity capital (e.g., Côté & Levine 2016). The latter is the result of their personal characteristics, which are manifested in their individual search for different life alternatives or the result of strong family involvement in this identity composition (i.e., the active involvement of parents). These students choose Slovene minority schools in Austria because, among other reasons, there is good infrastructure in Klagenfurt for extracurricular intensive football coaching or studying music (the Klagenfurt Conservatory of Music), or because going to Austria is a kind of preparatory act for possible further studies abroad. Although these schools also promote themselves in Slovenia, many students decide to enrol on the basis of prior recommendations from friends, and in some cases, all the children from one family attend school abroad.

The second group of students are those whose decision to go to school in Austria was more influenced by circumstances. These are the children of parents working in Austria, who are sometimes even still in the process of moving to Austria. Thus, in the focus groups, we constantly ran into students who had already been living in Austria; they may have been living there for a very long time (e.g., 10 years), but they are still treated as Slovenes from Slovenia (and separate from the Slovene minority there), as they have come from Slovenia and do not have Austrian citizenship. For these students, the decision to go to a school where lessons are (also) taught in Slovene is even more natural, because of the desire to reduce the language barrier and help to integrate into the environment where they have followed their parents. For example:

So, I went to school in Slovenia, in Jesenice, until fifth grade, and then my family had the opportunity to come here and we said why not. This school was one of the first we heard about and it sounded ideal: a school in Austria where they teach in Slovene. (FS3_7)

Parents are also crucial when considering transport; for students who go to boarding school weekly or for those who commute across the border daily (those who live close to the border are driven across the border, e.g., to Ferlach, from where they continue by bus). In most cases, the influence of parents is very strong: they provide strong support or help their children in the decision for schooling across the border, while at the same time making it financially possible to do so. However, the students themselves are convinced that studying abroad is not for everyone: “For some people, it’s obvious that they came here because they had to and that’s it ... But if you come here when you want to, you can manage” (FS2_9). They also highlight the experience as extremely positive in further shaping their independence, which embellishes their already curious personalities. The following student summarised his motives in a way that nicely combines many of the aspects presented so far:

For me, however, three factors were crucial in deciding to go to this school: (1) I knew a couple of people who had gone to Austria to study, and somewhere in the middle of the ninth grade of primary school in Ljubljana, I decided that I would go to Austria, too, (2) but I also played football and that was one of the factors that made me come here, (3) and also the language skills attracted me a lot: to learn German and later the possible options for further education, study, sports, etc. I think more options open to you if you learn German: you can study in Germany, Switzerland, or Austria. But honestly, I thought that maybe at this school there would be a little more use of German as a language of instruction, a little more German, maybe that surprised me in the end. But I was also very attracted by the city itself, the new challenges, maybe to become a bit more independent, to learn some basic values in life, to be able to deal with myself and just go about life in a way that I am aware of. (FS3_4)

While the motives for enrolment are very similar for all the students from Slovenia, there are significant differences between schools in terms of students’ expectations of their education at the school they are enrolled in, their perceptions of their skills and their plans for the future, and as a result some students transfer between schools (particularly between the Grammar School and the Commercial College in both directions).

The students who return to Slovenia weekly and still have strong contacts and ties with friends and family in Slovenia are also exposed to constant comparisons between the Austrian and Slovene school systems, to which they also react critically. Owing to the different approaches and ways of working in the three schools in question, the students’ reactions are also different, although most of them are convinced that education in Austria is easier for them than it would be in Slovenia. The schools are more student-friendly (“I find it a bit more relaxed here ... As for the breadth of the material and the pressure itself, it is less here” (FS1_1)). Therefore, students have more time to devote to themselves – to their various hobbies and self-reflection, e.g.:

In Slovenia, grammar school is very difficult. In primary (school in Slovenia) we get a lot of background knowledge, with it I have covered my knowledge for the whole schooling here, I can say that. When you get to grammar school (in Slovenia) there is more ... not so much of content as it is of grading. I have friends (in Slovenia) who have five assessments a week, which is just too much [...]. I have to say, I noticed that here I have the possibility to grow as a student, to think by myself what I want to do, what my goals are, what I want to be, because school – not that it's too easy – but it's just normally scheduled with assessments throughout the year and somehow you have the possibility to think about yourself; it's not all at once, right away, acutely, I don't know, it seems to me that you have the possibility to find your ambitions as well. I think it's a good thing that you have the possibility to think about yourself. To see what you want to be. (FS3_5)

At the same time, they feel they have more choices for their future than they would have had if they had studied in Slovenia. In particular, there are many responses that mention the lesser amount of evaluation and more room for manoeuvre that teachers in Austria have because of the additional (in their opinion very subjective) grading for cooperation.⁵ They also conclude that education in Austria is much more practical and narrowly focused on certain areas of education. As a result, there is less general knowledge, which they consider to be more abundant in Slovenia. This last opinion, i.e., the lack of general knowledge, is one of the reasons why most students believe that it is better not to return to Slovenia to study, but to continue their studies in Austria or elsewhere. We should also mention here the lower enrolment of Slovene minority students from Austria at Slovene universities; although it should be noted that this is not the case for some faculties in specialised fields, such as medicine and pharmacy, which cannot be studied in Carinthia. The still on average lower enrolment of members of the Slovene minority from Austria in faculties in Slovenia (compared to the Slovene minority from Italy) has so far been explained mainly by the greater prestige of Austrian faculties and the students' (lack of) knowledge of the Slovene language, but perhaps we should also add to this a more pragmatic consideration of specific knowledge,⁶ which individuals apparently believe they receive in Austrian secondary schools.

As enrolment is also partly related to family financial means, we also analyse the students' self-assessment of the socio-economic class they consider their household to be in, in relation to enrolment at a particular school. It is evident from the data that enrolment in the Grammar School is more or less independent of the family's financial capacity; the choice of a grammar school is linked to a greater extent to the individual student's ability and motivation. Meanwhile, for students of vocational schools, we observe that there are slight deviations: the bilingual Commercial College enrolls students who mostly consider themselves to belong to the middle class, while the school in St. Peter enrolls more students who consider themselves to belong to the upper-middle class. According to the data obtained, one can conclude that enrolment at the commercial college is

often a pragmatic decision – primarily in search of a profession and better job opportunities in neighbouring Austria, while enrolment at the private school in St. Peter is to a great extent an exploitation of family capital for education abroad. In both cases, the aim is of course to increase cultural capital in the form of the bilingual baccalaureate, but the starting points are different, giving some more choices than others.

5. Personal Experience

Students are convinced that studying abroad is not for everyone. One has to be an independent person, open to new things and ready to deal with new situations in life, which in turn makes them more independent and ready to face life. The students acknowledge that the bilingual environment and the possibility of living in a dormitory are of great help. They point out that it is easier because the (school) environment is very Slovene and they feel less immediate stress from not knowing the national language very well. However, they point out that sometimes the experience can be very tiring and the constant adjustment to new circumstances can also be stressful. This feeling is especially strong at the beginning of school, but then – as they say – you get used to it. High levels of neuroticism from previous research reported in monolingual students of the same age and in the same circumstances (Zorčič 2019; 2020a) can therefore be interpreted as a habituated feeling, an internalised state of constant stress. Even in the highest classes, some students report that the feeling of being a stranger persists. The perception of the feeling of homeliness is very subjective and students perceive it very differently, depending on their life circumstances, personal characteristics, and on the experience of studying abroad. Some individuals feel very comfortable and (after four years) already feel at home in Austria, while others state that they never will. The feeling of acceptance is also linked to the possibility of using Slovene in public. When asked about the use of Slovene in public spaces, those who already live here answered that they strictly use German because speaking Slovene can be unpleasant (“if you speak Slovene you will be looked at badly” (FS2_2)). Students also have certain negative experiences because they are Slovenes or are labelled by the German-speaking majority because of speaking Slovene (“Inadvertently or intentionally you are definitely labelled as ... well ... they say ‘Yugoslavian’, it could be a joke or it could not (FS1_1)”. “We are Yugoslavians, aren’t we ...” (FS2_1)). Positive examples are also highlighted, and students reflect on their own experiences and behaviour and on why the Slovene language is so unexposed in public following the historical situation, and what has changed in this respect recently (“We are no longer the main threat” (FS3_7)).⁷

It should be said that these are the generations of students who have been most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the whole experience of schooling has been curtailed, both in terms of living abroad and socialising with class-

mates. There has been considerable research on the impact of the pandemic on school children and young people, revealing many of the adverse consequences of school closures. In the schools in question, a survey was carried out among teachers during the pandemic and they confirmed that the negative effects of the pandemic would be felt most acutely in bilingual schools by monolingual students, especially by students from Slovenia whose German language input was lacking (Zorčič 2020b).

In this study, we asked the students for their views on the impact of the pandemic. They highlighted the difference in perception of the stressfulness of the situation at the beginning and at the end, as well as their concerns about the (in)appropriateness of the implementation of remote education in the initial phase. Regarding the psychological effects, apart from the restriction of movement, they mainly pointed to the problem of motivation to work and learn, especially after returning to school and to in-person classes. The consequence of a longer period of remote learning, the subsequent reduction in motivation to learn, as well as the less stringent knowledge requirements at the time of return to school, will have, or in their view already has, a significant impact on knowledge. With this in mind, the students were especially afraid of the final school-leaving exam. They summarised that, just like schooling abroad, home schooling is not for everyone, as it requires a great deal of self-discipline and organisation.

A particular characteristic of the cross-border students is that some felt compelled to be vaccinated against COVID-19 because of easier border crossing or fewer expenses because of less COVID testing; individuals did not feel the situation was “fair” (FS2_9) to them. It is also necessary to highlight the fact that students were restricted from socialising at the very time in their lives when socialising with peers is most important to them (“[...] when you are growing up the most, developing the most, getting to know yourself, (at that time) society, friends are important, as much as family” (FS3_6)), and classroom bonding suffered as a result. Class cohesion is particularly important in multilingual classes in minority (or any multilingual) schools, as only good cohesion allows for genuine communication in the languages used in the school environment.

6. Language Skills

6.1 German

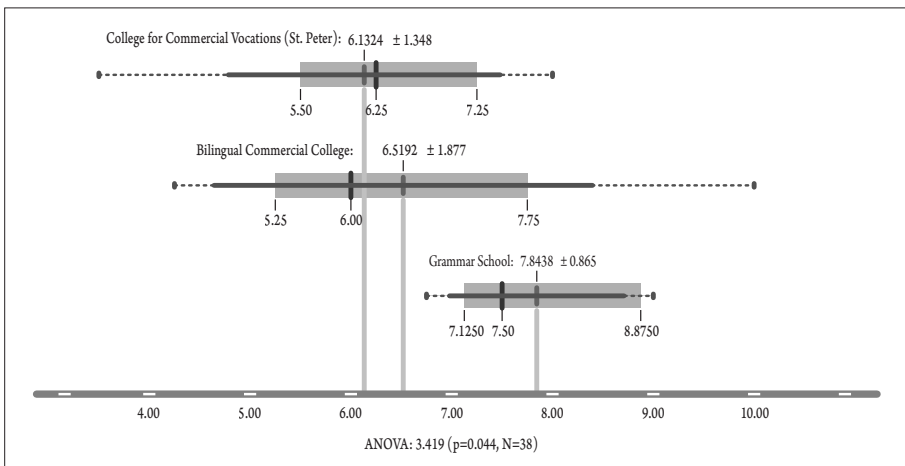
Learning foreign languages – and in particular the opportunity to learn German (more easily and quickly) in the context of schooling in Austria – was one of the important motivations for enrolment stated by students. One of the main findings among Slovene students seemed to be that most of them would have liked to have had a better knowledge of German at the end of their schooling, or (now) realise that even though they are studying in Austria, a significant additional commitment is needed to master the language. This is especially true

for the Grammar School, as Slovene is the only language of instruction and the students really have to activate themselves and find new sources of communication; preferably outside the school and the dormitory, as the possibility and temptation to use Slovene is too great in the context of minority institutions.

Yes, you have to force yourself, you have to force yourself to work and to be in touch with the language somehow. Well, if you have some sports where you have teammates from Austria, and you talk a lot, you are somehow in contact with German. But if you have nothing, you have to read a lot, listen a lot, or find someone who is Austrian and ... (FS3_2)

In the final two years, both vocational schools provide lessons in both languages; Slovene and German are exchanged on a monthly basis. However, as stated in previous research (cf. Zorčič 2019; 2020a), the focus group discussion this time also showed that these rules are not strictly followed.⁸ According to the answers, it even seems that one could go through schooling (at least until the baccalaureate) with very poor or even no knowledge of German. Especially for first-year students, it is assumed that German proficiency is not strictly necessary, but it turns out that this lack of language skills becomes a major concern in the latter years, with some students not even seeing the problem in their own poor engagement, but blaming the unpretentiousness of the teachers instead. At the College in St. Peter, the compulsory work placement (praxis) in the gastronomic industry is strongly emphasised as a turning point in the knowledge and use of German, although in conversation, individuals still do not feel confident in their competence to function in a German-speaking environment (e.g., the problem of taking a car to a workshop for repair).

Figure 1: Self-assessment of German Proficiency (10 = excellent)



Source: Own data.

The students also self-assessed their knowledge of German in a short questionnaire, which was completed by all the students in the focus groups. The results presented in Figure 1 confirm the statements made by the students in the focus groups. On average, students who attended the grammar school and who devoted a significant amount of time and commitment to learning German rated their knowledge of German the highest. Students at both vocational schools rated their German language skills as being much lower. The difference is statistically significant.

6.2 Slovene

They also talked about their first language, Slovene. The students were aware that Slovene as a language of instruction is different in Austria than it is in Slovenia. According to the students, there was “a lot of literal translation and incorrect terminology” (FS3_6), and the level of the language was “lower than if I went to school in Slovenia” (FS2). Some students were quite lenient on this issue:

Now most of the teachers are trying hard and speaking correctly, but there are also a few who only speak in the dialect they know from home. There are also some who have learnt Slovene as a foreign language, and it just shows. (FS1_4)

Others were quite critical, as they felt that no one was progressing because of the language situation: “I think, for me personally, it seems that Slovene is adapted to the Austrians in our school, and then German to us, and there is no progress for either of us ...” (FS5_4). For some of them the question of Slovene was not important at all, because they had come to school in Austria for another purpose:

It seems to me that what is more important is that if we are already in Austria, that German is their mother tongue, and then if Slovene is such that I just understand things, that's enough for me, it doesn't have to be someone who knows 100 % of both. If I am here to learn German and listen to it, I have no expectations for Slovene. (FS1_1)

The conversation became particularly heated when they talked about teachers of Slovene language (e.g., “[...] but now we are learning Slovene from someone whose Slovene is probably worse than mine, so sometimes I wondered a little bit how much sense it makes ...” (FS5_5)), and there is a noticeable difference between the two vocational schools and the grammar school. At the latter, they think a lot more about this topic, as Slovene is the only language of instruction at this school, but at the same time, the students there need a language assistant for Slovene (students from Slovenia use this person to upgrade their knowledge):

Slovene is like that: the whole class is in Slovene, but the required knowledge is very low. [...]. Once we were doing a worksheet, and since we have an assistant from Slovenia here, she brought a final exam for Slovene from a grammar school in Slovenia,

so we tried to solve it a little bit, and then the professor, who is a Slovene from Austria, said that his final exam in Slovene at the faculty in Austria had never been so difficult. That's how you see the differences. I would say this about the professors, it all depends on the individual, because they have very different backgrounds, some of them are Carinthian Slovenes, some of them are from Slovenia, where there is no 'r' at all,⁹ some of them are from abroad and they have just started with Slovene, so sometimes we correct some words ... (FS3_6)

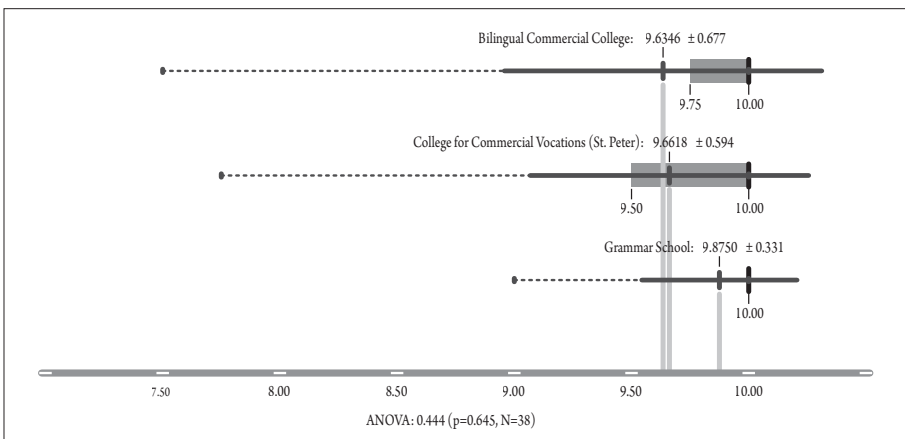
How do they react to that? Moderator (M)

Very well. They thank you. Some even ask for help. They ask if something is correct and things like that. (FS3_6)

However, the students also noticed deficiencies in their language lessons (especially a lack of spoken communication).¹⁰ It should be mentioned here that the increasing number of students with little or no knowledge of Slovene enrolled at the Slovene Grammar School (especially at the lower level), according to school management, was not the case to such an extent even ten years ago (I2). Teaching materials in Slovene also present a problem, as there are not many textbooks published in Slovene. The students mentioned a textbook for Slovene language, and Mohorjeva publishing house also publishes some textbooks for economics. Students take their own Slovene notes, translate them, or ask their Austrian classmates for help.

The students' self-assessment of their knowledge of Slovene showed a (statistically insignificant) difference between the schools, where the self-assessment of Slovene was highest among students from the grammar school, while students from both vocational schools were slightly more modest in their self-assessment of their knowledge of Slovene, but of course the scores reflect the dominance of their first language (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Self-assessment of Slovene proficiency (10 = excellent)



Source: Own data.

6.3 English and the Concept of Native Speaker

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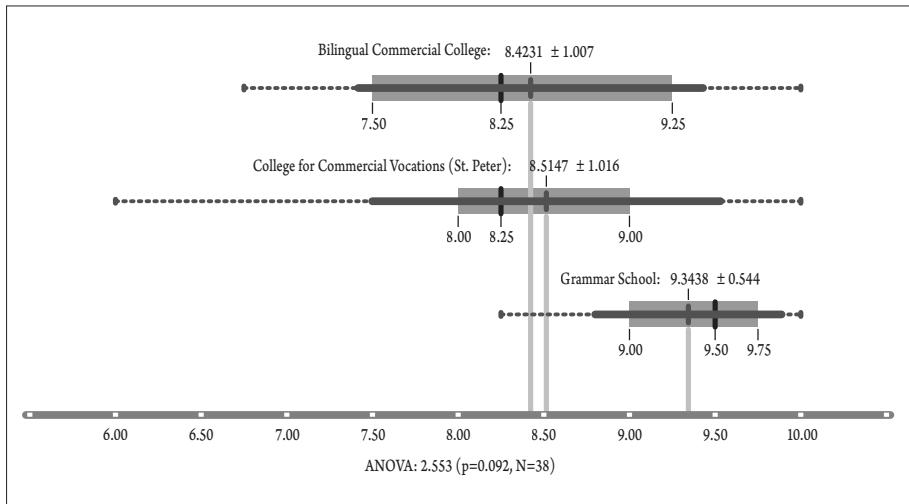
The conversation also turned to the almost mythological figure of the native speaker, which is a difficult term to define. In the focus group discussions, we used different terms that were close to the students' hearts (native, natural, speaker of the mother tongue, etc.). The topic was certainly interesting for the students and they were happy to discuss it in depth. Most of the students who participated in the focus groups did not feel themselves to be native speakers of German after four years of schooling – and this is taking into account the pandemic and the period of remote schooling. In fact, individuals admitted to speaking the language “to some extent” (FS1_2), even as native speakers: in most cases, these were individuals who were very integrated into their environment and were forced to use the language to its fullest extent (e.g., “I live with a German-speaking lady who doesn't speak Slovene, so I use the dialect with her, and then I use *Hochdeutsch* (Eng. High German) at school” (FS1_2)). In this context, the students also reflected on the extent to which knowledge of the local dialect qualifies a speaker as a native speaker:

FS1: 1: That's more or less all I know, just the dialect (laughs). 4: Yes, more of a dialect than *Hochdeutsch*. It's all like practice, you learn through conversation ... everywhere you go, only the dialect is used. M: But is knowledge of the dialect itself one of the conditions to be classified as a native ... 1: What? Native Carinthian (laughs).

There is an obvious discrepancy between how the students imagined learning German in Austria when they enrolled at school and how it turned out to be (“Yes, when I say I'm in school in Austria, people in Slovenia say, ‘Then you speak German very well’, and I think to myself, ‘Not the way you think I speak it’ (FS4_3)). Instead, a lot of commitment is required for quality language input.

The students from Slovenia were much more confident about their English than their German, although most of them were not sure that their English proficiency was equal to the proficiency they attribute to native speakers (“Working proficiency I would say. Let's say between C1 and C2” (FS1_1)). Their self-assessed English proficiency is shown in Figure 3 (the difference is indicated as statistically significant). The students were fully aware of their immersion in the English language (“We grew up with English. If I don't remember a word in Slovene, I think of it in English, a double process ...” (FS1_1)), and they also analysed the difference in their knowledge of English compared to their Austrian classmates.¹¹ In the context of language proficiency at the native speaker level, in one group, there was a debate about the linguistic competence of bilingual teachers in Slovene; in their opinion, teachers from Slovenia had a much better starting point in this case, and the statements in some cases bordered on linguistic chauvinism: “Yeah, I mean, they can never speak as nicely as a Slovene, that's logical. And even a Slovene will not be able to speak German (beautifully), even if he studies it all his life” (FS5_4).

Figure 3: Self-assessed English proficiency (10 = excellent)



Source: Own data.

7. Future Plans

Although the students have so far (more or less in practice) experienced studying abroad and have a certain advantage over peers when it comes to seeing their future path, not all of them are fully decided on their next steps. Most of them will continue their studies at university, but not all of them are sure where. Individuals who have not had a positive experience of schooling in their current environment ensure that they will not continue their education in Austria, some of them not even in another German-speaking country, as after all their time in Austria, they still do not have confidence in their German and some have even developed a dislike for the German language. Most of the students would certainly go abroad to study, but there are also a few who want to return to Slovenia. However, most would like to benefit from the (linguistic) knowledge and experience they have gained during their studies in Austria. Only the students from the bilingual commercial college are also considering immediate employment; most of them would like to work in Austria and consider this area to be important in their future life:

I think the aim of most of those who have moved here is to learn German to a level where they can get a job here. When I was looking for jobs, almost all of them say 'gute Deutschkenntnisse' (Eng. good German knowledge). That is to say, for most of us here the plan is to learn and get a job, maybe some to go on to study. Yeah, for me personally, I would like to get a job right after I finish school. (FS2_7)

8. European and Other Identities

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Given that their schooling in the neighbouring country is also largely possible because of Slovenia's inclusion in the European Union, we also talked about Europeanisation and the students' sense of belonging or their otherwise expressed European identity. The usual open-ended question of "Do you feel European?", was in most cases followed by a lively discussion on what this even means. The discussion involved generations who grew up when Slovenia was already part of the EU and therefore take most of the privileges of Slovene membership for granted:

Yes, I feel 100 % Slovene, but I don't know about European, I never think about it like that, it's all self-evident ... the only thing that means anything to me is that Slovenia is in Europe ... (FS2_9)

As expected, the students who were already discovering the benefits of being cross-border expressed high values of belonging to Europe, but many other identities also came to the fore. The heterogeneity of the group treated as Slovene students in these schools was evident. In addition to students who came from Slovenia (they still had registered residence there), there were children of Slovene immigrant parents from Slovenia (who had lived in Austria for a long time) or Slovene immigrants from elsewhere:

FS2: 2: A Slovene 70 %, a German 80–90 %, a European only 50 % M: What about an Austrian? 2: Not so much. 6: A Slovene would say 100 %, a Ukrainian would say 60–70 %, a European would say 50–40 %, somewhere in there.

We were also able to identify students who had Slovene citizenship, but their life and family paths had diverse national and identity traits:

FS3: 7: Slovene 50 %, because I was born there, but I also have Bosnian roots, Austrian not at all, European 80 %. 8: For me, Slovene about 20 %, because I like Slovenia and the language, but otherwise I am not Slovene, but I am 100 % Bosnian, and another 50 % Croatian, European 80 %.

However, the group was united on two issues: on the one hand, their knowledge of the Slovene language, and on the other, their lack of knowing the Slovene Carinthian dialect (and consequently not being part of the Slovene minority community in Austria). The permeability of this geographical area is sometimes quite incredible, and possible Austrian citizenship is (if at all) only a pragmatic assumption.¹² In the course of the conversation, trans-political issues were also raised: "I would go with the term Earthian, I have no particular attachment to anything, I don't have any particular favouritisms ..." (FS3_5) as well as various

global definitions: “it seems to me that we belong to a big community, when you go to other countries there is not so much difference, [...] because we young people are all going in roughly the same direction” (FS5_3), however, in such a lively conversation, the topic at hand also brought to light many hidden and suppressed emotions.¹³ A pervasive sense of distinction between North and South was highlighted (“Slovenia is still almost universally considered Balkan, so ... you’re not exactly considered European” (FS4_3)), and the boundary between the two was drawn each time depending on the stakeholders/speakers. In this sense, the differentiation of students by origin was also strongly emphasised at school, where, according to the students, it reflected a fear of the unknown,¹⁴ especially among teachers of the older generation. I hope and believe that many students looked at themselves in a mirror, in addition to holding one up to others, e.g.:

(I feel) 90–100 % European, for a Slovene, yes, well, it’s a bit of an identity thing for me, too, because I have Bosnian roots, but I’m third generation, born in Slovenia, and I can say without shame that I consider myself more Slovene than Bosnian. ... Although I have the feeling that for Slovenes I will always be ‘the bottom one’, ‘čefurka’ (a slur),¹⁵ but roughly speaking, yes, I would say that I consider myself 80 % Slovene, 40 % Croatian, 40–50 % Bosnian. (FS3_7)

9. Discussion

Students from Slovenia (although they are not a homogeneous group in terms of their first language or first ethnic self-definition) come to Austria not only with a better proficiency in Slovene, but also from a slightly different socio-economic background and, as far as their academic career is concerned, from a slightly different school culture, and above all, from schools where the only language of instruction had the status of the national language. Many of the students’ responses were in line with this difference and confirmed the existence of a new dynamic that these students bring with them to the Slovene minority schools in Austria. This is not only observed by researchers (Kolb 2018; Vavti 2012; Zorčič 2020a; b), school management has been dealing with this issue since the very beginning of the admission and enrolment of Slovene students at schools in Austria.

A social group is defined as two or more people who **interact with each other**, share similar characteristics, and have a collective sense of community (Reicher 1982; author’s emphasis). Small groups in school classrooms are a common phenomenon, but in minority schools, they are often defined by their means of communication. The Slovene or German language, in all their geographical and social variations, can be a unifying or constraining element in the formation of class groups and class cohesion. We tend to observe that

students from Slovenia are less likely to bond with groups of students from Austria, which is due to at least two reasons: (1) many students from Slovenia come to Austria at later stages of their schooling and enter a (sometimes already quite) group-formed school environment (especially at the Grammar School, where certain friendships have existed since lower grammar school, and groups are also formed on the basis of a common living environment, which presupposes the use of a common Carinthian dialect); (2) the knowledge of German, especially the locally spoken dialect, is very low among students from Slovenia, which makes genuine and spontaneous communication between adolescents difficult. The focus group discussion therefore confirmed what has already been found in previous research (cf. Zorčič 2019; 2020a): that groups are usually formed on the basis of the language of communication and previous acquaintances.

School management, or the people in charge of forming classes, plays a particularly important role in shaping classroom dynamics, as class cohesion is largely determined by the size of the class and the number of students from Slovenia it contains. Larger classes are always linguistically differentiated into Slovene and German groups, while smaller classes tend to have more coherence (and consequently more communication in both languages). Another special case is the almost "all-Slovene sections" in which, owing to the large number of Students from Slovenia, German is practically unheard; once this situation is established, it will persist for the rest of schooling without reforming the classes. Class formation must therefore be given great attention if schools are to give all students the best possible chance of communicating in as linguistically-diverse a manner as possible. It is important to note that the generations that participated in the focus groups were deprived of a part of their common school life when part of their education was on-line because of the pandemic. Especially at the beginning, in the first years, when the German skills of the students from Slovenia were very poor. Although the other two groups of students from Austria, the Slovene minority and the German speakers, speak German to each other, it is obvious that there is very little communication in German at school with the students from Slovenia: students from the Slovene minority use Slovene, students from German-speaking families (who some students don't even know exist in their class) adapt to their use of Slovene, and even teachers adapt (and apparently do not follow all of the monthly language rules as a result). Therefore students from Slovenia admit that it is difficult to converse in German, especially on topics they are not familiar with, i.e., things that are not school-related.

However, if we look at the consequences of the enrolment of students from Slovenia at minority schools in Austria from a different perspective, i.e., not from the point of view of students from Slovenia, but from the point of view of the Slovene minority, it is necessary to stress the good aspects of this practice, which has become widespread since Slovenia's accession to the European Union. The

presence of students from Slovenia in these schools has led to a much greater presence of the Slovene language. In this way, students from the Slovene minority, as well as monolingual students from German families, are exposed to a version of the Slovene language that they rarely hear otherwise, since in Carinthia, they are mostly exposed to the dialect of their home environment, and in more formal speaking positions to the supra-regional Carinthian version of Slovene. The Slovene colloquial language that their classmates from Slovenia bring with them, and which they undoubtedly use in their communication with their Austrian classmates, thus brings new speaking experiences to the speakers of Slovene in Austrian Carinthia and, as a consequence, better speaking competence in the social version of Slovene, which is very important for the expansion of their linguistic repertoire. The latter enables better linguistic proficiency and greater confidence in feeling better able to communicate in Slovene.

The shortcoming of the study is that it does not cover younger students from Slovenia whose parents work in Austria and are in the (transition) phase or have already moved to Austria. The possibilities for younger students are very small; the quality of bilingual education varies greatly and is only possible in the bilingual area. High quality bilingual language development for immigrant children (also outside the official bilingual area) is even more important. An active targeted research project and further development on this topic would be a necessity in the future.

10. Conclusion

The topic of cross-border education is relatively new, as this phenomenon has only become widespread in the last (in the Slovene context, two) decades (see also Grgič 2019). Of course, each geographical and temporal context has to be considered separately, but we can conclude that the context of students from Slovenia in minority schools in Austrian Carinthia is a success story. The outcome seems to be particularly favourable for the Slovene minority in Austrian Carinthia, which in this way not only maintains (the quality of and) minority education at upper secondary level, which would otherwise have had difficulties in securing an influx of students due to the decline of the ethnic community over the last century (assimilation) and decades (poorer – typically Westernised – demographics and urbanisation). However, thanks to the cross-border economy, these schools have been able to exploit their niche and not only survive, but also become a language-education centre for the wider region. The context also has beneficial consequences for the members of the Slovene minority who are educated at these schools: their classmates from Slovenia expose them to the Slovene language to a much greater extent, especially the spoken version, with which they have less direct contact in this area. Students from Slovenia also largely ensure their expectations of the experience of schooling abroad, especially individuals who have a very

elaborate self-image or clear plans for the future, so that they are able to neutralise any shortcomings in this mode of schooling in advance by themselves. We can also conclude that, owing to the successful handling of the situation during the pandemic by both countries, there has been no negative impact on cross-border education in the form of lower enrolment, and it seems that the story of success will continue for now.

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Notes

- ¹ The foundations are already laid in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2000, Art. 14 and 45), which deals with the rights to education and freedom of movement and residence. These rights are further addressed in part in the Act on the Ratification of the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Slovenia and the Government of the Republic of Austria on Cooperation in Culture, Education and Science (BATKIZ 2002) and the individual directives relating to associated family members (in the case of relocation).
- ² According to Article V, Paragraph 24 of the Minority School Law for Carinthia (Minderheiten-Schulgesetz für Kärnten 1958), only Austrian citizens with sufficient knowledge of Slovene may attend the school. However, an amendment to the law passed in 1990, which made it possible to establish the Bilingual Commercial College in Klagenfurt, relaxed the strict enrolment limitation by stipulating that the school was intended "primarily for Austrian citizens" (Änderung des Minderheiten-Schulgesetzes für Kärnten 1990, Art. II).
- ³ Kugy classes were set up as an initiative in the joint bid of Austria, Italy and Slovenia for the 2006 Winter Olympics themed *Senza confini* (Eng. Without borders). The Regional School Board of Carinthia allowed this plan to go ahead and opened up the possibility of enrolling a limited number of students from Slovenia and Italy. Despite the unsuccessful application for the Olympics, the classes remained an attractive educational offer at the Slovene Grammar School.
- ⁴ Similar conclusions were drawn in a study of the Federal Chancellery in Vienna: Položaj, raba jezika in perspektive slovenske narodne skupnosti na Koroškem (OGM 2022).
- ⁵ "[...] the professor has more freedom, doesn't he ... in the assessment of the cooperation ..." (FS2_9). "Yes, in fact, cooperation can save you a lot of the time, so it's not such a bad thing" (FS4_3). "Usually 40 % (of the grade) is one big test and 60 % is cooperation, which includes small tests, participation during the class, assignments, and that's up to the teacher to decide" (FS2_9). "And that's subjective" (FS2_1).
- ⁶ "For me, it feels like if you have a wish, it's better to stay here and continue studies here, unless you have a specific wish for Slovenia" (FS3_1). "I would say that there are two main differences, let's say, when we take a test: in Slovenia you write grammar and literature, history, things like that;

here, it's only writings, let's say, an article, a commentary, an opinion speech. There's no grammar in the school assignments" (FS3_6).

- 7 "But we also have some good experiences. For example, last week when I was buying something, the lady at the checkout was explaining to me that they had a new system and then when I was filling something in, she said that it sounds like I have an accent, where am I from? I said I was from Slovenia. And then she started speaking in Slovene. And it was so interesting for me because there are supposed to be so few Slovenes still here, but you meet them anyway. When I caught the bus with one of my friends in the evening and we were speaking in Slovene and when we got off the bus the driver said 'Lahko noč' (Eng. good night) and smiled. Some kind of bilingualism indeed exists here" (FS3_6). "... it's just that maybe some people are ashamed, that's one of the things of the Slovene minority now, to show in public that they understand, and maybe they just smile" (FS3_7). "But the situation has improved tremendously, especially in the last twenty years, maybe ... We watched a film in class where a boy was asking people in the towns in the Slovene Carinthian dialect and they all pretended not to understand him, but nowadays I have the feeling, especially with young people, that a lot of them say, 'Well, Slovenes are pretty cool,' and it's not such a problem anymore, that there's not so much of an attitude against the minority anymore, against foreigners anymore ..." (FS3_2). "But in fact there are so many more foreigners here from Third World countries that Slovenes are almost an insignificant minority among these foreigners; there are many more Syrians and such ..." (FS3_3). "You're not so ostracized anymore ..." (FS3_6). "You already look different, by the colour of your skin" (FS3_3).
- 8 "What about the one month German, one month Slovene rule?" (FS5_M). "Eh, that's worthless ..." (FS5_6). "Yeah, yeah, otherwise the professors all stick to it ..." (FS5_3). "Now a bit more, but if you don't understand, then ..." (FS5_6). "They try, only if you don't get stuck, then they have to explain in Slovene ..." (FS5_4). "Yeah, it depends on which subject" (FS5_3). "And the fact that we have a choice whether to write in Slovene or German is a big plus, even if it's German month, you have a choice whether to write the test in Slovene or in German ..." (FS5_2). "Yeah, but some professors have half the test in Slovene, half the test in German ..." (FS5_3).
- 9 Typical Carinthian laryngeal plosive, a dorsal consonant (see Karničar 2008).
- 10 "I would say that there is more emphasis on writing texts, which I think is very smart, that we learn about the ways of using language, but there is not enough conversation, for example, in English, in German, in Slovene, I think, unless we are doing some things with an assistant, I think there is not enough conversation, in general, too. Even the English exam, as it is structured, is writing, listening, grammar, and what else, reading, but there is not enough emphasis on speaking. Especially in English. That seems to me to be the weakest point for Austrians as well, speaking, in English in general because of their 'r's, which don't translate into English very well" (FS3_3).
- 11 (In Slovenia, English content is subtitled) "while Austrians mostly synchronise ... they're much worse at it (English)" (FS2_9). "It is well known that we have a much better system in Slovenia as far as English is concerned ... Our English professor is Irish and even he said that he noticed a big difference between Slovenes and Austrians ..." (FS4_2). "Slovenes have a higher level, definitely" (FS5_6). "After four years of doing the same things, I would say it's a bit more even, but at the beginning it was really obvious who was in the Austrian school and who was in the Slovene school before, because in Slovenia, there is a much higher level of English in primary school" (FS5_5). "And even when we moved here, they have a much lower level of English in the primary school, practically the whole primary school I had nothing to do in English" (FS5_4).
- 12 "As Slovene (I do feel) not very much, I basically lived there very little, we were more in Croatia, so for a while I didn't even speak Slovene, so I would say maybe 40–50 %, for a Croatian I would say 60 % ..." (FS3_9). "For an Austrian?" (FS3_M). "Well, I've been living in Austria for a while now, so, let's say 30 %, although I don't like Austrians, because they really do act quite differently than we do ... but, yeah ..." (FS3_9). "Do you already have citizenship?" (FS3_M). "No, but I want to have it" (FS3_9). "Does anyone have citizenship?" (FS3_M). "Ah, and then you have conscription and civilian military service and everything ..." (FS3_6).

- ¹³ “It seems to me that Austria is very nationally oriented and doesn’t accept those ‘from the Balkans’, and my personal experience is that you have to prove yourself by something that you are not ... that you are like them and you are not incompetent, and if you show progress in knowledge and in the ability to be independent and like them, only then will you be accepted. From the beginning, maybe they are watching you before they put you outside the Balkan basket” (FS3_4).
- ¹⁴ “And those remarks (from teachers) about not being able to work with a certain class because ‘there are a lot of Bosnians in it’ ... Really, they have problems because they have so many prejudices, because they still think that bombs are falling in Sarajevo and Belgrade, at least that’s what it looks like if we want to go on an excursion down there (laughs). They just think ... [...] that they’re just walking around with knives, and they’re cutting people, I don’t know, there are so many prejudices ... We can only go up. And to Italy ...” (FS3_4). “Yeah, the Austrians are more centred on themselves, and it’s not like they’d go to another country and see for themselves that maybe it’s not like it was 100 years ago, and that not everything south of them is the third world” (FS3_2).
- ¹⁵ A slur for identifying a member of any nation of former Yugoslavia except Slovenes.

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Vera Graovac Matassi, Damir Josipovič

Different Demographic Pathways of the Post-Socialist Transition: Mortality Trends in Croatia and Slovenia during COVID-19

The paper discusses the COVID-19 mortality in Slovenia and Croatia in 2020 and 2021. The aim of the paper is to determine similarities and differences in mortality trends during COVID-19 period and to discuss the underlying causes and consequences. It is hypothesised that the unfavourable age structure of both countries was a catalyst of the excess mortality differentials, and that the different paths of post-socialist transitions significantly contributed to differential mortality in 2020. The analyses confirmed a biased effect of the excess mortality indicator, which is applicable only if supported with sufficient attributive data. Moreover, findings confirmed the hypothesis that COVID-19 mortality largely contributed to overall mortality in Slovenia in 2020, particularly due to the increased mortality in long-term care facilities (LTCF) which was about 70% higher compared to that of Croatia.

Keywords: COVID-19, coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, excess mortality, Slovenia, Croatia, post-socialism.

Različne demografske smeri postsocialistične tranzicije: trendi umrljivosti na Hrvaškem in v Sloveniji v času covida-19

Prispevek obravnava stopnjo umrljivosti zaradi covida-19 v Sloveniji in na Hrvaškem v letih 2020 in 2021. Domnevamo, da je za razlike v stopnji umrljivosti kriva zlasti neugodna starostna struktura v Sloveniji in na Hrvaškem ter da so različne poti postsocialistične tranzicije, zlasti kar zadeva razvoj na področju dolgotrajne oskrbe, pomembno prispevale k povečani umrljivosti leta 2020. Analize so potrdile pristranski učinek kazalnika presežne umrljivosti, ki je uporaben le, če je podprt z zadostnimi opisnimi podatki. Poleg tega so ugotovitve potrdile hipotezo, da je umrljivost zaradi covida-19 pomembno prispevala k skupni umrljivosti v Sloveniji v letu 2020. Pri tem je bilo največ smrti zabeleženih v zavodih za dolgotrajno oskrbo, katerih smrtnost je bila približno 70 odstotkov višja kot na Hrvaškem.

Ključne besede: covid-19, koronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, presežna umrljivost, Slovenija, Hrvaška, postsocializem.

Correspondence address: Vera Graovac Matassi, Vseučilište u Zadru, Odjel za geografiju, Franje Tuđmana 24i, 23000 Zadar, HR-Hrvaška, vgraovac@unizd.hr; Damir Josipovič, Inštitut za narodnostna vprašanja, Erjavčeva 26, SI-1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia, damir.josipovic@guest.arnes.si.

1. Introduction

COVID-19 was a completely new phenomenon not only for Slovenia and Croatia, but also for the whole of Europe at the beginning of 2020. It presented a challenge in following it methodologically and measuring its medical-demographic effects. The latter is the primary concern of this paper. From the European epicentres in Bergamo (Italy) and Ischgl (Austria), the initial wave quickly reached Slovenia (officially on 13 February 2020) and, shortly after, Croatia (officially on 25 February 2020). The geographic sequence of the initial spread was easily discernible (Josipović 2020). The subsequent waves of new variants were blurred by the diverging responses of governments, but the pattern of spatial replacement of the former dominant variants followed the distinguished geographic sequence.

Between February 2020 and the end of 2021, a total of 464,121 confirmed cases and 6,129 COVID-19 deaths were reported in Slovenia, while in Croatia as many as 715,245 confirmed cases and 12,538 deaths were reported (NIJZ 2021; Croatian Institute of Public Health 2021a). With a population of about 2.1 million, Slovenia has the equivalent of approximately 55% of Croatia's population (3.9 million). So, the overall impression was that Slovenia had somewhat more infections (65% of the total number of infections registered in Croatia) but a lower death rate (49% of the total number registered in Croatia) confirmed with PCR (polymerase chain reaction) tests. However, the question is not only about the extent of testing and the reliability of tests; it is about the reasons for these differentials. In this paper, the primary aim was to examine the temporal spread of COVID-19 deaths and to compare the excess death rates in the two countries.

Knowing that mortality rates may render skewed results depending on age structure, we also took into consideration data on the age structure of the populations, COVID-19 deaths by age, and COVID-19 deaths within long-term care facilities (LTCF) where such a distinction was possible. The initial data on LTCF units did not allow for a week-to-week comparison for Croatia, while this differentiation was possible for Slovenia. Since we assumed that the number of COVID-19 deaths and the mortality of COVID-19 patients within LTCF units was the major difference between the two countries, we found auxiliary ways to bridge it. In the next stage, we thus analysed the comparative European data for 19 EU/EEA states, which we obtained through the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (hereafter ECDC) (ECDC 2021). These data allowed us to answer our main research questions: a) Were there differences between the two countries in COVID-19 mortality and excess mortality?, and b) Although at first glance COVID-19 mortality seemed similar in both countries, was the mortality of the elderly population in long-term facilities in 2020 an important catalyst of differentiation? The observed difference is a consequence of diverging demographic paths in the post-socialist transition having its roots not only in

the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the subsequent war in Croatia, but also in the differing internal processes of democratisations and rising autonomies of Yugoslav republics, especially in Slovenia and Croatia.

Researchers around the world have been unprecedentedly responsive in analysing the spread and effects of COVID-19 and have produced a large number of COVID-19-related papers. However, we have found none to address or assess the main research questions of this paper, i.e., not only to address the question of elderly care during the pandemic, but to connect its disparities to a specific demographic pathway in the post-socialist countries of Slovenia and Croatia.

2. Data and Methods

All analyses in this paper are based on official and openly accessible data provided by the representative national institutions in both countries: the Croatian Bureau of Statistics, the Croatian Institute of Public Health, the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia (hereafter SORS), and the National Institute of Public Health (NIJZ). In cases where the national statistics on COVID-19 mortality and related more specific demographic data were missing or incomplete, other databases were consulted, such as the ECDC and the World Bank.

The Croatian Institute of Public Health regularly published data regarding confirmed cases and deaths caused by COVID-19, the age structure of the deceased, as well as the data on all causes of death. However, both national bureaus of statistics provide the data related to overall mortality by month. For calculating the excess mortality, we used the P-score, counted as the percentage difference between the reported and projected number of deaths.

For Croatia, we calculated the excess mortality for 2020 and 2021 by comparing the number of reported deaths in each year by month and then comparing it to the projected deaths based on the average monthly deaths for the five-year pre-epidemic period between 2015 and 2019. The Slovene data was more up-to-date and readily available (notwithstanding other methodological problems, such as the spatial level of presentation, age-specific aggregations, specific distributions, etc.). Since the Slovene data was better amassed, we were not able to directly compare some of the indicators, for example the age structure of the deceased in nursing homes. Additionally, in order to provide a thorough preview of COVID-19 mortality in both countries, we used all the accessible data and made the necessary comparisons.

3. Results

3.1 Croatia

The first wave of COVID-19 in Croatia started in March 2020, but the number of confirmed cases and the number of COVID-19 deaths were significantly

lower compared to Slovenia and compared to the subsequent waves following the initially strict public health measures (lockdown). Namely, the infection and mortality rates differed among different countries during the first wave in spring 2020. In some western and southern European countries (particularly in Spain and Italy) the number of confirmed cases and deaths were particularly high (Kontis et al. 2020; Josipović 2020). On the other hand, some countries (including Croatia and Slovenia) introduced timely public health measures (social distancing, various limitations regarding gatherings, and, ultimately, lockdown), thus avoiding the large increase in the number of cases and deaths (Brauner et al. 2021; Hale et al. 2021; Sharma et al. 2021). During the summer, the infection continued to spread, but with a lesser intensity. Consequently, many countries, including Croatia, reopened their state borders and largely eased restrictions (Hale et al. 2021).

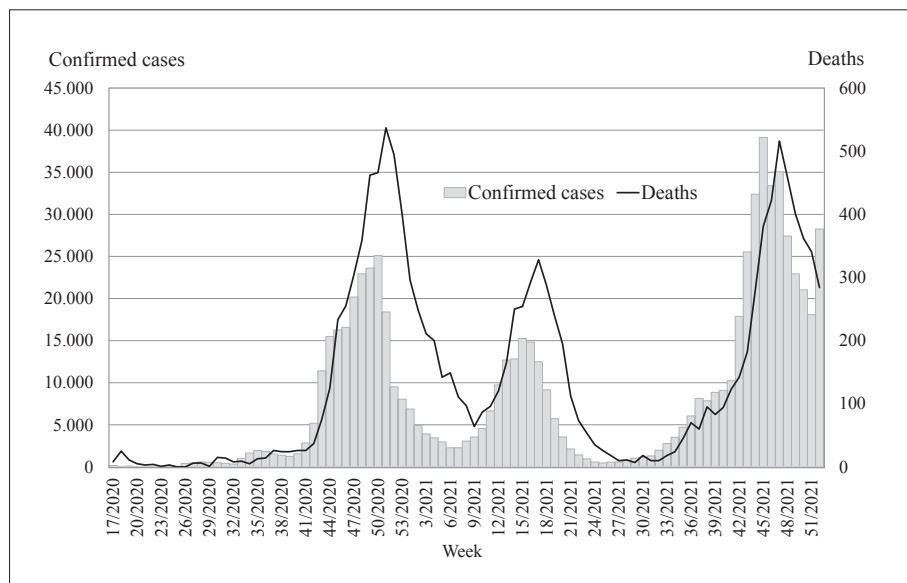
The second wave in Croatia started in the second half of October 2020 (Chart 1), and the number of cases and deaths was incomparably higher than in the first wave and much higher than in the subsequent wave. Similar trends were observed in Slovenia and other countries (Islam et al. 2021). The first wave predominantly affected the older population (Klempić Bogadi 2021), but in the second wave, the infection spread rapidly among younger generations and spread secondarily among older generations (Aleta & Moreno 2020). The peak number of confirmed cases in this wave was recorded in week 50 (7–12 December 2020; 25,095 cases), and the peak number of deaths was recorded a week later (week 51; 14–20 December 2020; 537 deaths). The increased numbers in this wave were largely the result of mild restrictions (Čipin et al. 2021). In late December 2020, the COVID-19 vaccination became available in Croatia.

The third wave in Croatia began in early March 2021, and the number of weekly confirmed cases and deaths were lower than in the previous wave. However, it is highly likely that the actual number of infected persons was not accurate, because at that time the official recommendations were that only one household member should be tested and the others were treated as probably infected (Croatian Institute of Public Health 2021b). The peak number of confirmed cases was recorded in week 15 (12–18 April 2021; 15,256 cases) and the peak number of deaths in week 17 (26 April – 2 May 2021; 328 deaths). At the beginning of this wave, Civil Protection introduced a number of restrictions (e.g., limited number of people at gatherings, limited working hours, cancellation of various events, online classes in schools and universities, mandatory face masks, etc.), which evidently had an effect (Odluka ... 2022).

The fourth wave of the pandemic started late in the summer of 2021 and lasted into the beginning of 2022. At the end of 2021, the number of confirmed cases reached 715,245 and the number of deaths was 12,538. Also, by the end of 2021, 56.8% of the total population of Croatia was fully vaccinated (57.6% in Slovenia), including 67.2% (67.7% in Slovenia) of the adult population (ECDC

2022). The vaccination rate was well below the expectations set forth by both governments. During this wave, the restrictions were less strict than during the previous waves and the pandemic began to spread rapidly. Additionally, an increasing number of breakthrough COVID-19 cases were reported around the world caused by variants that evaded the immune protection offered by the vaccines (Parums 2021).

Chart 1: Weekly number of confirmed cases and COVID-19 deaths in Croatia from mid-April 2020 to the end of 2021



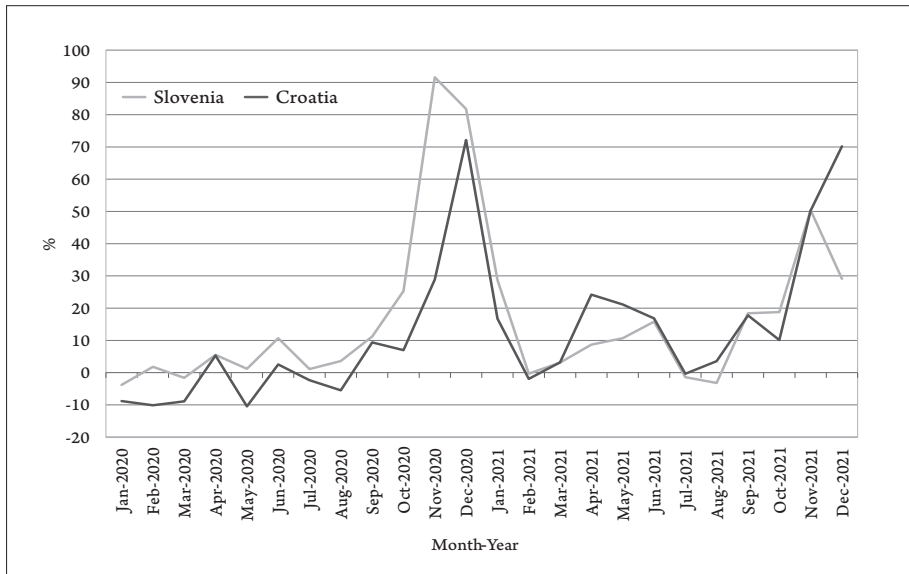
Source: Croatian Institute of Public Health (2021a).

To analyse the effects of COVID-19 mortality on overall mortality we compared the mortality from all causes during the epidemic with the mortality during the pre-epidemic five-year period (i.e., excess mortality). Spurred by the rapid spread of the pandemic in early 2020, many countries, including Croatia and Slovenia, began to experience excess mortality (Kapitsinis 2021). In Croatia, excess mortality was first detected during the first wave of the pandemic (April 2020; Chart 2), and then in June and September, but it was below 10.0% and subject to expected fluctuations. However, the first notably high excess mortality was recorded during the second wave (November and, particularly, December 2020), when the excess mortality in November rose to 28.9% and in December to as much as 72.1%.

In the following year (2021), excess mortality was recorded in all months except in February (-2.0%) and July (-0.4%), with the highest rate in December (70.2%) during the fourth wave of the pandemic. In 2020, about 8.1% (4,278)

more deaths were recorded in comparison to the 2015–2019 period. In 2021, the situation was much worse – 9,967 more deaths (18.9% more deaths than in the 2015–2019 period). A study conducted in Croatia in 2020 revealed differences in case fatality between the spring and summer periods (Krstić et al. 2020). During the summer, the number of confirmed cases nearly quadrupled, but case fatality decreased. However, cardiovascular comorbidities were still an important risk factor for case fatality. The case fatality rate decline during the summer could have been caused by several factors, broadly classifiable into pathogen-related, host-related, or environmental (and any combination or interaction thereof) (Krstić et al. 2020).

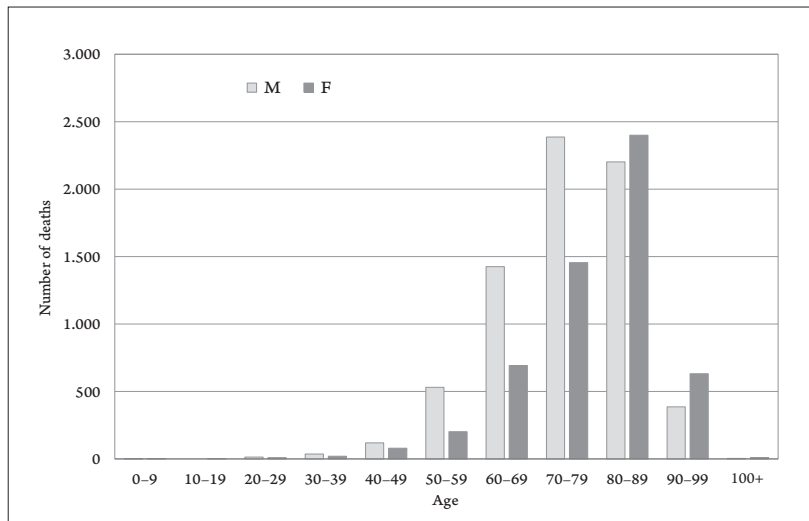
Chart 2: Excess mortality in Slovenia and Croatia by month in 2020 and 2021 – deaths from all causes compared to the average for 2015–2019



Source: Croatian Bureau of Statistics (2021), Croatian Institute for Public Health (2021a), SORS (2021), authors' calculations.

The analysis of case fatalities by age and sex in Croatia revealed that there were some significant differences between men and women and among different ages. Most of the fatalities were recorded in older age groups (60+). In the 60–69 and 70–79 age groups, more fatalities were recorded among men (20.1% and 33.6%, respectively) than among women (12.6% and 26.4%, respectively) (Chart 3, Table 1). In the 80+ age groups, the differences were not so pronounced. The largest proportion of case fatalities was recorded in the 80–89 age group, followed by 70–79 (Chart 3). Similar trends were observed in other European countries (Medford & Trias-Llimós 2020).

Chart 3: Total number of COVID-19 deaths in Croatia by age group between February 2020 and the end of 2021



Source: Croatian Institute of Public Health (2021c).

Table 1: COVID-19 case fatalities (percentage) in Croatia by age and sex between March 2020 and the end of 2021

Age	0-9	10-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70-79	80+	Total
Men	0.0	0.0	0.2	0.5	1.7	7.5	20.1	33.6	36.5	56.3
Women	0.0	0.1	0.2	0.4	1.4	3.7	12.6	26.4	55.3	43.7
Total	0.0	0.0	0.2	0.4	1.6	5.8	16.8	30.5	44.7	100.0

Source: Croatian Institute of Public Health (2021c).

If we compare the mortality by age and sex in 2020 (deaths from all causes) with the average mortality for the pre-epidemic period (2015–2019), we can clearly see that mortality substantially increased in the 60+ age groups for both sexes, and, as previously discussed, most of the COVID-19 case fatalities were recorded in those age groups (Table 2).

Table 2: Excess mortality (percentage) in Croatia by age and sex in 2020 – deaths from all causes compared to the average for 2015–2019

Age	0-9	10-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70-79	80+
Men	-11.9	1.0	-3.0	-9.2	-9.0	-5.5	8.1	9.9	15.2
Women	-3.5	-17.3	-21.5	-4.3	4.3	-8.8	9.2	3.5	9.8
Total	-8.3	-4.7	-7.5	-7.8	-4.9	-6.5	8.4	7.0	11.7

Source: Croatian Bureau of Statistics (2021), Croatian Institute for Public Health (2021a), SORS (2021), authors' calculations.

Excess mortality in older age groups should also be considered through the prism of population ageing. Both Croatia and Slovenia are positioned among the oldest populations in Europe. In 2020 in Croatia, the percentage of the population aged 65+ was 21.0%, and in the 2015–2020 period, the share of the oldest age group (aged 80+) increased by almost 16.0% (22.8% for men and 12.7% for women), mostly due to the increasing number of baby boomers reaching old age (Croatian Bureau of Statistics 2022). However, the differences in the age patterns of COVID-19 deaths among different countries are not dependent solely on the age structure of a certain population, but also on other country-specific factors (Medford & Trias-Llimós 2020).

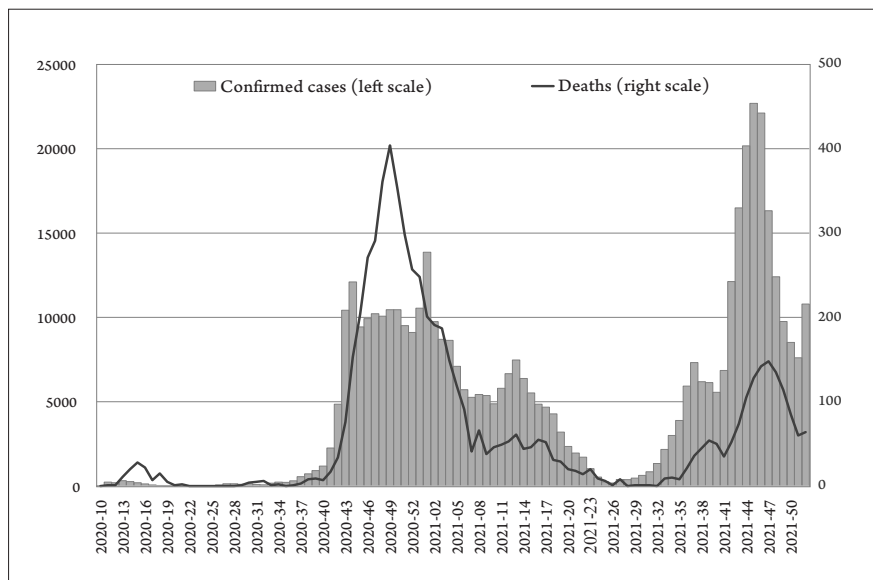
3.2 Slovenia

A combined view into the COVID-19 morbidity and overall mortality in Slovenia and its comparison to Croatia revealed many striking findings. We looked into the official data on COVID-19 infections and deaths through 2020 and 2021 separately for the residents in nursing homes and the rest of the population (Charts 4 and 5). Mortality among the residents of LTCF units was about thirtyfold higher compared to the rest of population. While nursing home residents experienced almost complete virus spread of the early Wuhan and Alfa variants in 2020, their death toll in Slovenia was around 19% (the second wave; weeks 42-2020 through 5-2021). The ratio is rather accurate because the testing was more complete – almost the whole populations of the LTCF units – while the rest of population, as in Croatia, remained partly untested. Hence, the mortality among the rest of population appears overstated. With an average of 1.2% during the late 2020/early 2021 period of peaking deaths, the ratio among the overall population remained the highest from the onset of the pandemic. With the introduction of the vaccine, the elderly population, including those in nursing homes, experienced a high level of protection against death, so the original and Alfa variants were quickly replaced by Delta, for which the existing vaccines were not that effective. During spring 2021 (from week 24-2021), the mortality rates plunged in all groups. With the onset of autumn 2021 and the rapid spread of the more transmissible Delta variant, the crude deaths, especially among the unvaccinated, surged to the levels of the second wave. As the population in nursing homes were already reduced and highly vaccinated, the absolute death toll was much higher among the remainder of population, though the infection to death ratio lowered substantially – to as low as 0.6% (weeks 37-51 of 2021).

Striking regional disparities found between the ratio of COVID-19 deaths to SARS-CoV-2 infections (Josipovič 2020) gave rise to further investigation into the age and gender structure of the deceased. There are two major divides within the age structure of the elderly population in Slovenia. The first is the internationally recognised average expected age of transition to retirement (or inactivity), which is around 65 years. But with the increasing mean age at death,

the most relevant age group becomes those aged 85 or above, as the average age at death in 2020 rose by two years in Slovenia (SORS 2021). There has been a tremendous increase in the population aged 65+ over the past pre-pandemic five years.

Chart 4: Weekly number of confirmed cases and COVID-19 deaths in Slovenia between mid-April 2020 and the end of 2021



Source: NIJZ (2021).

The post-WWII baby boom generations are gradually entering old age (65+). An increase in the retired population, especially men, was expected, since the higher proportion of men within the former labour contingent who immigrated from other Yugoslav republics prior to 1991 influenced gender differentials (Josipovič 2006). On the other hand, the oldest generations have seen an increase in their life expectancy, so the probability of an increased death rate has risen with each year. To fully appreciate the rising share of elderly people (65+), it is necessary to look at the 85+ age group, which comprises one-fifth (11,000 of 55,000) of the whole increase in the elderly contingent (Tables 3 and 4).

Table 3: Population by age and gender (65 years of age and over) in Slovenia

	1.1.2015	1.1.2020	Difference
Total	369,386	424,004	+54,618
Men	151,416	181,767	+30,351
Women	217,970	242,237	+24,267

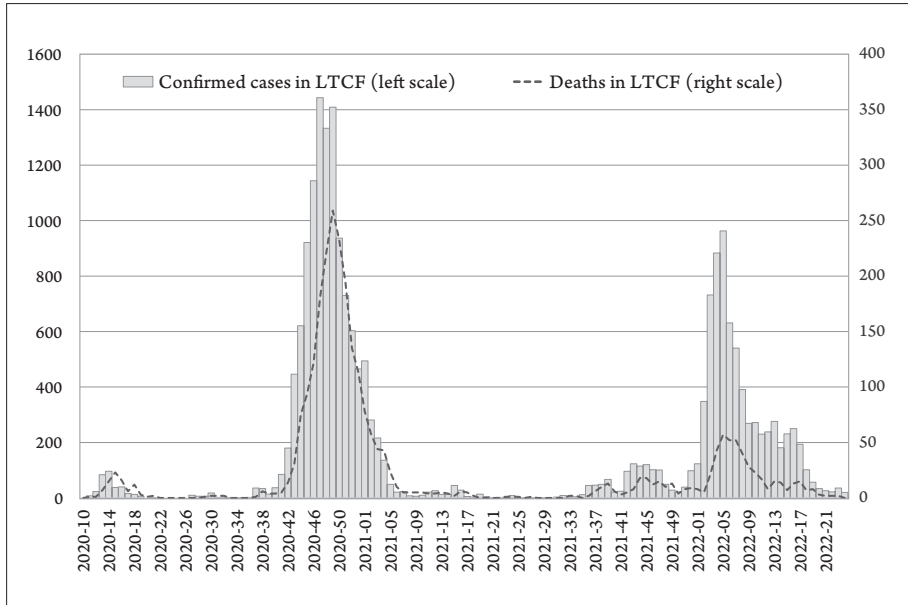
Source: SORS (2021).

Table 4: Population aged 85 years and over by gender in Slovenia, 2015–2020

Year	Total	Men	Women
1.1.2015	43,382	10,990	32,392
1.1.2016	46,171	12,076	34,095
1.1.2017	48,288	12,911	35,377
1.1.2018	50,395	13,635	36,760
1.1.2019	52,276	14,326	37,950
1.1.2020	54,136	15,236	38,900

Source: SORS (2021).

Chart 5: Weekly number of confirmed cases and COVID-19 deaths in nursing homes (LTCF) in Slovenia between mid-April 2020 and the end of 2021



Source: NIJZ (2021).

Despite the historically high percentages of the elderly population and the rising age at death in 2020 by two years, the COVID-19 mortality broken down into 10-year age-groups shows a striking picture. More than four out of five were aged 70 and up. A major jump occurs with men aged 60 or more and with women aged 70 or more. Altogether, 97.2% of the COVID-19 death toll was recorded in the population aged 60 years and above (Table 5). Comparing these demographics with those of Croatia in Table 1, one can observe that the death-toll was similar but slightly lower in age (see Tables 1 and 5).

Table 5: COVID-19 case fatalities (percentage) in Slovenia by age and sex between March 2020 and the end of 2021

Age	0–9	10–19	20–29	30–39	40–49	50–59	60–69	70–79	80+	Total
Men	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.6	3.3	10.4	27.3	58.2	46.2
Women	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.5	1.0	4.1	15.7	78.6	53.8
Total	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.6	2.1	7.0	21.1	69.2	100.0

Source: NIJZ (2021).

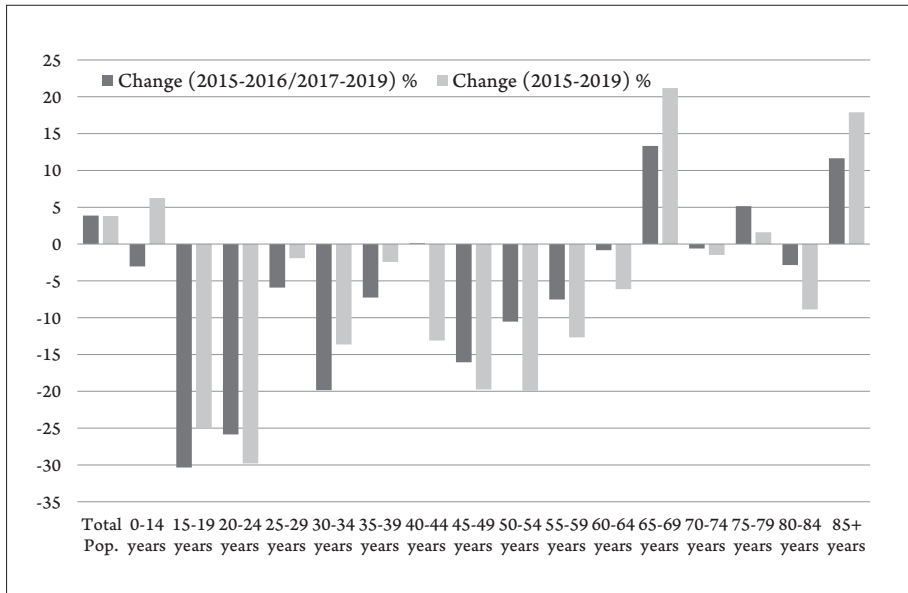
When looking at the monthly number of deaths over the last 20 years, we can observe that the largest number of deaths in Slovenia was recorded in January 2017 (2,425) when the seasonal flu, which was spread all over Europe in the winter of 2016/17, reached its peak in Slovenia. Before the COVID-19 epidemic, 29 January 2017 was the only day when the number of deaths in one day exceeded one hundred (Dolenc 2020). In just a five-year period, the number of men aged 85+ increased by roughly 50.0%, to 15,000, while the number of 85+ women increased by 22.0%, to 39,000 (Table 4). Thus, the gender gap is narrowing, notwithstanding the fact that we are dealing here with a highly vulnerable and fragile population, and that the situation may change at any moment, as it did with the excess deaths of approximately 3,000 in 2020 (Chart 2).

The age structure of the deceased should therefore be compared to the average gain or surplus within each age group. Only then can excess deaths be clearly attributed and interpreted. The next step is to compare excess mortality with COVID-19 mortality. If the data are reliable, the majority of variance in the distribution of excess mortality by age should be explained as COVID-19 deaths.

Accordingly, we regrouped the age-specific mortality rates and compared the two averages (2017–2019 and 2015–2016) to assess the age-specific differentials. Chart 6 shows striking features with a negative change (increased mortality) specifically in the 85+ and, remarkably, the 65–69 age groups. Most of the other age groups expressed positive change (decreased mortality), or at least a lack of change.

But how can the excess deaths be analytically defined and how can the share of COVID-19 deaths be identified within this surplus? Excess deaths in Slovenia are defined as a yearly surplus value compared to a given three-to-five-year average. The expected average of 40 per day in the two-week period from 8 to 21 February 2021, while at the same time the number of COVID-19 positive among them, decreased (–40% or 23.7 fewer patients per day). However, the mortality was still high: one death per every four hospitalised with COVID-19. As such, scrutinising age-specific rates is necessary.

Chart 6: Age-specific changes in the mortality pattern, 2015–2019, Slovenia



Source: SORS (2021).

Based on the data presented in Chart 6, we identified an overall 3.9% increase in projected mortality in 2020 (excluding the effect of COVID-19 deaths), since the raw data for specific age groups were not available. The provisional number of deaths (23,891) was reduced by the expected number (in accordance with the age-specific mortality trends from 2015–2019) of 21,391 usual deaths in 2020. The difference of 2,500 deaths may thus be ascribed to premature deaths resulting from COVID-19 (and other numerous stressors), since all other deaths were expected within the already augmented number. Otherwise, COVID-19 would have been affecting mortality rates in the years prior to 2020, which it did not, though the evidence is scarce (Josipovič 2020). However, the difference between the 2,500 excess deaths identified by this analysis and the official number of COVID-19 deaths supplied by the NIJZ in 2020 (3,126) is quite high. The NIJZ chart of COVID-19 deaths, which exceeds the projected value by 626 or almost a quarter (25%), seems exaggerated. There are many possible reasons for such a discrepancy. One very important reason might be the number of amplification cycles applied in the molecular tests (RT-PCR) which were carried out at 40 cycles.¹ Namely, with the increasing number of these repetitions beyond a margin of 30 cycles, the RT-PCR procedure increasingly produces false positive results (Borger et al. 2021).

Despite the introduction of vaccination in the elderly population (above 80 years of age) early in January 2021, the following five-month period (roughly until week 21-2021), during which they received the second of the two advised

doses (with three weeks or more between the two or more dosages depending on the type and manufacturer of the vaccine), paints a rather confusing picture. Despite a sharp decline and no newly discovered cases of SARS-CoV-2 in nursing homes, the overall number of infected people remained stagnant (see Charts 4 and 5). This corroborates the above statement (cf. Parums 2021) concerning the partial immune protection evasion of the Delta variant, which swiftly displaced the original and Alfa strains shortly after the mass vaccination process began. The fourth wave in Slovenia (the Delta-driven wave) took a deadly turn among the elderly, largely unvaccinated population (65+), sparing the nursing home proteges with a high vaccine intake. In December 2021, the first cases of Omicron appeared in Slovenia (NIJZ 2021).

3.3 The Results of Both Countries from a Comparative Perspective

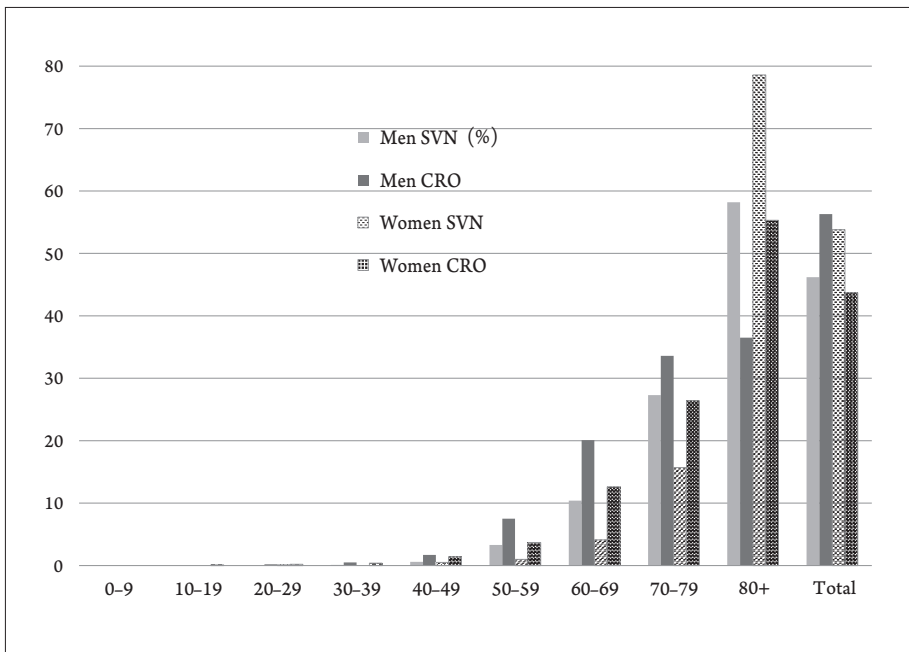
The data provided by the respective institutions for both Slovenia and Croatia show, as was the case in other countries, that cumulative infection rates were the lowest among children and adolescents aged 0–19. On the other hand, they were the highest in the working age groups, particularly among women. The higher number of COVID-19 infections among women in working age groups is closely connected to their high representation in professions that are particularly exposed to the disease (Sobotka et al. 2020), such as nursing, for example. However, according to Sobotka et al. (2020), this pattern changes in older age groups – there are more confirmed cases among men than among women. In contrast to Slovenia, no changes were detected in Croatia, since the confirmed cases among women still outnumber the cases among men. This is probably the result of a higher representation of women in those age groups.

In contrast with the cumulative infection rates by age group, case fatalities by age group are quite different – more than 90.0 % of case fatalities in both countries were recorded in the 60+ age groups. These age groups also recorded significant excess mortality in comparison to the pre-epidemic period. Higher mortality among older people is closely related to their weaker immune systems (Shang & Xu 2021), to cardiovascular and respiratory diseases (Yang et al. 2020), and other comorbidities. COVID-19 patients who had comorbidities, such as obesity, hypertension, or diabetes mellitus, were more likely to develop a more severe course and progression of the disease. Additionally, older patients, particularly those in the 65+ age groups who had comorbidities and were infected, had an increased admission rate into intensive care units and COVID-19 mortality (Sanyaolu et al. 2020). Even before the coronavirus outbreak in Croatia, cardiovascular diseases along with endocrine and metabolic diseases were the first and third causes of death in Croatia (with neoplasms being the second most common cause of death) (Erceg & Miler Knežević 2020). In

Slovenia, the situation was similar; the most pronounced causes of death were cardiovascular diseases, followed by neoplasms and diseases of the respiratory system (NIJZ 2021).

There are significant differences regarding COVID-19 mortality according to sex. In the age groups with the highest number of fatal cases (60–79 in both countries) most of the cases were recorded among men. In the 80+ age groups in both countries, more fatalities were recorded among women, which is closely connected to their higher representation in those age groups. While men in Croatia had significant mortality in the 60+ groups, men in Slovenia exceeded Croatian male mortality only in the age groups above 80 years. Similarly, with lower shares in the 60–79 age group, women in Slovenia only exhibited higher mortality compared to men in the 80+ age group (Chart 7).

Chart 7: COVID-19 case fatalities (percentage) in Slovenia and Croatia by age and sex between March 2020 and the end of 2021



Sources: NIJZ (2021), Croatian Institute of Public Health (2021c).

According to Bwire (2020), the biological differences between men's and women's immune systems may impact their ability to fight an infection, including the COVID-19 infection. Women are, in general, more resistant to infections than men, and this is likely mediated by various factors, such as hormones and a high expression of coronavirus receptors in men. Also, certain lifestyle differences, such as higher rates of smoking and alcohol consumption among men,

may affect the differential mortality. Women also tended to be more responsible during the pandemic, particularly in terms of frequent hand washing, wearing protective face masks, and social distancing (Bwire 2020).

For the first year of the pandemic in 2020, the analysis of the excess mortality in Slovenia showed an overestimated official number of COVID-19 deaths (Josipovič 2021). While the official number of COVID-19 deaths for 2020 published in January 2021 by the Slovenian Institute of Public Health (NIJZ 2021) was 3,126, the analysis confirmed only 2,500 excess deaths, considering the mortality trends within the last five-year period (2015–2019). So, the official number of COVID deaths was inflated by 626 deaths or as much as 25.0% compared to the projected value based on recent trends.

Despite the later confirmed high percentage of excess deaths in 2020, the officially reported number of COVID-19 deaths seemed to fit into the existing mortality gap, but only upon first glance. Namely, SORS published the provisional number of 3,301 excess deaths. Accordingly, the reported NIJZ number of 3,126 deaths seemed appropriate. Nevertheless, it disregarded the tempo effect and momentum of the population given an unfavourable age structure and the process of accelerated ageing with numerous generations of baby boomers reaching retirement age (Josipovič 2021). By mid-2021, SORS published the definitive data on mortality in 2020. The mortality gap increased to 2,625 but was still 20.0% or 501 lower than the number of COVID-19 deaths published by NIJZ. After almost a year (in December 2021), the Government Communication Office of the Republic of Slovenia (UKOM 2021) published the final number of COVID-19 deaths for 2020 – 2,725 – a reduction of 401 formerly ascribed as COVID-19 deaths, though there is still a gap of one hundred overstated COVID-19 deaths.

Another important difference regarding the effect of COVID-19 mortality in both countries is related to life expectancy at birth. Namely, in comparison to 2019, in 2021, life expectancy at birth in Croatia lowered by 1.9 years, while in Slovenia it lowered by 0.9 years.

4. Discussion

The presented data reveals similarities and differences in the COVID-19 spread in Slovenia and Croatia. In the following section will cover the main research question on what triggered the differences in COVID-19 mortality, and to what extent the similarities are a consequence of a joint geo-political past, first within the Austro-Hungarian Empire and then within the Yugoslav state.

The strongest impact on the economy and social affairs, and the specific transition pathways after gaining independence, compared to other post-socialist countries, can undoubtedly be found in the membership of both countries in the post-WWII socialist Yugoslav federation. As its westernmost republics (with

only Slovenia having state boundaries with the western capitalist countries of Italy and Austria) and the former constitutive regions of the Habsburg Empire, both countries entered the first Yugoslavia (The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes) as economically most advanced.

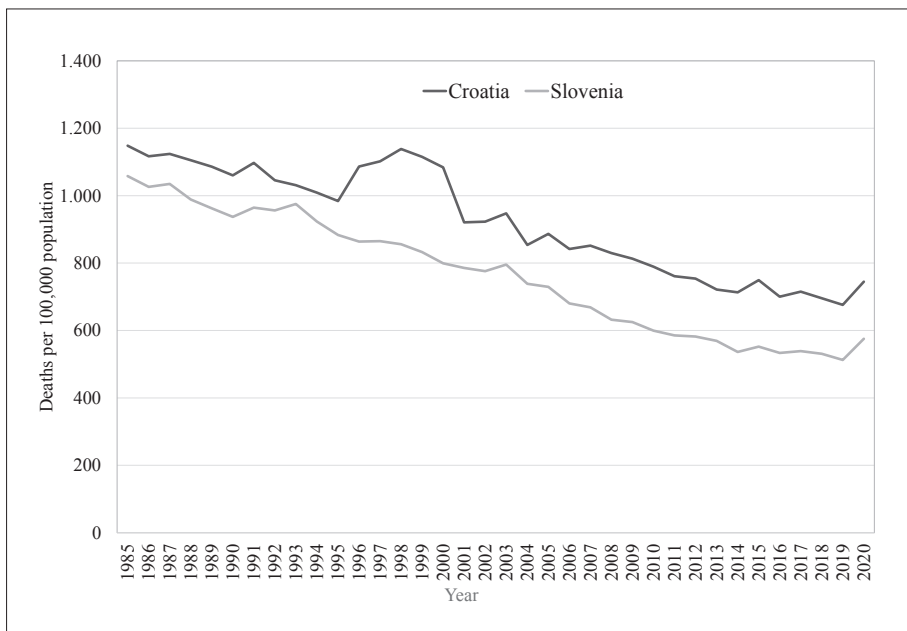
With the socialist revolution after the end of WWII and the collectivization of means of production, both countries remained the drivers of post-war rebuilding and economic development. The subsequent extensive industrialization in the 1960's and open borders with its western capitalist neighbours allowed for the development of a relatively open Yugoslav society with close ties to western Europe. The first period of state centralization and governance gradually evolved into progressively republic-oriented socio-economic development, including the innovative form of self-governance first applied in the large state-owned industrial systems. The new constitution of 1963 already acknowledged these trends by renaming the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia as the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The system of self-government (or self-governance) differed strongly from the Soviet centralized system behind the Iron Curtain applied in the member states of Council for Mutual Cooperation (the then Eastern Bloc). Increasing independence in companies' decision-making processes, which had already started in the late 1950's, slowly led to a rising political autonomy of the republics. These tendencies strengthened most in Slovenia and Croatia and resulted in the more nationalist-oriented Communist Party (The Association of Communists) leadership in both republics. With the liberal revolution in the late 1960's, and the MASPOK movement of the masses in 1971, the way was paved first to state intervention and immediate restriction of autonomies, but in its softened effect, it resulted in the new constitution of 1974, which granted the six republics the status of states in a federation with the right to self-declaration. After Tito's death, the long-reigning post-war Yugoslav president, in 1980, the autonomies and differentiation further developed, and with the decisive help of both diasporas in the late 1980s, eventually resulted in the break-up of Yugoslavia by the simultaneous proclamation of Slovenia's and Croatia's independence in 1991.

Starting in the 1970's, the otherwise closely intertwined republics of Slovenia and Croatia started to differ in some aspects of their socio-economic and demographic development. One striking difference between the two was the migration of temporary workers primarily to Germany, Austria, Switzerland, France, and Sweden, but elsewhere as well (Josipović 2006). This was initially labelled a temporary migration, which started after the liberalization of the border regime in 1962, but it turned into large, permanent emigration. While Slovene emigration was much lesser in numbers (7.1% by 1971 of all Yugoslavs abroad, according to the official census), it also compensated with immigration from other republics of Yugoslavia, while Croatia suffered higher emigration rates (33.9% by 1971 of all Yugoslavs abroad, according to the official census)

with much lower compensating migration from other republics. This differential emigration strongly affected the steadily diverging Slovene and Croatian mortality rates, as Croatia started facing population ageing earlier on and the mortality rates remained above those in Slovenia (Chart 8).

When considering the hypothesis on the prevailing demographic outcome of diverging paths of the socio-economic and political transition in Slovenia and Croatia, one could synthetically describe it with the diverging mortality pattern. As the mortality rates coincided until the mid-1970s, the gap between the two appeared after 1976 and grew to the present day. The average general mortality rates in both countries oscillated around 10 deaths per 1000 in the 1960–1975 period. In the 1976–1990 period, the gap rose to 0.9 in favour of Slovenia. After the break-up of Yugoslavia and the war in Croatia (1991–1995), the mortality rates rose to 11.2 in Croatia and remained low in Slovenia (9.8). In the last 25 years, the average mortality rate in Croatia climbed to 11.9, and stagnated in Slovenia (9.5), with the sole exception of a leap in the first year of COVID-19. For the whole period of 1960–2020 the relationship between mortality rates in both countries was moderately negative (-0.36 ; $P < 0.001$).

Chart 8: Age-standardized death rates in Croatia and Slovenia, all causes of death per 100,000 population in 1985–2020



Source: World Health Organization – European Health Information Gateway (2022).

A more precise indicator when comparing mortality between two or more countries is age-standardized death rate (deaths per 100,000). The available data

for the age-standardized death rates in the period between 1985 and 2020² also indicate that the death rates per 100,000 have been diverging since the 1980s. Since then, it has been continuously higher in Croatia, and the gap has steadily increased (Chart 8). However, the causality of these differences can be related to the differentials in the rates of in- or out- migration, where Croatia experienced dramatically higher rates compared to Slovenia, with these continuing to the present day (Josipović 2018). Hence, COVID-19 deaths in 2020 and 2021, despite the considerable excess mortality, have not changed the general mortality differentials between the two countries.

Comparing the numbers of COVID-19 deaths in Slovenia and Croatia relative to the size of each country brings forth another important difference – the share of COVID-19 deaths in nursing homes – which likewise marks a difference in the process of post-socialist transition in both countries. A comparison of the excess deaths confirms the larger initial shock of the COVID-19 deaths in Slovenia than in Croatia. The main portion of deaths occurred in nursing homes, which contributed to as much as 60% of all COVID deaths at the end of 2020 in Slovenia. After the depletion of the elderly population in nursing homes, the remaining old population diminished to the extent that it could not affect the overall death rates in 2021 to the same extremity as in 2020. This is where Croatia differs. While experiencing a steadier rise in excess deaths, Croatia maintained higher rates of excess deaths throughout 2021 compared to Slovenia, thus effectively annihilating the formerly achieved advantageous position. The assumption that the vaccination rates contributed to the lower excess deaths in any of countries should be dismissed because of the comparably high vaccination rates in both countries – close to 60%, which was below the European average but still significantly higher than in Bulgaria or Romania. The trend of lesser vaccination uptake is to some degree observable throughout the former socialist countries. One could argue that not only the transition from state socialism to market economy, but also the lasting dissatisfaction with leading political elites bear the sentiment of cautiousness among the population in various aspects of everyday life.

So, the main reasons for differences in COVID-19 deaths during 2020 and 2021 should be sought elsewhere. As pointed out, the primary variable of concern is the excess deaths in nursing homes. While this topic could present a separate analysis given its complexity, we touch only briefly upon it, since it brings some clarity to the differentials of COVID-19 mortality in both countries in each of the analysed years (2020 and 2021). There is no systematic database for excess death estimations in nursing homes, though Slovenia carefully distinguished between COVID-19 deaths in nursing homes (regardless of the ownership status) and elsewhere. Thus, the ratio between the two on a daily or weekly basis is easily representable, as shown in Chart 4. The situation regarding data availability is less favourable in Croatia, where no such database exists. To be

able to compare both countries, we relied on the international survey on long-term care facilities (LTCF) within 17 countries of the EU/EEA, including both Slovenia and Croatia (ECDC 2021).

Given the differences in COVID-19 reporting, as to the number of LTCF units, the number of beds, and the number of confirmed cases for varied time periods, we needed to standardize the data to render it comparable. The accessible data is summarized in Table 6.

Table 6: COVID-19 cases and fatalities (percentage) within LTCF units in Slovenia and Croatia between May and November 2021

Country	N of LTCF units	N of LTCF beds	Average N of beds per LTCF unit	N of LTCF residents	Population >80 years in country	Estimated % of 80+ residents in LTCF units	Reported fatality (deaths per 100 COVID-19 cases) in LTCF units
Slovenia	104	21,321	205	19,799	111,033	17.8	14.1
Croatia	325*	37,375	115	33,482	217,633	15.4	8.3

Source: ECDC (2021).

*Data reported for 2016.

The first impression on why Croatia experienced lower COVID-19 mortality during the first year of pandemic (Chart 2) may be obtained from Table 6. Being one of the decisive factors in the rates of COVID-19 mortality, patient density measured by the number of beds per LTCF unit is much lower in Croatia (205 vs. 115). With lower patient density, it is usually easier to arrange internal quarantine with suitable distances and isolation rooms within the buildings themselves. Another important factor is the population pertaining to LTCF units. While Croatia exhibits a percentage of the population above 80 years of age that is very similar to that of Slovenia, the percentage of elderly people in Croatian LTCF units is about a tenth lower. While this difference is insignificant, the reported fatality rates within LTCF units reveals that Slovenia suffered 70% higher mortality compared to Croatia in the reported period (Table 6).

By the end of 2021, approximately 58.0% of Slovenia's and 57.0% of Croatia's population was fully vaccinated (ECDC 2022). However, Croatia had 45.9% more confirmed cases than Slovenia, which indicates that the infection spread more vigorously among Slovenia's population. On the other hand, Croatia had 108.6% more COVID-19 deaths than Slovenia, alluding to a rather worse scenario after hospitalization compared to Slovenia. In fact, at the end of 2021, Croatia was among the top five EU countries according to the highest 14-day notification rate of reported deaths. Additionally, the observed case-fatality ratio (deaths per 100 confirmed cases) in Croatia was 1.77, while it was 1.24 in Slovenia. Similarly, the number of cumulative COVID-19 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants was 269.2 in Croatia and 248.7 in Slovenia. In Table 7, we summarize the main identified factors impacting the excess deaths in both countries.

The identified factors are assessed according to their estimated impact regarding the extent of excess deaths and mortality differentials (Table 7).

Table 7: Summary table of the main identified factors impacting the excess deaths and mortality differentials in Slovenia and Croatia with their estimated impact

Identified factors	Estimated impacts
Actual age structure of the population	Strong impact
Conditions in long-term care facilities	Diminishing impact / stronger in 2020
Vaccination	Diminishing impact
Preexisting mortality trends	Moderate impact
Existing comorbidities	Strong impact

Source: The results of the expert assessment analyses.

5. Conclusion

Both Croatia and Slovenia have been strongly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic – during the several waves of infections a significant part of the populations were affected. We determined that in both countries, COVID-19 had a significant impact on the overall mortality. The number of deaths was similarly distributed per 100,000 inhabitants, but in contrast to the previous year, Slovenia had a better score in 2021 compared to Croatia. In the whole studied period (2020–2021), Slovenia experienced two spikes of high mortality rates: the first around week 50 in 2020 with around 190 deaths per million, and the second in week 47 in 2021 with around 70 deaths per million. The first spike in Croatia was detected at the same time but was significantly weaker (around 140 deaths per million). In contrast with Slovenia, Croatia had two spikes in the following year when it lost the more favourable position against Slovenia: the first one in week 17 in 2021 with 80 deaths per million, and the second one in week 47 with around 130 deaths per million.

Additionally, Slovenia managed to ameliorate one of the highest nursing home mortalities in Europe in 2020, but it did not manage to decrease the number of deaths among the rest of population in the consecutive year despite its high immunization rate ($93.3 \pm 2\%$). Before the end of 2021, prior to the Omicron wave, of 2.1 million inhabitants 1.2 mil. were fully vaccinated, 0.55 mil. had been infected, and 0.2 mil. were naturally immune. Only about 0.1 million were left for the eventual contagion. Thus, COVID-19 mortality did not only affect general mortality in both countries, but also life expectancy. However, since the peak of the pandemic is over, and more detailed information is gradually becoming accessible, there is a strong need to examine the further impacts, especially those affecting life expectancy.

All the indicators included in the analysis show that the excess mortality for both years was higher in Croatia than in Slovenia, particularly if we compare the cumulative number of confirmed cases and deaths. The most striking difference between the countries is that in Croatia the excess mortality in 2021 was higher than in 2020 in all months, while in Slovenia it was the opposite. Slovenia had a higher number of cases against deaths than Croatia owing to more extensive testing. This can be explained by a delay or postponed deaths from 2020 to 2021 in Croatia. Additionally, the estimation of the impact of COVID-19 fatalities in LTCF units reveals part of the answer to why Croatia was in fact better off during 2020. Further analyses confirmed the long-lasting effect of the unfavourable age structure of the Croatian population compared to Slovenia. Thus, excess mortality renders itself a biased indicator in comparing various countries among themselves. The mean age at death and the life expectancy indicators as important descriptors of mortality differentials are yet to be closely scrutinised because of data availability, as they offer an insight into the age-specific disparities in mortality between Slovenia and Croatia. With this analysis, we touched upon factors affecting mortality in both countries. In a summary table, we identify them and assess their impact qualitatively. The results confirm the assumption on the complexity of factors in the interplay and suggest their further examination. The findings confirm the initial hypothesis that COVID-19 mortality largely contributed to overall mortality in Slovenia in 2020, where the mortality in LTCF units was of chief importance. The COVID-19 mortality in LTCF units in Slovenia was about 70% higher compared to that of Croatia. However, the results have somewhat unexpectedly shown that the overall picture was worse and the demographic losses higher in Croatia.

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Notes

- ¹ RT-PCR test (also called a molecular test) detects genetic material of the SARS-CoV-2 virus (that causes COVID-19) in a fluid sample (collected by nose or throat swab) by using a lab technique called reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) (Mayo Clinic 2022).
- ² Age-standardized death rates for the period before 1985 were not available.

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Monika Balijsa

Why do Croats Migrate to Austria? Motives for and Experiences of Migration since 2013

The study aimed to determine the push and pull factors and the impact of the pandemic and the opening of the Austrian labour market for Croatian citizens in 2020 on the migration of Croatian citizens to Austria after Croatia entered the EU. The study was conducted using qualitative methodology, i.e., semi-structured interviews as the main research method. The results showed that, in addition to the influence of economic and personal factors on emigration from Croatia, social migrant networks stood out as a strong pull factor for respondents to migrate to Austria. Nevertheless, some respondents, regardless of family and friends in other countries, migrate to Austria for its better living and working conditions. The pandemic and the opening of the Austrian labour market in 2020 were at one time an obstacle to emigration for some respondents, and their experiences indicate that in the next few years the number of Croats who immigrate to Austria could increase, both due to delayed emigration from Croatia and the migration of Croats from Germany.

Keywords: migration, Croatia, Austria, push and pull factors, legal regulations, COVID-19.

Zakaj se Hrvati selijo v Avstrijo? Motivi in izkušnje z migracijami po letu 2013

Namen študije je bil opredeliti dejavnike odbijanja in privlačenja ter vpliv pandemije in odprtja avstrijskega trga dela za hrvaške državljane leta 2020 na migracije hrvaških državljanov v Avstrijo po vstopu Hrvaške v EU. Študija je bila izvedena z uporabo kvalitativne metodologije, zlasti polstrukturiranih intervjujev. Kot kažejo rezultati, na odločitev za selitev v Avstrijo poleg ekonomskih in osebnih dejavnikov pomembno vplivajo socialne mreže izseljencev, a se nekateri anketiranci kljub družini in prijateljem v drugi državi v Avstrijo selijo zaradi boljših življenjskih in delovnih pogojev. Pandemija in odprtje avstrijskega trga dela leta 2020 sta v določenem trenutku predstavljala oviro za izselitev, vendar pa izkušnje anketirancev kažejo, da bi se lahko v prihodnjih nekaj letih število Hrvatov, ki se priseljujejo v Avstrijo, povečalo tako zaradi preloženega izseljevanja s Hrvaške kot tudi zaradi priseljevanja Hrvatov iz Nemčije.

Ključne besede: migracije, Hrvaška, Avstrija, dejavniki odbijanja in privlačenja, predpisi, covid-19.

Correspondence address: Monika Balijsa, Faculty of Croatian Studies, Borongajska cesta 83d, HR-10000 Zagreb, e-mail: mbalijsa@hrstud.hr.

1. Introduction

Globalisation and communities like the European Union (EU), whose members have opened their doors to migrants from other member states, have given additional impetus to international migration, driven by an ever-widening spectrum of factors. According to data from 2020, 1.2 million people from one EU member state migrated to another member state, and of all EU members, only Croatia, Latvia and Romania recorded a negative external migration balance (Eurostat 2023). The latter data are confirmation that by joining the EU, Croatia, as an economically and demographically weakened country, is exposed to strong, mostly negative migration processes which require a lot of effort in the form of various measures, incentives, etc. within the framework of public policies in order to be mitigated or stopped.

According to the latest data from the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), since Croatia's entry into the EU (1 July 2013), about 300,000 people have emigrated from Croatia, most of them Croatian citizens. Among the member states of the EU, the most attractive destinations for Croatian emigrants during the recent emigration wave were Germany, Austria, and Ireland, to which about 170,000 people emigrated between 2013 and 2021 (CBS, Migration of Population of Republic of Croatia 2013–2021). The number of emigrants is certainly higher, primarily because some citizens, regardless of the legal obligation (Residence Act 2023, Art. 3), did not deregister their residence in Croatia before emigrating.

Although in the recent wave of emigration most Croatian citizens undoubtedly emigrated to Germany, the subject of our study is the migration of Croatian citizens to Austria after Croatia entered the EU. The topic is primarily imposed by the aforementioned data from the CBS which confirms that Austria is among the most attractive destination countries, with 22,168 Croatians emigrating between 2013 and 2021. At the same time, the data from Austria's Federal Statistical Office show that the annual volume of migration from Croatia to Austria is significantly higher than shown in the annual reports of the CBS and that on January 1, 2022, 95,000 Croatian citizens lived in Austria (Statistik Austria 2022a; 2022b).¹ In addition, the research subject was also imposed by the review of previous research on emigration from the Republic of Croatia during the recent emigration wave presented in the third chapter.

2. What Causes Migration? – A Theoretical Approach

In literature on migration, there are many theoretical approaches, from those that refer only to one type of migration, to more general ones that try to answer the question of what causes migration; however, to date there is no single, coherent theory that explains all migration movements (Massey et al. 1993; Mesić 2002). One of the most well-known theories of migration is the push-pull theory, according to which the decision to migrate does not depend solely on objective

reasons such as low living standards and socioeconomic status, but also on the potential migrants' perception of their status, satisfaction, and life aspirations. One of the most famous theorists of this theory is E. Lee who systematised push and pull factors of migration into four basic categories: "factors associated with the area of origin, factors associated with the area of destination, intervening obstacles and personal factors" (Lee 1966, 50). Push factors, according to Lee (1966) and Lewis (1982), include changes in the natural environment, economic factors, political factors, and social factors, i.e., the migrant's feeling of deprivation, while the pull factors refer to better economic opportunities at the new destination, the acquisition of better education and working conditions, better living conditions, and going after someone who attracts the migrant in any way, thus strengthening social migrant networks (Lee 1966; Lewis 1982). The decision to migrate, according to Lee (1966), is primarily the result of push and pull factors, however, personal factors and intervening mechanisms also play an important role.

Lee's commonly used model from the second half of the last century, like many others, is often contested, but it is still regularly used to explain migration movements and serves as a basis for defining other models (Božić & Burić 2005). In the same period, a "place utility model" was developed, which emphasises the personal aspirations of migrants and their satisfaction. According to this model, a potential migrant analyses their living place and thinks of it in relation to its usefulness and their aspirations, and if the usefulness is lower than the aspirations, motivated by dissatisfaction, they look for alternative ways to satisfy their aspirations (Wolpert 1965, 60). "A key role is played by the integration of the individual into a place of residence and the way of defining utility, which in this case goes beyond just economic benefits and opportunities" (Božić & Burić 2005, 13). A few decades later, a model of subjective expected utility was developed; through a subjective evaluation process, individuals choose the option that provides them with the greatest utility among several alternatives (De Jong & Fawcet 1981). Fassmann and Hintermann also based their model on E. Lee's assumptions and supplemented it with the knowledge that the perception of one's situation and personal motivation are key factors in the behaviour of potential migrants. The same authors, beginning with the assumptions of the push-pull model and the place utility model, accept the assumptions about the "effect of differences in income and employment between sending and receiving countries on the decision to migrate" (Fassmann & Hintermann 1997, cited in Božić & Burić 2005, 16).

Much like the authors we mentioned, many others, in their theoretical or empirical research, have recently dealt with identifying factors that push people to leave their homeland and pull them to immigrate to another country and act in the background of migration. However, we still consider Lee's (1966) statement to be valuable today; that it is not possible to specify an exact set of push-pull factors that affect a certain person, nor a general set of them that apply

to all population migrations, but it is possible to single out some of them that stand out as the most common factors or that are of special importance. Recent research highlights economic factors, especially the unemployment rate and low income, among the most frequent push factors of migration, while higher standard of living and higher wages for the same workload are often mentioned as pull economic factors, but also related factors such as more favourable working conditions and greater career opportunities (Parkins 2010; Zoelle 2011; Djafar 2012; Krishnakumar & Indumathi 2014; Lang & Nadler 2014; Mujić & Zaimović Kurtović 2017; Rajković Iveta & Horvatin 2017; Todorović et al. 2020; Carbajal & Calvo 2021; Adamović & Potočnik 2022; Urbanski 2022). Social factors related to the education, social and health system, religious intolerance, etc., also play an important role in recent migration movements, but the population is often also encouraged to leave their country of origin by corruption, legal uncertainty, and the immorality of political elites (Parkins 2010; Lang & Nadler 2014; Jurić 2017; Carbajal & Calvo 2021; Urbanski 2022). Some authors also point out crime, violence, discrimination and security problems as frequent push and pull factors for recent migration (Parkins 2010; Urbanski 2022), and when it comes to forced or involuntary migration, war, political revolutions and religious conflicts stand out as the most common push factors (Hager 2021). In addition to the aforementioned, other frequent factors of migration in recent decades are climate change and natural disasters (Martínez-Zarzoso et al. 2022), as well as demographic changes such as overpopulation and, accordingly, a lack of jobs in developing countries and the aging of the population in developed countries that are forced to import foreign labour (Abella 2005).

3. A Review of Previous Research on Emigration from Croatia after 2013

Previous research on emigration from Croatia after 2013 is mainly concerned with defining the volume and characteristics of the recent emigration wave. The authors point out that the contemporary demographic development of Croatia is characterised by intense emigration (Jerić 2019), which occurs in conditions of total depopulation, population aging, natural decline, etc. (Pokos 2017), and causes intense loss of human capital, which is crucial for the development and progress of any country (Bališa 2019). Also, traditional destination countries that attracted Croatian emigrants back in the era of guest workers, such as Germany, Austria, Switzerland and Italy, were among the most attractive destination countries for Croatian emigrants during the recent emigration wave. The temporary state of working abroad in the 1960s is an important factor in understanding the current depopulation processes in Croatia, especially because the temporary departure of some of the guest workers turned into a permanent situation, and some of them were joined abroad by their families (Friganović & Pavić 1974;

Gelo 1987; Nejašmić 1994; Akrap 2004; Čizmić et al. 2005; Župarić-Iljić 2016; Akrap et al. 2017).

In the recent wave of emigration, it was mostly the young population between the ages of 20 and 40 that left Croatia (Pokos 2017; Balija 2020; Mesarić Žabčić & Šimunić 2022), which is not surprising, considering that the majority of the population decides to migrate at a younger age (Božić & Burić 2005). Of particular concern, however, is the growing number and share of minors, families, and the highly educated who were migrating, especially because of their low share in the total population of Croatia (Jurić 2017; Troskot et al. 2019), but also the share of emigrated people in the total population of certain Croatian demographically emptied areas, such as Slavonian counties, passive mountain areas, and post-war areas of special state concern (Župarić-Iljić 2016).

Research on motives for emigration after 2013 has been conducted on Croatian citizens who emigrated to Germany and Ireland. Jurić (2017, 362) states that the main motivation for migration from Croatia (to Germany) is the perception that in Croatia, “the work ethics values and fairness in general are not institutionalised, and emigrants believe that Croatian society has morally broken.” In their research, Rajković Iveta and Horvatin (2017, 247) problematized the emigration of young people to Ireland and pointed out that among the respondents, except the main economic motive, “psychological dissatisfaction, positive experiences of previous migrants, the possibility of quickly finding a job, simple bureaucratic procedure, knowledge of the English language, etc.” also stood out as motives for emigration.

Reviewing previous research on the recent emigration wave from Croatia has established that there are studies on the volume of emigration and the characteristics of emigration from Croatia, as well as research on the motives of emigration from Croatia to Germany and Ireland, while studies that problematize recent emigration from Croatia to Austria are lacking. Among the research dealing with recent emigration from Croatia to Austria, it is possible to single out the study by Mesarić Žabčić and Šimunić (2022), which aimed to map selected demographic characteristics of contemporary migration trends between Croatia and Austria and showed that the largest share of Croatian citizens today live in two Austrian regions – Vienna and Graz. There is also research by Šćukanec (2017), based mainly on the experiences of emigrants to Austria in the 1990s, which showed that respondents’ satisfaction with life in Austria mostly concerns the organisation of the state and economic security.

4. Objectives and Research Methods

Following the review of previous research, the contribution of this paper is to deepen the knowledge of existing studies on the emigration of Croatian citizens to Austria. The study aims to determine the push and pull factors for the migration of Croatian citizens to Austria during the period of the recent emigration

wave. Given that in the recent wave of emigration from Croatia almost half of the emigrants chose Germany as their destination country, we were primarily interested in why some emigrants nevertheless chose Austria. We tried to find out whether migration from Croatia to Austria was decisively influenced by social migrant networks. The study also aimed to determine the impact of the opening of the Austrian labour market for Croatian citizens on July 1, 2020 and the pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus on the recent emigration of Croatian citizens to Austria.

In studying the motives and experience of migration (influence of social migrant networks, administrative-legal obstacles, the COVID-19 pandemic, etc.), qualitative methodology, i.e. an interview, was used as the base research method.² The interviews were conducted from February to December 2022 and covered the migration experiences of sixteen Croatian citizens. According to CBS data, which indicate that the majority of the emigrated Croatian citizens after Croatia's entry to the EU were between the ages of 20 and 40, these represented the study's target group. At the time of the interview, the youngest respondent was 23, and the oldest was 39. All respondents migrated to Austria after 1 July 2013, mostly between 2014 and 2022. Before going abroad, the respondents had lived in the City of Zagreb, Zagreb County, Koprivnica-Križevci County, Varaždin County and Karlovac County, and in terms of their level of education, six respondents had completed high school, four respondents had an undergraduate degree, and six had a graduate degree.

The conducted interviews were semi-structured; some of the questions were prepared in advance, while some were asked spontaneously during the interviews. This form of interview was chosen so that the respondents could talk about their own experiences without time limits or suggested answers by the interviewer. The research sample was collected through Facebook groups (*Hrvati u Austriji* and *Idemo u Austriju*) and using the snowball method (we ensured that the respondents were not from within the same family). Given the geographical distance between the interviewer and the respondents, some of the interviews were conducted online, and some of them live, during the respondent's visit to Croatia, in public spaces. The interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. After the interviews were conducted, they were transcribed for easier access to the data, coding, thematic analysis and interpretation of the content. All interview details were saved on the author's computer, and the respondents were guaranteed anonymity and the use of their answers exclusively for scientific purposes.

5. Push Factors for the Emigration of Respondents from Croatia

The push factors include forceful aspects that encourage people to leave their homes and their countries of origin to become permanent residents in some

other country (Lee 1966; Lewis 1982; Krishnakumar & Indumathi 2014; Urbanski 2022). Migration can be the result of a wide range of push factors; from economic, such as a lack of employment options, low wages, etc., to political, cultural and others; clearly, the main factor encouraging the population to change their place of residence relates to differences between the two areas (Martin et al. 2006; Krishnakumar & Indumathi 2014; Urbanski 2022). The results of the conducted interviews showed that the push factors for the emigration of the Croatian citizens who emigrated to Austria after 2013 can be classified into two categories. Of the sixteen respondents, eleven emigrants pointed out that their main reason for emigration was economic and primarily related to unsatisfactory living standards and working conditions, low income, and the related inability to buy real estate in Croatia, thereby confirming the importance of differences in income between the country of origin and the receiving country of migrants on the decision to migrate (Fassmann & Hintermann 1997, cited in Božić & Burić 2005). The latter respondents most often gave answers similar to the following:

Respondent 1: Primarily because of better salaries. I got a job here [in Croatia] after high school and worked for a couple of years, but I had a couple of friends from high school who [...] went abroad, some to Germany, some to Austria and they had double, even higher, salaries, better work conditions [...].

Respondent 2: We didn't have a place to live, that is, we couldn't get a loan and buy a house for ourselves and our three children, and we decided to move out.

Of the sixteen respondents, only one respondent was unemployed before leaving Croatia, and it was the impossibility of finding a job for him and his wife that he pointed out as the main reason for emigrating from Croatia. This corresponds with the results of a study by Jurić (2017, 354), conducted among Croats who emigrated to Germany after 2013, which show that “unemployment or the inability to find a suitable job in the profession” are not the main motives for recent emigration from Croatia. However, while Jurić's results point to the conclusion that the main motivations of respondents to emigrate are not economic, the results of this study point to the opposite. The reason for the disparity among the results are certainly methodological shortcomings in recording data on external migration in Croatia, which do not allow for defining a representative research sample, that is, the limitations of qualitative research and quantitative research conducted on a convenient sample.³

The importance of economic push factors for leaving Croatia after 2013 is also confirmed by the results of a study by Rajković Iveta and Horvatin (2017, 266), whose respondents stated that the most common push factors for emigration from Croatia to Ireland were “the impossibility of finding employment in the profession, solving the housing problem issues and the joint life of the young

couple”, in combination with other reasons. Economic factors as crucial motives for emigration are confirmed by several other studies conducted in neighbouring and other countries (Mujić & Zaimović Kurtović 2017; Wasuge 2018, etc.), and the desire to improve the standard of living, higher wages and better employment opportunities are the dominant motives for young people’s migration aspirations in almost all countries in Southeast Europe (Todorović et al. 2020; Adamović & Potočnik 2022). Almost the same motives have been the driver of intensive emigration flows from the member states of the EU since 2004 – Slovakia, Czech Republic, Slovenia, Hungary and Poland (Lang & Nadler 2014). These results are in accordance with theoretical explanations that emphasise that unfavourable economic conditions and the disparity between immigration and emigration countries as the basic motive for emigration determine the overcoming of the economic situation of deprivation (De Jong & Fonseca 2020).

The second category of emigration motives refers to the remaining five respondents, who cited self-proving, leaving to gain new experience, and a desire for change as the main reasons for emigrating.

Respondent 3: [...] purely because of some new experience, there was no special reason or dissatisfaction [...].

The same respondents highlighted economic factors as secondary motives for emigration, and apart from the latter, a smaller number of respondents also highlighted dissatisfaction with the atmosphere where there is no progress at all and the desire to merge with a partner abroad as secondary motives for emigration, which additionally influenced and accelerated their desire for emigration driven by other push factors.

Respondent 7: And then you see that getting a job is based on ‘who you know’ [...] you get into an atmosphere where there is no progress at all. [...] you want to prove to yourself that you can apply everything you’ve learned to something big.

Respondent 5: I was a bit fed up with work. [...] Then I met my current husband, he was out there in Austria [...]. Well, primarily the desire for change and certainly additionally the desire to create a family with my partner [...].

These statements confirm the findings of earlier research, which highlighted the significant role of family/partner unification in deciding on migration, especially among the young population (King et al. 2016). The respondents’ statements confirm that the departure of Croatian citizens abroad is often the result of not only one, but several factors, most often one primary, and several secondary ones, but also that for the majority of respondents, the push factors for emigration from Croatia are stronger than the pull factors for immigration to Austria. In addition, although this study does not allow for generalisation, the findings of

the analysis of motives for emigration according to the educational structure of the respondents are also interesting. All respondents who had completed high school cited economic motives as the main push factors for emigration, while highly educated respondents more often cited motives such as gaining new experiences, the desire for change and self-proving as the primary reason for their emigration. Economic motives were more often their secondary reason for emigration.

6. Pull Factors and the Respondents' Experience of Migration to Austria

The main research question is primarily related to pull factors, and the reasons for choosing Austria as a destination country, which are most often considered in combination with the previously analysed push factors. Therefore, although they partially coincide with the results of certain previous studies, they are indispensable in the context of this one. While push factors encourage the population to leave their country of origin, the term pull factors refers to the various aspects that attract people to move to a particular location, and they are most often in contrast with push factors (Lee 1962; Lewis 1982; Krishnakumar & Indumathi 2014; Urbanski 2022). Most often, they refer to better conditions than those enjoyed by migrants in the countries of origin, and precisely the differences between the same factors in the country of origin and destination encourage the population to migrate. The same do not only refer to differences between economic factors, but also political, social, etc. (Krishnakumar & Indumathi 2014; Urbanski 2022). The importance of social factors was already confirmed in the previous chapter, in the statements of several emigrants whose migration from Croatia to Austria was accelerated precisely because of joining a partner who was already abroad.

The research question was approached with the assumption that social migrant networks hold a key role for respondents when choosing their destination country. The choice of a potential destination country for migrants is closely related to the tradition of emigration, and among potential destination countries, migrants most often consider those where migrant groups that are ready to accept them already exist. This refers primarily to family and friendship ties which, in addition to enabling migrants to be more likely to be accepted and initially integrated, also serve potential migrants as a channel of information about the destination country and opportunities in the labour market (Božić & Burić 2005; King et al. 2016). The importance of social migrant networks in providing information about the destination country is also confirmed by the statements of the majority of respondents who, when choosing the destination country, used information collected from acquaintances, friends or family members who had moved to their desired destination countries.

Respondent 15: Mostly through friends and acquaintances, and even now there are groups on Facebook for almost every country, so you can ask there.

Some of the respondents, when stating the ways of being informed about living and working conditions in Austria, pointed out that newspaper articles and comments on social platforms, such as Facebook, that conveyed the positive experiences of Croatian emigrants, as well as websites that provide the information needed when moving to Austria, encouraged them when leaving and choosing their destination country, especially those whose close friends or family members were not abroad and, accordingly, they could not be informed through their experiences.

Respondent 11: Our family is all in Croatia. But we heard and saw through newspapers, comments on social networks, etc. that people living better abroad so their experiences were kind of our encouragement for going abroad.

Respondent 7: Austria has quite a good amount of information on the Internet, even in Croatian.

These statements and explanations depart from traditional approaches that cannot explain individual differences in migration patterns and indicate that international migration is not only the result of individual responses to the laws of supply and demand but the result of interpersonal connections, i.e., social migrant networks, which have an extremely important role. The mentioned connections are a link between previous migrants, migrants, and non-migrants in the area of origin and destination, which through kinship, friendship and common local origin, and by lowering the costs and risks of moving, while also increasing the expected net gain, increase the probability of migration (Massey et al. 1993, 448–449). In addition, social migrant networks present an important form of social capital that emigrants often rely on when looking for employment abroad (Massey et al. 1993, 448). The latter is confirmed by the statements of the respondents who pointed out that it was friends, family members or acquaintances who helped them immigrate to Austria by offering them temporary accommodation or helping them find a job. Additionally, a few respondents stated that they had used their own experience to encourage their close friends or family members to emigrate or to support their intensive thoughts of emigrating from Croatia in the future.

Respondent 13: A close friend, also a colleague from work in Croatia, and now here in Austria, and her husband and children were in Austria at the moment when I was already thinking a lot about leaving Croatia. She also told me that they are looking for a lot of medical workers there and they even invited me to live with them until I find my apartment.

Respondent 7: A lot of them called me for experience, I helped some of them, [...] a lot of them went abroad according to my experience [...].

Respondent 13: I haven't yet, but I would like my younger brother to come here as well [...]. For now, he's changing his mind and [...] I think he's coming abroad soon too.

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Therefore, family, friends, acquaintances and personal factors, in addition to socio-economic conditions in the country of origin and destination, significantly influence the direction of contemporary emigration flows from Croatia. According to the above statements, it is difficult to expect that the current emigration flows from Croatia will stop, especially because of the increasing number of Croatians outside the homeland, but also the ever-widening spectrum of ways of informing and transferring the experiences of emigrants to non-migrants, and potential migrants in Croatia. The same statements also confirm the importance of the meso-level for explaining migration movements, which, as claimed by Božić and Burić (2005), was neglected for a long time.

Except for Austria, when thinking about leaving Croatia, the majority of respondents also inquired about life in Germany and Ireland, while fewer inquired about USA and Canada. For almost half of the respondents, the aforementioned social migrant networks were decisive when choosing Austria as their destination country, but some of the respondents decided to move to Austria regardless of their family abroad, specifically in Germany or USA.

Respondent 2: We specifically went to Austria because there are the best conditions for living and working, 13th and 14th salary. [...] those additional salaries were crucial for us.

These statements confirmed the settings of the liberal theory of migration, according to which the basis of everything is a human who tries to maximise his earnings and whose behaviour is guided by the criteria of satisfaction and utility (Vukić 1999, cited in Mesić 2002). Voluntary and economic migrations confirm that people are not satisfied with mere survival but constantly strive for better and higher, which they hope to find in a more developed country (Peračković & Rihtar 2016). Between the two countries more developed than the country of origin, some of the respondents found the country that offered them a higher income more attractive than the one where they had family and friends. Better living and working conditions were confirmed by the majority of emigrants as an important pull factor for immigrating to Austria, while some pointed out that their search for betterment, i.e., emigration, was encouraged by the emigration experience of their family members who had emigrated to the other parts of the world for the same reason.

Respondent 4: My uncle has been in America for a long time, he went there when he was a child, my brother has been in America for ten years, we are not in one place, we all look and go where it is better for us.

In addition to the above, several interviewees pointed out that better working conditions and the proximity of Croatia and Austria, increasingly in the last year or two, according to their observations and the experiences of their family members, encourage Croatian citizens who emigrated to Germany to move to Austria.

Respondent 7: It is an interesting phenomenon here that a lot of our people, even those who were previously in Germany, are now coming to live in Graz because of the proximity to Croatia [...] lately there have been enormous amounts of people, Croats, who are coming to live here [in Austria]. [...] and first they followed their families to Germany.

Respondent 16: [...] they went to Germany, to their relatives, and in the end came here [in Austria] because it is better, higher wages, 13th and 14th salary [...].

We might therefore cautiously conclude that social migrant networks have a strong influence on some Croatian emigrants during their first emigration experience, however, after gaining experience of living and working abroad, they often decide to go after higher incomes and better working conditions. In addition to the above, the results showed that knowledge of the German language was not decisive for the majority of respondents when choosing their destination country. Some of them, especially those who were working in their profession in Austria at the time of the interview, had prior knowledge of the language, while the respondents who immigrated to Austria without prior knowledge of the German language were either not employed in their profession when they arrived in Austria or knowledge of the German language was not necessary for their employment. Knowledge of the English language was therefore not a sufficient reason to choose Ireland as a destination country, which at the time of their emigration was also among the popular destination countries of Croatian emigrants.

7. The Impact of Legal Regulations and the COVID-19 Pandemic on Respondents' Migration to Austria

Lastly, the study aimed to determine the impact of legal regulation, such as the opening of the Austrian labour market for Croatian citizens on 1 July 2020, and the pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus on the migration of Croatian citizens to Austria. The aforementioned were viewed as obstacles that at one time partially prevented the migration of Croatian citizens abroad. Migration can occur after push and pull factors are properly weighed, however, intervening obstacles also play an important role in migration as restrictions that often

hinder potential migrants when changing their place of residence and must be overcome before migration finally takes place (Lee 1966). The difference between the volume of actual and potential migration is the result of unforeseen factors, such as legislation and migration policy of immigration countries, which often change and directly affect the migration of potential migrants (Fassmann & Hintermann 1997, cited in Božić & Burić 2005, 16). In addition to those mentioned, intervening obstacles to migration can relate to migration costs, transport accessibility, language, cultural differences, family ties, and the availability of necessary documents such as passports, work permits, etc. The importance and influence of some of them changes over time, and the modern age brought with it some new obstacles to migration, such as limiting access to the labour market in certain countries for foreign workers or even restrictions on movement that were once in force during the COVID-19 pandemic. The goals of the interventions are those that greatly influence migration movements, reduce migration pressure, control migration, or even prevent it (Van Hear et al. 2018).

Concerning the latter aim of the study, an important factor in the selection of respondents was the time of their migration to Austria, so that we could compare the experiences of those who migrated before and those who migrated after July 1, 2020, as well as before, during, and after (the beginning of the) pandemic. The majority of respondents who emigrated to Austria before July 1, 2020 pointed out that the process of obtaining a work permit was not complex for them because of the deficit of their profession in Austria, and their work permit was obtained by their employer.

Respondent 4: The employer applied for me and we waited for about two weeks, that's roughly how long it takes to see if there are local people interested in that job position and if anyone will complain [...].

Only one respondent, who moved there in January 2020 and managed to get a job after July 1, 2020, was not sure whether the aforementioned regulations contributed to this.

Respondent 3: I can't say whether that permit affected that I didn't get a job before July 1, 2020. I have been intensively looking for a job since I came [...].

According to the statements of the respondents, the opening of the Austrian market on July 1, 2020 mostly did not have a limiting effect on the employment of those who decided to migrate before this date, however, some respondents who emigrated after January 1, 2020 pointed out that the obligation of a work permit prolonged their migration abroad.

Respondent 1: [...] it was some additional brake that made thinking about leaving Croatia only a thought. [...] we knew that this permit will be cancelled in 2020, so I waited.

Experiences like this are certainly one of the reasons for the increasing number of Croatians who immigrated to Austria in 2021 (CBS, Migration of Population of Republic of Croatia 2013–2021). Therefore, a part of the total contingent emigrated from Croatia to Austria in 2021 consisted of those who had been thinking about going to Austria even before July 1, 2020 but they were limited by the aforementioned restrictions.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused a global immobility crisis, i.e., the closing of international borders, making it impossible for people/migrants around the world to take advantage of the opportunity to work in another country (Newland 2020). The closing of the borders was inevitable because it represented a way to stop or slow down the transmission of the COVID-19 virus between people, which spread through face-to-face contact (Barker et al. 2020). The pandemic had two effects on the respondents' migration. Some respondents, who were still in their homeland at the time of the beginning of the pandemic, were prompted to postpone their departure because they did not feel safe even in their homeland, therefore the option of emigrating during the pandemic seemed unattractive to them. On the other hand, some respondents decided to migrate precisely because of being unemployed in the conditions of crisis and insecurity caused by the pandemic.

Respondent 12: Honestly, we planned to move abroad at the end of 2019, but then my husband's injury slowed us down a bit, and then when the pandemic started, we stopped all plans until 2022. We were scared, there were also occasional quarantines [...].

Respondent 6: My wife and I lost our jobs at a time when it was very difficult to find a new job in Croatia, and we also had a child [...].

This is also confirmed by the aforementioned data of the CBS (CBS, Migration of Population of Republic of Croatia 2013–2021), which show that the number of Croatian citizens who migrated to Austria decreased by 20% in 2020, compared to 2019, while the increasing number of migrants recorded in 2021 was the result of the cancellation of the aforementioned restrictions, as well as emigration due to the pandemic-induced economic crisis in Croatia, which forced some Croatians to search for a better life outside their homeland. The decrease in the number of people who migrated from Croatia to Austria in 2020 is not surprising, given that the pandemic has had a negative impact on almost all forms of human mobility. According to UN data, due to the consequences of the pandemic, the growth in the number of international migrants in mid-2020

was 27% lower than expected (UN, n. d.), primarily due to the partial closure of borders and immigration regimes of a large number of countries around the world (IOM 2020).

8. Conclusion

The results of the study showed that the push factors in the emigration of the respondents were mostly economic or personal, while social migrant networks stood out among the respondents as a strong pull factor for immigrating to Austria. Nevertheless, some respondents, with family and/or friends in Germany or the USA, decided to move to Austria primarily because of the better living and working conditions in Austria. According to the statements of some respondents, in the last year or two, the latter benefits have increasingly encouraged Croatian citizens who emigrated to Germany to move to Austria. Although the research methodology does not allow for generalisation, the results suggest that social migrant networks have a strong influence on some Croatian emigrants during their first emigration, however, after gaining experience abroad, they often decide to move to a country that provides higher salaries and better working conditions. In addition to this, according to respondents, the proximity of Croatia and Austria also influenced the migration of some Croats from Germany to Austria, especially during the pandemic when some of them felt safer closer to their homeland. The aforementioned leaves a gap for new research focused on the volume and motives of the migration processes of Croats between Germany and Austria.

In addition, the results indicate that the pandemic and the opening of the Austrian labour market on July 1, 2020, were at one time an obstacle for some respondents when emigrating. The emigrants' experiences also indicate that in the coming years the number of Croats immigrating to Austria could increase, both by emigration of Croatian citizens from their homeland and migration of Croats from Germany. The latter, in addition to the growing number of Croats in Austria, and thus the ever-widening network of former migrants, migrants, and non-migrants in the country of origin and destination, indicates that in the coming years it is almost impossible to expect a weakening of the emigration flow from Croatia to Austria. Also, the respondents' statements about the pull factors of immigrating to Austria, which are incommensurable with the conditions in their homeland, are particularly worrying and suggest that in the near future we cannot expect a large number of returnees from Austria.

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Notes

- ¹ More about the methodological obstacles to the research of external migration of the Republic of Croatia and the differences between the data of the CBS and statistical data from the countries of immigration of the Croatian population in Akrap et al. (2017), Pokos (2017) and Balija (2020).
- ² The interview as a main research method was chosen primarily because of the methodological shortcomings of Croatian data on external migration that do not allow us to define a representative research sample, but also to collect as much information as possible about the individual migration experiences of the respondents.
- ³ The latter once again points to the need for new research on the motives for emigrating from Croatia aimed at one of the most important challenges of this country.

Margareta Gregurović, Drago Župarić-Ilić

“At first it was not very pleasant ... Now it is different”: Experiences and Challenges of Refugee Integration in Croatia

In observing the integration process at a local and neighbourhood level, this paper aims to analyse the integration experiences of asylum beneficiaries (refugees) in Croatia and their relationships with various stakeholders. The analyses are based on data obtained in 2018 by interviewing 25 refugees about their perceptions of living prospects in Croatia. The results indicated that most of the interviewees described their relationships and experiences with state institution officials as mostly negative or challenging, and in some cases discriminatory. Acceptance in local communities was predominantly assessed as positive, although it took a while for refugees to feel accepted.

Keywords: refugee, integration, local community, asylum, social cohesion, Croatia.

“Sprva ni bilo ravno prijetno ... zdaj pa je drugače”: Izkušnje in izzivi integracije beguncev na Hrvaškem

S proučevanjem procesa integracije na ravni lokalne skupnosti in sosedskih odnosov prispevek analizira izkušnje upravičencev do azila (beguncev) na Hrvaškem in njihove odnose z različnimi deležniki. Analize temeljijo na podatkih, pridobljenih leta 2018 prek intervjujev s 25 begunci glede njihovega dožemanja možnosti za življenje na Hrvaškem. Rezultati kažejo, da večina intervjuvancev svoje odnose in izkušnje z zaposlenimi v državnih institucijah opisuje kot negativne ali zapletene, v nekaterih primerih celo diskriminatorne. Sprejemanje v lokalnih skupnostih je večinoma ocenjeno kot pozitivno, čeprav je trajalo nekaj časa, da so se begunci počutili sprejete.

Ključne besede: begunec, integracija, lokalna skupnost, azil, socialna kohezija, Hrvaška.

Correspondence address: Margareta Gregurović, Department for Migration and Demographic Research, Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies, HR-10000 Zagreb, Croatia, e-mail: margareta.gregurovic@imin.hr; Drago Župarić-Ilić, Department of Sociology, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb, HR-10000 Zagreb, Croatia, e-mail: dzuparic@ffzg.hr.

1. Introduction

Migrant integration is a relatively new phenomenon in most Central and East European societies with strong historical emigration traditions. The Balkan region has always been a vivid, dynamic, and culturally rich area, where the social fabric depended on interactions between heterogeneous linguistic, ethnic, and religious groups. The wars in Yugoslavia at the end of the 20th century implied dealing with numerous refugees and internally displaced persons. Over the last two decades, Balkan countries have slowly become reception countries for a relatively low number of recognised asylum beneficiaries. From the enactment of the first national Asylum Law in July 2004 until the end of September 2022, a total of 1,034 international protections were granted in Croatia, which counts for approximately 10 % recognition rate.¹ For those granted international protection, daily struggles persist in seeking livelihood beyond basic acceptance to stay and feel safe, although it is roughly estimated that not all of them stayed in Croatia for more than a few months and used the available integration services.² However, the reception and integration of refugees as a policy and practice are gaining more and more attention among scholars, policymakers, and practitioners in the region, especially after the closure of the Balkan corridor in 2016 (Lalić Novak & Giljević 2019; Stojic Mitrovic 2019; Vončina & Marin 2019). Yet, little is known about how refugees perceive their life prospects, including the process of adaptation to local communities, their interaction with other members of society, and a sense of belonging in a new home.

This text focuses on analysing the integration of refugee newcomers into Croatian society using the fieldwork and empirical qualitative data obtained by interviewing 25 persons under international protection about their experiences of arrival and reception into local communities during the early integration process. This qualitative case study is part of wider research on refugee integration challenges by Ajduković et al. (2019), conducted in Croatia in 2018. Our critical assessment of dealing with ethnic and cultural diversity is partly entrenched in contesting the narrow view of a concept of integration only through its structural policy dimensions. However, we presumed that normative and institutional frameworks provide an important reference point in our informants' narratives, one that may influence their chances of becoming part of society and shape social cohesion within the community. Yet, we focus more on the assessment of daily relationships and interactions between refugees and the two most important stakeholders in the integration process: representatives of institutions and local residents in host communities. This institutional, as well as microsocial, focus will provide insights into the often-neglected perspective of both local actors and newcomers regarding their mutual encounters, interactions, expectations, and hopes, one in which integration is not only seen as a prescriptive policy, but rather as an everyday practice of mutual accommodation at the communal level.

2. Theoretical Starting Points: Croatian Integration Goes Local?

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Traditionally, the concept of integration was approached in two ways, as a process and/or as a final state, with a clearly normative connotation. According to Heckmann (1999, 3), who differentiates between structural, cultural, social, and identificational integration, integration refers to "the inclusion of new populations into existing social structures and to the kind and quality of connecting these new populations to the existing system of socio-economic, legal and cultural relations," which resembles a structural-functionalist perspective on it. Penninx (2019, 3) warns that the concept of integration has a different function and meaning in research and policymaking, noting that a "comprehensive, open (meaning non-normative), analytical concept is needed to study the process of settlement and integration" while integration policies are part of a normative political process in which integration is formulated as a problem within the normative framework, resolved by proposing concrete policy measures. Thus, being measured, standardised, and evaluated, mostly by indicators of their legal articulation, many national models of integration policies do, however, lack common ground for comparability of implementation successfulness (Gregurović & Župarić-Iljić 2018).

The meaning of integration has changed over time and, as Collyer et al. (2019, 1) stress, the individual- and societal-level policies designated for its implementation also changed and shifted towards a more instrumental designation, as "fixed and measurable set of requirements for the attainment of certain rights." Furthermore, there is a discrepancy between top-down and bottom-up multi-level governance approaches to integration in many diverse policy areas (dimensions) (Zapata-Barrero et al. 2017; Homsey et al. 2019). The institutional framework of integration on a governmental level only partly grasps the totality of social, linguistic, and cultural practices which unfold in mundane activities and in leisure time spent with neighbours. A presumption is that integration into a new, host society presents a great challenge for immigrants, particularly in dealing with institutions and navigating everyday situations in a new linguistic and cultural milieu. These processes are even more difficult when there are significant cultural differences between the country of origin and the receiving country, such as in the case of new-coming refugees from Asian and African countries to Croatia. But what is at stake, and what does it mean to become integrated, rather than assimilated?

While the concept of assimilation, widely used in US debates, revolves around the notion of the economic and social success of immigrants and/or ethnic groups blending into the "American mainstream", Schneider and Crul (2012, 2) remind us that immigrants may retain and celebrate their "own" cultural specificities. Furthermore, the departure from integration-assimilation equalisa-

tion is an important aspect of defining integration. Often depicted as the final stage of integration, assimilation is merely one of the modalities of the acculturation strategy (Berry 2005). Faist (2010) critically contends that while multiculturalism and assimilation emphasised migrants' societal integration in the host society, diversity is not only a condition of ethnic and cultural pluralism, but also a mode or management strategy for migrant incorporation, i.e. full inclusion in civil society.

Even though the integration of immigrants is a multi-dimensional process which is difficult to define unambiguously, we do not tend to use it interchangeably with other terms. We adhere to an intercultural policy approach that could also be understood as an "integration policy", following Guidikova (2015, 138) who defines intercultural integration as a

[...] departure from ethnicity-based integration paradigms, which either build an ethnic prism by neglect (as in guest-worker approaches where ethnicity was not a factor since no integration policies existed), by default (in assimilation where the default objective was cultural assimilation) or by design in multicultural policies where empowerment, affirmative action, representation and policies were defined around ethnic lines.

While acknowledging these nuances here, we follow an open, non-normative definition of integration as a process of becoming an accepted part of society, which implies interactions between immigrants and their host (receiving) society within three distinct dimensions: the legal-political, the socio-economic, and the cultural/religious dimension³ (Penninx & Garcés-Mascreñas 2016; Penninx 2004). The relationship between the two main parties – immigrants and the receiving society – implies the known postulate of integration being a two-way process, which tends to lay in the domain of interactive and dynamic reciprocity, somewhat similar to the intercultural approach which is based on the idea of the importance of interaction among people from different backgrounds focusing, as Zapata-Barrero (2015) stresses, on three basic premises – (1) exchange and promotion of (positive) interaction, (2) equality and access to citizenship, and (3) diversity advantage. Therefore, cultural proximity, mutual trust, and, especially, meaningful positive social interactions play an indispensable role in integration seen as the mutual adjustment of two groups to each other.

Beyond understanding integration (only) as a governance technique, one should take a critical stance and scrutinise it as a dynamic process among different actors, negotiating policy categorisations of "who requires integration and who does not" (Mügge & van der Haar 2016, 77). Key integration stakeholders in Croatia are local and regional self-government units (counties, towns and municipalities),⁴ as well as other local representatives (such as representatives of the Croatian Employment Service, schools, social and health care providers,

etc.). Therefore, it is important to analyse experiences and assess integration needs and challenges at a local level.

When theorising the local turn in researching immigrant policies, Zapata-Barrero et al. (2017, 2) remind us that one should gain a deeper understanding of vertical and horizontal multi-level governance of integration on different levels, where "cities and regions, then, are becoming more and more active agents, drawing their own agenda, policy strategies and key questions/answers to challenges related to integration and diversity accommodation." This is a premise applicable to Croatia, where besides the capital city other (smaller) cities have become prominent reception and integration communities for newcomers. In analysing the case of Odense in Denmark, Romana Careja (2019) provides important insights into how the local authorities balance between the national-level integration framework and local-level implementation realities; the localist, sub-national mode of multi-level governance approach enables refugees not only to be passive beneficiaries, but also active agents of their integration into societal and economic spheres.⁵

In setting the context of the integration process at a local and neighbourhood level (Ajduković et al. 2019), we aim to analyse the integration experiences of asylum beneficiaries (refugees) in Croatian society while reassessing local integration as social (community) cohesion (Amin 2005; Daley 2007). Social cohesion is often conceptualised and measured in terms of social trust and common social norms, yet an important dimension of socio-economic emancipation, cooperation and sharing also has a crucial role in community cohesion and stability.

Ager and Strang (2008) also posit that the main characteristics of a cohesive and integrated community mean that the locals and new-coming population both feel secure from threats, create a welcoming, tolerant and friendly climate, and foster a sense of belonging and feeling of togetherness. This means that all community members perceive spatial and social determinants for enabling inter-group contact as necessary assets for social cohesion. Finally, we aim to tackle the sense of belonging that emerges through social encounters, interactions and relationships within the life of the neighbourhood as a relational, nuanced, and multifaceted process.

3. Contextual Background: Historical Trajectories and Local Realities

Discussing a path dependency for dealing with ethnic and cultural diversity in Croatian society means recalling the historical context in which Croatia has always been at the crossroads of external political conditioning and internal societal polarisation. In recent times, the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia and the Homeland War for Croatian independence have torn apart social trust

and cohesion, resulting in war atrocities and displacement for nearly a million people within or beyond Croatian borders. A parallel process of the state's ethnic homogenisation meant reducing the numbers and ratios of other ethnicities in multinational Croatia, most notably of Croatian Serbs, who fled. Deep structural changes and transition difficulties resulted in the reaffirmance of the nation through new lines of inclusion/exclusion and transformation of a citizenship regime, longing for the diaspora to return (Štikš 2010). This inclination of the state has also resulted a restrictive (im)migration regime, a rigid understanding of asylum policy, and a lack of political will for the coherent implementation of integration programmes, leading society to gain the disintegrative tendencies of low public trust in institutions and suspicion towards minorities and "Others" of any kind (Hameršak et al. 2020; Župarić-Iljić & Gregurović 2020). Integration and disintegration tendencies are much like dialectic processes, influencing the daily lives of migrants, especially in the context of contrary forces taking place at the expense of newcomers seen as passive "beneficiaries" of a welfare state (Collyer et al. 2020). The social climate, which is far from "a welcoming culture", might then hold back future chances for equal treatment and inclusion. Moreover, disintegration tendencies could result in the rise of xenophobia, ethnic tensions, and racism, which all can be manifested through direct discrimination against those groups that are perceived as a threat to cultural, ethnic, or national identity, and to a social or state order (Scheepers et al. 2002).⁶

The same premises could apply to the context of integration into Croatian society. Newcomers are often exhausted by their liminal positions when waiting for protection and/or residence statuses to be determined, and *ad hoc* solutions for migrants' integration leave them in a tangle of bureaucratic procedures, without a clear vision of their life prospects in Croatia (Šelo Šabić 2017).

Although the Europeanisation process implied building and adjusting national migration, asylum and integration policies, it could not have prevented the new realities of high emigration rates once Croatia became part of the EU in 2013. Before then, asylum seekers' experiences and low recognition rates with many integration challenges had only captured the attention of a few state administrators, international agencies, and civil society actors. Balkan countries are still seen not as final destinations but mainly as transit territories for mostly irregular migrants moving to the more prosperous democracies of Western Europe.

However, the episode of the Balkan corridor was a game-changer when in late 2015 around 660.000 people passed through Croatian territory; it was a situation of closed, overtly controlled and securitised transit of Syrian refugees and other forced migrants to Western Europe (Šelo Šabić 2017). Soon after the closure of the corridor in the spring of 2016, harsh securitisation practices took place with ethnic and racial profiling of migrants stuck at various sites on the Balkan route, with dubious state-tolerated violence and organised push-backs of irregularised migrants on the borders with Serbia, and Bosnia and Herze-

govina. In parallel, the criminalisation of migration and of citizens' initiatives in their solidarity with migrants and refugees resulted in the erosion of public trust and propensity towards migrants in general, and asylum seekers in particular (Župarić-Iljić & Gregurović 2020).

With a population of less than four million, Croatia is still struggling to enable any real chance for the socio-economic emancipation of only a few hundred refugees who live there now, including 250 Syrian Kurds, resettled from refugee camps in Turkey in several phases between 2017 and 2019.⁷ The novelty was that the majority of them were not accommodated (only) in the capital of Zagreb, but also in smaller cities, such as Zadar, Slavonski Brod, Sisak, Karlovac, cities which for the first time were placed in the situation of meeting people who needed protection and assistance. The primary criterion for choosing locations was a practical one; in smaller cities, there were state-owned accommodation facilities available and suitable for the imminent housing of refugees. Nevertheless, another significant factor within these towns was the noticeable presence of a national minority of Bosniaks/Muslims, whose organisations took a prominent role in integration, using local Islamic communities to provide general assistance and conduct projects focused on basic orientation into society (cf. Župarić-Iljić 2017). Moreover, some prominent local civil society organisations played the role of facilitators in early integration by providing free legal aid, assistance in communication with institutions, and help with entering the labour market.⁸ This trajectory explains the setting of our case, one in which everyday encounters, narratives, and interactions are embedded in complexities of state practices and societal stances towards newcomers, which we analyse in the following sections.

4. Materials and Methods

Our analyses are based on the data collected in 2018 within an extensive study aiming to determine the needs and challenges of integrating refugees into Croatian society at the level of local communities in 30 socio-spatial units (Ajduković et al. 2019). A total of 168 interviews and four focus groups were conducted with 227 participants – representatives of various stakeholders⁹ in the process of refugee integration, including a subsample of 25 people granted international refugee protection analysed in this paper. We conducted 10 semi-structured interviews and four focus groups with 15 participants, concentrating on refugees' experience of admittance and integration in Croatia, addressing their experiences within the following dimensions of integration: accommodation, entering the labour market, education and language acquisition, health, etc. Besides the general perception of the integration process and refugees' notion of what a successful integration is, the goal was also to address relationships with various stakeholders in the integration process: the relationships between refugees and representatives of institutions and locals.

Refugees were offered the support of national and international NGOs involved in their reception and other local contacts in Croatian cities in which refugees settled (mostly in Zagreb, Split, Osijek and Sisak) during the late spring of 2018. The sample was purposive; all participants were fully informed of the research purpose and goals, and their participation was voluntary and anonymous.¹⁰ The sample of interviewed refugees included 19 males and 6 females. The principle of maximising the variance of key informants was respected, since the refugees were of both genders, had completed various levels of education, and had varying degrees of experience of living in Croatia; accompanied or not by their families and originating from different countries. The data saturation was estimated not only on the interviews conducted, but also considering the results of previous desk-research. The interviews lasted between 15 and 60 minutes, while the focus groups lasted around 90 minutes. Communication with approximately one-third of the refugees was carried out in English or Croatian, and interpreters were used in communication with others. Coding and thematic analysis of interview transcripts (Braun & Clarke 2006) were used to analyse collected data with MAX QDA software. The citations from the transcribed interviews are used to illustrate analysed segments referring to the perception of integration and the description of experiences in establishing contact with the local population.

5. What is Integration for Refugees in Croatia?

Following the proposed theoretical framework, in the analyses, we start from the position of the non-normative integration of refugees into the host society (Penninx & Garcés-Masareñas 2016). Within the legal-political, socio-economic, and cultural/religious dimensions of integration, all stakeholders, including refugees themselves, emphasised learning the Croatian language as the key element of successful integration at all levels, i.e., for all other aspects of integration, simultaneously reflecting (normative) top-down as well as bottom-up and multi-level governance approaches to integration. A common language is also a precondition for refugees to be able to function in the new local communities, and a way of achieving independence (Ajduković et al. 2019). However, the development of a social network and the involvement of refugees in community life, usually used as indicators of societal cohesiveness, were rarely mentioned as indicators of successful integration, directing the analyses towards more latent indicators of cohesion.

Assessment of how well-integrated, normatively and non-normatively, refugees feel in a new social environment was covered by the question about their satisfaction with life in Croatia. Experiences with state institutions and with the local population were used to denote these concepts. In the positive sense, the

interviewees mostly stressed the characteristics best fitting the cultural/religious dimension – cultural similarities and appreciation of religious differences – combined with a feeling of safety, as the most relevant aspects of life in Croatia:

Looking for safety and a future for himself and his family, this is the most important here in Croatia. (FG-172-4)

In second place was the kindness of local people, especially compared to certain other European countries. The following is one of the reasons stated by an interviewee for staying in Croatia back in 2011:

People are kinder than elsewhere, Germany for instance, so I decided to stay here even though I didn't hear about Croatia before I found myself here [...]. The most satisfying for me is that people have quickly accepted me, they were not that rude to send me away. (I-122)

A sense of neighbourly acceptance was also mentioned as an important source of satisfaction and self-respect:

Now often some of the neighbours call me to help them chop wood and do similar jobs, so they pay me. I am also satisfied with that because their invitation to do something for them and to pay me shows that they still trust me and that they appreciate me in some way. (I-064)

Several interviewees emphasised that Croats are simple people; they thought the local residents were good people and they respected them, which leads to mutual trust. Overall, the refugees contended that local Croatian citizens were inclined to generous and warm-hearted behaviour and being friendly and favourable towards refugees, which are some of the characteristics of a cohesive society.

In opposition, experiences within legal-political and socio-economic dimensions of integration were oftentimes sources of dissatisfaction, disclosing areas that should function as state-organised and coordinated processes of integration, but do not yet do so. The dominant answers given by the refugees were precarious work conditions, bad jobs, and low wages. The interviewed refugees believed they were paid less than locals for doing the same jobs. They stressed that their futures were uncertain and these factors jeopardised their possibility of being independent, and after two years of state-funded accommodation and poorly paid jobs, they felt insecure:

It should not be limited to only two years, but until they have a job. Two years, three years until he finds a job that suits him so that he can advance in job-position. Now they are looking and just can't find a job. (FG-169-1)

In other words, the intention to stay in Croatia was connected to whether the interviewees were to succeed in securing appropriate jobs and stable living conditions. It turns out that a period of two years is crucial for such a decision. If they are left without state support, they are usually unable to make a living from poorly paid, precarious jobs, and would re-think the option of staying or continuing on to other (Western) countries that provide a better chance of a proper life. These results point towards the notion that local authorities do not balance well between the national-level integration framework and local-level implementation realities, where structural insufficiencies, the lack of social cohesion, and the increase of individual exclusion, specifically on a normative level, lead to refugees' decisions to leave the country.

Another source of dissatisfaction, confirming the negative perception of the general administrative setting, was the slowness of administrative procedures and the ignorance of officials:

The most important thing is that everyone who must be informed about the rights of refugees gets informed. I know what I am entitled to, and they have to ask for information, and it takes a long time, if they get the information at all. (I-122)

Downsizing the concept of integration to the local level reveals that the general notion of significant stakeholders – especially local government representatives – does not seem to entail openness and perception in local communities for refugee integration. Most stakeholders express concern and believe some form of negative reaction from locals is expected, especially in small communities. Less resistance is expected in larger towns. Ajduković et al. (2019, 85) state that the reasons for expected difficulties are diverse and vary based on poverty and general difficulties experienced by locals in economically underdeveloped parts of Croatia where they feel discomfort caused by the mixing of the population, differences in religion, cultures and norms, and also by fear of the unknown. In the country's capital, which has the most extensive experience of integrating refugees, the interviewed stakeholders related negative attitudes towards refugees to fears of the local population, which were reflected in xenophobic comments and behaviours as well as the perception that refugees are privileged over the local population. However, a surprising result in the same study showed that Croatian citizens tend to support integration as an acculturation strategy for asylum beneficiaries in Croatia, as the majority of citizens participating in the national survey¹¹ (70.7 %) thought that refugees should both accept Croatian culture and maintain their own culture. Two other options – assimilation and separation – were the views upheld by 20 % and 4 % of participants respectively. This points to the conclusion that citizens generally support the cultural integration of refugees, which is closer to an intercultural and non-assimilationist approach and even slightly more optimistic about that cause than respective stakeholder informants.

The reception of refugees on a local community level could be embedded in previous experiences and the legacy of taking care of Bosnian refugees in the 1990s, as well as the history of co-existence with national minorities, especially the autochthone Muslim minority which is well integrated on an institutional level and has well-established networks deployed in implementing integration measures for newcomers refugees in towns such as Rijeka, Karlovac and Sisak. The established local encounters point towards mostly positive experiences reflecting a cohesive society at a local level, however, they are mostly positioned within the private sphere, which we will discuss further in the following section.

6. Establishing Contacts: What Went Well, and What Went Wrong?

Established contacts and everyday situations reported by refugees in Croatia are the main focus of this paper. These everyday experiences are used to analyse the level of acceptance and strength of local cohesiveness in the integration process, i.e., translating local integration into interaction and community cohesion. The social interactions and private relationships established by refugees can be analysed dually regarding the context in which they occur: as institutional and private. Firstly, we analyse the relationships and experiences with state institution officials, which were mostly described as negative or challenging, referring to the slowness in communication and general ignorance of officials over asylum matters:

And so when you go to institutions they don't really know, you have to instruct them, persuade them. (I-109)

[...] they are slow, it takes years to solve something. They seem to be just making promises. (I-007c)

Furthermore, some cases recorded evidently discriminatory practices by institution representatives and perceived possible abuse of power, such as deliberate prolonging of procedures and unjustified detention:

In the beginning, I experienced more embarrassing situations, because when I was informed about some rights, I walked around the institutions and asked for those rights. Somewhere they didn't even listen to me honestly, they said that I don't have the rights I state, that they don't know and that when they get what I say in writing [in a form of injunction], they will give me what I ask for. (I-064)

Several cases of communication challenges and problems were reported, such as insufficient Croatian language proficiency among refugees and insufficient knowledge of English among institutional officials or their reluctance to use it,

pointing towards possible institutional negligence and blockage. Even though some stakeholders are becoming more active agents in integration activities by adjusting their strategies and protocols to local realities, the general situation is saturated by the negative experiences of refugees in everyday encounters with institutions. These experiences imply that a deeper understanding of vertical and horizontal integration governance is still missing in the analysed communities.

On the contrary, the most positive reported experiences on the institutional level refer to those with the staff of social welfare centres and with schools, where one of the interviewees stated that people were nice to them and they treated them with respect. The majority of refugees were satisfied with their or their children's educational experiences; they perceived it as an opportunity to develop their social network and were happy that their children were accepted without any incidents. As Ajduković et al. (2019) stress, the significance of attending school is also attached to the participation of parents, since it allows them to meet other parents. Similarly, one of the interviewees emphasises: "Thus we established contacts with the parents of those children, and now we often spend pleasant times together" (I-064).

Experiences with civil society and humanitarian actors were also mostly positive. A very strong engagement of NGOs was recorded in the everyday activities of refugees – in the form of enabling and organising language courses, volunteering in providing homework help, and providing space for socialising with each other and with the locals. NGOs are also recognised as one of the important providers of information about refugee rights, and many of the activities carried out in the pre-COVID-19 period in reception centres were organised by NGO volunteers. Some of the interviewed refugees also noted their own experience of volunteering within several NGOs as positive, which could be observed as empowering and emancipatory practices. The role of NGOs is also acknowledged in providing help to job-seekers. However, the interviewed representatives of civil society organisations warned us that equal distribution of resources is necessary, since the locals could get the impression that refugees are privileged in exercising their rights in comparison to local residents (Ajduković et al. 2019).

However, when analysing the relationship between refugees and local residents, almost all of the interviewed refugees highlighted the positive experiences they had with acceptance, even though it took a while for them to feel accepted by their neighbours, i.e., their neighbours had to get to know them to understand that they were not problematic but normal people:

At first it was not very pleasant. When we came to live in the settlement in which there is the house in which we still live, people were not very nice to us. The children did not have any friends either [...]. Now it is different. I guess people got to know us and they stopped seeing us as some kind of danger. (I-063)

Over time the perceptions of social distance/closeness changed, so these superficial and distanced relationships grew into closer and friendlier ones:

[...] little by little we began spending time together, having coffee, and somehow, they got to know us as people. Today even that one neighbour who at first didn't accept us at all spends time with us and has coffee with us. (I-063)

Their interest in Arabian food is an incentive for expanding the circle of friends and for spending time together. (FG-170-3)

As shown, the varying self-narratives of nationals and newcomers might eventually converge in an unexpectedly positive manner, as in the case of a newly established friendship in Karlovac between a 50-year-old Croatian local who is a war veteran and an 11-year-old Syrian refugee boy.¹² Similarly, communal lunches held by the local Islamic community members for refugees in the city of Sisak foster interreligious dialogue and shared practices.¹³

The success of local-level integration again rests on the importance of speaking Croatian – language proficiency makes it possible to be accepted by the host population, otherwise, they feel isolated (Ajduković et al. 2019):

As soon as you can speak the language, they accept you as their equals [...]. If you can't speak, then you are somehow isolated. (I-109)

Besides language, cultural similarities were also indicated. The Syrian and Croatian cultures are perceived as similar, and this similarity contributed to the feeling of safety and acceptance, so in the refugees' opinion, there were no major cultural obstacles to their living in Croatia. Certain aspects of the refugees' culture, including wearing a headscarf or a specific cuisine, are interesting to locals, which was perceived as positive. Compared to Ager and Strang's (2018) presumptions on social cohesion, our results suggest that on a local, neighbourhood level, both the locals and the newcomers are getting to know each other, and to some extent share a welcoming, tolerant and relatively friendly atmosphere, which are important preconditions for a cohesive and integrated community. However, some examples show that we are still a long way off from achieving satisfying integration.

Aside from positive relations and contacts, there are specific prejudices when it comes to persons granted asylum, not necessarily when it comes to people coming from the Middle East, also indicating the preferred characteristics of migrants:

[...] when he tells people he gets to know that he is an asylum beneficiary, they avoid him, but when he says he came from Iraq to study here, they accept him. (FG-169-2)

Croats trust asylum beneficiaries with families more than those who are single, in which case they seem to be slightly scared of them. (FG-169-3)

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Furthermore, several interviewed refugees reported having negative experiences upon their arrival in the community, consisting mainly of unpleasant verbal comments and behaviour by individuals, and in three cases they also reported physical attacks – getting into a fight and being beaten by locals. Other negative experiences referred to situations when somebody spat at them in town (FG-171-3) and recreated a bomb attack: “[...] she put a plastic bag on a seat next to her in the bus, somebody yelled ‘boom!’” (FG-171-1), while media reports on incidents involving refugees and asylum seekers caused negative reactions in their neighbours:

[...] after an asylum seeker attacked a woman in Dugave [Zagreb city quarter where the reception centre is located], the local population thought that all the refugees were like that, and the following day he felt that the neighbours started behaving differently towards him. (FG-169-2)

These quotes indicate the non-linearity and fragility of the integration process, which is constantly affected by contextual situations. The examples also point towards threat-perception and conflict theories, especially in the context of highlighted securitisation and populist discourses, which have been evident in various social spheres in Croatia for quite some time.

The positively perceived aspects of social trust and common social norms, socio-economic emancipation, cooperation, and sharing, shape community cohesion and stability. The interviewed refugees, even though faced with great challenges on their way to being included and integrated, designated people's openness as one of the most satisfying aspects of their life in Croatia. On the opposite side, the attitudes of the general Croatian population towards refugees were neither positive nor negative. Ajduković et al. (2019) showed that on average, Croatian citizens expressed a neutral attitude towards refugees. Of the respondents, 15.3 % expressed clearly positive attitudes and 14.1 % expressed negative attitudes, and they, on average, rarely come into contact with refugees. The frequency of positive relationships and encounters reported by refugees set the grounds for successful intercultural dialogue and can serve as a means of reducing prejudice and negative experiences. Nevertheless, discontinuity in supporting effective access to public services along with community (in)stability leave space for further improvements.

7. Discussion

Croatia only has a few communities with any reception and integration experience prepared for refugee admittance. The preconditions in which integration

practices are taking place refer back to a lack of political/governmental will, relatively scarce budgetary public investments, as well as a somewhat ignorant social climate within host communities. The insufficiencies of integration programmes stem from a highly fragmented public administration system and inadequate inter-sectoral coordination and cooperation between different ministries and departments involved in integration activities on national and local levels, as confirmed by other studies (Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies 2016; Giljević & Lalić Novak 2018; Ajduković et al. 2019).

As an implementation practice, integration in Croatia remains a parallel structure between civil society and humanitarian actors, one that fixes the governmental gaps and insufficiencies instead of being a complementary and cooperative shared practice of the state, civil society and (im)migrants themselves. A shift from the state-centric to the poly-centric perspective of migration governance may include various sectors and multiple actors (Scholten et al. 2017), yet it leaves an open space for scrutinising integration beyond the oftentimes porous institutional setting of (miss)implementing practices. This was evident in our analysis of interviews with refugees; they saw no barriers to their participation in everyday life in host communities, yet, they criticised the institutions for often being too slow and inert in dealing with aspects of everyday life, or even being discriminatory and hostile towards their cause. This resembles the known phenomenon of “integration paradox”, whereby we may witness two of its modalities here; one in which refugees have a relatively positive attitude toward the local population, and a relatively negative attitude toward state administration because of perceived discrimination and a lower level of acceptance in institutions. Furthermore, it seems that the state (not) dealing with integration policy adequately and systematically results in an opposite, disintegrative effect – exclusion and marginalisation rather than inclusion/incorporation of refugee population into society (cf. Mügge & van der Haar 2016).

The policy-driven debate could also discuss the interactive and dynamic perspectives of integration that analyse contact, interaction, and participation of different disadvantaged and minority groups with other members of society. Our analysis detailed an understanding of the concept and process of integration within the institutional context of the Croatian asylum system, within the public sphere, and in the social environment of host communities. Often the expectations coming from representatives of local communities are that refugees should fit in and be grateful, revealing a somewhat assimilationist perspective. The preferable and successful indicators of refugee integration are seen by institutional stakeholders as sufficient language acquisition as the basis for employment and financial independence of adults, their independence from the system’s institutions, primarily from social benefits, and the enrolment of children in the educational system. This partly corresponds to the results of the latest 2022 edition of the Special Eurobarometer 519 Report (European Commission, 2022), where

right after considering speaking the host country language, finding a job, and contributing to the welfare system, cultural and societal factors are seen as important factors for the successful integration of immigrants.

Refugees themselves think they should be open to the local population. Isolation is not perceived as a desirable solution; however, it is common for refugees who do not plan to stay in Croatia and for those refugees who feel unsafe, insecure and threatened by the local community. Nonetheless, the representatives of local communities refer to isolation as an unwanted mode of settlement, leading to non-integration outcomes. Generally, they emphasise that refugees should be settled within the local communities to be accepted.

We contend that integration as a process is still mainly state-prescribed and a declaratory coordinated activity, with an institutional network that is not always well-managed, resulting in weakness regarding its implementation. Furthermore, what seems to be a novelty is a sort of local turn in understanding and implementing integration activities, picking up on daily interaction and community building through the work of local municipal, civil, and humanitarian actors in their assistance to refugees. Some of these actors, including faith-based and religious associations, are appointed and funded by the state as implementers of integration measures, oftentimes bridging the gaps of service provision for many of the beneficiaries.

But what is the role of local actors in this equation? Ager and Strang (2008, 184) emphasise that according to “the importance of continuity in supporting effective access to public services – it is clear that community stability is potentially an important facilitator of integration.” In our previous study, we demonstrated the importance of well-implemented integration policies on the level of social cohesion in local communities. Previously, we contended that

[...] burdened socio-economic emancipation of refugees as well as other institutional problems with their adaptation may bring a social divide and a gap at the level of local communities. Citizens who perceive these problems with integration may undermine the process of social cohesion and communal trust towards asylum seekers and refugees as those who are left on the margins (Župarić-Iljić & Gregurović 2020, 199).

This is something that should be investigated further, especially in the new context of challenges with the acceptance of refugees from Ukraine.

The limitations of our research relate to the relatively constrained scope of analysing integration aimed at a specific group of persons under international protection without including other statuses and categories of third-country nationals, such as immigrant workers, who could also count as subjects of national integration legal and institutional framework. Finally, in our analysis, we have not extensively addressed the potential and actual transnational linkages and activities of our research participants, ones that connect them with families

and friends in their countries of origin and in other European countries, which could be an important factor that may affect their integration trajectories.

Our findings were obtained with representatives of the local and regional government, public servants and NGOs, as well as in the context of a wider attitudinal perception of integration and acceptance of refugees and utilisation of the community and neighbourhood partnerships for fostering community cohesion. It seems, however, that local integration practices reflect the pragmatic approach of policymakers and practitioners to implementation activities and direct problem-solving. Yet, in the Croatian case, a lack of immigrant associations within the local host communities reminds us of mostly top-down logic with a centrally coordinated, to some extent assimilationist, approach of the government to disseminate policies to local levels, considering state and civic actors as accountable for the implementation of measures.

8. Concluding Remarks

We learn from the Croatian case that a rich historical multi-ethnic and multi-cultural setting, together with trajectories of national migration, asylum and border regime, resulted in a somewhat uncritical understanding of integration as the most desirable model of adaptation by our research participants. We have seen that an interactive approach to integration should include not only scrutiny of stakeholder-driven diversity management policies, but also a reassessment of social cohesion in the context of multiple social, political, and economic challenges. Expectations stemming from our refugee's interviews still provide hope that becoming an integrated part of society could mean coming together with locals, cheering on similarities and acknowledging differences, which calls for a more intercultural view on integration. For future researchers, this could be a starting point; checking whether contacts and joint narratives will foster social cohesion in local communities where they all meet.

We know that a lack of meaningful intergroup contact in a situation of deprivation lowers trust and cohesion (Daley 2007). However, the cultural pattern of communal life in relatively well-connected neighbourhood social networks is still present in Croatia, especially in smaller communities. Thus, as was emphasised in the conclusion of our study (cf. Ajduković et al. 2019, 105), the readiness of Croats to engage in neighbourly relationships with their new neighbours can be put to good and beneficial use, and activities can be implemented at the level of neighbourhoods to prepare micro-communities for the arrival of asylum beneficiaries. These community and neighbourhood partnerships could contribute to mutual adaptation by fostering community cohesion. In the same manner, the first neighbourly contact can play a key role in the development of future relationships, those that will be closer and friendlier, which is a well-known finding of contact theory.

Finally, although refugees in Croatia find that the integration system is not well organised and includes many contradictions, they generally do not see any major cultural barriers to their life in Croatia, which is an important asset for fostering communal cohesion. Moreover, as research in the UK context showed, social support, neighbourhood partnerships and community initiatives based on shared goals are needed equally for residents and newcomers to overcome divisions emerging from cultural differences (Daley 2007), which is also strongly relatable to the Croatian case. The cohesive potential of local communities for the acceptance of migrants and refugees can be seen in the answers of locals who understand integration as the most acceptable model of adaptation and incorporation of newcomers into the social matrix of Croatian society. Surprisingly, according to our findings, the majority of citizens have an intercultural understanding of integration as a preferable model of cultural adaptation to each other, rather than an assimilationist understanding of integration, as held by the state actors. This contributes to the discussion of divergence in state, society, and migrant understanding of what integration is and what it may be.

We found that systemic, structural, as well as societal factors and interactions all play a pivotal role in refugee acceptance and integration. Moreover, the integration of refugees into Croatian society may be seen as a continuous process that implies, first and foremost, creating preconditions for introducing citizens and newcomers to each other. This means the prevention and mitigation of possible negative phenomena related to the arrival of refugees and migrants in general, which asks for coordinated efforts of all stakeholders in the preparation and sensibilisation of citizens on the arrival and reception of people under international protection. Lastly, to integrate means to create equal chances for disadvantaged groups to become productive members of society while preventing discrimination, exclusion, and marginalisation.

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Notes

- ¹ However, it is important to point out that one of the reasons for such a low rate of approved statuses is that a significant number of applicants leave Croatia before the procedure is completed, meaning that a large number of procedures are suspended (see Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Croatia, 2022).

- ² See ECRE (2021).
- ³ The first dimension of integration (legal-political) refers to the ways and possibilities of attaining resident rights, rights to family reunion, political participation and attaining the right to citizenship; the second dimension (socio-economic) refers to the position of immigrants on the labour market and access to social rights and benefits such as the right to work, to health protection, and to education and housing; finally, the third dimension (cultural/religious) relates to cultural and religious rights of immigrants and particularly to their perceptions and the practice of difference in the host society (Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies 2016).
- ⁴ Even though there are three levels of local and regional self-government units (counties, towns and municipalities), the research targeted the ones that had, or were supposed to have, the experience of refugee integration, which ended in only including the level of town and county.
- ⁵ Penninx and Garcés-Mascareñas (2016) emphasise that shifting from supranational (EU) and national level to a more regional and local understanding of integration brings a perspective on integration experienced by practitioners, locals, and immigrants/refugees as "target groups" on a micro-level.
- ⁶ Besides the general perception of racism and discrimination, an interesting phenomenon of "integration paradox" seems to occur when analysing the integration of specific groups: the higher-educated immigrants are the ones who are better integrated into the host society, but also the ones who perceive more discrimination (van Doorn et al. 2013, 382).
- ⁷ However, even among those recognised refugees there are noticeable secondary movements towards Western Europe. The reasons for that are not investigated but it may be assumed that they are related to family and migrant networks, aspirations, and perception of better opportunities elsewhere.
- ⁸ Lately, based on experiences from 2019 onwards, assistance to refugees admitted to the city of Sisak has been formalised through the opening of the Center for Integration of Foreigners in cooperation between the municipality council, the local civic initiative, and the Norwegian Refugee Council. See Civil Rights Project Sisak (n.d.).
- ⁹ Besides refugees, those are representatives of local and regional self-government units, experts in the fields of education, health, employment and social care, and representatives of NGOs.
- ¹⁰ Ethics Approval was provided by the Ethics Committee of the Psychology Department of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (University of Zagreb) on 5 April 2018.
- ¹¹ The survey was conducted on a sample of 1,272 Croatian citizens aged 18 to 65, measuring the attitudes of the general public towards refugees (more in Ajduković et al. 2019).
- ¹² See KAportal.hr (2020).
- ¹³ See European Platform of Integrating Cities – EPIC (n. d.).

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Breda Mulec

Dilemmas of Public and State Administration: Bilingualism Bonus or Multilingualism without Bonus

The role of education systems is crucial in creating bilingualism and multilingualism. Based on domestic and foreign literature and structured interviews with public officials in North Macedonia and Italy, the article analyses the solutions and incentives for institutional bilingualism, which have proven insufficient thus far. It also offers a model of multilingualism as a concept of an ideal environment where speakers can communicate using multiple languages. The impact of new information and communication technologies on language learning and use in bilingual areas and their contribution to the creation of an ideal environment conducive to multilingualism will also be examined. The data obtained shows, among other things, that artificial intelligence is also revolutionising language use and learning. Nonetheless, despite rapid progress, human communication in different languages cannot be replaced by artificial algorithms.

Keywords: institutional bilingualism, bilingualism bonus, public employees, public sector, state administration, public administration, minorities, immigrants.

Dileme javne in državne uprave: dodatek za dvojezičnost ali večjezičnost brez dodatka

Vloga izobraževalnih sistemov je ključna pri ustvarjanju dvojezičnosti in večjezičnosti. V članku na podlagi domače in tuje literature ter strukturiranega intervjuja z javnimi uslužbenci v Severni Makedoniji in Italiji analiziramo dosedanje rešitve in spodbude za institucionalno dvojezičnost, ki so se pokazale kot nezadostne, pri čemer se nam ponuja model večjezičnosti kot koncept idealnega okolja, kjer bodo govorniki komunicirali večjezično. Preverjal se bo tudi učinek nove informacijsko-komunikacijske tehnologije na učenje in rabo jezikov na dvojezičnih območjih in na kreiranje idealnega okolja za spodbujanje večjezičnosti. Pridobljeni podatki so med drugim pokazali, da prinaša umetna inteligenca tudi na polju rabe in učenja jezikov pravo revolucijo, vendar kljub bliskovitemu napredku človeške komunikacije v različnih jezikih ni mogoče nadomestiti z umetnimi algoritmi.

Ključne besede: družbeni razred, identiteta, neenakost, integracija, Severna Irska, mir, revščina.

Correspondence address: Breda Mulec, Fakulteta za državne in evropske študije Nove univerze v Ljubljani, Žanova ulica 3, SI-4000 Kranj; Ministrstvo za vzgojo in izobraževanje, Masarykova ulica 16, SI-1000 Ljubljana; e-mail: breda.mulec@fds.nova-uni.si, bredamulec@hotmail.com.

1. Introduction

Democratic countries actively promote the use of minority languages, with nations housing minority populations implementing a range of measures to encourage the use of minority languages within state institutions. However, even where institutional bilingualism seems firmly established, practitioners find that certain solutions have proven ineffective. In specific countries like Slovenia, Italy, Belgium, and Canada, the use of minority languages is supported through financial incentives, such as a bilingualism bonus provided to public employees. Nevertheless, as indicated by the presentation of the project titled *Institutional Bilingualism in the Ethnically Mixed Areas in Slovenia: Evaluation of the Bilingualism Bonus Programme* (INV, n. d.), conducted by the Institute for Ethnic Studies, during the years 2018–2022, a significant number of public employees who receive this bonus do not speak or use the minority language in their interactions with the parties. These monetary incentives for public employees to use minority languages in bilingual areas have emerged alongside the introduction of the New Public Management doctrine, which aimed to depart from the conventional Weberian model of public management characterised by rigid hierarchical structures within public institutions. However, while the New Public Management doctrine employs new approaches to enhance public sector efficiency, often borrowing from private sector solutions, not all these strategies have proven effective. One such case is the bilingualism bonus. A comprehensive examination of countries addressing these issues is presented in the section titled *Institutional Bilingualism and Monetary Incentives – an Overview of Selected Countries*, while an in-depth discussion on the effectiveness of the public management doctrine is provided in the subsequent discussion section.

However, there are legislative solutions in some cases that are currently in effect and may not have been fully considered, presenting countries with unique dilemmas and challenges distinct from those described above. In this context, we turn our attention to North Macedonia. In the chapter titled *Introducing Institutional Bilingualism in North Macedonia*, we will explore the repercussions that have arisen following the introduction of institutional bilingualism across the entire country. Naturally, considering North Macedonia's reputation for its ethnic diversity, questions arise regarding the situation of speakers from other linguistic communities, especially in the absence of comprehensive legislation.

Nonetheless, in Europe, there are national policies that not only reject the bilingualism requirement but also discourage any form of monetary incentives within their borders. Furthermore, these policies actively promote the exclusion of minority languages from educational institutions and public life. A prominent example is Latvia, which, since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, has constructed its identity around its language and culture, while maintaining a notably negative stance towards its substantial Russian-speaking community.

Such a policy can yield severe and far-reaching consequences, even potentially escalating into armed conflicts. Hence, it is imperative to devote particular attention to the challenges faced by the Russian-speaking population in Latvia.

Countries are also facing other challenges that are increasingly putting pressure on their established national policies regarding traditional bilingualism within their borders. Migration is on the rise, with people moving to other countries in pursuit of a better life. In certain regions, refugees or migrants are already advocating for equal language rights, giving rise to new dilemmas concerning the criteria for institutionalising the use of these languages or determining the critical mass of speakers necessary for such institutionalisation. Herein lies a fundamental challenge, even for the wealthiest nations, as they struggle to ensure the use of a multitude of languages within their government offices and the broader public sector. This challenge persists because they often lack a sufficient pool of staff proficient in these languages, despite the available monetary incentives.

When contemplating solutions to the myriad of challenges encountered in the realm of language policies, the vision of an inclusive multilingual society emerges. In such a society, individuals from diverse linguistic and ethnic backgrounds communicate in their respective mother tongues. The premise is that early exposure to multilingualism in kindergartens and schools will foster a more open, tolerant, and competitive society, and that the necessity for special monetary incentives for public employees in bilingual areas would diminish, as in this ideal environment, individuals would naturally engage in multilingual communication.

A brief glance at history shows that the Ottoman Empire, spanning South-Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa, was already a multiethnic and multilingual entity. This observation requires some critical reflection, but it does offer encouragement showing that diverse linguistic and ethnic communities coexisted in the past. While the Ottoman Empire did not precisely embody the contemporary model of multilingualism, its fundamental elements can be identified in the empire's policy towards non-Muslim populations (Upton-Ward 2002, 245). As aptly pointed out by Upton-Ward, people of that era either coexisted or resided in separate areas, yet they engaged in common activities, traded with one another, and generally cultivated social relationships (Upton-Ward 2002, 246). The author of this insightful study further contends that the prevalence of multilingualism and multiculturalism was made feasible through a unique state organisation, facilitated by the concept of *Millets*, referring to distinct nations or ethnicities. This organisational structure prevented the assimilation of various cultures into the dominant majority. The Ottoman Empire's organisation through the *Millets* permitted communities to practise their religions and maintain their languages (Upton-Ward 2002, 247).

Numerous travellers across the Ottoman Empire documented the Empire's remarkable multilingualism. For instance, Evlya Celebi, in his 17th-century report-

age (cited in Sooyong & Bashkin 2021, 130), vividly portrays the extraordinary coexistence of different languages and dialects throughout the Ottoman Empire. In his writings, Celebi highlights the regions where he encountered bilingual or multilingual speakers. In Ohrid, he notes that the inhabitants primarily conversed in Greek or Bulgarian but seamlessly shifted to elegant Turkish when necessary. Moreover, linguistic diversity was not always confined to spoken language; in the ensuing centuries, bilingual and even multilingual newspapers began to circulate (Sooyong & Bashkin 2021, 140). Woodhead (2012, 146–147) describes the Ottoman Empire as polyglot, with Turkish being one of the languages in use alongside others like Armenian, Greek, Hebrew, and Church Slavonic. Leupold (2019, 2) paints a picture of a “polyglot homo ottomanicus” who prays in Fuzha Arabic in the Mosque, recites poetry in Farsi, writes complaint letters in Ottoman Turkish, trades with Westerners in French, and speaks Albanian with his family. Meanwhile, Dursteler (2012, 67–68) speaks of a Mediterranean linguistic ecosystem, characterised by diverse *lingua francas* that facilitate communication between various linguistic communities.

After reviewing the methodology, our analysis will delve into the state of bilingualism or multilingualism, primarily focusing on the aforementioned countries (Slovenia, Italy, Belgium, Canada, North Macedonia, and Latvia), with historical insights from the Ottoman Empire. The core discussion within this article revolves around charting a course towards multilingualism. Within the section titled Pathways to Multilingualism: Discussion and Proposals, we explore the benefits and incentives for embracing multilingualism.

Special consideration will also be devoted to the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence and digitisation within the realms of language learning and use. These developments are likely to revolutionise not only language learning but also language use. We will explore the question of whether artificial intelligence can serve as an asset or an obstacle to the creation of a multilingual society.

In the final chapter, we will test our hypotheses and provide guidance for the future.

2. Research Methods and Hypotheses

Based on a review of domestic and foreign literature, as well as an analysis of comparable practices (comparative method), the article aims to assess several hypotheses. Firstly, it will investigate whether the current solutions and incentives for institutional bilingualism are inadequate, thus calling for alternative, non-monetary solutions, and above all strategies that promote multilingualism among speakers and foster a multilingual environment. Secondly, the article will test the hypothesis that early introduction of multilingualism in kindergartens and schools is of paramount importance, given the prevailing global bias

towards elite languages and the inadequate attention given to the benefits of children's learning. Early introduction of multilingualism in kindergartens and schools fosters a more open, tolerant, and competitive society. This will render the need for special monetary incentives or bonuses obsolete, as within such an ideal environment, individuals naturally engage in multilingual communication. Lastly, the article will explore the hypothesis that new information technologies have the potential to facilitate two-way communication, allowing foreign speakers to communicate in their mother tongue while public employees receive the message in their language via simultaneous translation by artificial intelligence. This innovation is likely to expand language use.

The hypotheses were further tested through qualitative analysis, conducted in the form of structured interviews. This empirical study, involving three public employees from Italy and four from North Macedonia, took place from 15 January to 15 February 2023. The respondents came from countries with distinct traditions in promoting bilingualism, held university degrees, and were employed in public administration. The Italian respondents comprised the Head of the Slovene Schools Office at the Regional Education Office, an employee of Slovene nationality at the Central Office for the Slovene Language in Friuli Venezia Giulia, and an employee of Italian nationality from Friuli Venezia Giulia. In North Macedonia, the interviewees included two employees of Albanian nationality – one employed at Invest North Macedonia and the other as the Government PR Adviser. Additionally, there were two interviewees of Macedonian nationality, one employed at Invest North Macedonia and the other serving as a Macedonian Language Adviser in one of the public administration departments. The personal details of the interviewees have been kept confidential to maintain objectivity and minimise the need for idealisation or embellishment of the research context. The interview questions were thoughtfully structured and revolved around several key themes: the effectiveness of institutional bilingualism, the adequacy of both monetary and non-monetary incentives for public employees using multiple languages in their interactions with users of public sector services, the prevalence of language use among public employees, and the provision of simultaneous teaching of both languages in schools. The respondents were also asked about their attitudes towards early learning of the language of the majority (if they belonged to a minority group) and of other ethnic communities in their country. Furthermore, they shared their perspectives on the early introduction of multilingualism in schools and its potential impact on fostering a more open, tolerant, and competitive society. Lastly, the interviews encompassed questions about artificial intelligence (AI), namely whether public employees use AI in their multilingual communications and whether new communication technologies would facilitate or enhance bilingual or even multilingual communication.

3. Institutional Bilingualism and Monetary Incentives – an Overview of Selected Countries

3.1 Belgium

A law governing the use of languages in administrative procedures has been in place in Belgium for decades. The country's cultural and linguistic diversity is reflected in its three traditional communities: French, Flemish, and German. French and German-speaking communities predominantly reside in Wallonia, while Flanders is primarily Flemish-speaking. In Brussels, both Flemish and Walloon communities coexist. However, these communities are officially designated as monolingual, which means that some positions in public administration are language-specific. Thus, for example, only Flemish-speaking candidates can apply for jobs in Flanders. The only exception to this rule is bilingual Brussels, where public employees who use a second language alongside their mother tongue are eligible for a bilingualism bonus. This means that only employees who work in the bilingual region of Brussels or for the federal government and are proficient in both French and Flemish qualify for the bilingualism bonus. The amount of the bonus depends on the job's complexity. In monolingual regions, multilingualism does not yield any specific financial rewards (cf. Van Herck & Vermandere 2016).

3.2 Italy

Italian Law 482/1999 establishes a comprehensive legislative framework for safeguarding linguistic minorities. Under this law, various minority languages are officially recognised, entailing special protection in regions where these minority populations reside. The languages afforded this special status encompass Croatian, Albanian, Franco-Provençal, Friulian, French, Greek, German, Occitan, Ladin, Sardinian, and Slovene. The law acknowledges the spoken and written use of these minority languages within the respective minority-populated areas, but this is only possible if the administrative services employ public employees who are able to communicate in the given minority language. Notably, the law does not explicitly prescribe incentives for institutional bilingualism, as such provisions had already been adopted by autonomous regions and provinces prior to its enactment. The Slovene minority in the Autonomous Region of Friuli Venezia Giulia also benefits from this protection, enjoying the right to employ the Slovene language in state and local administrations. Public employees proficient in both languages are entitled to monetary incentives, although their language proficiency is not evaluated during their service (Norme a tutela della minoranza linguistica slovena della Regione Friuli-Venezia Giulia 2001).

3.3 Canada

Canada has been encouraging institutional bilingualism for decades. Initially, bilingualism was enforced in the federal parliament and the courts. Nearly a century later, in the 1970s, this policy was extended to administrative services. The federal government prioritised proficiency in both English and French during the recruitment process to increase the representation of French-speaking employees in the public sector. The required level of language proficiency corresponds to the complexity and responsibilities of each position, and a monthly allowance is granted. However, some researchers (Maltais 2018; Lecomte 2018; Borbey et al. 2017) have raised concerns about the efficacy of this language policy, particularly regarding the allocation of the bilingualism bonus. For example, Maltais (2018) highlights instances where employees in bilingual positions receive the bonus despite lacking sufficient language skills. Once they demonstrate at least satisfactory language proficiency in a language test, they receive the bonus on a permanent basis, and their language competences are no longer evaluated. Moreover, Borbey et al. (2017) argue that these language proficiency tests are cursory and do not adequately reflect the actual language knowledge needed for the job.

3.4 Slovenia

The Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia (1991) provides in Article 64 for the special rights of the autochthonous Italian and Hungarian national communities in Slovenia. The special status of the two national communities is thus recognised by the highest legal act in the country. Among other things, these national communities and their members have the right to education in their languages. In Slovenia, the bilingualism bonus is regulated by the Public Sector Salary System Act (2009). Proficiency in the language of the national community is required for employment in public institutions in the area where the Hungarian or Italian national community resides (Public Employees Act 2007, Art. 17). Nonetheless, ethnographic research has revealed that public employees from the majority population often lack practical proficiency in the language of the minority, despite this being a requirement for their positions for which the bilingualism bonus is paid (Novak Lukanović 2020; Novak-Lukanović & Mulec 2014; Burra 2022).

4. Institutional Bilingualism in North Macedonia

North Macedonia is an ethnically diverse country where a multitude of languages are spoken. The primary languages are Macedonian and Albanian, yet Turkish, Serbian, and Romanian also enjoy significant usage. Additionally, English is

increasingly spoken among the younger generation (Halimi 2014, 2). According to Friedman (2011, 282), “Turkish is still valued as sophisticated by old urban families, and Albanian is considered rural, albeit politically more powerful and now a pragmatic necessity.”

Institutional bilingualism was introduced across the entire country by the North Macedonia Law on the Use of Languages (Council of Europe 2019).

The official language of North Macedonia is Macedonian. However, the new Act envisaged mandatory official use of the language of any linguistic national community representing at least 20 % of the country’s total population. Members of such linguistic communities thus have the right to use their language in parliament, government institutions, the judiciary, public administration, and the broader public sector. Considering the country’s current demographic composition, such right is afforded to the Albanian national community. Members of the Albanian-speaking community can communicate in their language not only in contacts with government institutions and the state administration, but also with other public institutions, in hospitals and, last but not least, in educational institutions.

Before this regulation came into effect, institutional bilingualism had been obligatory solely in localities where over 20 % of the population belonged to a specific linguistic community. Nevertheless, researchers like Petrovski et al. (2010) pointed out an unconventional interpretation of bilingualism under the prior regulation. In the prevailing understanding, this bilingualism implied monolingual communication by members of the majority nation: those who communicated in Macedonian could be monolingual, while members of other linguistic groups were required to be proficient in both Macedonian and their mother tongue (Petrovski et al. 2010, 4). In practice, this meant that for Macedonians, knowledge of Albanian was not compulsory, while the Albanian-speaking community had to speak both languages.

However, according to Halimi (2014), another phenomenon has emerged. The political instability of recent years has led to tensions between the two ethnic communities. Younger generations of students, as observed in interviews conducted at the State University of Tetovo, perceive Macedonian as an imposed foreign language. They achieve better results when learning English and favour German over Macedonian as third language. Foreign languages have thus begun to overshadow the majority language, Macedonian (Halimi 2014, 13). This may potentially lead to asymmetric bilingualism, where one language system gradually supplants the previous one, ultimately resulting in a shift towards monolingualism, disproportionately favouring minority language over majority language.

The concept of institutional bilingualism has not been fully implemented, even in areas where the Albanian ethnic community constitutes over 20 % of the population. However, institutional bilingualism is now mandated for the entire

country, rather than being limited to specific regions with a higher percentage of a linguistic community, which brings new challenges and dilemmas. In his study, Stankovski (2019, 24) identifies numerous issues yet to arise in the implementation of this new regulation. As reported by Fernández Ibáñez (2021), such bilingualism poses daily challenges, as all legal acts, documents, and even technical forms must be available in both languages. This solution has faced resistance from a portion of the majority population, the Macedonians, who fear that Albanians will cease to communicate in the Macedonian language. The introduction of bilingualism across the public sector nationwide has also been viewed as inappropriate (International Crisis Group 2001, 1).

The historical context cannot be overlooked, either. Following the breakup of Yugoslavia, new countries found themselves with members of various nations and linguistic communities who had coexisted not only in previous decades but also for centuries under Ottoman Empire rule. However, the formation of these new states brought about tensions among different groups, leading to demands for recognition of the identities and languages of various ethnic communities. Such multiethnic entities seek to distinguish themselves also through language, as highlighted by previous research (e.g., Petrovski et al. 2010; Sujecka 2021; Friedman 2011; Halimi 2014).

5. Dilemmas of Russian-speaking Citizens in Latvia

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, an estimated 25 million ethnic Russians found themselves residing outside the borders of the newly formed Russian Federation. Putin described this as the worst geopolitical disaster of the twentieth century (Coolican 2021, 1). During the existence of the Soviet Union, Russians in Latvia predominantly communicated in Russian. While learning the majority language, Latvian, was not compulsory for the Russian-speaking community, the same cannot be said for Latvians who had to learn Russian alongside their mother tongue. Attitudes towards languages shifted after Latvia gained independence. Many members of the Russian minority lost Latvian citizenship due to their lack of proficiency in the majority language (Dilans 2009, 1). Consequently, Latvian became the sole official language in the country, despite a substantial Russian-speaking community of approximately 800,000 individuals, most of whom arrived after World War II, at the time of the Soviet Union (Dilans 2009, 1).

In this transformed landscape of the newly established state, Russian began to be treated as a foreign language. This shift discouraged younger generations from learning Russian. The young nation heavily relied on language for its national symbols and identity, viewing language as the primary tool of differentiation from others, according to Hoffman (1991, 238). Cheskin (2012, 326) further argues that “the military and cultural ‘threat’ from Russia has been

a common theme for Latvian nationalistic parties”. Despite a sizable Russian-speaking community, language policy, according to research, no longer places emphasis on learning Russian but rather focuses on asymmetrical bilingualism with a priority on mastering Latvian. Zepa (2003) believes that this policy aims to foster greater loyalty to the newly formed state and to distance it from the previous socio-political order.

Within educational institutions, Russian is only offered as a third foreign language and has been losing its position to English (Dilans 2009, 5). Moreover, the learning of Russian is primarily concentrated in areas with a significant minority population. The introduction of Latvian as the language of instruction (comprising 60 % of the curriculum) in Russian upper secondary schools has encountered resistance from both teachers and students (Cheskin 2012, 332). Under such circumstances, it is challenging to envision institutional bilingualism, with monolingualism emerging as the more likely outcome. In the present political climate, such a stance could potentially provide grounds for the Russian Federation to interfere in Latvia’s internal affairs, under the pretext of safeguarding its minority population. In fact, as stated by Coolican (2021, 2), Putin’s *Russkii mir* (Eng. Russian World) has become an intrinsic part of Russia’s diasporic policies.

This ideological concept, as articulated by Putin, is comprised of three pillars: Russian language, historical Soviet memory, and the Russian Orthodox Church (Coolican 2021, 2). Nevertheless, there are noticeable shifts in the perspectives of younger generations. Pisarenko’s study (2006) indicates that Russian-speaking students endorse policies that prioritise bilingualism as part of integration while rejecting both assimilation, where communication occurs exclusively in the majority nation’s language, and exclusion policies, which advocate for the exclusive use of the Russian language. Notably, Zabrodskaia (2019, 133) observes a significantly different outlook among younger members of the Russian-speaking community concerning Russia’s policy toward its diaspora. Among them, a dismissive attitude towards the current Russian policy under Vladimir Putin emerges, with the younger generation talking about “how strange Russia is” (Zabrodskaia 2019, 133).

6. Pathways to Multilingualism: Discussion and Proposals

6.1 Monetary Incentives for Multilingualism in the Public Sector

The illustration above demonstrates the diverse approaches employed worldwide when it comes to learning and using different languages within public institutions. In regions with lower socio-political stability, authorities often hesitate to endorse bilingualism or multilingualism. There may even be policies that could, in the long term, lead to tensions among various linguistic communities

or result in asymmetric bilingualism, where one language supplants another. On the other hand, societies with a well-established tradition of institutional bilingualism encounter other challenges. Foremost among these is the necessity for a distinct approach to human resource management within the public sector. Whereas the New Public Management model, which advocated the transfer of certain practices from the private sector to the public sector, was favoured until recently, it has now come under criticism. This shift in perspective is particularly noticeable in the realm of institutional bilingualism, as highlighted by the aforementioned studies, which reveal inadequacies in monetary incentives for the increased use of minority languages within state institutions.

Our survey also perceived a certain degree of scepticism among the respondents about additional rewards. Thus, for instance, the employee of Slovene nationality working at the Central Office for the Slovene Language in Friuli Venezia Giulia is not keen on the idea of providing extra monetary incentives:

Instead of providing incentives through bonuses, a more appropriate approach would be to encourage public institutions to conduct recruitment competitions with a priority requirement for a high level of proficiency in the Slovene language (Interview 1).

Also the employee of Italian nationality employed in the Region of Friuli Venezia Giulia disagrees with such bonuses, as they can cause tensions among colleagues (Interview 2).

The Head of the Slovene Schools Office at the Regional Education Office agrees, in principle, with the bonus, but points to complications in its implementation, as bonuses are not integrated into a standardised system:

The unequal treatment of employees performing the same work in the public sector would face opposition from trade unions. Without their agreement, such a change cannot be implemented. Any salary adjustment requires modifications to collective agreements, and given the multitude of these agreements, it could result in Slovenes receiving a bonus in one administrative body and not in another (Interview 3).

The following solution was suggested:

The approach adopted for the Germans and Ladins in South Tyrol is a more suitable solution. The differentiation begins with the *maturità* exam at the end of grammar school; the language proficiency certificate obtained on such occasion is accompanied by a special certificate affirming that passing the *maturità* exam equates to possessing the language skills required for employment within the public administration of the autonomous region. In this way, everyone has an interest in learning and using the minority language (Interview 3).

Public employees in North Macedonia do not see the point in special bonuses. The problem lies elsewhere. As explained by the Adviser at Invest North Mace-

donia (Macedonian), the deficiency in language use is not linked to monetary incentives but rather to the shortcomings of the school system:

This has nothing to do with material incentives, but with politics. Albanian children do not start learning Macedonian from the very beginning, in the first grade. Their parents complain about their children being overloaded with other subjects and consider learning Macedonian akin to learning a foreign language. For their children, it represents an extra effort and source of stress (Interview 4).

Other respondents also did not place significant emphasis on the bonus, either, with the employee of Albanian nationality emphasising that the critical issue lies in the implementation of the specific law (Interview 5).

As pointed out by various authors in their studies (e.g., Frey et al. 2013; Piney et al. 2015; Shamsul Haque 2007), the pursuit of substantial profits is not the primary motivation in the public sector, as it is in the private sector. Hence, the rewards to motivate public employees are not necessarily financial. There are multiple factors that drive public employees to perform their duties in the public interest. Sometimes, a simple compliment from superiors and parties can suffice, while any doubts regarding the fairness of additional monetary rewards may demotivate them. As the Head of the Slovene Schools Office pointed out, this often involves double work (translating official acts without monetary rewards) driven by personal conviction or a profound sense of national belonging (Interview 3).

6.2 Benefits of a Multilingual Society

The selected countries serve as examples that highlight the diverse challenges they encounter in the realm of language policy. When contemplating solutions that could be universally applicable, a model of a multilingual society emerges. García and Lin (2017) define multilingualism as the simultaneous learning of more than two languages.

The overarching aim of multilingualism is to facilitate improved and more effective communication among individuals and nations. In this context, García and Lin (2017, 2) add that one of its aims is also to accommodate students who do not speak the language of instruction.

Contemporary research increasingly favours multilingual societies over not only monolingual but also bilingual ones. The monolingual model is a vestige of the past, rooted in nationalism and outdated ideologies, while multilingualism champions the desired ideal of cosmopolitan European speakers (Weichselbraun 2014, 422). Such an ideal society naturally fosters openness and tolerance, a sentiment corroborated by both literature and research participants. Nevertheless, some reservations regarding the deployment of multilingualism have been expressed by public employees of Macedonian nationality in North Macedonia.

They emphasise the need to make Macedonian as the sole official language in the potential deployment of multilingualism (Interview 6). The Adviser at Invest North Macedonia holds a contrary perspective on the introduction of a multilingualism model, explaining that it is a matter of personal choice. If you wish to learn languages, go ahead and learn them; if you do not wish to learn them, then it is perfectly fine not to [...] (Interview 4).

Joshua A. Fishman (1976, in García & Lin 2017, 4) explains that teaching in a monolingual mode, i.e. either in the language of the majority or the language of the minority, is harmful to children and deprives them of opportunities offered by the globalised world. Other researchers, such as Dewaele (2015, 3), concord that the old view has shifted: multilingualism is the norm, and monolingualism is the exception (Dewaele 2015, 3). He adds that children possess an incredible ability to learn multiple languages simultaneously from birth. Concerns expressed by parents and educators regarding the cognitive and developmental implications of early multilingual teaching are entirely unfounded. In fact, research suggests that multilingual children tend to be more successful, communicative, and even display greater understanding and empathy (Dewaele 2015, 5). A solution proposed by scholars is therefore to introduce multilingual teaching at an early stage, ideally within kindergartens and primary schools. Such an education system should enable children to effectively learn various languages from a very young age, depending on their individual preferences. A child's language preferences often align with their familial or cultural backgrounds. Immigrant children, for instance, may feel a stronger affinity for the languages spoken by their parents or even their grandparents.

Multilingual education should become a mainstream model, accessible to all learners, rather than being reserved exclusively for the children of the elite who can afford expensive language courses and thus secure better education and improved job prospects for their children (elitism). Also, children living close to bilingual areas will be more likely to learn the languages of their neighbours.

This transformation poses new challenges for national education systems. Countries will need to adapt their language policies to incorporate more effective teaching methods and ensure an adequate number of qualified teaching staff. An excellent example of successful cross-curricular integration can be found at the Nova Gorica School Centre in Slovenia, where the subject teacher and the teacher of Italian are both present in class, making the learning process more engaging. In this way, students simultaneously develop professional competences in both languages. Enhanced language skills will make students attractive to a range of employers, including the public sector in the bilingual area.

However, the process of adapting education systems to produce multilingual speakers is long and complex. As Dewaele (2015, 4) points out, governments often encourage the learning of foreign languages but may not give enough attention to languages spoken by children in their home environments. This is

particularly evident among children of immigrants, where educational institutions often prioritise communication in the majority language rather than in a language the child understands, arguing it will aid the child's integration into society.

Weichselbraun (2014, 423) also references studies that highlight the dominance of national standards promoting multilingualism while neglecting immigrant language learning. Such negative trends are observed in Latvia, where current policy leans towards assimilating the Russian minority. Additionally, it is concerning that as many as 40 % of the world's students, according to UNESCO (2022), lack access to education in their mother tongue. This issue is also present in Slovenia, where very few Roma children complete primary school due, in part, to poor linguistic competences (Bešter et al. 2016). Furthermore, North Macedonia exhibits some worrying trends, with respondents indicating a negative or even hostile attitude towards learning the minority language (Albanian) or the majority language (Macedonian) in kindergartens and schools. In contrast, in the Region of Friuli Venezia Giulia, Italian is taught from the first year of primary school in schools with a Slovene curriculum, and also Italian families enrol their children in such schools. However, among adults, there is limited interest. They tend to prefer widely-used European languages such as German, Spanish, and English (Interview 3).

These trends may also be influenced by the EU language policy which, despite emphasising the importance of multilingualism in society (Busse 2017), tends to favour certain languages for learning while marginalising minority languages. As Weichselbraun (2014, 425) points out, a minority language can be a "kitchen" language in which speakers express their emotions in the home environment, but not a language used in the economy and public institutions. English is undoubtedly the *lingua franca* in European institutions and systems, relegating other languages to secondary roles (Busse 2017, 566).

6.3 Artificial Intelligence – an Asset, a Solution, or an Obstacle?

In the quest for innovative solutions, it is imperative to acknowledge the rapid advancements of artificial intelligence (AI) and digitisation within the realms of language acquisition and use. Godwin Jones (2017) focuses his research on mobile devices and SMART technology, which serve as valuable tools for both formal and informal language learning. Today, AI, "resembling human intelligence and not being human per se" (Kirov & Malamin 2022, 3), "a machine-based technique with algorithmic power for making predictions, diagnoses, recommendations, and decisions" (Chen et al. 2022, 28), has progressed to a stage where it can support language learning and use. With the assistance of machine intelligence, we can now effortlessly book lunch at a restaurant, and AI-driven voices exhibit an astonishing human-like quality. A multitude of tools

are readily accessible to provide technical translations across various languages. The integration of language learning with AI is on the rise, and the digital realm offers a vast array of animations to aid language learners. Nevertheless, despite this rapid progress, human communication in different languages cannot be supplanted by artificial algorithms. Godwin Jones (2019, 6) points to the social and emotional facets of human interactions, attributes that cannot be replaced with algorithms. Consequently, the objectives of language policies should extend far beyond mere technical multilingual communication, often confined to completing official forms.

The outcomes of qualitative research echo similar reservations. The employee of Slovene nationality working at the Central Office for the Slovene Language in Friuli Venezia Giulia also uses online apps to enhance her proficiency in Slovene (Interview 1). The employee of Italian nationality working in the Region of Friuli Venezia Giulia shares a similar perspective, saying that he does not use AI in multilingual communication. He believes, however, that communication technology will be able to improve communication in both or multiple languages. On the other hand, the Macedonian Language Adviser points to poor technical, at times chaotic translations (Interview 7).

Nonetheless, as mentioned above, AI cannot discern human emotions. Consequently, the Head of the Slovene Schools Office at the Regional Education Office is convinced that AI will have little impact on communication and interpersonal relationships. Artificial intelligence is a tool within the human-machine (computer) relation and does not contribute to the deepening of interpersonal ties and understanding (Interview 3).

In North Macedonia, not even AI can solve the current challenges. Both the Adviser at Invest North Macedonia (Macedonian) (Interview 4) and the PR officer of the Macedonian government (Albanian) (Interview 6) assert they do not use AI in the public administration. The Adviser at Invest North Macedonia further adds that at the moment, Albanians within the public administration can also speak Macedonian but the future does not appear promising. She is concerned that, owing to divisive politics, future generations of Albanians will no longer be able or willing to speak Macedonian (Interview 4).

7. Conclusions

The examples of various national approaches and our analysis of empirical data have confirmed the hypothesis that the existing solutions and incentives for institutional bilingualism are inadequate and that we must seek alternative non-monetary solutions, particularly those that promote multilingualism among speakers and a multilingual environment in general. Challenges vary among countries, and multilingualism does not necessarily entail elevating all widely spoken languages and those learned by children to official status. Nor can

the unique official status of minorities be equated with that of other linguistic communities within the country. However, a language policy that encourages the learning of languages spoken by various linguistic groups within the country and its neighbours, even preceding widely accepted *lingua francas*, might solve many of the problems we face today. As a result, such multilingual speakers will be able to easily switch between languages when providing public services, potentially rendering additional monetary incentives for minority language use unnecessary.

Drawing from domestic and foreign literature as well as our empirical research, it is possible to support the hypotheses that multilingualism needs to start in early childhood, that the existing policies worldwide favour elite languages, and that less consideration is given to the tangible benefits of children's language acquisition. Additionally, there is support for the idea that introducing early multilingualism in kindergartens and schools can foster a more open, tolerant, and competitive society.

However, the hypothesis that new information technologies will facilitate two-way communication, with foreign speakers using their own language while employees receive messages in their preferred language through simultaneous AI translation – thus enabling expanded language use – cannot be fully supported. While AI is certainly revolutionising language use and learning, human communication in various languages, despite rapid technological progress, cannot be replaced with artificial algorithms.

In Slovenia, a new Strategy for Language Education 2030 is being drafted by a group of experts who agree that early multilingualism is the only way forward. Several factors are instrumental in achieving these goals, including the broader environment, society, and suitable pedagogical methods. Multilingualism must be perceived as an asset rather than an obstacle. In language policy planning, the child's best interests must be considered, and priority should be given to languages proximate to the child, those prevalent in their immediate surroundings, and, naturally, the languages of neighbouring countries.

Interviews

Interview 1 – Public employee of Slovene nationality at the Central Office for the Slovene Language in Friuli Venezia Giulia, 2023.

Interview 2 – Public employee of Italian nationality, Friuli Venezia Giulia, 2023.

Interview 3 – Head of the Slovene Schools Office at the Regional Education Office, Friuli Venezia Giulia, 2023.

Interview 4 – Adviser at Invest North Macedonia (Macedonian), 2023.

Interview 5 – Adviser at Invest North Macedonia (Albanian), 2023.

Interview 6 – PR Officer for the Government of Macedonia (Albanian), 2023.

Interview 7 – Macedonian Language Adviser, 2023.

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Marija Jurić Pahor

Diaspora and Diasporisation: Slovene National Identity in the Contemporary Globalised World

After a brief presentation of the history of the concept of diaspora and its derivatives, and a critical review of the relevant literature, the article explores the phenomenon of diasporic Sloveneness, with a particular focus on the contemporary Slovenian diaspora. The concept encompasses, but is not limited to, Slovenes and members of Slovene national communities (with an emphasis on Carinthian and Trieste Slovenes) who have dispersed around the world since Slovenia's independence in 1991. The author concludes that the contemporary Slovene diaspora consists mainly of young, highly educated people who are actively striving to establish themselves in the global world. Even though they have emigrated from their country of origin, they remain - especially through modern communication technologies - connected to it. The article provides an insight into the complex and multifaceted process of diasporic grouping and long-distance nationalism, which also includes processes of transculturation and sheds light on Slovene national identity in the contemporary globalised world.

Keywords: diaspora, contemporary Slovene diaspora, national identity, nationalism at a distance, transculturation.

Diaspora in diasporizacija: slovenska narodna identiteta v sodobnem globaliziranem svetu

Po kratki predstavitvi zgodovine pojma diaspora in njenih izpeljank ter kritičnem pregledu zadnje literature se prispevek osredotoča na pojav diasporičnega slovenstva s posebnim ozirom na sodobno slovensko diasporo. Pojem zajema, vendar ne izključno, Slovenke in Slovence ter pripadnike slovenskih narodnih skupnosti (s poudarkom na koroških in tržaških Slovencih), ki so se po osamosvojitvi Slovenije leta 1991 razkropili po svetu. Avtorica ugotavlja, da sodobno slovensko diasporo tvorijo zlasti mladi, visoko izobraženi ljudje, ki si aktivno prizadevajo za uveljavitev v globalnem svetu. Čeprav so se izselili iz izvorne domovine, ostajajo – zlasti prek sodobnih komunikacijskih tehnologij – z njo tudi povezani. Razprava omogoča vpogled v razvejan in kompleksen proces diasporičnega skupinjenja in nacionalizma na daljavo, ki vključuje tudi procese transkulturacije, in osvetlitev slovenske narodne identitete v sodobnem globaliziranem svetu.

Ključne besede: diaspora, sodobna slovenska diaspora, narodna identiteta, nacionalizem na daljavo, transkulturacija.

Correspondence address: Marija Jurić Pahor, Inštitut za narodnostna vprašanja, Erjavčeva 26, SI-1000 Ljubljana, Slovenija, e-mail: juric.pahor@alice.it.

1. Introduction

The concept of diaspora is derived from the ancient Greek verb *speiro* (to sow) and the prefix *dia* (through) and means “dispersion”, “scattering” (Cohen 2008, xiv; Vertovec 2009, 129). For a long time, the term was mainly associated with the history of Jewish communities living outside the Land of Israel and displaced around the world. In Judaism, the diaspora is connoted with the expulsion of Jews from the mythologically significant Promised Land. The term diaspora stands for a special case of migration and living abroad. Before the 1990s, the paradigmatic example of diaspora was the Jews, along with the Armenians and the Greeks, but the term has since come to be applied to a wide spectrum of populations opened up by forced as well as voluntary mass migrations (even if the latter involve a certain degree of choice or coercion): exiles, refugees, immigrants, ethnic and religious minorities, asylum-seekers, etc. The semantic range of the concept of diaspora has also increased with the broadening of the spectrum of groups. It is no longer limited to the negative experience of involuntary existence abroad, exile or banishment; it also brings to the fore the positive connotations of diaspora-related dynamics. Khachig Tölölyan, publisher of the *Diaspora* journal, founded in 1991, describes contemporary diasporas as “exemplary communities of the transnational moment” (Tölölyan 1991, 5), as a kind of counterweight to the nation-state, which has been transformed, but not annihilated, by the processes of globalisation, since it remains, in his view, a privileged form of politics. In this way, Tölölyan is addressing perhaps the most important implication of the current debate on the term diaspora: the possibility of gaining insight into global phenomena in society, culture and literature that are divorced from modern national categorisations, yet are nevertheless co-determined by the thinking models developed to describe nations or nation-states.

Just like nations, diasporas can be understood as “imagined communities” (Anderson 2007). Although it often seems that nations have become the only way of imagining communities, this is not the case. In fact, according to Anderson (2007, 23), imagined communities are all communities that transcend direct face-to-face contact. The nation is neither the first nor the last socially dominant form of imagined community in history, but it has evolved from earlier forms and will transform into new ones. The notion of a contemporary diaspora is situated in a tension between global mobility and nationalism, which is no longer defined territorially. Zlatko Skrbis (1999; 2003, 11) speaks of long-distance nationalism, stressing that the ambitions associated with it “have not had an exclusive domicile in homelands for quite some time”. The implied tension is also suggested – and this paper will elaborate on this – by the term “contemporary Slovene diaspora”, which is used to “denote Slovenes” who “dispersed around the world” after the creation of the state of Slovenia in 1991 (Lapuh 2011, 71), and can also be extended to include members of Slovene ethnic communities who emigrated

from Slovenia's neighbouring countries (with focus specifically on the case of Slovenes in the Province of Trieste/Italy and Carinthia/Austria). Špela Grašič (2014) also defines as a diasporic community the segment of the population in Ljubljana's Fužine district described by Goran Vojnović in his novel *Čefurji raus!* (2008), which consists mainly of immigrants from the former Yugoslav republics. Although in the classic sense the word diaspora describes a specific community, terms describing diaspora as a state (*diasporicity* or *diasporism*), a process (*diasporisation*, *de-diasporisation*, *re-diasporisation*), and in adjectival form also as an orientation or modality (*diasporic identity*, *diasporic nationalism*, *diasporic existence*, etc.) also exist (cf. Brubaker 2010, 294).

2. Diaspora: A Critical Definition of the Concept

The starting point for much of the debate on the current use of the term diaspora is William Safran's *Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return* (1991, 83–84). Diasporas, according to Safran, are communities that

(1) have been dispersed from one centre of origin to at least two peripheral or foreign regions; (2) retain a memory, vision or myth of their original homeland; (3) believe that they are not or cannot be fully accepted in the host society; (4) regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and a place to which they wish or would wish to return; (5) strive to preserve or restore this homeland; and (6) their group consciousness is significantly defined by their ongoing and continuous relationships with their environment of origin.

More recent definitions of diaspora stress that diaspora is not necessarily marked by the criterion of forced emigration, as implied by Safran's definition, but can also be caused by voluntary decisions, often motivated by economic reasons (Carmen 2018). James Clifford (1997a, 285–287), with a view of the African diaspora as portrayed by Paul Gilroy in his book *Black Atlantic*, points out that Safran's register of definitions is inadequate, especially as far as the question of "roots" and the tendency to return to the original homeland are concerned. Diasporic communities, he argues, cannot be reduced to a "single centre of origin", nor to a "racial", ethnic or national essence that is immutable, since they suggest the multiplicity of their geographical areas of origin and, consequently, of their histories, and, in the case of Africans, of a kind of shared and persistent cultural "sensibility" linked to the colonial history of slavery and eradication. This "sensibility" is as important in the formation of diasporic communities as the projection of a specific origin.

It should be stressed that this is not a real origin, but a projection of origin or imaginary, which, in terms of iteration,¹ is inscribed in history and geography, linking the displaced culture to the original homeland, a space that is no longer held by the diaspora member, and which is most often tied to a specific land or

territory. It is precisely this process of integration that produces hybridity, as it is created through the collection, juxtaposition, and appropriation of different components along this path that defines diaspora. “I feel Argentinean because I was born here, but I have Slovene blood running through my veins ... but I am drawn to the first Prekmurje”, a 60-year-old descendant of immigrants from Prekmurje between the wars told the researcher who interviewed her (Molek 2019, 114). It is in this context that one can also see observations that members of (especially contemporary) diasporas are often bilingual or multilingual, moving between different cultures and establishing or maintaining a home in two (or more) countries or homelands. They also form networks of relationships with individuals and diverse groups in the country of reception as well as in the country of origin and elsewhere in the world (e.g., Repič 2006; Lapuh 2011; Molek 2019).

Stuart Hall (1990, 226–227) asked, with regard to the identity of the “new ethnicities” (African and Indian Caribbeans in Britain): If identity does not proceed in a straight, unbroken line, from some fixed origin, how can its formation be understood? He answers: “We might think of Black Caribbean identities as ‘framed’ by two simultaneous axes or vectors, simultaneously operative: the vector of similarity and continuity; and the vector of difference and rupture.” The first one, according to Hall, gives members of the diaspora some grounding in, some continuity with, the past. The second reminds them that what they share is the experience of a profound discontinuity.

This duality is also characteristic of the identity of the large groups of migrants who have been emigrating from the Slovene ethnic territory since the mid-19th century. It is estimated that by the First World War, some 280,000 people had emigrated from this territory. According to the 1910 American census, 183,331 people spoke Slovene as their mother tongue. Ten years later, the number had risen to 208,552 (Drnovšek 2013, 74). The most common historical causes of mass emigration and migration have been the collapse of empires, the emergence of new states, nationalisms and processes of national homogenisation, political terror and wars, and, often linked to these causes, the desire for a better life. During the two world wars, fascism and the economic crisis in Venezia Giulia in particular triggered a massive diasporisation of Slovenes. Around 100,000 people emigrated from this region; 70,000 of them to Yugoslavia, and the rest to South America (especially Argentina and Brazil), France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Egypt (Vovko 1992, 91; Kalc 1992). Even in the period after the Second World War, Slovenes emigrated in large numbers for political and economic reasons. Andrej Vovko (1992, 91) has experienced the simultaneous similarity and continuity, and the profound discontinuity of which Hall speaks (cf. preceding paragraph): “We are scattered into the wide world, / our trace / is a hot tear and pain, / which forges it hard in consciousness / and crushes us to the ground: / Forced beggars!”

According to Hall, diasporic identity, or the identity of “new ethnicities” as a form of collective identification, is never uniform, but always implies a rupture, which is most generally characterised by the forced or voluntary displacement of people from the territory they have held and (at least partly) still hold as their own, to new geographical areas. It is also fragmented and variously constructed from the collisions, contacts and intersections of diverse cultural practices, discourses, and experiences. This is also true of the “contemporary Slovene diaspora”, a term used to designate Slovenes, and more specifically Slovene citizens who, following the process of Slovenia’s independence in 1991, “dispersed around the world” (Lapuh 2011, 71). Friš and Hazemali (2021, 267) state that between 1991 and 2019, 281,111 statistically registered inhabitants left Slovenia, of whom almost 58%, or 162,329, were foreign nationals, and 42%, or 105,8574, were Slovene citizens. At the time of Slovenia’s independence, residents from the former Yugoslavia living in Slovenia also became “foreign citizens”. According to Friš and Hazemali (2021, 270), Slovenes and their descendants are now located all over the world, with the largest number in the USA (between 200,000 and 300,000), followed by Germany (50,000), Canada (40,000), Argentina (30,000), Australia (20,000 to 25,000), France (20,000), Switzerland (15,000), Serbia (10,000), Sweden (5,000 to 7,000), and other countries, especially in Europe.

3. Slovene Independence and the Effects of Slovenia’s Accession to the EU

Slovenia’s independence marked the first major turning point in the migration dynamics associated with the country. Internal immigrants and members of nationalities from various republics of the former Yugoslavia living in Slovenia became, virtually overnight, “(external) immigrants/immigrants, citizens of foreign countries” (Lukšič Hacin 2018, 65) and/or members of nationalities with a “country of origin” abroad. Špela Grašič (2014), as mentioned above, defines those living in Ljubljana’s Fužine, in reference to Vojnovič’s novel *Čefurji raus!*, as a “diasporic community”; similarly, Špela Kalčič and Jure Gombač (2011) define the immigrants from Bosnia and Herzegovina living in Slovenia as a “Bosnian diaspora”. The label *Čefur*² suggests a rejection of immigration from other Yugoslav republics by the Slovene majority population. In 1990, the percentage of those who agreed with the statement that immigrants “endangered Slovenes” was as high as 53% (Komac 2007, 49–50). Current surveys show that this percentage has increased considerably in relation to the perception of “cultural endangerment” (Medvešek et al. 2022, 102–103). The perception of “cultural endangerment” has increased considerably (Medvešek et al. 2022, 102–103), while the percentage of those who agreed with the statement “immigrants endanger Slovenes” has also increased. Vera Kržišnik-Bukić (2014b, 137) points out that after Slovenia’s independence, the government not only tried to

stop the trend of members of the ABČHMS³ acquiring citizenship, but also to “get rid of these people altogether”. This is evidenced by the case of the “erased”, who were illegally removed from the permanent population register of Slovenia by the Ministry of the Interior on 26 February 1992, an act that had serious consequences for those affected and was soon recognised as “silent” or “administrative ethnic cleansing” (Dedić et al. 2003, 45). The European Court of Human Rights found in 2012 that Slovenia had violated the rights of the erased. Thirty years had to pass before the “erased” received a public apology from the state (Mirovni inštitut 2022).

In the pre- and post-independence period, Slovenia operated as a “nationalising state” (Brubaker 1996), which, in its eagerness to build a “complete” or “realised” nation-state, sought to assimilate or otherwise subjugate, in particular, those national communities that remained unrecognised or relegated to a secondary role in the process of nation-building. Conversely, Slovenia’s independence, and in particular its accession to the European Union (EU) in 2004 and to the Schengen area in 2007, have had a significant impact on the situation of Slovene minorities in Slovenia’s neighbouring countries. The borders became increasingly porous until they were abolished and became merely administrative. Even upon Slovenia’s accession to the EU, there was talk of the notion of *zamejstvo* (borderlands) losing its meaning: Slovenes here and beyond the border became citizens of the European Union (Rudl 2009, 48). This began a process of accelerating cross-border contact between Slovenes, which was and is particularly evident in Austrian Carinthia, where the total number of Slovene EU citizens in the cities of Klagenfurt/Celovec and Villach/Beljak increased from 700 to 2,800 between 2008 and 2021, and in 36 rural municipalities (with a Slovene-speaking population of between 5 % and 30 % or more) from 500 to 2,100 (OGM 2022, 17). The finding that children of immigrant Slovene citizens make up a significant proportion of those enrolled in bilingual primary schools (which is also true for children from ethnically mixed and German-speaking families, see OGM 2022, 31–33) and that as many as one-quarter of those who have immigrated say that they take part in Slovene social and cultural life allows us to conclude that the Slovene in Carinthia today is in a situation which Brigitte Busch (2022, 58), referring to the Austrian OGM opinion poll, describes as a “situation of resistance or revitalisation”. Refugees and migrants who settled in the bilingual territory of Carinthia during or after the Yugoslav War also contribute to the revitalisation of the Slovene language (Obid 2017, 133). Among them is Amina Majetić, a graduate of the Federal Gymnasium for Slovenes in Klagenfurt, who was born in Jesenice in 1991 and whose parents were originally from Bosnia. She is a teacher of Slovene and German, a poet, and a musician. In December 2021 she took over leadership of the Slovene Writers’ Association in Austria. She represents Slovenia and/or Austria at music festivals all over Europe (Locutio 2023).

The data on the immigration of Slovene citizens to Carinthia cannot obscure the fact that between 1996 and 2016, 100,000 people left the country, 60 % of them under the age of 26 (Addendum 2018; see also Aigner & Klingmaier 2015; Obid 2017, 134). The OGM study (2022, 57) for the last 20 years further concludes that “[b]oth the more ‘Slovene’ a place was in 2001, the more its population declined”. The majority of Carinthia’s inhabitants moved to Vienna or Graz. Experts, including Carinthian Slovenes, speak of a “brain drain” (Obid 2017, 132–138; Addendum 2018), of a “growing ‘diaspora’ in Vienna and Graz” (OGM 2022, 14) and also of “a fairly large Carinthian-Slovene ‘diaspora’, especially in Vienna and Graz” (Obid 2020, 43; see also OGM 2022, 16). Marija Wakounig (2021, 216), a native Carinthian Slovene and university professor at the University of Vienna, explicitly links the notion of “brain drain” to the (Carinthian-Slovene) “intellectual and economic diaspora”. She herself belongs to the Slovene-speaking educated elite who – like Martin Kušej, Tanja Prušnik or Andrej Leben – “make a decisive contribution to the cultural and intellectual dynamics and to the awareness that Austria is a multilingual country” (Busch 2022, 58). Busch remarks: “Those who leave the traditional settlement area are not automatically ‘lost’ for the national community”. The history of national movements shows that “the diaspora can significantly influence the development of ‘home’ with important impulses” (Obid 2020, 44). For Elena Messner, who was born in 1983 in Klagenfurt and has lived in Vienna for many years, Carinthia remains “a kind of zone of academic and literary contacts and in this sense a productive intellectual space” (Praster 2022). The question of whether the “diaspora of Carinthian Slovenes” is “a loss or a gain for the national community” was also discussed at the three-day conference titled *The Future of Carinthian Slovenes – 100 years after the Carinthian plebiscite*, organised by the Hermagoras Society (Mohorjeva družba) in Klagenfurt/Celovec, in July 2020 (Mohorjeva 2020) under the banner of *Carinthija*. Many members of the Carinthian-Slovene diaspora are also closely connected with colleagues and institutions in Slovenia (and elsewhere in the world).

Emmerich Kelih (2022, 274) estimates that there are currently about 5,000 Slovenes living in Vienna, of whom 3,530 are native Slovenes. He also notes that after the economic crisis of 2008, there has also been a “brain drain” from Slovenia and an influx into academic professions in Vienna. Among them is Mihaela Pavličev, a native of Ptuj and professor of evolutionary biology at the University of Vienna, where she also obtained her PhD and subsequently worked at the universities of St. Louis, Oslo, and Cincinnati. In 2019, she returned to Vienna and, for the 2022–2024 term, became a member of the leadership of the SMUL World Network, which was founded in 2015 and brings together Slovene scientists, professors and renowned personalities working in academia and research around the world, primarily associated with the University of Ljubljana (SMUL 2023). For many years, a “post-Yugoslav diaspora” has also been active in Vienna,

working to create a counter-narrative to the hegemonic, nationalised and ethnised narratives of the post-Yugoslav states (Živadinović 2022).

It is noteworthy that, as in the case of Carinthia, the majority of emigrants from the Republic of Slovenia since 1990 have been young and highly educated Slovene citizens (Lapuh 2011) and, more broadly, young people from Slovenia (irrespective of citizenship)⁴ (Naterer et al. 2019). Young people from Slovenia emigrate mainly to Austria and Germany (Gostič 2019, 225), but also to the USA, Switzerland and the UK (Naterer et al. 2019, 39). In this case, too, there is a “brain drain”. Marina Lukšič Hacin (2020) links this concept to the integration of highly skilled and qualified human resources into broader global dynamics and more developed fields.

Although the number of Slovenes in the Province of Trieste fell by 58% between 1910 and 2015, the primary reason for this decline being the mass emigration before and after the Second World War (Bufon 2021; see also Dolhar 2021, 2), it is striking that more tangible data on the “brain drain” from the Province of Trieste over the last three decades are not (yet) available. This is despite the knowledge that – as Milan Bufon points out in his interview with Poljanka Dolhar (Dolhar 2021, 3) – this is a pressing problem, which “concerns above all the most vital, younger part of the population, especially the highly educated population, who have found employment and with it a new living environment elsewhere in Italy, Slovenia, and especially in more developed European countries”. Zaira Vidau (2017, 90–91) mentions the USA and Australia as places of emigration for young Slovenes from the Province of Trieste (and more broadly from Friuli Venezia Giulia), referring to interviews with “young emigrants around the world” regularly published by *Primorski dnevnik* over a long period of time. The longitudinally based PoMATURI project launched by the Slovene Research Institute in Trieste (Bogatec 2019; 2020a) will provide welcome data. According to Zaira Vidau, the phenomenon of “brain drain” in Slovenia in particular is widespread, as young people who complete their university education in Slovenia also find employment and set up a new home there (Brezigar & Vidau 2021, 99). The loss of the young or younger generation, according to Bufon (see Dolhar 2021, 3), “in the foreseeable future will be felt in the context of our minority community and in the short term will lead to a decline in the number of children with a Slovene language of instruction” – a fact that is also confirmed by empirical data (Bogatec 2020b). Nevertheless, there is also a process of revitalisation of the Slovene language among Slovenes in the Province of Trieste, facilitated by the immigration of a particularly young and younger urban Italian population into the Trieste countryside. This is evidenced by the significantly increased enrolment of children from mixed and non-Slovene marriages in schools with Slovene as the language of instruction (Bogatec 2020b). Italian immigrants in the Province of Trieste “are no longer just ‘foreigners’ but an integral part of the local society, especially when they learn

the Slovene language and join associations” (Bufon 2020, 165). The phenomenon promises a revival of Slovene and Slovene-ness in the rural areas of Trieste, but it is also supported by studies showing that the identities of young Slovenes in the Province of Trieste – and more broadly in Friuli Venezia Giulia, but also in Carinthia – are becoming increasingly complex and cannot (any longer) be reduced to a stereotypical us-and-them divide. Heterogeneous identities and multifaceted feelings of belonging are coming to the fore (see Vavti 2012; Pertot & Kosic 2014; Vidau 2018; Obid 2018).

4. Diasporic Nationalism: SLO Global

Global mobility is a key concept in contemporary social-theoretical debates, conceptually and metaphorically characterising the nature of modern societies. Increasing mobility, in conjunction with modern information and communication technologies, enables the emergence of a “transnational everyday reality” (Nedelcu 2012, 8), based on the ubiquity, simultaneity and immediacy of interactions across borders. In this way, individuals who are physically distant from their original homeland nevertheless remain connected to it, as technology enables them to maintain long-distance interpersonal contact, to be socially and emotionally supported, to follow cultural traditions, and to feel a sense of familiarity across the globe. It also gives them the opportunity to create and sustain diasporic communities. There are more diasporas in the world today than ever before, and there is an increasing amount of “brain circulation” (which contributes to reducing the negative effects of “brain drain”) and diaspora networks (Cohen 2008). Thus, contemporary diasporic subjects often appear as prototypical cosmopolitans: mobile, flexible, open to new contacts and to maintaining old ones, capable of shaping knowledge that responds to global challenges, without being constrained by national or local influences and allegiances. Although social carceralisms such as nationality and ethnicity are often only perceived from the perspective of global mobility, in the sense of transcending state/national borders and constraints, in this kind of understanding of diasporic communities it is worth noting that diasporic communities are not “emblems of transnationalism” (Tölölyan 1991, 6) *per se*, nor can they be reduced to the function of subverting the norms of the nation-state and defined “as ways of sustaining connections with more than one place while practising non-absolutist forms of citizenship” (Clifford 1997b, 9). What is meant is a citizenship that is no longer confined to territorialised notions, but is created through a movement in space and time that combines both “roots and routes”. According to Zlatko Skrbiš (1999), at least one other, very important dimension caused by the increasingly dynamic global migratory movements should be taken into account, namely the preservation and sharpening of national ties at the transnational level, i.e., diasporic nationalism or long-distance nationalism.

Diasporic nationalism, also known as “long-distance nationalism” according to Benedict Anderson (1992), defines a set of ideas and practices of belonging that link people living in different geographical locations to a particular territory that they perceive as their ancestral homeland (Glick Schiller 2005). Although closely related to classic notions of nationalism and the nation-state, the notion is characterised by its transcendence of narrow territorial frameworks, referring to “the simple fact that nationalist ambitions have long had no exclusive domicile in homelands” (Skrbiš 2003, 11). Or, as Arjun Appadurai (1993, 798) writes: “The genie of nation-state, never perfectly contained in the bottle of the territorial-state, is now itself diasporic.”

The issue of diasporic Sloveneness came to the fore in the second half of the 1980s, when the diaspora became an important factor in the process of the recognition of Slovenia as an independent and autonomous state. Slovene immigrant communities, which had previously had almost no formal contact with Slovenia, became – especially in 1991 – “influential political actors” (Skrbiš 2003, 12; Klemenčič 1999; 2002; Žigon 2002; Kristen 2007a; Valentinčič 2018). Darko Friš and David Hazemali (2021, 267) note:

[W]hen ‘things got serious’, [Slovenes around the world and their descendants] played a key role first in the independence and then in the international recognition of the young Slovene state. Like their compatriots from abroad,⁵ they took to the streets, united in NGOs, associations and federations, but also individually, and demonstrated in front of key institutions of the countries in which they lived. They wrote thousands of letters of support for the Republic of Slovenia, addressed to important diplomats and other political leaders [...]. As Helena Jaklitsch, Minister for Slovenes Abroad and Internationally, wrote in January [2021]: ‘[...] they were our best diplomacy, the best we could have wished for.’

Despite their political differentiation, Slovenes around the world at that time were able to insist on common denominators and “kept the continuity of the state-building idea”, recalled Lojze Peterle, President of the first Slovene democratic government, at the round table of their traditional gathering in Ljubljana on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of Slovenia’s independence (MMC RTVSLO 2016). Dual citizenship, as Nadia Molek (2019, 158–161) and Jaka Repič (2006, 166–168) illustrate in the case of Argentina, has proven to be crucial in the relationship with the Republic of Slovenia and is seen as an incentive to spread a sense of belonging to the Slovene community. Slovenes in Argentina legitimised their origins by acquiring Slovene citizenship, many of them began to visit Slovenia regularly after independence, and around 200 of them moved to or returned to Slovenia after 1991. Many people spoke of travel, cultural and academic exchanges between the two countries, as well as financial support from the Slovene state to Slovene community institutions.⁶ A significant number of Slovenes who did not intend to move to Slovenia also sought to

acquire Slovene citizenship in order to confirm their “identity with a document”. Molek (2019, 159) argues that this was a recurrent perception of the social meaning of citizenship, also characteristic of the Slovene migrant communities outside of Argentina’s Entre Ríos that she studied. In this way, citizenship was turned into “a tool that gives legitimacy to Slovene citizenship”. Seyla Benhabib’s (2010, 171) observation that there is a growing number of individuals in the world who wish to maintain dual citizenship or to live for a longer period of time in a country without renouncing their nationality of origin is significant. Unlike Argentina, or Mexico and the Dominican Republic, the United States “has remained impervious to many calls to allow dual nationality,” which, according to Benhabib, “makes a mockery of the complex interdependence of human lives across borders and territories”.

Slovenia has also shown its reluctance towards dual citizenship in the post-independence period (Kejžar 2007, 171–175). The current law – the Law on Citizenship of the Republic of Slovenia, adopted in 2007 – also implies a strong stereotype of the homogeneity of the Slovene nation and the linking of loyalty to the state with loyalty to the nation. This is also suggested by the status that Barbara Kejžar (2007, 176–177) describes as “an incomplete form of dual citizenship” or, in reference to Felicita Medved, “quasi-citizenship”, which is linked to the category of Slovenes outside the borders of Slovenia. This status “equates Slovenes worldwide and abroad with Slovene citizens in certain areas and grants them certain citizenship rights despite the fact that these individuals do not have Slovene citizenship”. However, as Kejžar (2007, 177) points out, such generosity is not to be found in the case of immigrants of non-Slovene origin. On the contrary, Slovenia has, as he points out in reference to an analysis by Marc Morjé Howard, one of the most restrictive policies for granting citizenship to these immigrants, alongside Lithuania.

National identity (tied to one’s own existing or potential nation-state) still seems to be the primary identity of the human being in Slovenia, but also in Europe or the West, and this identity is being strengthened in connection with neoliberal discourse (Jurić Pahor 2020a, 563–565). Zlatko Skrbiš (1999, 183) is convinced that long-distance nationalism (diasporic nationalism) will also gain more and more significance in the future. The large proportion of particularly young and often highly educated Slovene citizens (half of them employed, 36 % students) who emigrated from Slovenia in the post-independence period “represents not only a wave of new Slovene emigration, but also a new Slovene diaspora” (Lapuh 2011, 84). The empirical survey (N = 650) shows that the intensity of their “sense of Slovene belonging [...] is strong, which means that they express and feel belonging to the Slovene nation” (Lapuh 2011, 85–86). Bevc and Ogorevc (2014, 19) also found a strong attachment “to their home/ Slovene environment” in their study on the potential and actual emigration of young people (former Slovene Erasmus students) from Slovenia for the period

2005–2010. Attachment to this environment is also the biggest obstacle to their emigration.⁷ Today's times are permeated with reflections and imaginings that imply an emotionally marked investment in a national imaginary of belonging (Zadel 2020, 118–119). Among others, it is shaped by the national brand “I **feel SLOVENIA**”, which is supposed to ensure the successful positioning and marketing of Slovenia on a global level. Individuals should (re)live Slovenia, feel its “heartbeat,” embrace it as their own and strengthen it – “at home” and/or “anywhere in the world” (Juric Pahor 2020a, 565).

SLO Global, which was established in 2020, is called “an online business network platform to promote, connect and inform the Slovene business diaspora and Expats,” and it aims to achieve this goal. Its main purpose is to “encourage business cooperation and exchange of business opportunities between Slovenes around the world. SLO Global is part of the Slovenian Global Business Network which was founded by Dr Štefan Bogdan Barenboim Šalej (São Paulo, Brazil & Ljubljana, Slovenia), [...] together with Dr Peter Kraljič, Director of Emeritus of McKinsey & Co. (Düsseldorf, Germany & Koloman, Slovenia) and Ambassador Aljaž Gosnar [...] (Ljubljana, Slovenia)” (SLO Global 2023 – About Us tab; SSK 2021). SLO Global operates from Brazil and makes it clear that diasporas are becoming “a legitimate source of political power that transcends the borders of states and nations, while at the same time having a decisive impact on them” (Skrbiš 2003, 11). It is no coincidence that the theme of the second annual virtual conference in December 2021 was *From Minorities to Majorities*. The participants, over 100 of them, from 26 countries on four continents, were introduced by the Minister for Slovenes Abroad and Internationally, Helena Jaklitsch, who highlighted the great progress towards more active networking of successful Slovene businesspeople at home and abroad and said:

If two years ago we were still thinking of three separate Slovenias [kin-state, abroad and emigration], also in the field of economy, which only casually meet, the time of the pandemic, also with the strong and bold support of the Slovene Business Global Alliance, has shown that in this connection lies immeasurable power. (Urad 2021)

The current Minister and State Secretary for Slovenes Abroad, Matej Arčon and Vesna Humar, are also associated with SLO Global (SLO Global 2023 – Events tab), as well as several diplomatic missions and consulates of the Republic of Slovenia around the world (SLO Global 2023 – Business Directory tab), in the knowledge that economic substance is of paramount importance for the preservation of Slovene identity.

Like any nationalism, long distance nationalism – or even “digital nationalism” (see Bajt 2014) – implies an effort to keep the foreign, the other, the different at an appropriately safety distance. These efforts, which go hand in hand with the decision to disable the need to communicate, cooperate and coordinate

with the national/ethnic other – the different, can also be interpreted, at least in part, as a consequence of ontological insecurity based on the new fragility of social bonds, which the time of the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated in Slovenia as well. Such desires, even in an era of transnational connections and interdependence, especially when they merge with emergency situations, can converge, coalesce and concentrate in policies that give thought to the ideology of the modern nation-state, symbolised and realised by the border. Of course, it is not (or at least not only) a geopolitical border, but an imaginary border created by nationalism. Nationalist discourse divides the world into “us” and “them”; it erects borders between one and the other. The “border syndrome” becomes even more pronounced and reveals its productive power especially against refugees, migrants and populations/minorities along the border (see Jurić Pahor 2020b). “Border policies” have become a fundamental instrument of state policies, and it is worth bearing in mind that borders are becoming increasingly flexible and multiplying, which is already evidenced by the fact that the contemporary configuration of the global space can simply no longer be considered the sum of disconnected territories (Mezzarda & Neilson 2018), as also suggested by the SLO Global activity. Alongside the proliferation of borders, researchers also perceive a marked rise in nationalist economic protectionism, which gives rise to new forms of domination and exploitation, and a rise in racism, Islamophobia and miscephobia. In recent decades, and especially in the last few years, migration policies and public debates in several of the European countries studied, including Slovenia, have significantly shifted away from the earlier proclamation of more liberal and democratic values (Jalušič & Bajt 2020).

The notion of diaspora, which began to gain momentum in the 1990s and experienced a veritable conjuncture at the beginning of the 21st century, is also a sign of a shift away from more liberal (or liberalist) values and has continued to this day. The question arises: why have terms such as *exile*, *immigrant*, *refugee*, *expatriate* and, in Slovenia, the terms *zdomec* and *izseljenec*, *diasporan* and *expatriate* (diasporans, wishing to return, have maintained permanent residence in their home country, while expatriates have not; see Urad 2022a), which have been in use for a long time, suddenly proved to be inadequate? Monika Fludernik (2003, xxii, xvi) perceives in this development a shift from an individualist to a communitarian perspective, which began to take hold in the USA, then spread worldwide, and defines identity politics: “The current scenario of diasporic communities privileges communal collective rights over individual rights, the collective self over the private self.” It is no coincidence that in Slovenia, “the single term Slovenes around the world, or with the foreign word diaspora, is most frequently used in recent times to refer to returnees and emigrants and their descendants” (Urad 2022a). The term “Carinthian-Slovene diaspora” in Vienna and Graz, discussed in Chapter 3, also entered scholarly language in 2020. It corresponds to the definition given by the Dictionary of the Slovene Standard

Language (Slovar slovenskega knjižnega jezika 2, 2014): a diaspora is “a national or religious community living scattered in the territory of another nationality or religion”.

Although Zlatko Skrbiš (2003, 9) argued twenty years ago that with the completion of Slovenia’s independence process, the Slovene diaspora “exhausted its active role and became a passive subject of political discourses, used mainly to legitimise the nationalist ideal of Slovene nationhood”, this has not been the case, at least in the last few years. On the contrary, both Slovene emigrants in the diaspora and Slovenes living in the border areas of Slovenia’s neighbouring countries are actively involved in the scientific, educational, economic and cultural development of the Republic of Slovenia. They are perceived as a highly qualified potential that should be used for the benefit of the state and “Sloveneness”. In this sense, the Slovene diaspora is also no longer seen as a welcome actor, first in the process of independence and then in the international recognition of the young Slovene state, or as someone who follows in the footsteps of their ancestors and does not forget their roots, but in the event of assimilation or forgetting them, can “rediscover” and “embrace” them (Valentinčič 2016). The Slovene state is also increasingly recognising and acknowledging it as part of a dynamic process that is actively seeking to assert itself in a global world where the capitalist world economy and the market play a decisive role. Of course, it is also, and above all, concerned with the realisation of its own national policy and related economic interests.

Although it is difficult to deny the political and rhetorical utility of calls for the “unity of Slovene space” – and in particular for the “unity of Slovene cultural space” as envisaged in the Resolution on the National Programme for Culture for the period 2022–2029, adopted by the National Assembly of the Republic of Slovenia at the end of February 2022, with the (co)efforts of the Minister for Slovenes Abroad, Helena Jaklitsch (Resolucija o nacionalnem programu za kulturo 2022–2029, 2022; Urad 2022b) – it is important to stress that it is politically conjunctural. It corresponds to the nationalising self-image of Slovenes, which, among other things, assumes that “Slovenes abroad” (i.e., Slovenes in neighbouring countries and Slovenes abroad) will transnationally connect, integrate into the Slovene national community and (co-)contribute to the greater visibility of the Republic of Slovenia in the international environment (Urad 2022b). This vision is also state-centric, as it does not take into account that “Slovenes abroad” may be identified with countries such as Austria, Italy, Croatia, Argentina, Australia, etc., in addition to the Republic of Slovenia. Štefka Vavti (2012), who conducted an in-depth qualitative study on the identifications of young Carinthian Slovenes who were living in Carinthia at the time of her study, or who were studying in one of the major Austrian educational centres, illustrates that the patterns of national identification, in addition to young Carinthian Slovenes, who identify themselves entirely as belonging to a national community (their national identi-

fication is often local), include those who come from mixed marriages, live in a peripheral or German-speaking environment, have breaks in their biographies, and are not involved in Slovene organisations and societies. Given their daily exposure to differences, they inevitably develop transcultural, hybrid or mixed belongings. People who have Slovene (in any form) in their repertoire constitute a very heterogeneous group that can no longer be understood as a unified linguistic or cultural community (Busch 2022, 60), as research on the linguistic habitus of bilingual youth also points out (Zorčič 2019). This community also includes those for whom Slovene – because it has not been passed down from the previous generation – is a lost or repressed family language. The loss of a language due to its prohibition and forced or violent assimilation (especially during fascism and Nazism) is considered by researchers to be a traumatic event (Paternu 2005; Busch 2022, 60). Such loss is often experienced as a void in the third generation, causing a desire to re-appropriate the language. Studies show that language revitalisation can contribute to the healing process at both the individual and societal level (Busch 2022, 60).

5. Diasporic and National Identities: Between “Roots and Routes”

Countries’ migration policies continue to have a strong impact on international migration movements, and moreover, the issue of migration policies has become one of the key social issues of the 21st century (Učakar 2018). The word immigration itself usually appears in policy documents with the words crime, struggle, control, borders, implying the danger of immigrants for the majority society. Moreover, immigrants are perceived as culturally different (Učakar 2018, 14), which is also true for members of minorities living along borders, especially when they are suspected of being bi-national, transcultural and in relation to refugees or migrants (Jurić Pahor 2020b, 72–73). This is also suggested by the dominant national Slovene discourse, which denies the category of hybrid, mixed or even repressed identities as if these do not exist (Sedmak 2020), considers it inauthentic, immoral, and even traitorous (Pušnik 2011, 158), or is too quick to associate it with loss of identity and assimilation. Regardless, this discourse will make it increasingly difficult to deny the “heterogeneity that more than anything else characterises diasporic Slovene identity” (Skrbiš 2003, 9).

Diaspora is most often characterised in academic literature as an ethnic community, and what structures it often remains unaddressed, or is guided by an internal, inherent logic in the sense of a pure, monolinear national unit. Members often articulate their belonging to the diasporic community through discourses of shared “roots and routes” (Georgiou 2006, 5; see also Golob 2010), which means that they do not consider it as something that emerges *ex nihilo*, but as something that is connected to the original “kin-state/home” and/or “home”, while being

shaped and transformed through a continuous and often highly branched and complex process of grouping and being on the move. This includes the seemingly “anational conception of homeland”, which Kovačič (2021, 108–109) discusses in the case of 40 younger interviewees who emigrated from Slovenia during the economic crisis of 2008–2015. His research showed that a world with more promising career opportunities opened up to them abroad, even though the original home environment remained important to them. The interviewees did not associate this space with the country of Slovenia or with the aspiration to return to it, but with their original micro-environment, which they experienced as a kind of familiarity or domesticity. The fact that this space was accessible and real for them abroad, including the Slovene language, was confirmed by the fact that only 17.5% of the interviewees stated that they missed the Slovene language, “as it can be used on a daily basis in videoconference communication with relatives and by reading various content online, and many of the younger ones live abroad with a partner or roommates from Slovenia” (Kovačič 2021, 120).

The specific patterns of articulation of groupings and identities in the diaspora (and beyond) must always be seen against the background of a particular historical moment, the subjective experiences and cultural background of expatriates. These are also determined by the current cultural contacts that migrants increasingly cultivate across national borders, thanks to the sophistication of digital technology. These articulations are manifested in the coexistence of different, even contradictory, cultural codes and value systems, which, precisely because of their synergistic and/or conflicting nature, can never become definitively defined or permanently established. Cultural (or even ethnic) demarcation, in the sense of diasporic communities or identities being trapped in rigid binarisms of the *we/you* type, is alien to this kind of coexistence. No one lives his or her life only in the shelter of a single identification, without contact with the Other. In this sense, this coexistence also contradicts the theories of the “melting pot” or assimilation, which at one time or another have been very present in contemporary ethnic studies or diaspora studies. Skrbiš (2003, 16, 17) writes that “assimilation processes” in Slovene diasporic communities around the world “have done their work” and emphasises that “decline, not growth, is what characterises Slovene communities around the world.” In the context of the contemporary Slovene diaspora, Friš and Hazemali (2021, 270) argue that “the rapid assimilation into a new environment tends to accelerate assimilation”. Marija Wakounig (2021, 216) makes a similar observation in the case of the Carinthian Slovene “intellectual and economic diaspora”. She argues that while the latter contributes to raising awareness of the problems of the Carinthian minority in Austria and beyond, it accelerates the assimilation and national marginalisation of Slovenes living in Carinthia.

Irena Šumi (2000, 132) characterises this kind of view of “Sloveneness” as an assumption that implies a compulsion according to which the subject must

constantly behave in accordance with their origins, that they must renew their presumed originality: “the Slovene minority [...] is both ‘objectively’ ‘Slovene’ and ‘is becoming’ Slovene (or as such is ‘disappearing’, ‘assimilating’)”. Assumptions that understand Slovene ethnicity essentially as a “pseudo-exclusivist” category, as something rooted in the past and constructed around the notion of Slovene ethnicity, do not help to understand diasporic or ethnic processes and identities. According to Irena Šumi (2000, 133), the main reason for the “structural paralysis” and “analytical impotence” of research dealing with the topic of Slovene ethnicity also lies within the belief that every subject and every phenomenon constantly behaves in accordance with its origin, that it must constantly renew its originality. Assimilation and the decline of the Slovene population and the associated fear of “disappearance” seem inevitable, especially in the face of the challenges of contemporary globalised society. Dejan Valentinčič (2021, 75–78) defends this dictum with the example of the Slovene community in the USA. He argues that the first generation of Slovene emigrants, who arrived in the USA between 1870 and 1924, still had such conditions of grouping (settling in agglomerations close to factories, their own infrastructure, e.g., shops, taverns, bakeries, churches, doctors, lawyers, their own newspapers, their own societies, etc.) that enabled it to affirm its original Slovene identity and culture, but that “by the end of the 1940s, its life force was already failing”; only the arrival of post-war political and then economic migration “reinvigorated” the community.

Theories posit national or ethnic assimilation as a linear process by which one group (usually non-dominant or minority) becomes culturally similar to another (usually dominant or majority) over time, until it “merges” with it. In contemporary societies, Valentinčič (2019, 14, 16) argues, they are associated with the notion of “endangered Sloveneness” and the related notion of “threatened Sloveneness” and are closely linked to broader social changes, which sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has captured with the “fluid society” metaphor. According to Valentinčič (2019, 16), these changes are now so rapid and powerful that it would be more appropriate to speak of a “gaseous society”: “Everything is mixing, everything is changing, nothing has a fixed form anymore, and contemporary types of migration are an integral part of this. In many places it is becoming more and more difficult to maintain and develop.” Milan Bufon (2020, 21) also perceives similar processes in the case of the Province of Trieste. He says that this once entirely Slovene rural suburb now appears as a “hybrid or ‘fluid’ social space”, and no longer as “an area with certain uniform and distinctive characteristics”. A similar dictum pervades his book on Slovenes in Trieste – the city where the largest urban Slovene community once lived. The book also shows that interest in the Slovene language is once again growing in Trieste (Bufon 2023). Here, the already written-off utopia of the revival of the Slovene language and Slovene identity returns to the scene once more, in the form of a new hope, which only develops its real effect in historical retrospect – radically

transformed, above all in terms of its social nature. This is not, or is not only partly, a nostalgic aspiration to restore the former, supposedly better state of affairs, but rather an open-ended process characterised by uncertainties and the articulation of the partly still unknown, the new.

We should take into account the increased mobility of people and abandon the idea that language and territory are statically linked. In a rapidly changing world, such ideas are inadequate or insufficiently relevant, if only because more and more young people are living outside their traditional areas of settlement. Lives, as Tim Ingold would say, are “no longer lived within places, but through, around, in and out of them, and simultaneously from and to other places” (cited in Gregorič Bon 2013, 81). Identities are correspondingly complex. Individuals may express multiple identities depending on the context of interactions that transcend national borders and are located in more than one place. Accordingly, there are “switching identities”, negotiations with identities or intermediate positions. Stuart Hall speaks, in reference to Marie Louise Pratt, of “contact zones” and Fernando Ortiz, respectively, of “primal scenes of transculturation,” which, according to Hall (2017, 161), are not to be seen outside of the Euro-imperial expansion and, in the contemporary era in particular, of the new multicultural and global cities; there are complex relations of asymmetrical exchanges, regulated contact and enforced exclusion among different cultures, which have nevertheless irrevocably transformed the identity of everyone involved. Under the conditions of transculturation (for more on the notion, see Jurić Pahor 2012; 2017), such transformation therefore never takes place in equal but always in unequal conditions, articulated in structures of hierarchisation and subordination. Nevertheless, these “contact zones” have also always been the site of cultural hybridisations, creolisations and syncretisms – in short, scenes of diaspora formation where different cultures not only intersect but are also obliged to change themselves in the face of each other. In such a situation, difference is neither rejected nor fixed or consolidated, but continuously translated or (re) negotiated (Hall 2017, 165–166; Hall 2016). This process also allows for a more inclusive approach to addressing identities and spaces of the common than essentialist or totalizing, unifying models assume. It is based on the assumption that the idea of the common cannot be rooted but only produced in dialogue with the other, the foreign, the different, taking into account also and especially the position of identities and people in their historical context and in the texture of current social relations.

6. Conclusion

Stuart Hall (1996) symptomatically addressed his famous debate in the form of the question *Who Needs Identity?* He pointed out that late modernity coincides with a time of loss of identity stability, which signals that the time has come for

new identities to emerge. Modern identities are subject to constant change and transformation and often coincide with a sense of unhomeliness in which the existential modus of being-in-the-world as *Un-zuhause-sein* (Eng. not-being-at-home) is expressed (cf. Heidegger 1997, 261). This is also suggested by the notions of diaspora and diasporisation, which, such is the central premise of the paper, are situated in the tension field between global mobility and nationalism. Although this nationalism is no longer defined territorially, since it has a transnational and transterritorial character, it allows – also through new communication technologies – the creation and/or finding of an imaginary nation, identity or home, and, in the face of being thrown out of the familiar social environment, also a relatively solid vision of the future. The phenomenon was exemplified by the case of the contemporary Slovene diaspora, which in the narrow sense of the word refers to the group of Slovenes who dispersed around the world after the constitution of the state of Slovenia in 1991, and in a broader sense also to emigrants – members of Slovene national communities outside Slovenia or outside the traditional territories of settlement of Slovene national communities (the focus was on the case of the Slovenes from Carinthia, Austria and the Province of Trieste, Italy). It was found that the contemporary Slovene diaspora is closely linked to (e)migration, especially of young and highly educated people (“brain drain”). It is part of a dynamic process that is actively seeking to establish itself in the global world, where the capitalist world economy and the market play a decisive role. Several indications, e.g., the SLO Global online business network, support the assumption that it is at least partly linked to diverse actors in the homeland of origin, which is attributable in particular to the policy of promoting “brain circulation”, which has been pursued over the last few years, in particular by the Government Office of the Republic of Slovenia for Slovenes in Neighbouring Countries and Slovenes Abroad. The contemporary Slovene diaspora is being shaped and transformed through a continuous and often very complex process of grouping and being on the move. It also prompts processes of transculturation that undermine traditional values and beliefs about unique, homogeneous, and bounded national and ethnic identities and foreground the circumstances of mixing people, cultures, languages, shifting borders, confrontations, and clashes. Identities are becoming increasingly multi-faceted, diasporic and hybrid, and are always constituted in relation to the other and the otherness, and based on what Stuart Hall calls constitutive outside. Diasporisation or hybridization, as Ernesto Laclau (2007, 65) argues “[...] does not necessarily mean decline through the loss of identity: it can also mean empowering existing identities through the opening of new possibilities. Only a conservative identity, closed on itself, could experience hybridization as a loss”.

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Notes

- ¹ Jacques Derrida (1999) introduced the notion of iteration into the philosophy of language. Iteration denotes the repetition of a concept in philosophical and social discourse. According to Derrida, in the process of iterating a concept (or notion), the same meaning is never reproduced as in the first, original use of the concept. Each iteration transforms the meaning, adds something to it or even takes something away from it. There is no "original" source of meaning or "original" in this sense, just as there are no rigid and unique definitions.

- ² According to the *Dictionary of the Slovene Standard Language* (Slovar slovenskega knjižnega jezika 2, 2014), the word *Čefur* 1. pejoratively denotes “a member of any nation of the former Yugoslavia other than Slovenes living in Slovenia”, 2. “a member of a subcultural group with a distinctive language that is a mixture of Slovene and other nations of the former Yugoslavia”.
- ³ ABČHMS is the designation for members of the Albanian, Bosniak, Montenegrin, Croat, Macedonian and Serb national communities.
- ⁴ For example, in 2003, according to the population register, there were 47,000 foreign citizens in Slovenia, i.e., 2.3% of the population. Most of them came from the former Yugoslavia, especially Bosnia and Herzegovina, followed by those from the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Croatia and Macedonia (Bevc et al. 2004, 33).
- ⁵ On the efforts for Slovene independence among the Slovenes of the Porabian region, see Munda Hirnök (2007), among the Slovenes of Carinthia, see Klemenčič (2008), among the Slovenes of Italy, see Kristen (2007b) and Devetak (2021).
- ⁶ The aspirations for cultural and academic exchange and financial assistance are taken into account and set out in the Resolution on the Relations with Slovenes Abroad adopted by the National Assembly of the Republic of Slovenia in 2002 (Resolucija o odnosih s Slovenci po svetu 2002).
- ⁷ In contrast, Gorazd Kovačič (2021, 121, 119–120), using the example of 40 young and younger interviewees who emigrated from Slovenia after the economic crisis of 2008–2015, concludes that “belonging to Slovenia as a cultural and national space can be detected in only less than one-fifth of the interviewees.” When asked what they miss from their homeland or home environment in their new surroundings, however, “92.5% of them answered that they miss their former friends and family members, 57.5% miss the Slovene landscape, food and social climate (the way people communicate, mentality, etc.) [...]”, which relativises the above finding and rather confirms the phenomenon defined by Billig (1995) as “banal nationalism”. This nationalism is embedded in everyday life. It operates especially subliminally (below the threshold of consciousness) and likes to express itself in an emphasis on the “domestic, our” as distinct from the “non-domestic, foreign”. In Slovenia, for example, alongside nature and landscapes, it also likes to be tied to culinary symbols (e.g., Mlekuž 2020).

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