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Noémi Nagy

The Conceptualization of Minorities in the Practice of UN Treaty Bodies – A Case Study from the Alpine-Adriatic-Pannonian Area

Abstract

International law regularly operates with the term minorities and related concepts when recognizing group-specific rights, without setting out definitions of the protected groups. However, while the law itself is largely silent on the issue of conceptualization, the practice of monitoring organs can provide guidance in this regard. Therefore, this paper draws on the doctrinal and comparative legal analysis of the case-law of UN human rights treaty bodies. Specifically, concluding observations are analysed in the context of the Alpine-Adriatic-Pannonian area, including Slovenia and its neighbours as well as other states of the former Yugoslavia. The paper aims to show the emerging consensus within the approaches of the individual treaty bodies and to identify elements of the minority concept which appear systematically in the practice of all treaty bodies in the region under examination, thus contributing to the conceptualization of minorities in the framework of international human rights law.

Keywords

conceptualization of minorities, UN treaty bodies, Alpine-Adriatic-Pannonian area, legal regulation of the status of ethnic communities

Corresponding author

Noémi Nagy, MSCA/ERA Research Fellow at the Institute for Ethnic Studies in Ljubljana, Slovenia, and Associate Professor at the Department of International Law, Ludovika University of Public Service in Budapest, Hungary; **e-mail:** noemi.nagy@inv.si;
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2870-3456

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1. Introduction: The Definitional Problem

Despite decades of scholarly effort, there is still no universally accepted definition of minorities and other identity-related concepts, such as ethnicity, race or nationality. Yet, international law customarily operates with these terms when recognizing group-specific rights or providing protection from discrimination, without actually setting out definitions on the protected groups (conceptualization) or membership criteria therein (operationalization). According to Alfredsson (2004, 163), comprehensive definitions of the beneficiaries of group rights are missing from international human rights instruments because States are reluctant to deal with rights of groups. Furthermore, ignorance, lack of tolerance and racism play a role in the absence of codified definitions.

This is not merely an unresolved theoretical issue but a practical deficiency with crucial importance for the protection of minorities. The lack of international regulation leaves States with too much discretion in determining which communities, based on what criteria and under what labels, are officially recognized as (certain types of) minorities in their territory. In this process, in addition to the subjective self-identification of individuals and communities, as well as certain objective criteria, political considerations play an important role. Top-down interventions into group identities and boundaries, manipulation, increasing the number of minorities, fragmentation of certain categories or, conversely, blocking the paths to recognition, and the dilemma of recognition/non-recognition are common phenomena in the Alpine-Adriatic-Pannonian area.[1]

Divergent views are well reflected in the national legal regulations on the status of ethnic communities not only in the region under study, but elsewhere, too: some States simply refuse to recognize the existence of any minorities in their territory (e.g. France, Egypt); others recognize only certain groups (e.g. Austria, Slovenia); still others apply a narrow concept, confining protection only to their linguistic (e.g. Italy) or national (e.g. Russia, Ukraine[2]) minorities (Nagy & Tóth 2025; Nagy & Vizi 2024; Spiliopoulou Åkermark 1997, 142). In addition, most States differentiate in the rights and status of traditional vs. modern (migrant) communities (Medda-Windischer 2008). Furthermore, whereas the lack of an internationally binding definition could provide space for generous protective measures, in practice it usually leads to a lower level of protection.[3] Finally, a universal definition would have the benefit of strengthening the standard-setting nature of international law.

The main question is: can something be effectively protected if it is not defined? (Marko et al. 2019, 37). To put it more elaborately, "ambiguity in terms of the targeted communities and membership boundaries for minority protection mechanisms and social inclusion measures may hinder the achievement of policy goals. In addition, the potential for abuse can open avenues for further discrimination and marginalization" of these already vulnerable groups (Pap 2021, 214). For example, several abuses occurred during the 2002–2003 elections of minority self-governments in Hungary. There, in the absence of formal identification or registration, anyone could participate: not only persons belonging to the given minority, but practically anyone was able to vote and be elected. Although registration on the minorities' electoral list has since been introduced as a legal requirement, the process is based exclusively on self-identification without any objective criteria and abuses still occur. The possibility of making false declarations about minority affiliation not only interferes with the right to establish minority self-governments, but it also negatively affects the exercise of other minority rights. Unfortunately, the phenomenon of ethnobusiness is widespread in Central and Eastern Europe (Dobos 2020; Korhecz 2022; Nagy 2022, 40–46), and is deplored by UN treaty bodies.[4]

Following from the above, addressing the problems of conceptualization and operationalization is vital for the protection of minorities. Whereas it is extremely difficult

> to identify common elements which are able to grasp the plurality of existing relevant communities […], the prevailing view is that it is possible to find some elements of the concept of minority endorsed by international law and therefore to determine the scope of application of the respective rules *ratione personae* (Pentassuglia 2002, 55).

True enough, while international legal regulation in general is silent on the issue of conceptualization of groups,[5] the practice of monitoring organs can provide guidance in this regard. It would be convenient to rely on the extensive monitoring work within the Council of Europe – i.e. that of the Advisory Committee of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and of the Committee of Experts of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages – but this has been widely discussed in scholarship (see, e.g. Craig 2016; for a recent assessment, see Bašić 2023). Less known are the contributions to the definitional problem of minorities offered by monitoring organs within the framework of general international human rights instruments (per-

haps with the exception of the UN Human Rights Committee, which is quite broadly discussed). Therefore, this paper draws on the doctrinal and comparative legal analysis of the case-law of the UN human rights treaty bodies, i.e. independent expert organs monitoring the implementation of the nine core human rights treaties adopted under the auspices of the United Nations.[6]

The main source of analysis consists of concluding observations, but a few views on individual communications and general comments/recommendations are also included where relevant. Specifically, concluding observations on State reports will be analysed in the context of the Alpine-Adriatic-Pannonian area, including Slovenia and its neighbours as well as other States of the former Yugoslavia. The selection of countries is aligned to the geographical focus of *Treatises and Documents, Journal of Ethnic Studies,* for which this paper is intended.

The paper has two aims. First, to investigate whether there is an emerging consensus or split between the approaches of the individual treaty bodies, and hence in the UN human rights system as a whole. Second, to identify elements of the minority concept which systematically appear in the practice of all treaty bodies in the examined countries, thus constituting a possible basis for setting forth an all-encompassing definition of minorities within the framework of international human rights law. Considering the paper's geographical focus, both of these aims can only be achieved partially, and my findings should be considered as preliminary results of a broader research project with a universal scope.

2. Research Method

As mentioned above, the research applies doctrinal and comparative legal analysis to reveal the practice of the UN human rights treaty bodies, including first and foremost the Human Rights Committee (CCPR), the monitoring organ of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which is the only international treaty with universal scope and general application to contain a minority-specific provision (see below).

In addition, the practice of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD); the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR); the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW); the Committee against Torture (CAT); the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC); the Committee on Migrant Workers (CMW); the Committee on the Rights of Persons with

Disabilities (CRPD); and the Committee on Enforced Disappearances (CED) will be examined.

From the abundant practice of treaty bodies, the paper will scrutinize the concluding observations adopted on the basis of nine selected States' reports from the Alpine-Adriatic-Pannonian area, namely Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Hungary, Italy, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia (including Kosovo)[7], and Slovenia. Concluding observations on former Yugoslavia were also analysed, offering the opportunity to examine historical trends and possible changes in approaches.[8]

Table 1: Entry into force of the core human rights treaties in the examined States

	ICERD	ICCPR	ICESCR	CEDAW	CAT	CRC	ICMW	CRPD	CPED
Austria	1972	1978	1978	1982	1987	1992	x	2008	2012
Bosnia&Herzegovina	1993	1993	1993	1993	1993	1993	1996	2010	2012
Croatia	1992	1992	1992	1992	1992	1992	x	2007	2022
Hungary	1967	1974	1974	1980	1987	1991	x	2007	x
Italy	1976	1978	1978	1985	1989	1991	x	2009	2015
Montenegro	2006	2006	2006	2006	2006	2006	x	2009	2011
North Macedonia	1994	1994	1994	1994	1994	1993	x	2011	x
Serbia	2001	2001	2001	2001	2001	2001	x	2009	2011
Slovenia	1992	1992	1992	1992	1993	1993	x	2008	2021
Yugoslavia	1967	1978	1978	1982	1991	1991	x	x	x

Source: United Nations Treaty Series. (Prepared by author).

Tables 1 and 2 present descriptive statistics of the research: the date of entry into force of the individual treaties in the examined States (Table 1), and the number of concluding observations adopted during all monitoring cycles completed until the date of writing and in total (Table 2). Where concluding observations were not yet available/adopted for the last monitoring cycle, lists of issues prior to reporting (LoIPR) were included instead. Altogether, 291 documents were analysed.

All documents analysed in this paper are available from online public databases: the UN Treaty Body Database and/or the United Nations Digital Library. Except when quoting directly from or referring specifically to a particular document, concluding observations will not be individually referenced in the body of the paper, for reasons of space constraints and easier readability. However, in the Reference section, individual document identifiers will be provided, categorized according

to the respective country and treaty body, so that documents can be easily accessed in the above-mentioned databases.

Table 2: Number of concluding observations adopted by UN treaty bodies in the examined States

	CERD	CCPR	CESCR	CEDAW	CAT	CRC	CMW	CRPD	CED	Total
Austria	12	6	9	6	6	4	0	2	1	46
Bosnia&Herzegovina	7	3	3	3	3	3	3	2	1	28
Croatia	6	4	2	3	5	4	0	1	0	25
Hungary	13	7	8	7	4	4	0	2	0	45
Italy	11	6	7	6	6	4	0	1	1	42
Montenegro	3	2	1	3	3	2	0	1	1	16
North Macedonia	3	4	2	3	4	3	0	1	0	20
Serbia	2	5	4	3	4	2	0	1	1	22
Slovenia	4	3	2	5	4	3	0	2	0	23
Yugoslavia	12	3	6	1	1	1	0	0	0	24
Total	73	43	44	40	40	30	3	13	5	291

Source: United Nations Digital Library; UN Treaty Bodies Database. (Prepared by author).

3. Preliminary Remarks: The Relevance of UN Treaty Bodies

Before turning to the analysis, a few preliminary observations must be made. First, when it comes to minorities, not all human rights treaties carry the same weight. In numerical terms, there are only a few documents adopted by the CMW (3), the CED (5) and the CRPD (13) in the examined region. By contrast, most documents were adopted by CERD (73), whereas the number of reports under CCPR, CESCR, CEDAW and CAT is in the range of 40 (see Table 2).

The importance of treaty body materials for the purpose of this analysis is also influenced by the minority-relevance of the treaties they monitor. In fact, only the ICCPR and the CRC contain explicit references to the rights of minorities. Specifically, Article 27 of the ICCPR sets out the following:

> In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion, or to use their own language.

As can be seen, the provision does not offer a definition of minority, but merely hints at a few objective elements that could form part of the concept and/or be taken into consideration when operationalizing the term. To qualify for protection under Article 27, an individual must belong to an ethnic, religious or linguistic minority, yet these terms – ethnicity, religion, and language – were also left undefined during the drafting process.

One element of the minority concept was explicitly set out in a 1993 decision of the Human Rights Committee: numerical inferiority. The authors of the communication challenged legislation in Canada's Quebec province that prohibited the use of any language other than French in commercial signs. The Committee concluded that English speakers within Quebec did not qualify as a (linguistic) minority for the purposes of Article 27 of the ICCPR, since

> the minorities referred to in article 27 are minorities within a State, and not minorities within any province. A group may constitute a majority in a province but still be a minority in a State and thus be entitled to the benefits of article 27.[9]

This criterion, however, does not appear in the concluding observations of the CCPR or of other treaty bodies.

In 1994, the Human Rights Committee adopted a general comment which also discussed conceptual issues, albeit only indirectly and briefly. Stating that "the persons designed to be protected are those who belong to a group and who share in common a culture, a religion and/or a language", it claimed that Article 27 does not require members of a minority group to be citizens of the State party. For the Committee, "it is not relevant to determine the degree of permanence that the term 'exist' connotes", since under Article 2(1) States are required to ensure that the rights protected under the ICCPR are available to all individuals subject to their jurisdiction, except for rights expressly applicable to citizens. Thus, Article 27 also entitles non-nationals, including migrant workers and even visitors.[10]

Article 30 of the CRC repeats Article 27 of the ICCPR almost *verbatim*, except that it also refers to indigeneity:

> In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities or persons of indigenous origin exist, a child belonging to such a minority or who is indigenous shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of his or her group, to enjoy his or her own culture, to profess and practise his or her own religion, or to use his or her own language.

Again, no definitions are provided in the text, and one must turn to the monitoring materials for more in-depth classification.

In addition to these two provisions explicitly related to minorities, most human rights treaties contain some reference to the prohibition of discrimination on grounds such as race, colour, descent, language, religion, national, ethnic or social origin, etc. These factors – either individually or, more often, in combination – are standard conceptual elements of a minority group. This provides further justification as to why international human rights treaties are relevant in this context, even when they do not contain explicit references to minorities.

In the case of ICERD, the prohibition of racial discrimination – defined as

> any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life (ICERD, Article 1)

– is the very purpose and subject-matter of international protection. Unsurprisingly, none of the five suspect grounds are defined in the treaty text, not even race, which seems to function as the umbrella term for the purposes of the Convention. In the CERD's view, it is not necessary to assume the existence of races or accept racial theory to combat racial discrimination; on the contrary, both the Convention and the Committee condemn theories of racial superiority as well as racist practices (Thornberry 2005, 250–251). The various grounds of discrimination in Article 1 "do not immediately translate themselves into recognizable varieties of community, vulnerable to discrimination" (Thornberry 2005, 257) and, clearly, there are overlaps between them. In fact, according to Thornberry (2019, 326), the *travaux préparatoires* of the Convention suggest that "not every descriptor was understood to mark out a sharply defined conceptual space".

To help clarify the scope and content of the Convention, the CERD adopted several general recommendations, two of which are especially relevant here. General recommendation VIII (1990) concerns affiliation with a particular racial or ethnic group and succinctly states that "such identification shall, if no justification exists to the contrary, be based upon self-identification by the individual concerned".[11] General recommendation XXIV (1999) concerns the reporting of information on persons belonging to different races and national or ethnic groups, and

on indigenous peoples, calling for the uniform application of criteria to determine the existence of ethnic groups within a State's territory, thus avoiding differential treatment of population groups.[12]

Despite the uneven amount and relevance of the available materials, unless otherwise indicated, the observations in the next sections apply equally to all treaty bodies, in relation to all countries under discussion. This may suggest that the findings of the article are universally applicable, and while this may well be the case, all statements should be understood as describing the situation within the examined geographical area.

4. Results of the Analysis

4.1 Terminology

Perhaps the most important overall observation about the practice of UN treaty bodies is that there seems to be a consensus in their approach and use of terms related to minorities. This is reflected, *inter alia*, in a general shift over the past decade from minorities to vulnerable/disadvantaged/marginalized groups as an umbrella term. As Eichler and Topidi (2022, 6) rightly point out, by

> shifting the focus of legal protection and policy responses to categorisations beyond [objective criteria], and instead including vulnerability as a determining criterion, the demands of such groups may be captured in a more holistic way, although at the cost of creating an 'open-ended', almost infinite process of judicialising the very protection of collective subjects.

Furthermore, treaty bodies are often inconsistent in their application of terminology. The following concepts are used interchangeably throughout the reports: ethnic and/or national minorities, ethnic/national communities, nationalities (mostly in earlier reports), ethnic minority groups, national minority groups, ethnic groups, national groups, minorities, minority groups/communities, and nations (least frequently). The terms race, class, colour, descent, or caste occasionally appear (mostly in CERD reports), but with the exception of Italy, where the legacies of the colonial past still linger,[13] this is not typical in the countries of the Alpine-Adriatic-Pannonian region.

Although the Committees acknowledge that the above-mentioned categories overlap, they rarely pursue conceptual clarification. Requests addressed to States to define or categorize certain population

groups (and to eliminate differentiations between them) are scarce, and the treaty bodies themselves never give any explanations of the terms. For instance, in its 1993 report on Croatia, the CERD inquired about the legal difference between the terms minorities, peoples, nations and communities.[14] Since no satisfactory explanation was given, in the following concluding observations it identified as a principal subject of concern "the lack of clarity as to the various legal definitions to describe ethnic and national minorities".[15] Similarly, in 1990 the CERD sought clarification as to the criteria for distinguishing between nationalities and ethnic groups in Hungary – alas, no answer was provided by the representative of the State party.[16] With regard to former Yugoslavia, both the CERD and the CCPR asked about the distinction made between nations and nationalities, to which the following explanation was given: there were six nations in Yugoslavia (Montenegrins, Croats, Slovenes, Serbs, Moslems and Macedonians), whereas all other groups were considered nationalities or national minorities (in one instance, it was added that they originated in other countries). National groups was an inclusive term for both categories.[17] The various definitions of different ethnic groups are not only confusing for members of the treaty bodies, but they also have potentially discriminatory effects.[18]

Conceptual issues also arose in relation to the Muslims (Moslems) and Turks in Yugoslavia. The CERD wanted to know why Muslims were classified as a national group rather than a religious one, and why the Turks were classified separately. The State representative explained, somewhat confusingly, that the term Moslem referred to a nation/nationality/ethnic group/national group (all four terms were used in the two relevant reports) of Slavic origin and not to a religious group. They lived mostly in Bosnia and Herzegovina and part of Serbia, whereas persons practising Islam in Yugoslavia might be Serbs or Albanians. Moslems generally belonged to the Moslem religion but were distinct from Turks. Those who had declared themselves as Turks, though they might be practising Moslems, were not considered part of the Moslem nation but members of a separate nationality.[19]

In the treaty bodies' practice, the terms ethnic and national are not clearly distinguished and are often mentioned together, connected or separated by conjunctions like and, or, or, confusingly, and/or. Still, ethnic seems to be the broader term. For instance, disaggregated data on population composition are almost always required by ethnic origin, and race, colour, descent, national or ethnic origin, mother tongues and languages commonly spoken are considered indicators of ethnic diversity.[20]

4.2 Specific Groups

In many reports, certain groups are referred to by name, often without clarifying whether they qualify as minorities and, if so, what type of minorities. For example, reports on North Macedonia refer to the Albanian, Roma and Turkish minorities, whereas in its 1990 report on Yugoslavia the CERD also inquired about the number of persons of Bulgarian ethnic origin in Macedonia.[21] Frequently, communities are classified under different categories in different reports. For instance, in the first two CERD reports on Austria, adopted in 1974 and 1976 respectively, only the Croatian and Slovene minorities/languages in Carinthia, Burgenland and Styria were mentioned. The Austrian representative explained that no distinct national or ethnic groups or racial minorities existed in the country, and that the only legally recognized minorities were linguistic minorities. One member of CERD pointed out in vain that the 1955 State Treaty for the Re-establishment of an Independent and Democratic Austria referred to these groups as national minorities.[22] Yet, only a few years later, Croats and Slovenes were classified as ethnic groups in both CERD and CCPR reports, along with Czechs and Hungarians, who had not been mentioned in the previous reports at all.[23]

In Yugoslavia, too, Hungarians were first included in CERD and CCPR reports as late as the early 1990s[24] (and then not mentioned again in reports on Serbia). In an early report on Yugoslavia, the CERD also asked why Austrians and Germans were not classified under a single heading. The State representative explained that they had declared themselves to be members of separate nationalities.[25]

In the reports from the examined region (and indeed across Eastern and Western Europe more broadly) there is a single community that features as a unique category: the Roma (in earlier reports often referred to as Gypsies, nomads or nomad populations). Roma people are sometimes classified as an ethnic group, other times as a national minority, and occasionally not classified at all but treated as an in-between or outsider category. A frequent concern of the treaty bodies is that the Roma community is not accorded minority status in Italy (and formerly, Croatia); thus, they repeatedly call on State parties to recognize the Roma as a (national) minority.[26]

In Italy, where the law protects linguistic minorities only, the representative of the State party explained to the CCPR in 1989 that "gypsies" were not considered a minority because they were "made up of different groups speaking different languages".[27] Later it was stated that the Roma were not protected as a minority because they did not have a connection with a specific territory. The CCPR recalled that "the ab-

sence of connection with a specific territory does not bar a community for qualifying as a minority under article 27" of the ICCPR.[28]

Furthermore, the Roma are often singled out for issues such as child marriage and other harmful practices, health, employment and housing, and are identified as particularly vulnerable to sexual and economic exploitation, trafficking, and domestic violence. An interesting terminological issue is that in Montenegro, Serbia and Kosovo the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities are mentioned together, but the Roma are also referred to separately (apparently with Roma serving as the umbrella term for other nomadic populations).[29] Likewise, from the late 2000s onwards Sinti, and a few years later Camminanti (and on one occasion, Travellers)[30] appear alongside Roma in the reports on Italy.[31]

4.3 Legal Recognition

Recognition is the State's legal answer to the question of the existence of a group on its territory. This is especially relevant in the context of the ICCPR, since Article 27 applies only in States in which minority groups actually exist. Whereas States parties tend to adopt a restrictive definition in this regard (cf. Nagy & Vizi 2024), treaty bodies embrace an increasingly inclusive approach and are critical of States that restrict the definition of minorities to certain legally recognized groups, thereby excluding others from full legal protection.[32] As mentioned in the previous section, a prime example of such practice is the non-recognition of the Roma in Italy.

In this vein, in its latest LoIPR, the CESCR called on Austria to

> indicate the measures taken to broaden the criteria for the recognition of a national minority under the Ethnic Group Act so as to ensure that all ethnic minority groups in the State party can receive State support to sustain their culture and identity and fully enjoy their economic, social and cultural rights.[33]

Similarly, the CCPR emphasizes that States

> should ensure that all members of ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities, whether or not their communities are recognized as national minorities, enjoy effective protection against discrimination and are able to enjoy their own culture, to practise and profess their own religion, and use their own language, in accordance with article 27 of the Covenant.[34]

Italy recognizes only linguistic minorities within its territory (Albanian, Catalan, Croatian, Franco-Provençal, French, Friulian, German, Greek,

Ladin, Occitan, Sardinian and Slovenian) and provides special status to the German-, French- and Slovenian-speaking minorities living in Alto Adige/Südtirol, Valle d'Aosta/Vallée d'Aoste and Friuli Venezia Giulia, respectively.[35] The legal distinction between "acknowledged" and "other minorities" is clearly based on language: the former groups are "numerically quite large, whose members [do] not speak Italian", whereas the latter are "smaller and much integrated, [who] speak Italian and for whom there [is] no linguistic problem".[36] Here, too, the Committees' concern is that such a restrictive definition may lead to situations in which members of other minorities (such as the Roma) do not enjoy equal protection of their rights.[37]

The situation is similar in Slovenia, where only the Hungarians and Italians are recognized as national minorities (in the words of the constitution: autochthonous national communities), thus singled out for special protection. The CCPR reminded that immigrant communities constituting minorities within the meaning of Article 27 are also entitled to the benefit of that article.[38]

Legal distinctions based on race, ethnicity or religion that result in the discrimination of certain population groups in the exercise of their human rights are a serious concern of UN treaty bodies. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, the so-called "constituent peoples" (Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs) enjoy privileged status, whereas "Others" – that is persons belonging to national minorities or ethnic groups other than Bosniaks, Croats or Serbs – are prevented from exercising certain political rights, such as standing for election to the House of Peoples and the tripartite Presidency.[39] In Serbia, when it comes to the official registration of religious communities and the acquisition of legal personality, a distinction is made between traditional and non-traditional religions. This, in the view of the CCPR, violates the principle of equal protection and has a negative impact on the enjoyment of rights under Article 27.[40]

4.4 Objective Characteristics

4.4.1 Distinctive Features

As for the objective characteristics of the minority concept, the following terms are often mentioned as features that distinguish a minority group from the rest of the population: culture/cultural identity/cultural heritage, own language/mother tongue/national language, history, religion/belief, traditions/customs/way of life. The frequency of their occurrence suggests that these characteristics can be seen as concep-

tual elements of a minority. However, based on a contextual reading, one may also argue that they are simply indicative of ethnic difference, since they are almost always mentioned as part of certain rights (e.g. freedom of religion, the right to learn/use the minority language) or as components of other, albeit related, concepts (such as cultural or ethnic diversity).

Logically, when a State recognizes only its linguistic minorities (Austria, Italy), language must be seen as a conceptual element. (The same would apply to religion in the case of religious minorities, but nowhere in the examined region does a State recognize religious minorities only.) However, for the treaty bodies it is far from obvious that linguistic difference necessarily leads to the creation of a minority – at least in exclusive terms. For instance, the CERD specifically asked Hungary why the criterion of mother tongue had been chosen to determine the category to which the various ethnic groups belonged.[41]

Based on the overall practice of UN treaty bodies in the Alpine-Adriatic-Pannonian area, ethnicity seems to be the *sine qua non* of the minority concept. Even in the case of religious minorities (typically Muslims or Jews), CERD only deals with them if they also qualify as ethnic minorities. True enough, this follows from the definition of racial discrimination, where religion is not mentioned explicitly (Article 1 of ICERD, see above). As Thornberry (2005, 258) explains, CERD tends to read national, ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities or cultural groups of various kinds within the frame of Article 1; however, in the case of religion, the Committee searches for an ethnic or other connection, or for intersectionality, between race and religion.[42]

4.4.2 Close Ties to the Territorial State

According to the unanimous position of UN treaty bodies, citizenship is not relevant for establishing minority status. This is so even if aliens, foreigners, migrants, refugees, asylum-seekers, (internally/externally) displaced persons, returnees and stateless persons are usually mentioned under separate headings and/or as frequent victims of violations of certain rights (for instance, in the context of the ICCPR: freedom of movement, the right to liberty and security of person, prohibition of torture, etc.).

Although traditional or autochthonous minorities (with an element of ethnicity and a long-term connection to the territory where they reside) and new minorities (based on migration status) are differentiated by the treaty bodies, this is mostly a terminological matter and does not imply a difference in the rights that these groups (or rather: indi-

viduals belonging to them) should enjoy.[43] The irrelevance of citizenship as a potential element of the minority concept was confirmed by the Human Rights Committee's General comment No. 23 in 1994 (see above).

This does not mean, however, that citizenship is entirely irrelevant. Statelessness is a situation that human rights instruments and monitoring organs seek to avoid by all means, and in practice, the lack of citizenship of the territorial State often leads to violations of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. The UN treaty bodies are particularly troubled by the precarious condition of the erased persons in Slovenia. The erased are former permanent residents of Slovenia originating from other former Yugoslav republics, including Bosnians, ethnic Albanians from Kosovo, Macedonians and Serbs, whose names were removed from the population registers in 1992 and who, as a result, lost their permanent residence and associated rights in the country (Zorn 2005). The Committees have repeatedly urged Slovenia to remedy this situation and to definitively resolve the legal status of all concerned individuals.[44]

Similarly to citizenship, the area of residence or long-term presence in a particular area – another characteristic of autochthony and a frequent conceptual element in States' minority definitions – is also rejected by UN treaty bodies. Instead, States parties are recommended to adopt a flexible approach and avoid unjustified differential treatment of minority groups based on area of residence or length of established settlement within their territories.[45]

Such is the case, for instance, in Austria, where individuals belonging to autochthonous national minorities residing in the so-called historical settlement areas – *inter alia*, the Slovenes in Carinthia and the Roma and Croats in Burgenland – and individuals not residing in those areas, such as Slovenes outside Carinthia and Roma and Croats outside Burgenland, are treated differently.[46] In Italy, the CERD observed that the Slovene minority in Trieste had a special status in that its members could use their own language in courts, whereas in areas outside Trieste the Slovene minority could not do so.[47] Slovenia provides special protection for the autochthonous Hungarian and Italian national communities,[48] and also differentiates between autochthonous/indigenous vs. non-autochthonous/non-indigenous/new Roma, the latter being denied certain rights. To avoid further discrimination against this already marginalized population, treaty bodies repeatedly call on Slovenia to end the distinction between the two types of Roma status and to provide the whole Roma community with a status free of discrimination.[49]

In Hungary, only those ethnic groups that have lived in the territory of the State for at least one century can be recognized as a minority (with post-2012 terminology: nationality) – a statutory condition that, in the opinion of both the CERD and the CCPR, should be repealed. According to the CCPR, such a restrictive requirement could result in the exclusion of nomadic and other groups that do not satisfy the condition due to their lifestyle from the full protection of the law.[50]

4.4.3 Non-dominant Position

A very important element of the minority concept is what Capotorti called a non-dominant position in his famous 1978 report.[51] Although this term has never been used in the UN treaty bodies' concluding observations, CERD reports occasionally refer to the dominant majority/group (such as the Bosniaks and Croats within the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Serbs within the Republika Srpska), from which, *a contrario*, the non-dominant position of minorities follows.[52] In any case, discrimination is mentioned in every report in the context of minorities, along with vulnerability, segregation, social exclusion, marginalization, disadvantaged status and underprivileged backgrounds. These terms all convey the same meaning – namely, that minority groups occupy an inferior position within society, which makes their equal protection, inclusion and/or integration vital. In fact, the UN treaty bodies' approach reflects the unfortunate reality that "minority issues in the everyday world are still concerned with processes of 'othering', of structural discrimination and systemic inequalities" (Eichler & Topidi 2022, 4).

Intersectional/multiple forms of discrimination are frequently identified in the reports. Depending on the individual treaty body's mandate, minority/ethnic background may intersect with age (children, the elderly), sex (women, girls), migration status[53] and disability. Interestingly, no intersection has been noted between minority/ethnic background and sexual orientation. This means that if and when LGBTQ+ persons are mentioned in the reports, they are either classified under the broad category of vulnerable/marginalized/disadvantaged groups and treated like other such groups (including traditional, ethnic/national minorities),[54] or discussed under a separate heading.

4.5 Subjective Characteristics

Subjective elements of the minority concept – similar to what Capotorti referred to as a sense of solidarity between members of the group, di-

rected towards preserving their distinct identity – are very rarely mentioned in the reports. A noteworthy exception is the CERD's first report on Austria, where "ethnic consciousness" and "kindred" were mentioned as "sociological criteria".[55]

By contrast, self-identification as an overarching principle for claiming minority membership is a recurring theme in most treaty bodies' reports, but always in the context of the individual, not the community. Interpreted in this way, self-identification is not an element of the minority concept *per se*, but rather a mode of operationalization, i.e. a means of determining who belongs to a minority group.

Operationalization strategies for minority membership in general include self-identification; identification by other members or elected/appointed representatives of the group; classification made by outsiders (third-party identification), relying on the perception of the majority; or the use of objective criteria, such as name, language or residence (Pap 2021, 215). The universally accepted view in international law is that the identification of individuals as members of ethnic/minority/racial groups should be voluntary and based on self-identification by the individuals concerned (cf. Eichler & Topidi 2022, 4–5). In line with this, the CCPR expressed its concern

> at the administrative shortcomings of the minority election register and the self-government system [in Hungary], which, *inter alia*, renders it obligatory for minorities to register their ethnic identity, and therefore deters those who do not wish their ethnic identity to be known, or who have multiple ethnic identities, from registering in particular elections.[56]

In several other reports, too, the principle of self-identification is regularly emphasized as a cornerstone and indispensable element in the operationalization of minorities.[57]

5. Summary and Final Conclusions

Based on the 291 concluding observations analysed in this paper, the overall conclusion is that there is a consensus in the UN treaty bodies' approach and use of terms related to minorities. First and foremost, over the past decade a general shift can be observed from minorities to vulnerable/disadvantaged/marginalized groups as an umbrella term. However, there is no consistency in the application of specific terminology; rather, a variety of concepts are used interchangeably throughout the reports, including ethnic and/or national minorities, nationalities,

ethnic minority groups, national minority groups, ethnic groups, national groups, and others. Naturally, the easiest way to avoid definitional problems is to mention particular groups by name, which is often the case when treaty bodies inquire about the situation of specific communities.

In the examined reports, the Roma (in earlier times often referred to as Gypsies or nomads, and more recently mentioned alongside Sinti, Camminanti, Ashkali and/or Egyptians) stand out as a unique category. They are sometimes classified as an ethnic group, at other times as a national minority, and occasionally not classified at all but treated as an in-between category. A major concern of the treaty bodies is that the Roma community is not accorded (national) minority status in certain States parties (currently only in Italy within the examined region). This is seen as one of the reasons why they face even more discrimination and human rights violations than other minorities.

Various types of minorities – ethnic, national, linguistic, religious and racial – appear alongside one another in the reports, and although the Committees acknowledge that these categories overlap, they rarely pursue conceptual clarification. In fact, the Committees seem to manage quite well without clear definitions, as for them the *de facto* protection of human/minority rights appears paramount. Their ultimate goal is to extend the highest possible level of protection to the widest strata of society, that is, to all groups that are vulnerable in any way.

This is also evident from the fact that, whereas States parties tend to adopt restrictive definitions of minorities, UN treaty bodies embrace an increasingly inclusive approach and are critical of States that confine the definition of minorities to certain legally recognized groups, thereby excluding others from full legal protection. In the view of the treaty bodies, neither citizenship nor long-term residence in a State's territory should be considered a precondition for minority status. This means that new (migrant) communities could also qualify for protection under minority-protection provisions, including Article 27 of the ICCPR.

As for other objective characteristics of the minority concept, the following features are often mentioned as distinguishing a minority group from the rest of the population: culture, cultural identity and cultural heritage; own language, mother tongue and national language; history; religion and belief; and traditions, customs and way of life. The frequency of such references suggests that these characteristics can be regarded as conceptual elements of a minority; however, one could equally argue that they are simply indicative of ethnic difference. Based

on the overall practice of UN treaty bodies in the Alpine-Adriatic-Pannonian area, it can be stated that, if anything, ethnicity seems to be the *sine qua non* of the minority concept (whatever the term ethnicity may mean).

A very important element of the minority concept is what Capotorti called a non-dominant position in his famous 1978 report. Although this term has never been used in the UN treaty bodies' concluding observations, discrimination is mentioned in every report, along with vulnerability, segregation, social exclusion, marginalization, disadvantaged status and underprivileged backgrounds. These terms all convey the same idea – namely, that minority groups occupy an inferior position within society.

In terms of operationalization of the minority concept, the universally accepted view of the UN treaty bodies is in line with that of other international human rights organs, namely that the identification of individuals as members of minority groups should be voluntary and anonymous, based on self-identification by the individuals concerned.

To conclude, the practice of the UN treaty bodies demonstrates the tension between an emerging professional consensus and the existing practice of States. The concluding observations reflect a general concern that specific minority rights, understood as part of universal human rights, should not exclude any potentially affected individual or group from their personal scope of application. As my colleague and I (Nagy & Vizi 2025, 52) have argued elsewhere, the development of international law, the prevailing faith in the universality of human rights and recent expert interpretations of minority rights point to an understanding that the very justification of minority rights lies in counterbalancing unequal power relations between different social groups.

However, States did not originally assume minority-protection obligations for such considerations. From a historical perspective, the international recognition of minority rights served to reconcile specific groups and to manage specific security threats and conflicts. This approach has not significantly changed since the Second World War, although minority rights are now framed within the discourse of the international protection of universal human rights (Nagy & Vizi 2025, 52–53). Against this backdrop, there is little chance that the UN treaty bodies' recommendations will resonate with the political will of States – at least in the Alpine-Adriatic-Pannonian area, where the nation-state narrative and the traditional concept of minorities still prevail.

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UN treaty bodies' concluding observations on **Montenegro**:

CERD: CERD/C/MNE/CO/1; CERD/C/MNE/CO/2-3; CERD/C/MNE/CO/4-6.

CCPR: CCPR/C/MNE/CO/1; CCPR/C/MNE/QPR/2 (LoIPR).

CESCR: E/C.12/MNE/CO/1.

CEDAW: CEDAW/C/MNE/CO/1; CEDAW/C/MNE/CO/2; CEDAW/C/MNE/CO/3.

CAT: CAT/C/MNE/CO/1; CAT/C/MNE/CO/2; CAT/C/MNE/CO/3.

CRC: CRC/C/MNE/CO/1; CRC/C/MNE/CO/2-3.

CRPD: CRPD/C/MNE/CO/1.

CED: CED/C/MNE/CO/1.

UN treaty bodies' concluding observations on **North-Macedonia**:

CERD: A/52/18, paras. 512-529; CERD/C/MKD/CO/7; CERD/C/MKD/CO/8-10.

CCPR: CCPR/C/79/Add.96; CCPR/C/MKD/CO/2; CCPR/C/MKD/CO/3; CCPR/C/MKD/QPR/4 (LoIPR).

CESCR: E/C.12/MKD/CO/1; E/C.12/MKD/CO/2-4.

CEDAW: CEDAW/C/MKD/CO/3; CEDAW/C/MKD/CO/4-5; CEDAW/C/MKD/CO/6.

CAT: A/54/44, paras. 106-117; CAT/C/MKD/CO/2; CAT/C/MKD/CO/3; CAT/C/MKD/CO/4.

CRC: CRC/C/15/Add.118; CRC/C/MKD/CO/2; CRC/C/MKD/CO/3-6.

CRPD: CRPD/C/MKD/CO/1.

UN treaty bodies' concluding observations on **Serbia**:

CERD: CERD/C/SRB/CO/1; CERD/C/SRB/CO/2-5.

CCPR: CCPR/CO/81/SEMO; CCPR/C/SRB/CO/2; CCPR/C/SRB/CO/3; CCPR/C/SRB/CO/4.

CESCR: E/C.12/1/Add.108; E/C.12/SRB/CO/2; E/C.12/SRB/CO/3.

CEDAW: CEDAW/C/SCG/CO/1; CEDAW/C/SCG/CO/2-3; CEDAW/C/SCG/CO/4.

CAT: CAT/C/SRB/CO/1; CAT/C/SRB/CO/2; CAT/C/SRB/CO/3; CAT/C/SRB/QPR/4 (LoIPR).

CRC: CRC/C/SRB/CO/1; CRC/C/SRB/CO/2-3.

CRPD: CRPD/C/SRB/CO/1.

CED: CED/C/SRB/CO/1.

UN treaty bodies' concluding observations on **Slovenia**:

CERD: CERD/C/304/Add.105; CERD/C/62/CO/9; CERD/C/SVN/CO/6-7; CERD/C/SVN/CO/8-11.

CCPR: CCPR/C/79/Add.40; CCPR/CO/84/SVN; CCPR/C/SVN/CO/3.

CESCR: E/C.12/SVN/CO/1; E/C.12/SVN/CO/2.

CEDAW: A/52/38/Rev.1, paras. 81-122; A/58/38, Part II, paras. 184-228; CEDAW/C/SVN/CO/4; CEDAW/C/SVN/CO/5-6; CEDAW/C/SVN/CO/7.

CAT: A/55/44, paras. 189-212; CAT/C/CR/30/4; CAT/C/SVN/CO/3; CAT/C/SVN/CO/4.

CRC: CRC/C/15/Add.65; CRC/C/15/Add.230; CRC/C/SVN/CO/3-4.

CRPD: CRPD/C/SVN/CO/1; CRPD/C/SVN/QPR/2-4 (LoIPR).

UN treaty bodies' concluding observations on **Yugoslavia**:

CERD: A/8027, para. 39; A/9018, paras. 219-223; A/10018, paras. 105-109; A/31/18, paras. 117-121; A/34/18, paras. 210-221; A/36/18, paras. 212-219; A/38/18, paras. 148-161; A/40/18, paras. 538-556; A/45/18, paras. 192-205; A/48/18, paras. 509-547; A/50/18, paras. 226-246; A/53/18, paras. 190-214.

CCPR: A/33/40, paras. 366-398; A/39/40, paras. 193-238; A/47/40, paras. 431-469.

CESCR: E/1982/WG.1/SR.4, paras. 18-50; E/1982/WG.1/SR.5, paras. 1-8; E/C.12/1988/4, paras. 240-269; E/1984/WG.1/SR.16, paras. 26-46; E/1984/WG.1/SR.18, paras. 64-79; E/C.12/2000/21, paras. 496-511.

CEDAW: A/46/38, paras. 334-359.

CAT: A/54/44, paras. 35-52.

CRC: CRC/C/15/Add.49.

Notes

[1] For the historical relevance of these discussions in the region, see Žagar (1996).

[2] Furthermore, Ukraine also recognizes the Crimean Tatars, Karaites, and Krymchaks as indigenous peoples (see Mission of the President of Ukraine in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, 2024).

[3] Report of the Special Rapporteur on minority issues, A/74/160, 15 July 2019, para. 21.

[4] For instance, in its most recent report on Bosnia and Herzegovina, the CERD expressed concern about "the reported misuse of national minority status during election processes and in the selection of members of institutions or bodies, where a position for a person belonging to a national minority is guaranteed" (CERD/C/BIH/CO/14-15 (2024) para. 19.)

[5] A noteworthy exception is indigenous peoples. ILO Convention No. 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples (1989) gives a fairly detailed definition in its Article 1, whereas the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) establishes a right for indigenous peoples to determine their own identity or membership in accordance with their customs and traditions, and to select the membership of their institutions (Article 33). On the specific conceptual issues surrounding indigenous peoples, see e.g. Scheinin (2004), or more recently, Imai and Gunn (2018).

[6] These are the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD, 1965); the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR, 1966); the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR, 1966); the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1979); the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT, 1984); the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989); the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (ICMW, 1990); International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (CPED, 2006), and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2006).

[7] There are only two reports adopted regarding Kosovo, by the CCPR and CESCR, respectively. In both cases, the treaty bodies evaluated the human rights situation in Kosovo based on the reports submitted by the United Nations Interim Administration Mission. CCPR/C/UNK/CO/1 (2006); E/C.12/UNK/CO/1 (2008).

[8] Due to space constraints, the relevant State regulations on the concept and recognition of minorities cannot be presented in this paper.

[9] CCPR: *Ballantyne, Davidson and McIntyre v. Canada*, Communications Nos. 359/1989 and 385/1989, Views of 31 March 1993, para. 11.2.

[10] CCPR: General Comment No. 23, UN Doc. CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.5, 26 April 1994, paras. 5.1–5.2.

[11] CERD: General recommendation VIII concerning the interpretation and application of article 1, paragraphs 1 and 4, of the Convention. In *Report of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination,* A/45/18, 1991, p. 79.

[12] CERD: General recommendation XXIV concerning article 1 of the Convention. In *Report of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination*, A/54/18, Annex V, 1999, p. 105.

[13] CERD/C/ITA/CO/19-20 (2016) para. 26; CERD/C/ITA/CO/21-22 (2023) paras. 36-37.

[14] A/48/18 (1993) para. 481.

[15] CERD/C/304/Add.55 (1999) para. 6; CERD/C/60/CO/4 (2002) para. 8.

[16] A/45/18 (1990) para. 219.

[17] CERD A/36/18 (1981) paras. 213; A/38/18 (1983) paras. 150, 156; A/39/40 (1984) para. 236;

[18] CERD/C/62/CO/9 (2003) para. 7.

[19] A/38/18 (1983) paras. 150, 156; A/40/18 (1985) paras. 542, 552.

[20] CERD/C/ITA/CO/15 (2008) para. 11. Cf. paragraph 11 of revised reporting guidelines for CERD: Guidelines for the CERD-Specific Document to be Submitted by States Parties under Article 9, Paragraph 1, of the Convention. CERD/C/2007/1, 13 June 2008.

[21] A/45/18 (1990) para. 194.

[22] A/9618 (1974) paras. 135, 137; A/31/18 (1976) para. 51.

[23] A/35/18 (1980) para. 87; A/47/40 (1992) para. 119. Cf. A/38/40 (1983) para. 218.

[24] A/47/40 (1992) paras. 450, 455; A/48/18 (1993) paras. 515, 526.

[25] A/38/18 (1983) paras. 150, 156.

[26] CCPR/CO/71/HRV (2001) para. 22; CERD/C/304/Add.68 (1999) para. 12; CERD A/56/18 (2001) para. 309; CERD/C/ITA/CO/15 (2008) para. 12; CERD/C/ITA/CO/16-18 (2012) para. 3; CCPR/C/ITA/CO/6 (2017) para. 15.

[27] A/44/40 (1989) para. 595.

[28] CCPR/C/ITA/CO/5 (2006) para. 22.

[29] CERD/C/MNE/CO/1 (2009) paras. 6, 16-18; CERD/C/MNE/CO/2-3 (2014) paras. 3, 5, 11-15; CERD/C/MNE/CO/4-6 (2018) paras. 5, 10-21, 23; CERD/C/SRB/CO/1 (2011) paras. 8-9, 14-16, 19; CERD/C/SRB/CO/2-5 (2018) paras. 5, 20-23; CCPR/C/MNE/CO/1 (2014) para. 19; CCPR/C/MNE/QPR/2 (2020, LoIPR) paras. 7-8; CCPR/C/UNK/CO/1 (2006) paras. 13-14, 21-22; E/C.12/MNE/CO/1 (2014) paras. 10, 19, 22-23, 25; E/C.12/UNK/CO/1 (2008) paras. 13, 15, 26, 29, 31; E/C.12/SRB/CO/2 (2014) paras. 4, 11-13, 17, 28, 30-31, 35; CEDAW/C/MNE/CO/1 (2011) paras. 21, 23, 26-31, 34-35, 38-39; CEDAW/C/MNE/CO/2 (2017) paras. 20, 22-25, 30-32, 34-35, 42-43; CEDAW/C/MNE/CO/3 (2024) paras. 25-27, 31-32, 43-44; CAT/C/MNE/CO/1 (2008) para. 16; CAT/C/MNE/CO/2 (2014) paras. 12, 22; CAT/C/MNE/CO/3 (2022) para. 4; CRC/C/MNE/CO/1 (2010) paras. 14, 32-33, 40, 49-50, 55, 57-60, 63, 65, 69; CRC/C/MNE/CO/2-3 (2018) paras. 11, 21-22, 27-28, 35-36, 47, 50, 55, 60; CRPD/C/MNE/CO/1 (2017) paras. 4, 10.

[30] E/C.12/ITA/CO/5 (2015) paras. 5 and 45. Reference is made to the National Strategy for the Inclusion of Roma, Sinti and Travellers.

[31] CERD/C/ITA/CO/15 (2008) paras. 12, 14, 22; CERD/C/ITA/CO/16-18 (2012) paras. 3, 8, 11, 15, 17-21, 24; CERD/C/ITA/CO/19-20 (2016) paras. 14, 21-22,

33; CERD/C/ITA/CO/21-22 (2023) paras. 3, 12, 14-15, 22-27, 34, 36, 45; CCPR/C/ITA/CO/6 (2017) paras. 3, 12-15; CEDAW/C/ITA/CO/7 (2017), CEDAW/C/ITA/CO/8 (2024) paras. 11-12, 17, 25, 35-38; CAT/C/ITA/QPR/7 (2020, LoIPR) para. 26; CRC/C/ITA/CO/3-4 (2011) para. 24; CRC/C/ITA/CO/5-6 (2019) paras. 15, 18, 31-32.

[32] Cf. CCPR/C/79/Add.103 (1998) para. 14; CRC/C/15/Add.98 (1999) para. 30; E/C.12/AUT/CO/4 (2013) para. 24.

[33] E/C.12/AUT/QPR/5 (2019, LoIPR) para. 33.

[34] CCPR/CO/81/SEMO (2004) para. 23.

[35] Cf. A/44/40 (1989) paras. 605-606; A/50/18 (1995) para. 96.

[36] A/39/18 (1984) para. 307.

[37] CCPR/C/79/Add.37 (1994) para. XI.

[38] CCPR/C/79/Add.40 (1994) para. 12.

[39] CERD/C/BIH/CO/6 (2006) paras. 11-12; CCPR/C/BIH/CO/1 (2006) para. 8; CCPR/C/BIH/CO/2 (2012) para. 6; CERD/C/BIH/CO/9-11 (2015) paras. 5, 7; CCPR/C/BIH/CO/3 (2017) paras. 11-12; CERD/C/BIH/CO/14-15 (2024) paras. 9-10.

[40] CCPR/C/SRB/CO/2 (2011) para. 20; CCPR/C/SRB/CO/3 (2017) paras. 36-37.

[41] A/37/18 (1982) para. 239.

[42] The intersectionality between religion and ethnic origin is explicitly mentioned by CERD in its 2015 report on Bosnia and Herzegovina (CERD/C/BIH/CO/9-11, para. 11), whereas intersectionality between religion and race is pointed out in its 2012 report on Italy (CERD/C/ITA/CO/16-18, para. 19). Reference is made to ethno-religious groups in the 2018 reports on Montenegro (CERD/C/MNE/CO/4-6, para. 10) and Serbia (CERD/C/SRB/CO/2-5, para. 13), respectively. However, further research is needed to ascertain whether the notion of religious minority implies some ethnic or cultural connection in the practice of other treaty bodies, too.

[43] For instance, in its 2002 report the CERD had "difficulty in understanding the distinction made by [Austria] between autochthonous and other minorities and the legal and practical consequences following from this". CERD/C/60/CO/1, para. 11.

[44] E/C.12/SVN/CO/1 (2006) paras. 16, 32; CERD/C/SVN/CO/6-7 (2010) para. 14; CAT/C/SVN/CO/3 (2011) para. 18; CRC/C/SVN/CO/3-4 (2013) paras. 35-36; CCPR/C/SVN/CO/3 (2016) paras. 21-22.

[45] CERD: General recommendation XIV on article 1, paragraph 1 of the Convention. In: Report of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, A/48/18, 1993, p. 114. Cf. CCPR/C/ITA/CO/5 (2006) para. 22.: "[T]he absence of connection with a specific territory does not bar a community for qualifying as a minority under article 27" of the ICCPR.

[46] CERD/C/AUT/CO/17 (2008) para. 10; E/C.12/AUT/CO/4 (2013) para. 24.

[47] A/39/18 (1984) para. 300.

[48] E.g. CCPR/C/79/Add.40 (1994) para. 12.

[49] CERD/C/62/CO/9 (2003) para. 10; CRC/C/15/Add.230 (2004) paras. 22-23; E/C.12/SVN/CO/1 (2005) para. 11; CCPR/CO/84/SVN (2005) paras. 16-17; CRC/C/SVN/CO/3-4 (2013) paras. 24-25; CERD/C/SVN/CO/8-11 (2015) paras. 6-7; CCPR/C/SVN/CO/3 (2016) paras. 23-24.

[50] A/51/18 (1996) paras. 106-131; CCPR/C/HUN/CO/5 (2010) para. 22.

[51] Among the many attempts to offer a definition of minorities, the most often quoted one was provided by Francesco Capotorti in 1978. As Special Rapporteur of the UN Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, in his study on the rights of minorities, he used the following working definition that became widely acknowledged in academia: "a minority is a group numerically inferior to the rest of the population of a State, in a non-dominant position, whose members – being nationals of the State – possess ethnic, religious or linguistic characteristics differing from those of the rest of the population and show, if only implicitly, a sense of solidarity, directed towards preserving their cultures, traditions, religion or language" (Capotorti 1978, para. 568).

[52] See, e.g. CERD/C/BIH/CO/6 (2006) para. 11; CERD/C/BIH/CO/9-11 (2015) para. 11; A/48/18 (1993) para. 501 (Croatia); A/40/18 (1985) para. 56 (Hungary).

[53] Within the Alpine-Adriatic-Pannonian area, only Bosnia and Herzegovina ratified the ICMW, and the relevant treaty body has so far adopted three concluding observations. The last two explicitly refer to the situation of the Roma within the migrant communities. CMW/C/BIH/CO/2 (2012) para. 35; CMW/C/BIH/CO/3 (2019) paras. 45-46, 61.

[54] For instance, in the latest LoIPR on Montenegro, the CCPR inquired about "measures taken to combat discrimination and prejudice against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex persons" under the following heading: "Non-discrimination, rights of minorities and prohibition of advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred (arts. 2, 20, 26 and 27)". CCPR/C/MNE/QPR/2 (2020) para. 8.

[55] A/9618 (1974) para. 135.

[56] CCPR/C/HUN/CO/5 (2010) para. 21.

[57] CERD/C/ITA/CO/16-18 (2012) para. 11. See also A/35/18 (1980) para. 92; A/47/40 (1992) para. 119; CERD/C/HRV/CO/8 (2009) para. 10; E/C.12/MNE/CO/1 (2014) para. 6; CERD/C/MKD/CO/8-10 (2015) para. 7; CERD/C/SVN/CO/8-11 (2015), para. 5; CRC/C/HUN/CO/6 (2020) para. 11; CERD/C/HRV/CO/9-14 (2023) para. 6; CERD/C/ITA/CO/21-22 (2023) para. 5; CERD/C/BIH/CO/14-15 (2024) para. 6.

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Konceptualizacija manjšin v praksi pogodbenih teles OZN – študija primera iz alpsko-jadransko-panonske regije

Izvleček

V mednarodnem pravu se v povezavi s pravicami določenih skupin pogosto uporablja izraz manjšine ter sorodni pojmi, vendar pa pravo samo teh skupin ne opredeljuje natančno. Koristne usmeritve na tem področju zato ponuja praksa organov, ki spremljajo izvajanje ustreznih mednarodnih instrumentov. Članek temelji na doktrinarni in primerjalnopravni analizi sodne prakse teles OZN za človekove pravice. Zaključne ugotovitve so umeščene v kontekst alpsko-jadransko-panonske regije, ki vključuje Slovenijo, njene sosede in druge države nekdanje Jugoslavije. Namen članka je pokazati, da med pogodbenimi telesi obstaja vse večje soglasje glede pojmovanja manjšin, ter izluščiti bistvene sestavine koncepta manjšin, ki se dosledno pojavljajo v njihovi praksi. Članek tako prispeva k nadaljnji konceptualizaciji manjšin v okviru mednarodnega prava človekovih pravic.

Ključne besede

konceptualizacija manjšin, pogodbena telesa OZN, alpsko-jadransko-panonska regija, pravna ureditev položaja etničnih skupnosti

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Mojca Medvešek[1], Romana Bešter[1], Janez Pirc[1]

The Participation Paradox: Immigrants' Civic and Political Engagement and Majority Attitudes in Slovenia

Abstract

This article examines the participation paradox in Slovenia through three dimensions: the legal-political framework, immigrants' civic and political participation, and majority attitudes. While civic rights are guaranteed to all residents, political rights remain stratified by citizenship and residence status, with full participation tied to naturalization. Survey results (N = 1,303) show that immigrants without Slovenian citizenship report lower civic membership and political participation than Slovenian citizens, even when eligible, while naturalized immigrants display higher engagement. Majority respondents accept immigrants' civic involvement but oppose their electoral rights. The participation paradox thus stems from institutional restrictions, behavioural differences, and public scepticism.

Keywords

participation paradox, immigrants, civic participation, political participation, citizenship, majority attitudes, Slovenia

Corresponding author

Mojca Medvešek, Inštitut za narodnostna vprašanja (Institute for Ethnic Studies), Ljubljana, Slovenija; **e-mail**: mojca.medvesek@inv.si; **ORCID**: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1876-2930

[1] Inštitut za narodnostna vprašanja (Institute for Ethnic Studies), Ljubljana, Slovenia.

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1. Introduction

Integration is a multidimensional process that extends beyond the economic and social spheres to encompass cultural, civic, and political dimensions. While economic integration concerns access to the labour market and social protection, and cultural integration involves language acquisition and social interaction, civic and political integration address migrants' opportunities to participate in civic life, exercise rights, and influence decision-making. These dimensions are interconnected: without civic and political voice, economic and social integration may remain incomplete, and without basic social security, civic and political participation is often hindered.

A central concept in this debate is the participation paradox (cf. Klarenbeek & Weide 2020). Immigrants are increasingly expected to demonstrate active citizenship and integration through participation in public life, yet at the same time, their opportunities for full political inclusion remain restricted. States often encourage civic involvement while limiting access to core political rights such as voting, candidacy, or party membership. This tension creates a paradox in which expectations of participation exceed the rights and opportunities available to immigrants. This paradox reflects broader tensions in theories of democratic inclusion: while scholars argue for the gradual extension of rights (Dahl 1989; Carens 2013; Bauböck 2005), citizenship remains the crucial threshold for full participation in most democracies (Earnest 2008). However, inclusion depends not only on legal frameworks but also on institutional infrastructures that provide bridges into political life (Bloemraad 2006) and on majority attitudes shaped by intergroup contact and perceived threat (Pettigrew & Tropp 2006; Verkuyten 2018). These structural, institutional, and societal dimensions jointly constitute the participation paradox.

Slovenia provides a particularly relevant case for examining this paradox. As a relatively new immigration country, its migration history was shaped predominantly by flows from the successor states of the former Yugoslavia. More recently, however, it has been increasingly influenced by intra-EU mobility and arrivals from other regions. While culturally and linguistically proximate groups from the Western Balkans might be expected to integrate more easily, and EU citizens benefit from specific supranational rights, the restrictive legal framework ties full political rights strictly to naturalization. The result is a stratified system of inclusion in which differences between EU and non-EU immigrants become particularly salient, producing structural imbalances and raising questions about the scope and depth of immigrant participation.

This article explores the participation paradox in Slovenia across three interrelated dimensions. First, it examines the legal and institutional opportunities for immigrant participation, focusing on the hierarchy of voting and candidacy rights, party membership, and consultative bodies. Second, it analyses the actual patterns of immigrant civic and political participation, highlighting the gap between formal opportunities and real engagement. Third, it investigates the attitudes of the majority population toward immigrant participation, showing how public perceptions reinforce or mitigate institutional and behavioural barriers.

The article addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the legal and institutional opportunities for immigrant civic and political participation?
2. What are the actual patterns of immigrant civic and political participation?
3. What are the attitudes of the majority population toward immigrant civic and political participation?

By answering these questions, the article aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the participation paradox and its implications for immigrant integration and democratic inclusion in Slovenia.

2. Theoretical Framework

To better understand the participation paradox in Slovenia, it is necessary to situate the analysis within broader theoretical approaches to immigrant political incorporation and majority–minority relations.

The concept of the participation paradox (Klarenbeek & Weide 2020) highlights the tension between the encouragement of immigrant integration and the simultaneous fear of immigrants' political influence. Migrants are expected to demonstrate civic engagement and loyalty to the host society, yet legal frameworks and political discourse often restrict their access to meaningful participation. This paradox provides a central lens for analysing immigrant incorporation in Slovenia.

Theories of democratic inclusion and stratification further illuminate these dynamics. Rather than treating political incorporation as binary, this literature conceives of democracy as a layered process in which different status groups enjoy differentiated access to rights (Dahl 1989; Earnest 2008). The long-term exclusion of resident non-citizens is viewed as problematic for democratic legitimacy (Carens 2013), while proposals for "expansive citizenship" argue for loosening the tight coup-

ling between national membership and political rights (Bauböck 2005). Taken together, these perspectives support viewing the Slovenian regime as a stratified system in which citizenship remains the crucial threshold for full inclusion.

Complementing these approaches, Bloemraad (2006) emphasizes the link between citizenship and the incorporation of immigrants into institutions and political processes, introducing the concept of institutional completeness to describe how inclusive institutions can foster immigrants' engagement and belonging. Her work highlights how organizational infrastructures such as political parties, trade unions, and community organizations provide crucial bridges into political life; where such infrastructures are weak or inaccessible, participation is likely to remain low even when formal rights exist. This perspective is particularly useful for examining how legal and political institutions in Slovenia condition immigrants' capacity to participate.

At the societal level, theories of intergroup relations help explain the attitudes of the majority populations. Intergroup contact theory (Pettigrew & Tropp 2006) suggests that meaningful contact between groups can reduce prejudice under certain conditions (e.g., equal status, cooperation, institutional support). However, when these conditions are absent, contact may reinforce stereotypes and tensions (Durrheim & Dixon 2005).

The threatened majority or threatened dominance theory (Verkuyten 2018) emphasizes how demographic change and the perception of cultural or political threat can provoke resistance among majority populations. Even relatively small immigrant groups can trigger anxieties about the erosion of majority dominance, which in turn shapes public attitudes toward their political participation. By contrast, Kende and colleagues (2024) find that greater political engagement of immigrants can correlate with more positive majority attitudes and a reduced sense of threat. This suggests the possibility of a positive spiral, whereby active immigrant participation gradually improves intergroup relations, though only under certain conditions (e.g., access to local elections and civil society organizations). From a normative perspective, these perceptions raise questions about how far majority claims to maintain dominance can legitimately constrain the democratic voice of long-term residents, a tension that our data illuminate but cannot fully resolve.

Finally, research on public opinion and political opportunity structures (Just & Anderson 2014; OSCE/ODIHR 2017) demonstrates how institutional frameworks and discourse shape both the opportunities for immigrant political involvement and the public's willingness to accept

it. Restrictive opportunity structures often go hand in hand with more negative public attitudes, producing feedback loops that reinforce exclusion.

In short, these theoretical perspectives illuminate the structural, behavioural, and symbolic dimensions of immigrant participation and majority responses. They provide the foundation for our analysis of the Slovenian legal and institutional context, the actual participation of immigrants, and the attitudes of the majority population, all of which jointly constitute the participation paradox.

3. Legal-Political Framework in Slovenia

Immigrant participation is primarily structured by the legal and institutional framework that specifies the allocation of rights and the conditions under which they can be exercised. In Slovenia, immigrants formally have the same opportunities for civic participation as the majority population, yet significant differences emerge in the domain of political participation. The regulation of political rights creates a distinct hierarchy based on citizenship status and length of residence, reflecting broader theoretical accounts of democratic inclusion and stratification.

3.1 Hierarchy of Civic and Political Rights

To present the Slovenian framework more clearly, we distinguish between civic and political rights. Civic rights, a concept increasingly used in the literature on civic integration (Goodman 2014), refer to opportunities for engagement in civil society and community life, such as participation in associations, trade unions, and cultural or religious organizations. Immigrants in Slovenia, regardless of their citizenship status, are afforded the same formal conditions for civic participation as the majority population. The situation differs significantly in the domain of political rights, which include voting and candidacy in local, national, and European elections, party membership, and petition and referendum rights. Here, access is strictly stratified: third-country nationals (TCNs) with permanent residence may vote in local elections but cannot stand as candidates, while EU citizens with permanent or temporary residence may both vote and run for local office, with the important restriction that the office of mayor remains reserved for Slovenian citizens. However, the political rights of EU citizens in Slovenia expanded gradually through successive amendments to the Local Elections Act. These changes were initially driven by the harmonization of domestic legisla-

tion with EU requirements prior to Slovenia's accession to the Union, and later by the implementation of EU electoral provisions. In 2002, EU citizens with permanent residence were granted the right to vote in local elections (Local Elections Act-D). Three years later, the right of EU citizens to stand as candidates was introduced (Local Elections Act-E). Finally, in 2012 (Local Elections Act-I), these rights were extended to EU citizens with temporary residence, establishing the current framework of active and passive voting rights at the local level. Full political rights, particularly at the national level, remain strictly tied to Slovenian citizenship.

Similar hierarchies of political rights are found across Europe. While EU citizens' rights to vote and stand as candidates in local and European elections are mandated by EU law (TFEU 2016, Art. 20 and 22; Council Directive 94/80/EC, 1994), voting rights for TCNs remain entirely within national competence (Groenendijk 2014). Slovenia's decision to grant local voting rights to TCNs with permanent residence, introduced by the Local Elections Act in 2002 (Local Elections Act-D), thus reflects a national policy choice rather than an EU obligation. Comparable arrangements exist in a few other member states, such as Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Ireland, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Slovakia, and Sweden, whereas most others continue to restrict local voting rights to their own nationals or EU residents (Delpero 2022).

The Slovenian legal framework thus establishes a clear hierarchy of rights based on citizenship status and length of residence. This hierarchy represents the structural basis of the participation paradox, as it creates a tiered system of inclusion in which full political participation can only be achieved through naturalization. Table 1 summarizes the distribution of key civic and political rights in Slovenia by citizenship and residence status.

As shown by Table 1, full political rights are accessible only to Slovenian citizens. EU citizens with permanent or temporary residence enjoy a comparatively broader set of local political rights than TCNs, as they may both vote and stand as candidates in local elections. Their rights nonetheless remain significantly narrower than those of Slovenian citizens. In particular, EU residents are excluded from participation in national referenda and national elections. TCNs with permanent residence have only the right to vote in local elections,[1] while immigrants from third countries with temporary residence remain largely excluded from political participation.

Table 1: Matrix of key civic and political rights by residence status in Slovenia

Status	Participation in societies	Trade unions	Referendum		Petition	Local elections		National elections		European elections		Party membership
			Local level	National level		Voting	Candidacy	Voting	Candidacy	Voting	Candidacy	
Slovenian citizens	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
EU citizens (permanent and temporary residence)	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗*	✓	✓**	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓
TCNs (permanent residence)	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗*	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗***
TCNs (temporary residence)	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗*	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗***

Sources: Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia (1991); Associations Act (2011); Referendum and People's Initiative Act (2007); Local Elections Act (2007); President of the Republic Election Act (1992; 2003); National Assembly Election Act (2006); National Council Act (2005); Election of Members of the European Parliament from the Republic of Slovenia Act (2004); Political Parties Act (2005).

* Any citizen of the EU and any natural or legal person residing or having its registered office in a Member State has the right to petition the European Parliament (Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union 2012).

** Cannot serve as mayor.

*** Foreign citizens may become honorary members of a political party if the party's statute so provides.

Critical thresholds in the rights hierarchy appear at three points: first, in the shift from temporary to permanent residence for TCNs; second, in the gap between TCNs with permanent residence and EU citizens with residence in Slovenia, as the latter enjoy broader local political rights; and finally, at naturalization, which represents the most substantial leap, granting access to the full set of political rights.

The patterns highlighted in Table 1 reflect what Dahl (1989) described as the gradual extension of democratic inclusion, where access to participation expands step by step but remains stratified. Bauböck's (2005) idea of expansive citizenship (namely, decoupling rights from

strict territoriality and membership) is only partially reflected, since Slovenian law maintains strong distinctions between citizens, EU residents, and TCNs. Earnest's (2008) spectrum of rights is likewise evident in the Slovenian case, as political rights incrementally increase with status, culminating in naturalization as the decisive threshold for full participation.

Slovenia's requirement of ten years of residence for ordinary naturalization places it at the stricter end of the EU spectrum (Yavçan & Gorgerino 2025). Recent European developments, however, illustrate diverging trajectories: while some countries, such as Germany, have shortened residence requirements in order to expand access, others, like Portugal, have moved toward more restrictive rules (Federal Ministry of the Interior 2024; Goncalves 2025). These contrasting reforms demonstrate that access to nationality and political participation does not follow a uniform path but evolves unevenly across member states. Although Slovenia remains restrictive in terms of the naturalization pathway, its recognition of local voting rights for TCNs with permanent residence situates it above a number of EU countries that provide no such rights (Yilmaz & Wolffhardt 2024). Such stratified configurations of rights, with more generous local rights for EU citizens than for TCNs and strict citizenship requirements for national elections, are broadly consistent with patterns observed in other European countries, including long-standing immigration destinations such as the Netherlands (Yilmaz & Wolffhardt 2024).

3.2 Party Membership and Consultative Bodies

Beyond voting rights, other institutional arenas of participation are equally restrictive. The Political Parties Act stipulates that only citizens of Slovenia and other EU member states may establish or formally join political parties. TCNs may be admitted merely as honorary members if permitted by party statutes (Political Parties Act 2005). This exclusion from core political organizations reinforces the dependency of TCNs' political participation on naturalization.

At the same time, Slovenia has created consultative bodies intended to channel immigrant voices. The Council for the Integration of Foreigners was established in 2008 and later replaced by the Council for the Inclusion of Foreigners, which since 2015 has included three representatives of immigrant communities (from the former Yugoslavia excluding Croatia, from EU countries, and from third countries). In 2022 the Council was moved under the Government Office for the Support and Integration of Migrants, and a representative of an NGO was added. In

parallel, the Council of the Government of the Republic of Slovenia for Issues of National Communities of the Former SFRY[2] in the Republic of Slovenia, established in 2011 under the Ministry of Culture, addresses cultural, linguistic, and media rights of Albanian, Bosniak, Montenegrin, Croatian, Macedonian, and Serbian communities. It is composed of representatives of the competent government ministries and one representative of each of the above-mentioned communities (Portal GOV.SI, n. d.). The adoption of the Act on the Implementation of Cultural Rights of Members of National Communities of the Nations of the Former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 2024 transformed this government council into a permanent consultative body under the Ministry of Culture. More recently, the Strategy for the Integration of Foreigners who are not Citizens of the European Union into the Cultural, Economic and Social Life of the Republic of Slovenia (Ministry of the Interior 2023) introduced yet another layer of consultative mechanisms for immigrants by providing for the establishment of municipal councils for foreigners at the local level.

Despite these institutional arrangements, most consultative bodies remain symbolic rather than effective, with limited activity and little actual influence on policymaking (Mirovni inštitut 2020; Solano & Huddleston 2020). This resonates with Bloemraad's (2006) emphasis on institutional completeness, showing that the mere existence of institutions is insufficient if they lack power and functionality.

4. Data and Methodology

This study draws on an original survey (Medvešek et al. 2024) conducted among adult residents of Slovenia (18+) using the Central Population Register as the sampling frame. We employed systematic random sampling to select a probability sample of n = 2,500 individuals. Because immigrants are typically underrepresented in general population surveys, we supplemented the core sample with an onomastic boost sample: an additional n = 7,000 adults were randomly drawn from the register and screened via an onomastic procedure (lists of first and last names common in the main countries of origin, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Croatia) to identify likely foreign-born residents (Reichel & Morales 2017; Prandner & Weichbold 2019). This yielded an onomastic subsample of n = 1,682. We adopted this approach because, even for research purposes, the register cannot be queried by country of birth or citizenship.

Table 2: Sample representativeness: comparison with Eurostat population data for adults (18+)

	Survey on Immigrant Integration through Civil Society and Political Participation (born in Slovenia, 2022/2023)		Survey on Immigrant Integration through Civil Society and Political Participation (foreign-born, 2022/2023)		Eurostat (born in Slovenia, 2021)		Eurostat (foreign-born population, 2021)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Gender								
Male	399	40.9	156	47.7	706,117	48.3	161,132	59.0
Female	577	59.1	171	52.3	755,694	51.7	111,824	41.0
Total	976	100	327	100	1,461,811	100	272,956	100
Age								
18–30	165	16.9	57	17.4	235,382	16.1	43,334	15.9
31–45	255	26.1	97	29.7	376,664	25.7	75,799	27.8
46–60	293	30.1	88	26.9	375,894	25.7	76,834	28.1
61 and more	263	27.0	85	26.0	473,871	32.4	76,989	28.2
Total	976	100	327	100	1,461,811	100	272,956	100
Education								
Primary	65	6.7	39	11.9	–	10.8	–	21.9
Secondary	490	50.2	181	55.4	–	53.2	–	57.9
Tertiary	398	40.8	99	30.3	–	36.1	–	20.2
No answer	23	2.4	8	2.4	–	–	–	–
Total	976	100	327	100	–	100	–	100
Citizenship								
Slovenian	946	96.7	155	47.4	–	–	–	–
Foreign	6	0.6	155	47.4	–	–	–	–
No answer	24	2.5	17	5.2	–	–	–	–
Total	976	100	327	100	–	–	–	–

Sources: Eurostat (2023a; 2023b); Medvešek et al. (2023).

Fieldwork ran from October 2022 to January 2023, producing 1,303 valid interviews: 976 respondents born in Slovenia and 327 immigrants. Sample composition and key sociodemographic distributions compared to Eurostat population benchmarks are reported in Table 2. A comparison with Eurostat population structure data indicates that, in the probability subsample (excluding the onomastic boost), immigrants account for approximately 13% immigrants, close to the national estimate of 15%, and that its demographic profile broadly aligns with population benchmarks, with the familiar small bias toward higher education levels typical of surveys (Eurostat 2023a; 2023b; Medvešek et al. 2023). Structural deviations in the combined dataset (probability + onomastic) reflect the deliberate oversample of immigrants.

5. Patterns of Immigrant Participation in Slovenia

While the legal framework defines formal opportunities, actual participation depends on whether immigrants make use of these rights and whether structural and symbolic barriers restrict their engagement. Examining civic and political participation thus reveals the extent to which legal opportunities translate into practice.

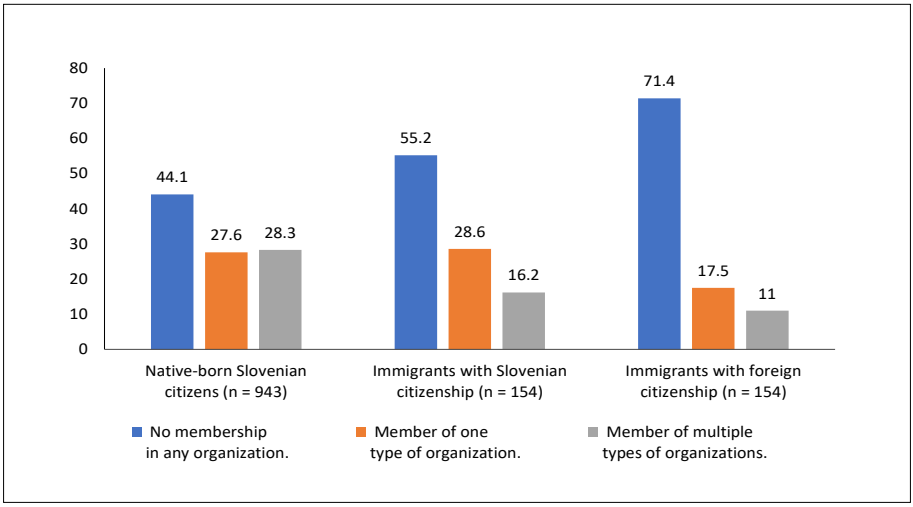
5.1 Civic Participation

We measured civic engagement across a wide range of organizations, focusing on two dimensions: membership (formal affiliation) and active participation (involvement in organizational activities). Activity is analysed in two ways: (a) overall activity (which may occur with or without formal membership) and (b) activity among members only. The organizations included trade unions, professional associations, charitable and humanitarian groups, environmental organizations, animal-rights and peace organizations, sports and recreation clubs, educational, art, music and cultural associations, volunteer fire brigades, faith-related organizations, and other organizations.

To disentangle immigrant status from citizenship and minimize confounding, we employ an immigrant–citizenship typology distinguishing (a) native-born Slovenian citizens, (b) immigrants with Slovenian citizenship, and (c) immigrants with foreign citizenship. We report findings at two levels: first, overall patterns across all respondents (Charts 1 and 2), and second, a two-stage analysis that separates entry into organizations from activation within them (Charts 3 and 4).

The intensity of organizational membership, categorized into three levels (no membership, single membership, multiple memberships), varies significantly by immigrant–citizenship status. A chi-square test of independence revealed statistically significant differences, $\chi^2(4) = 48.10$, $p < .001$, with a Cramér's V of 0.139 indicating a small association. Immigrants with foreign citizenship are more likely to report no membership compared to naturalized immigrants and native-born Slovenian citizens, reflecting lower engagement in civil society organizations. This pattern underscores the influence of citizenship status on the extent of organizational involvement, with foreign citizens exhibiting the least intensive participation.

Chart 1: Membership in civil society organizations by immigrant–citizenship status, N valid = 1,251 (in %)



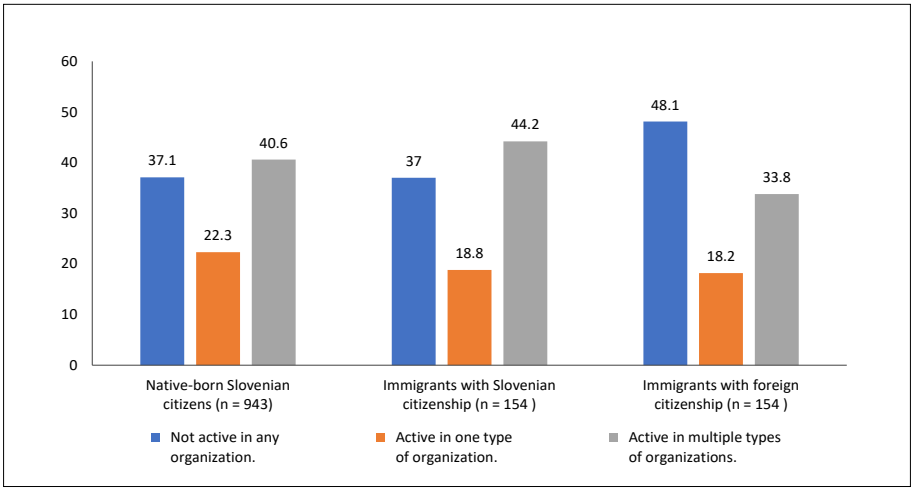
Source: Medvešek et al. (2024).

The analysis of activity intensity, categorized into three levels (not active in any organization, active in one type of organization, active in multiple types of organizations), shows no statistically significant differences between groups by immigrant–citizenship status ($\chi^2(4) = 7.99$, $p = .092$; Cramer's V = 0.057) (see Chart 2). Given the very small association, the observed group differences are unlikely to be of practical importance.

However, these aggregates mix members and non-members and cannot address whether immigrant members are less active than native members. Using a two-stage approach that (a) first examines entry (any membership) and then (b) assesses activity among members only, we find a clear entry gap but no activation gap. Membership differs sub-

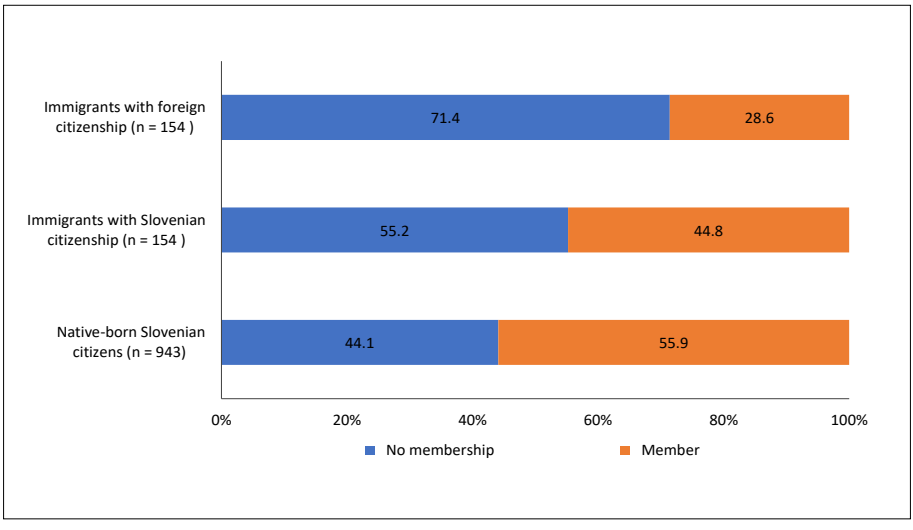
stantially across immigrant–citizenship groups ($\chi^2(2) = 42.364$, $p < .001$, Cramér's V = 0.184): only 28.6% of immigrants with foreign citizenship report any membership, compared with 44.8% among naturalized immigrants and 55.9% among native-born citizens.

Chart 2: Activity in civil society organizations by immigrant–citizenship status, N valid = 1,251 (in %)



Source: Medvešek et al. (2024).

Chart 3: Membership (Yes/No) in civil society organizations by immigrant–citizenship status, N valid = 1,251 (in %)

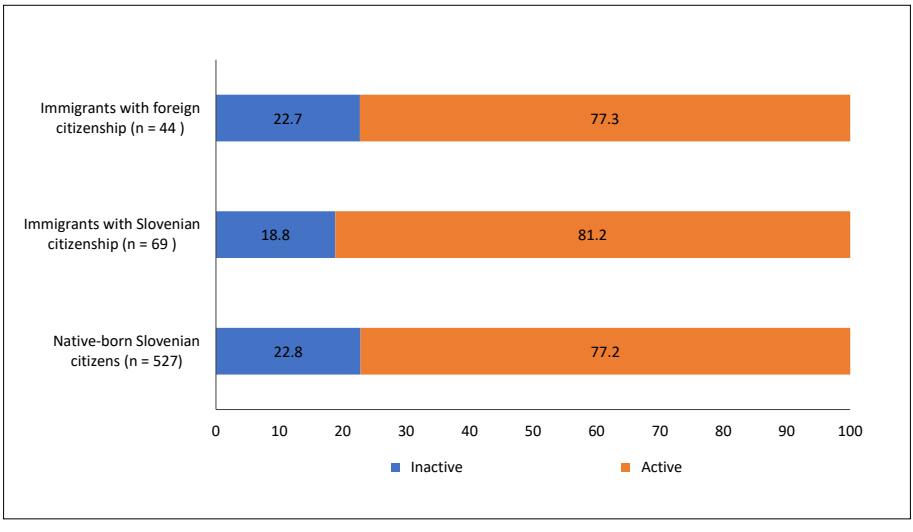


Source: Medvešek et al. (2024).

By contrast, when we focus only on those who are members, levels of activity are broadly similar across groups (Chart 4). Among members, 81.2% of naturalized immigrants, 77.3% of immigrants with foreign citizenship, and 77.2% of native-born citizens report being active in their organizations, with no statistically significant differences ($\chi^2(2) = 0.547$, $p = .761$, Cramér's $V = 0.029$).

These results indicate that the main barrier for immigrants lies at the point of entry into civil society organizations, rather than in their level of activity once membership is achieved. In other words, immigrants are less likely to become members, but once inside, they participate just as actively as natives. Several mechanisms may underlie this entry gap. From an institutional-completeness perspective (Bloemraad 2006), limited outreach by parties, unions, and associations towards immigrant communities, combined with a lack of bridging organizations, can leave immigrants outside core civic networks. Qualitative research in other contexts also points to perceived discrimination, uncertainty about fitting in, and limited information about opportunities as factors that reduce the likelihood of joining organizations, even where formal access is open (Just & Anderson 2014). Our data do not allow us to identify these mechanisms directly, but the pattern is consistent with a situation in which immigrants face barriers to entry rather than a lack of willingness to engage once they are included.

Chart 4: Activity in civil society organizations among members by immigrant–citizenship status, N valid = 640 (in %)



Source: Medvešek et al. (2024).

5.2 Electoral Participation

Electoral turnout constitutes a key indicator of political participation, yet it is strongly shaped by structural factors, particularly voting eligibility and citizenship status. The aim of this analysis is twofold: first, to examine how estimated turnout levels change when restricting the analysis to eligible voters; and second, to identify differences across three status groups – immigrants with Slovenian citizenship, immigrants with foreign citizenship, and Slovenia-born citizens.

The analysis relies on survey data covering participation in local, national, and European elections. Eligibility to vote is treated as an analytic proxy , defined as respondents aged 18+ at the time of each election who did not self-report "I have no voting right," and therefore indicating perceived formal access to electoral participation. This allows a closer assessment of participation within the population that reports formal access to elections. Other legal conditions (e.g., citizenship/EU status, electoral-roll registration) were not coded and therefore do not define eligibility here; they are used only for stratification by citizenship status. All measures are based on self-reports.[3]

Electoral participation is measured using two complementary indices:

1. Overall self-reported electoral participation: A binary indicator coded 1 if the respondent reported voting in at least one of the three elections (local, national, or European), and 0 otherwise, regardless of eligibility (responses indicating "I have no voting right" are coded as 0). If all three election items are missing, the indicator is coded as missing.
2. Self-reported electoral participation among eligibles: The same indicator, calculated only for those eligible (18+ at the time of the elections; respondents answering "I have no voting right" are excluded). Ineligible respondents are coded as missing values.

This distinction enables a comparison of self-reported electoral participation patterns within the eligible population and disentangles the effects of institutional restrictions from behavioural differences. European elections were included in the analysis as a critical test case of dual exclusion: institutional (asymmetric eligibility, especially for TCNs) and behavioural (lower perceived salience, weaker local mobilization). This approach allows us to differentiate between legally conditioned restrictions on access and actual behavioural differences in participation among eligibles, thereby avoiding inflated differences.

Overall self-reported electoral participation captures the aggregate, rights-dependent level of participation, while self-reported electoral

participation among eligibles identifies behavioural differences among those formally entitled to vote. This comparison separates institutional exclusion (ineligibility) from actual voting behaviour among eligibles.

In this analysis, eligibility is understood as meeting the legal conditions for participation in a specific election. This is not necessarily identical to citizenship, as eligibility is determined by electoral law and administrative rules (age, permanent residence, registration on the electoral roll, and depending on the type of election, EU/non-EU citizenship). For example, foreign citizens with permanent residence may also be eligible to vote in local elections, whereas elections at the national level are restricted to Slovenian citizens. Turnout gaps in European elections thus stem from two distinct sources: eligibility rules that exclude more foreign citizens (institutional), and behavioural/mobilizational differences among those eligible (e.g., information, language, networks). If turnout gaps persist even after restricting the analysis to eligibles, this reinforces the conclusion regarding the participation paradox: differences are not merely artefacts of legal barriers, but reflect structural behavioural and mobilizational factors among those with formal voting rights. These may include weaker party outreach, lower levels of political efficacy, language barriers, informational gaps about electoral rules, and concerns about the consequences of visible political engagement for one's treatment by authorities (Bloemraad 2006; Just & Anderson 2014).

Given these eligibility gaps, we next examine turnout among self-reported eligibles. Of the 1,303 respondents, eligibility data were available for 1,300 (3 missing). Of these, 1,241 reported being eligible for at least one election (95.5%), and 59 were ineligible (4.5%). Of the self-reported eligible respondents, 1,199 fall into one of the three immigrant–citizenship status groups, while 42 have missing status. Self-reported eligibility varies sharply by immigrant–citizenship status: among immigrants with Slovenian citizenship, 99.4% reported eligibility (154 out of 155); among immigrants with foreign citizenship, 69.0% reported eligibility (107 out of 155); and among Slovenia-born citizens, 99.4% reported eligibility (938 out of 944). The association between status of citizenship and self-reported eligibility is strong and statistically significant ($\chi^2(2) = 297.998$, $p < .001$; Cramér's $V = 0.487$).[4]

Patterns are similar in the full sample, but they become clearer once we restrict the analysis to eligibles. Overall self-reported electoral participation was 85.4%. Among respondents eligible for at least one election, self-reported electoral participation was 88.8%, which is an increase of 3.4 percentage points relative to the overall measure (see Table 3). By immigrant–citizenship status, the shift is minimal for Slove-

nia-born citizens, from 94.0% to 94.3%, and for immigrants with Slovenian citizenship, from 88.3% to 88.3%, but sizable for immigrants with foreign citizenship, from 29.4% to 42.1%, underscoring the compositional impact of ineligibility in this group.

Without the eligibility filter, the association between citizenship status and participation is very strong: $\chi^2(2) = 440.063$, $p < .001$, Cramér's V = 0.593. Among eligibles, the association remains strong: $\chi^2(2) = 266.379$, $p < .001$, Cramér's V = 0.471, showing that the participation gap persists even when restricting to eligible respondents.

Table 3: Overall self-reported electoral participation and self-reported electoral participation among eligibles by status of citizenship

Status of citizenship	Overall self-reported electoral participation (%)	Voted / total (overall)	Self-reported electoral participation among eligibles (%)	Voted / total (eligibles)
Slovenia-born citizens	94.0	886 / 943	94.3	885 / 938
Immigrants with Slovenian citizenship	88.3	136 / 154	88.3	136 / 154
Immigrants with foreign citizenship	29.4	45 / 153	42.1	45 / 107
Total	**85.4**	**1,067 / 1,250**	**88.8**	**1,066 / 1,199**

Source: Medvešek et al. (2024).

Note: Overall = self-reported electoral participation in at least one of three elections (local, national, European); ineligible respondents coded as non-voters. Eligibles = same indicator restricted to respondents eligible for at least one election (18+ at election time; those reporting "no voting right" excluded). Missing answers are excluded from denominators. Totals exclude cases with missing citizenship status. For national elections, only Slovenian citizens are legally eligible. The immigrant foreign citizen subgroup includes 11 self-reports; we show the value for completeness but do not use this cell for substantive interpretation or between-group comparisons.

We next disaggregate turnout by election type among self-reported eligibles.

Local elections: Self-reported electoral participation among eligibles was 86.6% (1,025 out of 1,183). By status: Slovenia-born citizens 91.7% (855 out of 932), immigrants with Slovenian citizenship 87.2% (129 out of 148), immigrants with foreign citizenship 39.8% (41 out of 103). Differences are significant ($\chi^2(2) = 216.200$, $p < .001$; Cramér's V = 0.427).

National elections: Self-reported electoral participation was 88.8% (1,012 out of 1,140). By status: Slovenia-born citizens 93.9% (868 out

of 924), immigrants with Slovenian citizenship 88.1% (133 out of 151), immigrants with foreign citizenship 16.9% (11 out of 65).[5] Differences are significant ($\chi^2(2) = 361.472$, $p < .001$, Cramér's V = 0.563). Accordingly, we retain the value for completeness but do not use this subgroup estimate for interpretation or between-group comparisons. Omnibus tests are reported as customary, while the narrative focuses on citizen subgroups due to eligibility restrictions.

European elections: Self-reported electoral participation was 66.5% (756 out of 1,136). By status: Slovenia-born citizens 71.1% (648 out of 912), immigrants with Slovenian citizenship 65.1% (97 out of 149), immigrants with foreign citizenship 14.7% (11 out of 75). Differences are significant ($\chi^2(2) = 99.138$, $p < .001$, Cramér's V = 0.295).

Participation gaps are substantial across election types, but their interpretation differs by institutional context. Immigrants with foreign citizenship are more often ineligible overall, and among self-reported eligibles they report markedly lower electoral participation than Slovenia-born citizens and immigrants with Slovenian citizenship. For national elections, where citizenship is a legal requirement, we retain the foreign citizen cell for completeness but do not use it for substantive interpretation or between-group comparisons.

In European elections, where some foreign residents (EU citizens) can be legally eligible, the low self-reported participation among eligibles, especially among immigrants with foreign citizenship, indicates that the participation gap is not solely explained by formal eligibility and persists among those who perceive themselves as able to vote. Local elections show a similar pattern: despite plausible legal access for foreign residents, sizeable gaps remain among self-reported eligibles.

These patterns are consistent with influences beyond formal eligibility, such as information access, administrative or registration frictions, language barriers, or weaker mobilization ties, although the data do not identify the mechanisms directly. The second-order nature of European elections may make such inequalities in information and networks more visible among eligible voters.

In interpreting these patterns, it is also important to consider transnational electoral ties. Some immigrants who are eligible to vote in Slovenia may prioritise voting in their country of origin, especially in national elections, or may perceive host-country elections as less salient. While our data do not capture voting behaviour in origin-country elections, this possibility provides an additional lens for understanding why electoral participation among eligible foreign citizens remains low despite the formal extension of certain rights.

For robustness, we repeated the key comparisons excluding European elections. Excluding European elections yields similar results: overall 85.2% (valid N = 1,250), eligibles 89.3% (valid N = 1,191); gaps by status remain large (overall $\chi^2(2) = 454.053$, Cramér's V = 0.603; eligibles $\chi^2(2) = 271.588$, Cramér's V = 0.478).

Results indicate a twofold constraint among immigrants with foreign citizenship: higher rates of ineligibility reduce overall turnout, and a large participation gap persists among eligibles. These patterns are statistically robust across local, national, and European elections, and remain when European elections are excluded. Because eligibility and turnout are self-reported and the foreign-citizen subsample is smaller, we emphasize between-group contrasts rather than absolute levels. Reliance on perceived (self-reported) eligibility implies that some foreign-citizen respondents consider themselves eligible for national elections due to informational or interpretive reasons (e.g., misperceptions of rules or confusion across election types). This is substantively relevant for understanding informational and administrative barriers to participation. The data do not allow us to identify the mechanisms that shape participation beyond formal eligibility.

5.3 Non-electoral Political Participation

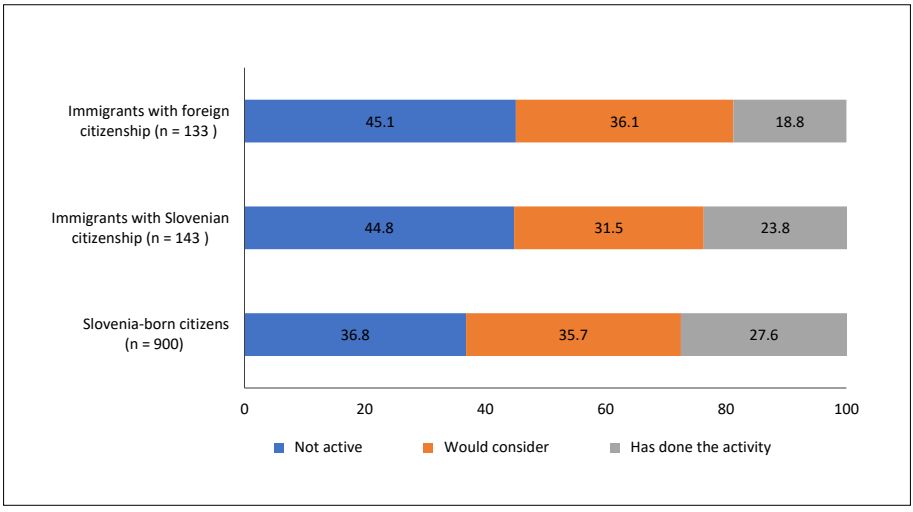
Beyond elections, eligibility is no longer applied. We estimate two complementary indices of political participation – institutional and individual political participation – for the full sample (with "don't know" coded as missing).

Institutional political participation: We measure engagement through formal political channels and organizations using items: attendance at political meetings/rallies, contacting politicians, financial contributions to political activities, and media appearances to express political views, on a 0–2 scale: 2 = has done the activity (in the last 12 months or earlier); 1 = would consider doing it; 0 = no and would never do it. "Don't know" responses are coded as missing. Party membership/engagement is then aligned to the same 0–2 scheme: 2 = both members (active or inactive) and non-members who nevertheless participate, while 0 denotes no membership/participation (the "would consider" level may not apply to this item and can be absent in the data). From these five recoded items, we construct a three-category institutional indicator defined as the maximum across items (2 > 1 > 0). We require at least three valid item responses for a non-missing classification. Categories are interpreted as 0 = not active, 1 = would consider (no past action), and 2 = has done (past or last 12 months).

Individual political participation: To capture engagement outside formal channels, we use five items: signing petitions, boycotts/buycotts for political reasons, participation in demonstrations, online political action/expression, and other individual political actions (e.g., persuading others about political issues). Each item is recoded to a 0–2 scale: 2 = has done the activity (in the last 12 months or earlier); 1 = would consider doing it; 0 = no and would never do it. "Don't know" responses are coded as missing. For analysis, we construct a three-category individual indicator as the maximum across the five recoded items (2 > 1 > 0), requiring at least three valid item responses for a non-missing classification. Categories are interpreted as 0 = not active, 1 = would consider (no past action), and 2 = has done (past or last 12 months).

In the domain of institutional political participation, the association across immigrant–citizenship groups is not statistically significant ($\chi^2(4) = 8.023$, $p = .091$, Cramér's $V = 0.058$). Descriptively, the share classified as "has done the activity" is highest among Slovenia-born citizens (27.6%), lower among immigrants with Slovenian citizenship (23.8%), and lowest among immigrants with foreign citizenship (18.8%); conversely, "not active" is more common in the two immigrant groups (≈45%) than among Slovenia-born citizens (36.8%) (Chart 5). Differences are small and not significant, but the pattern aligns with weaker institutional engagement among immigrants, especially those with foreign citizenship.

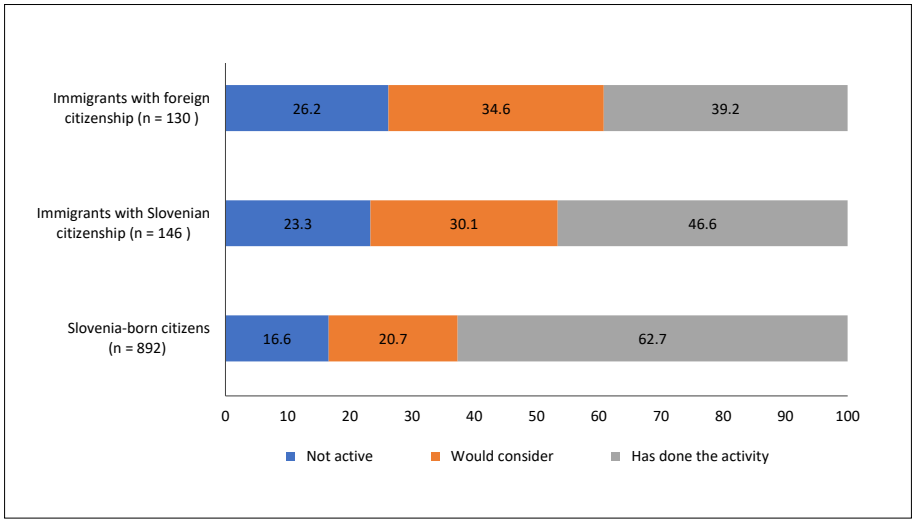
Chart 5: Institutional political participation by immigrant–citizenship status, N valid = 1,176 (in %)



Source: Medvešek et al. (2024).

On a three-level indicator of individual participation, distributions differ significantly across immigrant–citizenship groups ($\chi^2(4) = 34.688$, $p < .001$; Cramér's V = 0.122). Immigrants with foreign citizenship are more likely to report no individual participation and less likely to report having done such activities than Slovenia-born citizens, with immigrants holding Slovenian citizenship in between. Descriptively, "has done the activity" is 62.7% among Slovenia-born citizens, 46.6% among immigrants with Slovenian citizenship, and 39.2% among immigrants with foreign citizenship; "not active" is 16.6%, 23.3%, and 26.2%, respectively (Chart 6). Overall effect sizes are small-to-modest, but the pattern is clear.

Chart 6: Individual political participation by immigrant–citizenship status, N valid = 1,168, (in %)



Source: Medvešek et al. (2024).

The descriptive pattern is consistent: immigrants with foreign citizenship report lower participation than Slovenia-born citizens, with immigrants holding Slovenian citizenship generally in between. The strength of evidence differs by domain: for the institutional indicator, group differences are not statistically significant; for the individual indicator, they are statistically significant. Gaps are most visible at the active level, while differences in the "would consider" category are smaller. Because measures are self-reported and subgroup sizes differ, we emphasize between-group contrasts rather than absolute levels. Overall, the participation gradient by immigrant–citizenship status persists descriptively in both domains and is statistically supported for individual participation.

6. Majority Attitudes Toward Immigrant Participation

Immigrant participation does not occur in a vacuum; it is shaped not only by legal frameworks and immigrants' own engagement but also by the perceptions and acceptance of the majority population. Public attitudes toward immigrants thus represent a crucial factor in understanding both the scope and the limits of integration.

In our research, the majority population's attitudes toward immigrant civic and political participation were assessed through questions on various immigrant rights that the majority population would approve or disapprove of. These questions included whether immigrants without Slovenian citizenship but permanently residing in Slovenia should have equal voting or candidacy rights, be allowed to establish state co-funded civil society organizations, participate in state co-funded majority organizations, join political parties, or organize protests. Responses were recorded as "Yes", "No", or "I don't know".

Table 4: Support for immigrant rights among respondents born in Slovenia (N = 610)

"Yes"	Support (%)
Same right to vote as the majority population (permanent residents)	17.1
Same right to stand as candidates in elections as the majority population (permanent residents)	12.8
Possibility to establish their own civil society organizations co-funded by the state	23.4
Possibility to participate in majority organizations (e.g., trade unions) co-funded by the state	34.9
Possibility to join existing political parties	29.5
Possibility to claim their rights through organizing protests	29.8

Source: Medvešek et al. (2024).

The results show a clear hierarchy of support for different types of political and civic rights for immigrants without Slovenian citizenship. The lowest levels of support are observed for electoral rights: approximately 17% support equal voting rights and 13% support equal candidacy rights (Table 4). Higher levels of support are found for rights related to participation through civil society channels: 23% support the establishment of immigrant-led civil society organizations, 35% support partici-

pation in majority organizations, and around 30% support joining political parties or organizing protests. Cochran's Q ($Q = 251.7$, $df = 5$; $p < .001$) rejects the hypothesis of equal proportions, confirming a systematic hierarchy of support: the majority is more willing to legitimize expression and organization, but less so direct political influence through voting and candidacy.

This pattern reveals an important paradox of political participation: the majority population is relatively more accepting of immigrants' social presence (organization, party membership, protests) than of their institutional political power (voting, candidacy).

These findings are consistent with theoretical perspectives discussed earlier. Intergroup contact theory (Pettigrew & Tropp 2006; Durrheim & Dixon 2005) highlights that positive and equal-status contact is crucial to reducing prejudice. The pattern observed here may suggest that such contact remains limited in Slovenia, which could help explain why majority respondents accept immigrants' presence in civic life but remain resistant to their institutional political influence. From the perspective of threatened majority theories (Verkuyten 2018; Kende et al. 2024), the particularly low support for electoral rights may reflect a perception that expanding immigrants' political rights could undermine the dominant position of the majority population. In addition, as Just and Anderson (2014) argue, public opinion is shaped by political opportunity structures: Slovenia's restrictive institutional framework may both mirror and reinforce sceptical public attitudes, thereby sustaining the participation paradox.

7. Conclusion

This article has explored the participation paradox in Slovenia through three interrelated dimensions: the legal-political framework, the actual patterns of civic and political participation of immigrants, and the attitudes of the majority population. The analysis has shown that while Slovenia guarantees formally equal civic rights to all residents, political rights remain strongly stratified by citizenship and residence status. Full participation is tied to naturalization, positioning citizenship as the decisive threshold for democratic inclusion.

Survey findings confirm that this legal hierarchy translates into unequal outcomes: immigrants, and particularly foreign citizens, show significantly lower levels of membership in civil society organizations and markedly lower voter turnout compared to Slovenian citizens. Even among eligible foreign citizens, participation lags behind, pointing not

only to institutional exclusion but also to behavioural and symbolic barriers. At the same time, naturalized immigrants display higher levels of political engagement than immigrants with foreign citizenship, yet generally remain below Slovenia-born citizens, underlining the centrality of citizenship for effective participation.

Majority attitudes further reinforce the paradox. While there is some acceptance of immigrants' civic involvement, support for their political rights, especially voting and candidacy, remains very limited. This hierarchy of support reflects both intergroup contact theory, which highlights the persistence of prejudice under conditions of low-quality contact, and threatened-dominance theory, which interprets restrictive attitudes as a response to perceived challenges to majority status.

These findings highlight the multifaceted nature of the participation paradox but also underscore the limitations of survey-based research in capturing its full complexity. Reliance on self-reported participation measures, the challenges of onomastic sampling, and the relatively small immigrant subsample constrain the generalizability of results. Moreover, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to link institutional barriers, individual characteristics, and participation outcomes in a causal way.

The policy implications of this research are therefore more nuanced than often suggested in the integration literature. While institutional reforms such as shortening naturalization periods or expanding local voting rights may have theoretical appeal, they face substantial practical obstacles. The results indicate that changes in legal status, particularly naturalization, are associated with significant increases in electoral participation (including among self-reported eligibles), yet other barriers clearly persist. Moreover, implementing such reforms in the face of strong public opposition could backfire by heightening intergroup tensions and reinforcing negative stereotypes about immigrant political influence.

More broadly, our findings raise questions about the democratic status of long-term residents who remain excluded from core political rights. The coexistence of high expectations for integration and persistent resistance to extending electoral rights effectively normalizes a tiered system of voice, in which immigrants are accepted as workers and neighbours but not fully recognized as political co-owners of the polity. Majority opposition to immigrant voting rights reflects perceived threats to political dominance, yet majority preferences alone cannot be the sole arbiter of whose interests deserve representation in a democratic system. If having a say over collectively binding decisions is un-

derstood as a basic dimension of democratic equality, then the participation paradox points to a deeper tension between current citizenship regimes and the ideal of inclusive democracy.

Against this backdrop, a more realistic approach may lie in incremental measures that simultaneously build public support and address the most pressing barriers to participation. These could include strengthening consultative mechanisms, enhancing civic education programs for both immigrants and the majority population, and fostering positive intergroup contact through local-level initiatives. Such measures, while less dramatic than comprehensive legal reform, may prove more sustainable and effective in the long term.

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Notes

[1] An exception for them and for EU citizens applies to the election of members of the National Council (*Državni svet),* where foreign citizens may vote under the same conditions as Slovenian citizens if they pursue the relevant professional activity or are employed in Slovenia.

[2] This is an abbreviation for the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

[3] This operationalization captures perceived (self-reported) access to voting rights rather than legally verified eligibility. Respondents' understanding of their electoral rights may diverge from formal legal status, particularly for national elections that require Slovenian citizenship. In our data, some foreign-citizen respondents did not report lacking voting rights for national elections. This may reflect misperceptions of eligibility rules, confusion between election levels, or survey response error. We prioritize respondents' own perception of access, as subjective barriers (e.g., lack of information, confusion about eligibility) are substantively relevant to participation.

[4] The foreign-citizen subgroup's self-reported eligibility for national elections (e.g., N = 65 among self-reported eligibles) arises from this operationalization: these respondents did not indicate "no voting right".

[5] Notably, 65 foreign-citizen respondents did not report lacking voting rights for national elections. This is consistent with our use of perceived eligibility and cautions against substantive interpretation of that non-citizen cell.

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Participacijski paradoks: civilnodružbena in politična vključenost priseljencev ter stališča večinskega prebivalstva v Sloveniji

Izvleček

Članek obravnava participacijski paradoks v Sloveniji skozi tri dimenzije: pravno-politični okvir, civilnodružbeno in politično participacijo priseljencev ter odnos večine. Čeprav so civilne pravice zagotovljene vsem prebivalcem, politične pravice ostajajo stratificirane glede na državljanstvo in status prebivanja, polna participacija pa vezana na naturalizacijo. Anketni podatki (N = 1.303) kažejo, da imajo priseljenci brez slovenskega državljanstva nižje stopnje članstva v civilnodružbenih organizacijah in manj politično participirajo kot državljani, tudi kadar imajo volilno pravico, medtem ko naturalizirani izkazujejo večjo angažiranost. Večinsko prebivalstvo sprejema civilnodružbeno vključenost, a nasprotuje volilnim pravicam priseljencev. Participacijski paradoks oblikujejo institucionalne omejitve, vedenjske razlike in skepticizem večine.

Ključne besede

participacijski paradoks, priseljenci, civilnodružbena participacija, politična participacija, državljanstvo, stališča večine, Slovenija

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Ana Ješe Perković

Between Return and Permanence: Circular Migration in Southeast Europe

Abstract

This article examines migration patterns in Southeast Europe, with a particular focus on circular labour migrants from Bosnia and Herzegovina in Slovenia. Facing labour shortages across both low-skilled and high-skilled sectors, Slovenia has increasingly relied on migrants from the Balkans to fill these gaps. However, the persistent outflow of workers from Bosnia and Herzegovina has had detrimental effects on Bosnia's economy and society, exacerbating brain drain and demographic shifts. To address these challenges in third countries, the European Union has been promoting a circular migration model over the past three decades. While this model theoretically offers benefits to both countries by reducing brain drain and meeting labour demands, its practical effectiveness remains uncertain. This article analyses the impact of circular migration policy in Slovenia by examining migration statistics and assessing whether circular migration functions as intended in practice.

Keywords

circular migration, labour migrants, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovenia

Corresponding author

Ana Ješe Perković, Department of Sociology, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, Aškerčeva cesta 2, SI-1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia; **e-mail:** ana.jeseperkovic@ff.uni-lj.si, **ORCID**: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5272-1692

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1. Introduction

Slovenia attracts a significant number of labour migrants from the Balkans, making it a country shaped not only by the emigration of its own citizens but also by the immigration of citizens from neighbouring states. Over the past two decades, the inflow of foreign nationals has exceeded the outflow, while, conversely, more Slovenian citizens have emigrated than returned (SURS). This pattern is not new: already in the 1960s, Slovenia recruited workers from other parts of Yugoslavia, and this trend has continued even after the dissolution of the former state. Today, the majority of labour migrants come from Bosnia and Herzegovina, accounting for around 40% of all migrants, followed by Serbia, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Croatia (SURS).

Slovenia's geographical and cultural proximity to these countries, together with its relatively stable economy and persistent demand for additional labour, act as strong pull factors. At the same time, the broader orientation of EU migration policies and the pressures of the 2015 refugee crisis, which tested Slovenia's institutional capacities, suggest that the Slovenian government increasingly frames migration within a circular migration paradigm. While the Slovenian economy relies heavily on migrant labour to sustain growth, the large-scale outflow from Bosnia and Herzegovina has negative repercussions for that country's economy and society, exacerbating both demographic challenges and brain drain. In this context, a circular migration model is often seen as a potential solution – one that could mitigate brain drain while enabling migrants to contribute to the Slovenian labour market and eventually return home.

This article examines the dynamics of circular migration, highlighting both its advantages and limitations. First, we draw on existing theoretical debates on labour migration, with particular attention to the Slovenian academic context. Second, we review the institutional framework for circular migration in Slovenia. Finally, we analyse official migration statistics to assess whether the circular migration model is functioning in practice, focusing specifically on Bosnian labour migrants in Slovenia. Following Geddes (2015, 573), who notes that "one proxy for temporary [and circular] migration is the registration of residence permits", we investigate the number of permanent and temporary residence permits issued to Bosnian nationals over the past fifteen years. On this basis, we assess the extent to which circular migration operates in practice. We argue that circular migration can be an effective model only if properly implemented and supported by favourable conditions in both

sending and receiving countries – namely, a functioning economy and political stability in the country of origin, which are essential for return migration to occur.

2. Overview of Theoretical Framework

This chapter provides a concise yet elaborated overview of theoretical developments in migration research, situating the present study within the broader field. Migration has always been part of human history; however, contemporary forms of mobility are shaped by processes of globalisation and are markedly different from earlier movements. Traditionally, migration was primarily associated with the search for employment and improved economic status, or it was classified as forced migration driven by political or religious persecution (Hammar & Tamas 1997). Today, the concept encompasses highly diverse forms of mobility across shifting geographical, economic, and political contexts. Emphasis is now placed on diversity, interconnectedness, and the multiplicity of motivations. Migration can thus be understood as "a modern form of mobility and a dynamic set of relations between spaces, cultures, people and identifications" (Passerini et al. 2010, 3).

During the 1980s and 1990s, a significant theoretical shift occurred with the emergence of the "new economics of labor migration" (Stark 1991). This school of thought challenged the earlier neoclassical approach, which had treated migration primarily as an outcome of individual rational choice in response to wage differentials between countries. By contrast, the new economics of labour migration adopts a household and family perspective, where migration decisions are made collectively to diversify income sources, reduce risk, and achieve greater security (de Haas 2008, 34–39). This explains migration even in contexts where higher earnings abroad are uncertain. Moreover, this framework recognises the enduring role of migrants' remittances and the continuing ties to their communities of origin, thereby stressing the developmental potential of migration for sending societies.

In parallel, theories of transnationalism have gained prominence, particularly since the 1990s. Transnationalism highlights the ways migrants sustain multiple linkages – economic, social, political, and cultural – across national borders. Technological advancements, cheaper travel, and accessible telecommunications have made it far easier for migrants to maintain close connections with their home societies while integrating into host contexts. Migrants can thus live "transnational lives", sustaining their original identities and attachments while simultaneously

adapting to new cultural environments (de Haas 2008, 34–39). These transnational perspectives are crucial for understanding contemporary circular migration, where repeated back-and-forth movement blurs the traditional boundaries between temporary and permanent settlement.

While economic factors remain central in shaping migration, they cannot fully explain contemporary patterns. Theories of migration must also account for the heterogeneity of migrant populations. In the context of intensified global mobility, migrants cannot be treated as a unified category; rather, they are a mixed and differentiated group with diverse backgrounds, aspirations, and experiences (Cukut Krilić 2009, 31). Moreover, Boyd and Grieco (2003) remind us that focusing only on the structural causes of migration risks overlooking the agency of migrants and the importance of social and personal factors. Individual life circumstances – such as educational opportunities, family obligations, social values, and personal goals – play a crucial role in shaping both the decision to migrate and the outcomes of migration.

Building on this theoretical background, the present article adopts the new economics of labour migration and the transnationalism perspective as its central frameworks. This combination allows us to conceptualise circular migration not merely as a labour market adjustment mechanism, but as a process deeply embedded in family strategies, social networks, and transnational ties. At the same time, we recognise the structural constraints shaped by national and EU-level migration policies. This framework is particularly suited for analysing the case of Bosnian labour migrants in Slovenia, who often migrate as part of household strategies, sustain strong transnational connections, and are directly affected by shifting institutional frameworks that enable or hinder the possibility of circular migration.

The article also builds on existing literature on migration from Southeast Europe. As Božić and Kuti (2016) note, research on the former Yugoslav region has often prioritised migration flows and post-socialist transitions, while migrant networks have received less systematic attention. Recent scholarship, however, has increasingly focused on migration from Bosnia and Herzegovina (Ćudić et al. 2023; Savić-Bojanić & Jevtić 2022; Dimova & Wolff 2015; Babić 2013). A key contribution is Emirhafizović et al. (2013), who edited a comprehensive volume analysing Bosnian migration to destinations including the United States, Norway, Switzerland, Germany, Austria, and Slovenia.

Research on Bosnian immigrants and their descendants in Slovenia has also been substantial. Silva Mežnarić's (1986) pioneering study *"Bosanci": A kuda idu Slovenci nedeljom* ["Bosnians": And Where Do Slo-

venians Go on Sundays] was the first to systematically address Bosnian internal migrants in Slovenia. More recently, Ješe Perković (2024) has examined transnational social spaces and Bosnian descendants in Slovenia. Considerable attention has also been given to legal status and citizenship issues, especially following the "erasure", when approximately 28,000 individuals were removed from the register of permanent residents and reclassified as foreigners (Mandelc & Učakar 2011). Ješe Perković and Učakar (2017) further explored shifting public perceptions of labour migrants during the 2008–2015 economic crisis, noting how attitudes shifted from largely negative to more sympathetic after widespread labour abuses were revealed.

Nevertheless, further research is urgently needed on labour migrants from third countries to the EU. Such research is necessary not only to better understand their lived realities but also to inform more coherent and equitable migration policies.

3. Temporary and Circular Migration: Concepts and Debates

In this chapter, we define temporary and circular migration and review competing perspectives on these concepts. Although the term circular migration is often considered a contemporary phenomenon, it has been in use for decades. As early as 1982, Graeme Hugo employed the term to describe internal migration within Indonesia (Rannveig Agunias & Newland 2007, 2). Over time, circular migration has been used to describe various migration patterns; however, in recent years, it has become most commonly associated with temporary worker programmes.

There are distinct differences between temporary and circular migration. As Geddes (2015, 573) explains, "temporary migration is time-limited (although the scope of the temporariness can vary), while circular migration creates the possibility of entry and re-entry (although most member states do not have legal and policy frameworks for circular migration)". The European Migration Network (EMN 2011, 14) defines temporary migration as "migration for a specific motivation and/or purpose with the intention that, afterwards, there will be a return to country of origin or onward movement". The EMN Glossary also notes that, "with regard to the development of EU policy, this may be seen in the context of *inter alia* circular migration and seasonal workers" (EMN 2011, 14). Circular migration is defined as "a repetition of legal migration by the same person between two or more countries",

with examples provided in the Commission Communication on circular migration and mobility partnerships between the European Union and third countries (EMN 2011, 14). There has been considerable difficulty in distinguishing circular migration from temporary migration. At a minimum, it is essential to recognize that circular migration, or mobility, is a broad concept encompassing all forms of repeated cross-border movements – whether organized or spontaneous – occurring over varying time spans, with the potential to generate positive developmental outcomes (Geddes 2015, 573).

3.1 The Triple Win Narrative

Advocates[1] of circular migration, particularly within EU institutions, highlight its supposed triple win potential. First, sending countries are thought to avoid brain drain because migrants eventually return home, often with enhanced skills and resources. Second, receiving countries benefit by securing a flexible labour force for the period needed, without long-term responsibilities such as pensions, healthcare, or family reunification. Third, migrants themselves are expected to gain access to better wages, new skills, and opportunities to send remittances home, while retaining the possibility of return. Advocates further argue that circular and temporary migration schemes may reduce irregular migration by creating legal, regulated avenues for mobility.

This optimistic framing, however, tends to privilege macroeconomic outcomes while neglecting the lived experiences of migrants and their families. Early debates in the latter half of the twentieth century, especially those concerning highly educated migrants, already highlighted the tension between the developmental potential of mobility and the risks of brain drain. The current emphasis on circularity reframes this tension in a policy-friendly way, but longstanding concerns about exploitation and integration remain unresolved.

3.2 EU Policy Context

For circular migration to function effectively, EU and member state institutions stress the need for appropriate governance mechanisms. The European Commission (2007) promotes policies that combine incentives for circulation with support for reintegration. Key measures include multiple-entry visas or employment permits to allow repeat mobility, alongside assistance for returnees in their country of origin – such as job placement services or support for entrepreneurship.

The European Migration Network (EMN 2011, 33) identified four key objectives underlying EU attention to temporary and circular migration:

1. supporting economic progress in the member state (e.g. by addressing labour shortages, contributing to the knowledge society, etc.);
2. promoting the development of third countries, including mitigating brain drain and stimulating brain gain;
3. ensuring a livelihood strategy and the integration of migrants; and
4. the return of migrants.

As Zimmermann (2014) argues, enabling a high level of mobility within the circular migration context achieves the best effects, as workers move for work and usually do not stay in the target country if they cannot find a job. Conversely, enforcing restrictions and stringent conditions for re-entry into the country, which is the normal legislative framework and practice of most developed countries in relation to temporary migration, often contributes to attempts at illegal entry, residence, and work, as well as to migrants' unwillingness to return to their country of origin after their legal work permit expires.

> Would-be circular migrants who cannot easily move in and out of the host country are also more likely to bring family members with them when they migrate, since migrants can no longer be sure that they will be able to return home to see their family (Zimmemann 2014).

3.3 Critiques and Historical Parallels

Critics of circular migration policy point to the past experiences of guest-worker policies and long-term social consequences, such as German *Gastarbeiter* (engl. guest-worker) system in the 1960s, when workers were recruited and sent back on the employer's demand. They highlight a significant resemblance to the guest-worker migration policies of the 1950s and 1960s – a form of migration that, for many migrants, ultimately became permanent rather than temporary (Castles 2006; Medica 2010). This model is defined by partial social inclusion and citizenship exclusion (Medica 2010, 40). Its main characteristic is that migrant workers are included in certain spheres of social life (especially the labour market) but have no access to others (citizenship, political participation, etc.). Migration is perceived as a temporary phenomenon that should end with the migrants returning to their country of origin

(Medica 2010, 40). Moreover, the temporary nature of circular migration discourages employers from investing in the human capital, skills, and knowledge of these workers. Many migrants often take a downward step in their careers by performing jobs for which they are overqualified.

"Germany, like other Western European countries, was trying to import labour but not people" (Castles 2006, 742). However, Germany could not prevent the reunion of workers with their family members in the host country (Castles 2006, 743). As Medica (2011) points out, it became evident that the guest-worker migration policy in Germany had been outlived, and the emerging multicultural image became a response to the challenges posed by the need for different cultures to cohabit in society.

Despite previous experiences with the guest-worker model, political interest in both temporary and circular migration has increased over the past three decades. In 2014, an EU-level agreement was reached on a directive regulating the rights of temporary migrants employed as seasonal workers (Geddes 2015, 573). This directive applies to sectors such as agriculture, horticulture, and tourism, where migration tends to be seasonal and temporary yet also circular, as workers may return year after year. It establishes regulations regarding the entry and residence of migrant seasonal workers and upholds the principle of equal treatment in areas such as working conditions, wages, health and safety, and holiday entitlement (Geddes 2015, 573). However, it excludes issues such as access to unemployment benefits, which fall outside the scope of temporary, seasonal migration.

3.4 Bilateral Agreements and Their Effectiveness

Several bilateral agreements between EU countries and third countries have attempted to implement circular migration in practice:

1. Germany-Western Balkans Agreement: allows workers in the health sector from the Western Balkans to work in Germany temporarily, but many do not return.
2. Spain-Morocco Seasonal Work Program: some Moroccan agricultural workers have participated in circular migration, but enforcement is difficult.
3. Slovenia-Bosnia and Herzegovina Agreement: aimed at promoting temporary labour migration, but evidence suggests many Bosnian workers stay rather than circulate. (Geddes 2015, 573)

As Rannveig Agunias and Newland (2007) underscore, research consistently demonstrates that many migrants, including members of the diaspora, express a desire and intention to return to their countries of origin, either temporarily or permanently. However, various factors often impede their ability to fulfil this intention. The aspiration to return, whether temporary or permanent, does not always translate into actual mobility. For some migrants, the cost of returning may be prohibitive, or they may fear losing their jobs, while certain temporary migrants risk losing their residency status. Others may perceive a lack of professional or business opportunities in their country of origin, making return less appealing. Furthermore, some migrants establish strong social and economic ties in their host country, reducing their interest in returning home except for occasional visits. Due to all these factors, the effectiveness of bilateral agreements in promoting circularity remains questionable.

Against this backdrop, this article examines the case of the Slovenia - Bosnia and Herzegovina Agreement to assess whether circular migration has functioned as intended. We argue that while circular migration is presented as an optimal triple win model, its success depends on the interplay between policy design, structural conditions in both sending and receiving countries, and the agency of migrants themselves.

4. Slovenian Legal Framework for Circular Migration

Slovenia, as a newly independent state in 1991, faced the challenge of establishing its own legal and institutional framework for managing immigration. Over the years, its policies have been shaped by EU accession, Schengen Area integration, and broader geopolitical and economic trends.

Following independence, Slovenia enacted the 1991 Citizenship Act, which posed significant challenges for non-Slovenian residents of the former Yugoslavia, particularly Bosnians, Serbs, and Croats. One of the most contentious issues during this period was the Erased crisis of 1992. In 1999, the Slovenian National Assembly adopted a resolution on immigration policy, which set out policy guidelines, and the Aliens Act, which provided the legal basis for implementing immigration controls and residency regulations. Together, these marked Slovenia's first formal attempt to regulate immigration and residence permits.

Prior to EU accession in 2004, Slovenia's migration policies were primarily focused on controlling permanent immigration. However, EU accession necessitated the alignment of its immigration policies with European standards. The country began harmonising its frameworks with EU policies that encouraged managed migration and labour mobility. Slovenia officially joined the Schengen Area in 2007, eliminating internal border controls while reinforcing external EU borders. The adoption of the 2011 Foreigners Act facilitated work permits for third-country nationals by simplifying visa and residence permit procedures for both EU and third-country nationals, thereby laying the groundwork for circular migration schemes.

In the 2010s, the Economic Migration Strategy 2010–2020 (Evropska migracijska mreža, 2018) partly regulated the integration of third-country nationals into the labour market. Its objectives, aligned with the Slovenian Development Strategy (2005), were to:

1. offset the decline of the working-age population and address short-term labour market imbalances through immigration;
2. attract migrants who enhance innovation, entrepreneurship, competitiveness, and human capital;
3. enable Slovene workers to gain experience abroad while limiting brain drain by promoting the circulation of experts.

In 2015, further facilitation of work mobility was introduced into Slovenian legislation. On 1 September 2015, the Employment, Self-Employment, and Work of Foreigners Act (ZZSDT) came into force, implementing a "single permit" system. Prior to this reform, Slovenian legislation prescribed three distinct types of work permits, only one of which – namely, the "permanent work permit" – allowed a foreign worker to transition into long-term immigration. This permit was directly linked to a permanent residence permit (Malačič 2010, 92). The other two permits – the employment permit and the permit for seasonal work (commonly referred to as the "work permit") – were more closely associated with circular migration. Both were valid for only one year and required renewal.

The introduction of the single permit enables third-country nationals to enter Slovenia and obtain residence, employment, and work authorization through a streamlined process. Applicants now benefit from a simplified procedure at the administrative unit, following the one-stop-shop principle. As a result, foreign nationals seeking employment, self-employment, or work in Slovenia no longer need to acquire two separate permits. The single permit consolidates and replaces the resi-

dence permit (previously issued by administrative units) and the work permit (formerly issued by the Employment Service of Slovenia).

Owing to historical ties and the needs of the Slovenian economy, a bilateral Agreement on the Employment of Citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Slovenia was signed between the two countries in 2012 (Law on the Ratification … 2012). The agreement established a legal framework for regulating labour migration between the two countries. Effective since 1 March 2013, the agreement aligns with the EU's focus on circular migration and aims to promote ethical recruitment practices, mitigate brain drain, and eliminate administrative barriers to the employment of Bosnian citizens in Slovenia. Furthermore, it seeks to safeguard migrant workers' rights while reinforcing the expectation that they will return voluntarily to Bosnia and Herzegovina upon the expiration of their work permits.

The key characteristics of this agreement include:

1. Facilitation of Employment – enabling Bosnian workers to access employment opportunities in Slovenia under regulated conditions, ensuring compliance with Slovenian labour laws.
2. Employer Sponsorship Requirement – Slovenian employers must apply for work permits on behalf of Bosnian workers, ensuring that employment is arranged before migration occurs.
3. Temporary and Circular Migration Focus – promoting temporary labour migration, with an emphasis on short-term and circular migration patterns rather than permanent settlement.
4. Regulated Work Permit System – work permits issued under this agreement are job- and employer-specific, meaning workers are tied to a particular employer for the duration of their contract.
5. Worker Protection Measures – provisions to prevent labour exploitation, ensuring that Bosnian workers receive fair wages and working conditions in line with Slovenian labour laws.
6. Administrative Cooperation – mechanisms for collaboration between Slovenian and Bosnian authorities to oversee implementation, monitor compliance, and resolve any issues.

This agreement reflects broader European trends of managed labour migration while maintaining a temporary migration model. However, its effectiveness in achieving true circular migration remains a subject of debate. In the following chapter, we examine whether the agreement effectively facilitates circular migration and encourages migrants to return to their home country.

5. Circular Migration in Practice: From Bosnia and Herzegovina to Slovenia and Back

Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) share a long history of migration, shaped by their common past within Yugoslavia and by evolving labour and political dynamics. During the period of socialist Yugoslavia, Slovenia, as the most economically developed republic, attracted many labour migrants from Bosnia and other southern republics. Many Bosnians moved to Slovenia in search of better employment opportunities, particularly in industries such as construction, manufacturing, and mining. Today, BiH remains one of the main sources of migrant labour in Slovenia, particularly in low-wage sectors.

In this chapter, we analyse official statistical data on labour migration from BiH to Slovenia. As Geddes (2015, 573) notes, "one proxy for temporary [and circular] migration is the registration of residence permits." To assess whether circular migration has been implemented in practice, we examine the number of permanent and temporary residence permits issued by the Slovenian government to Bosnian nationals over a fifteen-year period. We collected data from two primary sources: the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia (SURS) and the Migration Directorate at the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Slovenia (MNZ). These sources provide official records on labour migration trends, including the issuance and renewal of residence and work permits.

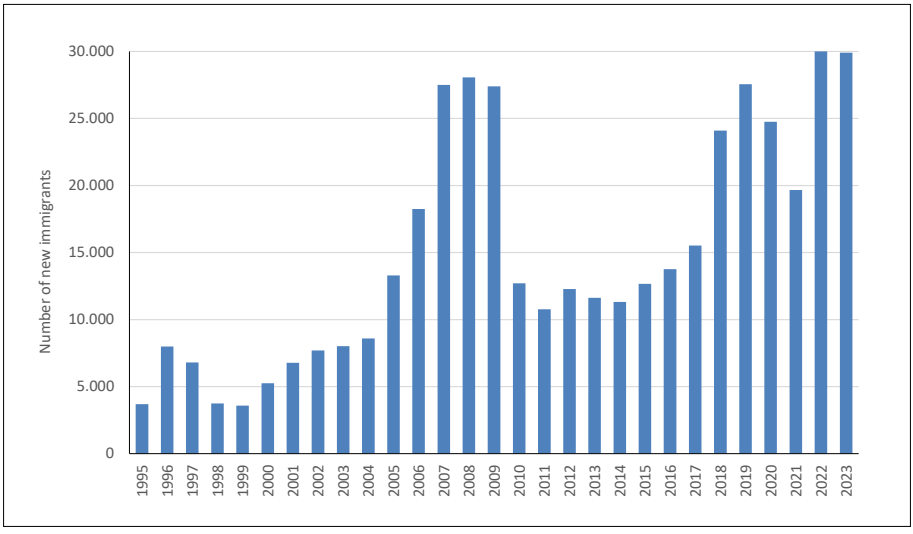
Given the limited availability of official statistical data from BiH, we were unable to obtain comprehensive data on emigration from BiH. However, to supplement our analysis, we incorporated secondary data from various sources, including the Labour and Employment Agency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, European Commission country reports, European Migration Network and the International Labour Organization. These sources provided valuable insights into emigration patterns from BiH, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of labour migration flows between the two countries. To ensure the reliability and validity of our findings, we employed a comparative approach, cross-referencing data from multiple sources where possible. Additionally, we considered potential limitations related to data collection methodologies and reporting discrepancies among institutions. This methodological approach enables a more nuanced interpretation of labour migration dynamics within the Slovenian and broader European context.

In analysing official data from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia (SURS), we selected a fifteen-year period from 2008 to 2023.

This timeframe was chosen to capture significant economic fluctuations, beginning with the onset of the 2008 financial crisis – which had profound effects on Slovenia and Europe – and concluding with the economic downturn and high inflation rates following the COVID-19 crisis. While some analyses conducted by SURS do not cover this exact period, they nonetheless provide a valuable representation of migration trends in Slovenia. Additionally, the Migration Directorate (MNZ) has been collecting data since its establishment in 2007, though some data for the initial years are incomplete.

To gain a broader understanding of immigration trends in Slovenia, we first examine the number of new immigrants over three decades. Since gaining independence, Slovenia has primarily functioned as a receiving country. As depicted in Chart 1, the number of immigrant foreign nationals steadily increased from 1995 until 2009. However, the economic crisis that severely impacted the Slovenian economy in 2009, coupled with a prolonged political crisis, led to a substantial decline in immigration over the following seven years. Subsequently, immigration numbers began to recover gradually, reaching levels comparable to those observed in 2007–2008, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2022, the number of immigrants reached the highest level in independent Slovenia. These trends underscore the sensitivity of migration flows to economic cycles and broader socio-political conditions.

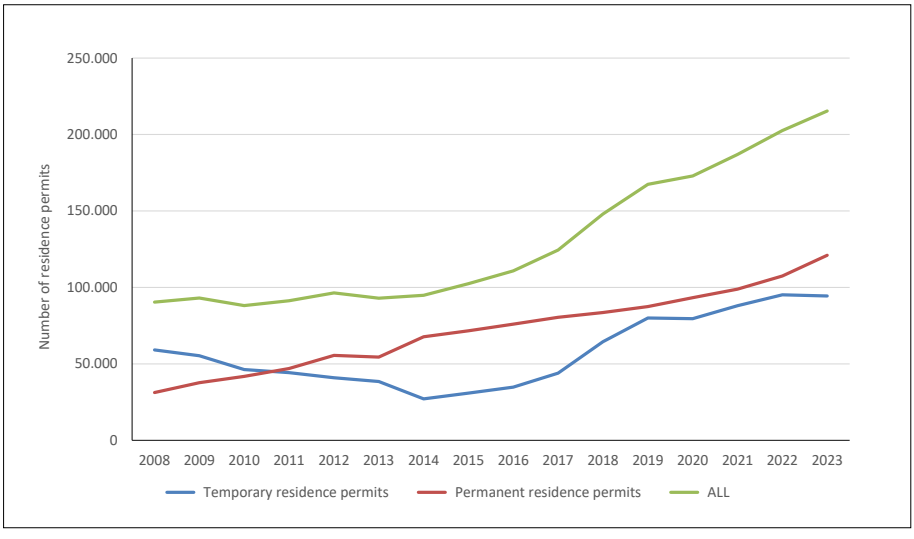
Chart 1: Number of immigrant foreign nationals in Slovenia per year, 1995–2023



Source: SURS.

Chart 2 presents data on permanent and temporary residence permits issued to third-country nationals in Slovenia as of 31 December each year from 2008 to 2023. In 2008, there were 59,174 third-country nationals holding temporary residence permits and 31,245 with permanent residence permits. The unstable economic conditions in the early 2010s negatively affected the labour market. By 2011, the number of permanent residence permits had surpassed that of temporary residence permits. The data indicate a significant decline in the issuance of temporary residence permits during the economic crisis (2013–2015), with numbers dropping by half. In 2013, the Bilateral Agreement on the Employment of Workers between Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Law on the Ratification … 2012) came into force. Given that this agreement promotes a circular migration model, an increase in the number of temporary residence permits would have been expected in the following years. However, this increase did not occur immediately; it was in 2017 that the number of temporary residence permits began to rise. In 2013, also the EU visa-liberalisation regime for Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Albania was implemented, and a single permit system was introduced into Slovenian legislation in 2015, as mentioned in the previous chapter. Hence, migration flows increased, and the overall number of residence permits issued has been steadily increasing ever since.

Chart 2: Number of permanent and temporary residence permits for citizens of third countries in Slovenia on 31 December, 2008–2023

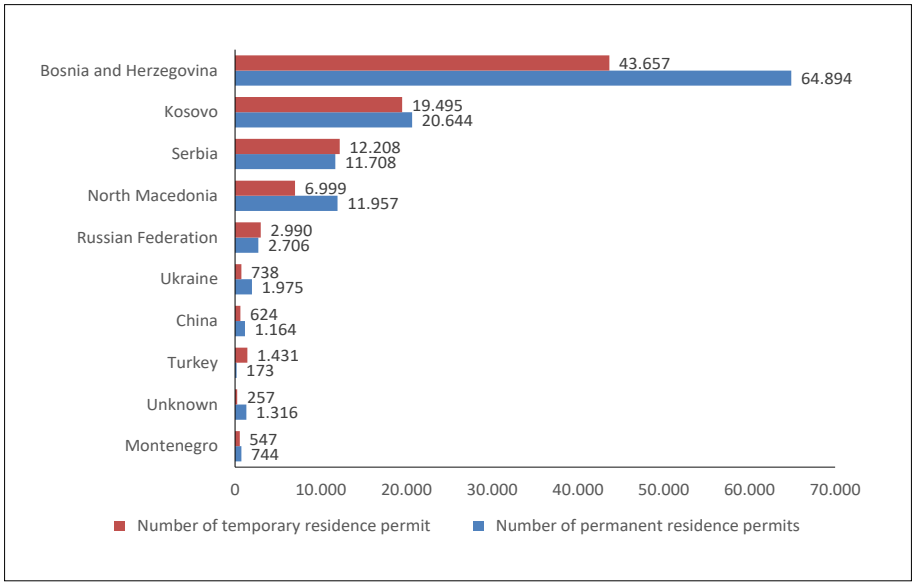


Source: MNZ.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, temporary residence permits increased by 10% to 88,005, while permanent residence permits rose by 6% to 98,925, compared with the previous year. By 2023, the number of permanent residence permits had risen to 121,032, while temporary residence permits reached 94,359. Notably, around half of these permits were issued to Bosnian nationals (see Chart 3).

According to data from the Migration Directorate (MNZ), nationals of BiH have represented the largest group of labour migrants in Slovenia since its independence. As shown in Chart 3, Bosnian nationals remain the most numerous group holding residence permits in Slovenia. It is important to note that official statistics on labour migration do not account for undocumented workers, meaning the actual number of Bosnian labour migrants in Slovenia is likely higher.

Chart 3: Top ten third countries whose nationals held the highest number of valid permanent and temporary residence permits in Slovenia on 31 December 2023



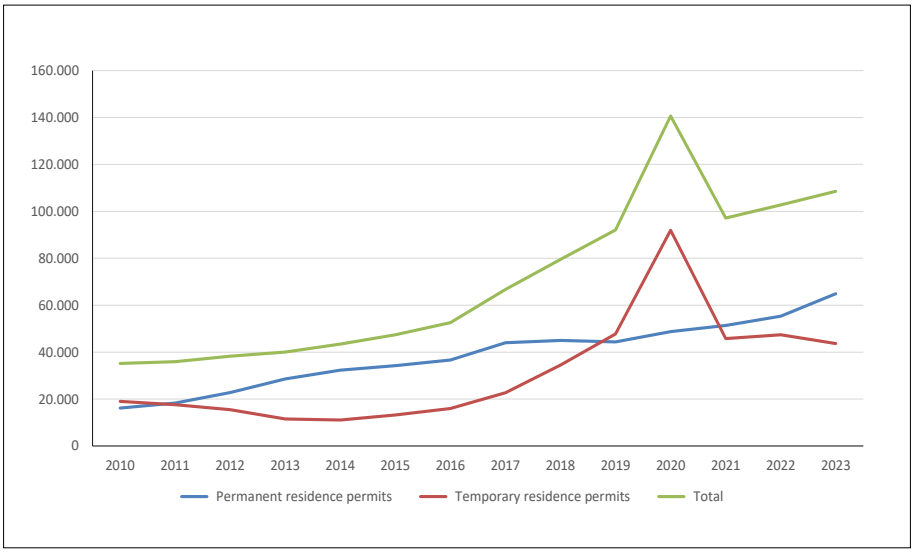
Source: MNZ.

Chart 4 illustrates the number of valid permanent and temporary residence permits issued to citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Slovenia from 2010 to 2023, recorded on the last day of each year (31 December). The data is presented in three categories: permanent residence permits (blue line), temporary residence permits (red line), and the total number of permits (green line).

The trend indicates a steady increase in the total number of residence permits over the years, with a particularly sharp rise observed between 2017 and 2019. This upward trajectory was primarily driven by the increase in temporary residence permits, which peaked significantly in 2020 before experiencing a substantial decline in 2021. This fluctuation was likely the result of COVID-19 policy restrictions, which prompted Bosnian nationals to apply in greater numbers for temporary residence permits in order to facilitate freer movement despite institutional barriers.

Conversely, the number of permanent residence permits has shown a more stable and gradual increase throughout the observed period. From 2010 to 2023, the number of permanent residence permits consistently grew, suggesting a long-term integration trend among Bosnian nationals residing in Slovenia.

Chart 4: Number of valid temporary and permanent residence permits on the last day of each year (as of December 31) from 2010 to 2023, issued to citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina



Source: MNZ.

Over the years, the number of permanent residence permits has consistently exceeded that of temporary permits. Notably, in the past three years, the issuance of temporary residence permits has stagnated. However, both types of residence permits remain at a high level, indicating that some workers return home while others stay for longer periods. A significant number of migrant workers who remain in the host country

for an extended time aspire not only to work but also to settle there permanently. Many bring their families to join them and often assist friends in securing employment (Ješe Perković 2024). The reasons for not returning to Bosnia and Herzegovina have yet to be thoroughly researched. However, based on other case studies (Zimmermann 2014), it can be assumed that key factors include the country's poor economic conditions and the migrants' partial integration into the host society. As they become more embedded in the host society, their inclination toward circular migration diminishes, and they increasingly opt for permanent residence.

There is no official data on the number of Bosnian labour migrants who return home or engage in circular migration. However, reports from the Agency for Work and Employment of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the European Commission's Country Report (2023) indicate a significant outflow of people from BiH and a growing shortage of workers in key sectors. Despite this, unemployment in BiH remains around 12%. The Bosnian labour market is very specific, as it is strongly influenced by remittances and undeclared work. The size of the undeclared economy is estimated at 30% of GDP (Pasovic & Efendic 2018), while over 20% of the labour force is believed to participate in the undeclared economy (Williams & Efendic 2020). As Williams and Efendic (2021, 486) write, "the main characteristics of the labour market in BiH are a very low activity rate, which is about half of the EU average (around 40%), and high unemployment rates, especially for young people."

According to the SEE Jobs Gateway Database (2023), the labour force participation rate among the working-age population was nearly 60% in 2023. Although it has been steadily increasing, women's participation in the labour market remains significantly lower than that of men. Similarly, the labour market participation rate of young people (aged 15–24) remains relatively low, at approximately 30%. The overall employment rate also remains low, at 47% in 2023, while the unemployment rate stood at 13% in the same year.

The circular migration model appears only partially effective for Bosnian workers, as economic and political instability in Bosnia and Herzegovina, along with weak state institutions, discourages return migration. Given the long history of migration between Slovenia and BiH, a large Bosnian community has developed in Slovenia, providing newcomers with a social network and safety net. This network offers information, practical guidance, and financial assistance to Bosnians seeking employment in Slovenia, facilitating their integration into the host society while making return migration more difficult (Ješe Perković 2004).

Moreover, the majority of Bosnian labour migrants in Slovenia are low-skilled workers, for whom frequent movement between the home and host countries presents greater challenges. This underscores a broader issue: circular migration is not a universally applicable model across all countries and workforce categories.

6. Conclusion

Slovenia has relied on migrant labour since the 1960s, first through internal migration within Yugoslavia and later through external migration. Throughout this period, Bosnia and Herzegovina has consistently served as the principal source of workers. This long-standing migration trend has been shaped by multiple factors: Slovenia's comparatively robust economy, persistent shortages of low-skilled labour, political and economic instability in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the wider Balkan region, and the geographical, cultural, and linguistic proximity between the two countries. While such migration has supported Slovenia's labour market needs, it has simultaneously had adverse effects on Bosnia and Herzegovina, contributing to economic stagnation, demographic decline, and social transformation. These challenges have often been framed as potentially mitigable through the model of circular migration.

In alignment with the EU's migration policy discourse, Slovenia has formally adopted a circular migration framework through a bilateral agreement with Bosnia and Herzegovina signed in 2012. This agreement emphasises the importance of return and the circulation of workers, thereby institutionalising the idea that migration should not result in permanent settlement. The model reflects the broader EU narrative of circular migration as a triple win: ensuring labour supply for member states, promoting development in sending countries by offsetting brain drain, and enabling migrants to benefit from both wage differentials and skills acquisition.

Our analysis of official migration statistics provides a more nuanced picture. Over a fifteen-year period, we examined the number of temporary and permanent residence permits issued to Bosnian nationals in Slovenia. The data reveal a simultaneous increase in both categories: temporary permits suggest significant short-term labour mobility, while rising permanent permits demonstrate that many workers choose to remain long-term and integrate into Slovenian society. This outcome reflects broader structural conditions: ongoing instability and limited opportunities in Bosnia and Herzegovina reduce the attractiveness of

return, while relatively stable employment prospects and cultural proximity encourage settlement in Slovenia.

These findings highlight the tension between circular migration as a policy narrative and migration as a social reality. The EU promotes circular migration because it symbolically reconciles divergent policy objectives: addressing labour shortages, avoiding permanent settlement, and fostering development in sending countries. Yet, in practice, the structural preconditions required for genuine circulation – flexible re-entry regimes, reintegration support in the country of origin, and a stable domestic economy are seldom fulfilled. As a result, circular migration schemes often reproduce the dynamics of past guest-worker programmes, facilitating initial entry but ultimately leading to settlement rather than circulation.

The effectiveness of circular migration also varies by skill level. Highly educated migrants are better positioned to engage in circularity, as they possess greater mobility, adaptability, and access to higher-paying opportunities. Low-skilled migrants, by contrast, often face structural barriers: employers are reluctant to invest in their training or integration, and their labour market mobility remains limited. Consequently, circular migration schemes may deepen existing inequalities if they are not accompanied by measures that recognise and support the diversity of migrant experiences.

In light of these dynamics, migration governance must go beyond economic calculations. While labour market needs are central, migration policies should prioritise the social, economic, and human dimensions of mobility. For Slovenia and other EU member states the challenge is to design frameworks that balance the promotion of voluntary circular migration with robust integration mechanisms for those who remain. This requires policies that ensure fair working conditions, access to social rights, and meaningful reintegration support, while also fostering long-term stability and development in sending countries. Only under such conditions can circular migration move from being a largely rhetorical policy device to a viable and sustainable form of mobility.

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Notes

[1] The main advocates of the positive effects of temporary and circular migration are the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the European Commission or state institutions.

Med vrnitvijo in naselitvijo: krožne migracije v jugovzhodni Evropi

Izvleček

Članek obravnava migracijske vzorce v jugovzhodni Evropi, s posebnim poudarkom na krožnih delovnih migracijah iz Bosne in Hercegovine v Slovenijo. Ker se Slovenija sooča s kroničnim pomanjkanjem delovne sile tako med manj kot med visoko usposobljenimi delavci, se vse bolj opira na migrante z območja Zahodnega Balkana, vendar pa trajen odliv delavcev iz Bosne in Hercegovine negativno vpliva na tamkajšnje gospodarstvo in družbo, saj poglablja beg možganov in pospešuje neugodne demografske trende. Da bi se soočila s temi izzivi, Evropska unija že zadnjih trideset let spodbuja model krožnih migracij. Čeprav ta model teoretično prinaša obojestranske koristi, saj hkrati zmanjšuje izgubo človeškega kapitala in zadovoljuje potrebe po delovni sili, ostaja njegova dejanska učinkovitost vprašljiva. Članek zato analizira vpliv politike krožnih migracij v Sloveniji s pomočjo statističnih podatkov in ocenjuje, v kolikšni meri se cilji krožnih migracij uresničujejo v praksi.

Ključne besede

krožne migracije, delovni migranti, Bosna in Hercegovina, Slovenija

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Nikola Vukasovic[1], Vasileios Chatzimpyros[1]

Identity Construction and Belonging: A Study of Second-Generation Bosnian Immigrants

Abstract

The study examines identity formation and the sense of belonging among second-generation Bosnian immigrants in Serbia and Montenegro, children of refugees displaced by the Bosnian War. Despite a shared cultural heritage across the Balkans, these individuals often navigate historical animosities and nationalist tensions in a post-conflict society. A qualitative approach, grounded in Social Identity Theory and based on semi-structured interviews, identified three central themes: rejection of national and ethnic distinctions in favour of a broader Balkan identity, the essential role of family in shaping values, and artistic expression as a means of self-exploration. The findings suggest identity among second-generation immigrants is fluid and continuously shaped by personal interactions rather than inherited divisions. These findings contribute to the existing literature by offering insight into how cultural heritage, familial dynamics, and creative expression shaped participants' identities.

Keywords

identity formation, second-generation immigrants, belonging, post-conflict societies, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Corresponding author

Nikola Vukasovic, Psychology Department, CITY College, University of York Europe Campus, Leontos Sofou 3, Thessaloniki 546 26, Greece; **e-mail**: vukasovicnikola01@gmail.com

[1] Psychology Department, CITY College, University of York Europe Campus, Leontos Sofou 3, Thessaloniki 546 26, Greece

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, the concept of identity has garnered increasing attention in the social sciences and public discourse. Individuals typically use categories such as culture, nationality, ethnicity, religion, and occupation to define themselves. While forming a stable self-concept can be challenging for many, second-generation immigrants may face additional hurdles influenced by a combination of cultural, social, and psychological factors. Born or raised in a country different from their parents' country of origin, many second-generation immigrants report grappling with dual or hyphenated identities and at times feeling foreign in their country of birth. This complexity arises from integrating their life experiences with an inherited past that may include the traumatic circumstances of their family's migration (Monscheuer 2023; Zhang et al. 2018). Understanding how second-generation immigrants negotiate these layered identities offers valuable insight into the broader dynamics of identity construction in increasingly multicultural societies. The dissolution of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s triggered a series of violent ethnic conflicts. The Bosnian War (1992–1995) involved conflict among three major ethnic groups: Serbs (Orthodox), Croats (Catholic), and Bosniaks (Muslim) (Bolton & Jeffrey 2008). The conflict was characterised by genocide and mass displacement, with the death toll ranging from 100,000 to 300,000 (Hayden 2007). Many first sought refuge within former Yugoslav republics before later relocating to countries such as the USA, Germany, Austria, and Sweden (Valenta & Ramet 2016). By 2011, at least 43% of Bosnia and Herzegovina's (BiH) total population lived abroad (Kačapor-Džihić & Oruč 2012).

Serbia and Montenegro, then known as the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Jordan 2021), recorded approximately 297,000 refugees from BiH (Nenadić et al. 2005). Precise figures are difficult to determine due to unrecorded migration and variations in refugee classification. The war concluded with the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement in December 1995, which established a tripartite presidency to ensure representation for each of the three constituent peoples (Nenadić et al. 2005). Decades later, the Western Balkan countries continue to face political instability and economic challenges (Kalemaj & Kalemaj 2022). Ethnic tensions persist in public discourse and political events, reflected in the continued use of derogatory terms rooted in historical conflicts.

Serbia was marked by nationalist narratives and unresolved wartime legacies, while post-2006 Montenegro pursued a more civic-oriented model of statehood (Džankić 2014). Both states implemented policies aimed at refugee integration; however, interethnic relations remained

shaped by enduring mistrust and ambiguous notions of national belonging (Bieber 2004). Despite formal commitments to inclusion, everyday interactions often reflect persistent ethnic hierarchies, contested victimhood narratives, and the maintenance of symbolic boundaries (Jovanović & Bermúdez 2021).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Second-Generation Immigrants

Research on second-generation immigrants (hereafter SGIs) has largely gained prominence over the past three decades, initially in the United States and later in Europe (Crul & Vermeulen 2003). The definition of second generation varies across contexts and lacks consistent application. In some cases, the term refers to those born in a country with at least one foreign-born parent, while in others it includes individuals born abroad who have resided in the country for a specified period. Additionally, some definitions differentiate based on whether one or both parents are immigrants (Chimienti et al. 2021).

In this study, SGIs are defined as descendants of migrants without direct migration experience (Brunello & De Paola 2016). Although born and raised in the country, many SGIs report being perceived as foreigners and may experience discrimination, sometimes exacerbated by legal systems such as Serbia and Montenegro's principle of ***jus sanguinis*** (the right of blood) (Džankic 2010). Under such systems, individuals born in the country to foreign-born parents may not automatically receive citizenship, which can limit access to public services.

2.2 Identity and Sense of Belonging

Identity construction entails both explicit and implicit meanings, as well as the mental and social processes that shape and redefine it over time (Schwartz 2001). Essentialist perspectives view identity as stable and closely linked to well-being (Behtoui 2019), whereas non-essentialist views, adopted here, conceptualise identity as fluid, shaped by social, cultural, and psychological factors (Barkhuizen 2016). From this standpoint, the identity of an individual only acquires meaning and significance compared to other identities (Rattansi & Phoenix 2005).

As Jenkins (2014) argues, identity is not just perceived but actively constructed by others. Furthermore, individuals exist within economic, political, and social hierarchies that shape their access to resources and social mobility. For SGIs, such structures may constrain participation in

mainstream society (Chimienti et al. 2019). Social Identity Theory (SIT) introduced by Tajfel and Turner (1979), suggests that individuals derive a significant portion of their self-concept from group membership, categorising themselves into ingroups and distinguishing from outgroups (Bochatay et al. 2019). SGIs may navigate multiple social identities based on ethnicity, nationality, and cultural expectations, continuously negotiating their sense of belonging within the local community. To build on this theoretical grounding, identity is treated as a multidimensional and culture-dependent construct (Ma et al. 2024), operationalised through group affiliations and experiences of inclusion and exclusion (IIchuck 2024). Belonging can be defined as the subjective sense of being an integral part of one's family, communities, and broader environments (Hagerty et al. 1992). This need is often understood as rooted in biology, given that human survival has historically depended on social bonds (Boyd & Richerson 2009). Research in educational contexts has linked a sense of belonging to a range of positive academic, health, and social outcomes (Allen et al. 2018; Faircloth & Hamm 2005; Zhang et al. 2018). Conversely, lack of belonging has been associated with depression, cognitive decline, and poor health (Allen et al. 2021; Hawkley & Capitanio 2015).

Belonging can also be seen as "an act of self-identification or identification by others" (Yuval-Davis 2006, 199). SIT highlights how individuals categorise themselves into subordinate and superordinate groups and may simultaneously belong to multiple levels within these groupings (Wenzel et al. 2008). Within a specific group, members often share a prototype, an ideal representation of what it means to belong, reflecting common goals, values, and traits (Oakes et al. 1998). In addition, individuals are also part of larger, more abstract groups, whose defining characteristics may not always fully align with their personal experiences. Within SIT, belonging is understood through processes of group categorisation, where individuals define themselves in relation to social groups that are often organised around shared prototypes (Froechlich et al. 2024). Using this framework, belonging extends beyond simply claiming an identity but also being accepted as a member of a group by others (Kohli et al. 2024). In post-conflict societies, ethnic categories and social boundaries are politically charged, making belonging especially complex for those positioned between groups (Henig et al. 2024). In former Yugoslav countries, shared cultural practices and value systems can blur personal identity lines, but they can also ease acculturation challenges (Milutinović 2013). Although research on Bosnian SGIs remains limited, literature shows that Bosnian refugees experience an

erosion in trust regarding their social reality's stability which results in an incomplete sense of belonging (Mijić 2022). Studies examining the acculturation experiences of 1.5-generation Bosnians in Western countries indicate identity struggles and a persistent sense of non-belonging (Vukojević 2019). Bosnian SGIs in the United States reported challenges in acculturation due to close identification with their heritage, with a strong need to preserve their family's narratives as part of their identity (Dikyurt 2023). Similarly, Bosnian SGIs in Switzerland reported that through family narratives, legacies of conflict continue to be a structural force for their identities and have significant repercussions to their sense of belonging (Müller-Suleymanova 2021). Eastmond (2006) argued that refugee return is often misunderstood as a singular event rather than open-ended and transnational as a physical return home does not guarantee social integration. This is relevant not only for returnees or refugees but also for Bosnian SGIs who never left yet live in fractured post-war environments with which they do not feel a strong sense of belonging. This calls for a broader understanding of identity and sense of belonging as fluid and negotiated, an approach relevant but underexplored in the context of Bosnian SGIs who have grown up in the post-war homeland itself. Within this context, the current study investigates how Bosnian SGIs in Serbia and Montenegro negotiate ethnic labels and broader regional identifications as well as how these identities are expressed to navigate their sense of belonging, in a sociopolitical environment shaped by both cultural continuity and historical division.

2.3 Research Gap

Despite research on Bosnian immigrants in Western Europe and the U.S., little attention has been given to SGIs in culturally similar neighbouring countries like Serbia and Montenegro (Karamehic-Oates & Karamehic-Muratovic 2021; Müller-Suleymanova 2021; Sichling & Karamehic-Muratovic 2020; Vukojević 2019). Despite cultural similarities, Bosnian immigrants in the Balkans are often perceived as foreigners due to lingering post-war tensions. SGIs navigate a context of both cultural homogeneity and heterogeneity, negotiating identities shaped by historical legacies and lived experience. This research addresses a gap in second-generation identity studies by using Social Identity Theory to examine how group affiliations, in-group dynamics, and ethnic category salience shape identity in post-conflict settings. While existing literature on SIT has examined identity construction among second-generation immigrants in Western multicultural societies, less attention has been paid

to how these processes unfold in societies shaped by ethnic conflict and forced displacement. The Balkan region remains underrepresented in migrant identity research, despite its complex socio-cultural context. It also offers a theoretical contribution by demonstrating how identity can function not only through in-group identification but also through dis-identification, ambivalence, and supra-ethnic affiliation, processes that extend SIT in contexts where ethnic categories are politicised and historically fraught. This study contributes to this underdeveloped area by exploring how second-generation Bosnian migrants negotiate social categories as they construct a sense of identity and belonging within these contested landscapes marked by collective memories of war, offering valuable insight into post-conflict identity development, collective memory, and reconciliation processes in the Western Balkans. By exploring how participants negotiate ethnic labels and broader regional identifications, as well as how these identities are expressed, this research contributes to debates on identity fluidity and the conceptualisation of selfhood in constrained socio-political spaces. This offers not only insight into Serbia and Montenegro but also highlights dynamics that are relevant to understanding of how second-generation identities are negotiated in terms of belonging in post-conflict settings. In particular, it shows how belonging can be enacted in ways that resist identity boundaries, offering perspectives on how social identity can be navigated in complex post-conflict settings.

2.4 Research Aim and Questions

This research aims to qualitatively explore how group affiliations, in-group/outgroup dynamics, family narratives, and the salience of ethnic categories shape identity formation and belonging among second-generation Bosnian immigrants, the children of war refugees, within a post-war socio-cultural landscape.

Research Questions:

- How do second-generation Bosnian immigrants negotiate social categories (ethnic, cultural, regional, and national) as they construct a sense of identity and belonging in the post-conflict context of Serbia and Montenegro?
- How do family narratives and traditions influence the salience of social identities and belonging?
- How do second-generation Bosnian immigrants actualise and express their social identities to navigate belonging in post-conflict Serbian and Montenegrin societies?

3. Methodology

3.1 Design

This study explored the subjective experiences of SGIs in the process of identity creation using semi-structured interviews to elicit flexible narratives (Morrow & Smith 2000; Mason 2002). Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006) was used to identify recurring themes in the qualitative data related to identity construction.

3.2 Participants

The study involved eight SGIs (four male, four female), aged 18–30. All had at least one parent who was a Bosnian War refugee and were residing in Serbia or Montenegro at the time of the study. A non-probability, snowball sampling method was used to access this relatively hard-to-reach population (Naderifar et al. 2017; Kirchherr & Charles 2018). This approach may facilitate more candid disclosure, potentially yielding more in-depth responses. The first participants were recruited through personal networks, while subsequent ones were identified through referrals. Participants received study information and consent forms via email. To ensure anonymity, numerical identifiers were assigned (e.g., Participant 1, Participant 2).

3.3 Measures

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted in the Serbo-Croatian language. The interview guide included ten open-ended questions progressing from general to specific, focused on identity and belonging. Interviews were conducted via Google Meet (audio only) to enhance participant comfort, given the sensitive nature of the topic. This format also reduced the likelihood that non-verbal cues would influence participants' narratives. Interviews averaged 35 minutes and were transcribed and translated into English.

3.4 Procedure

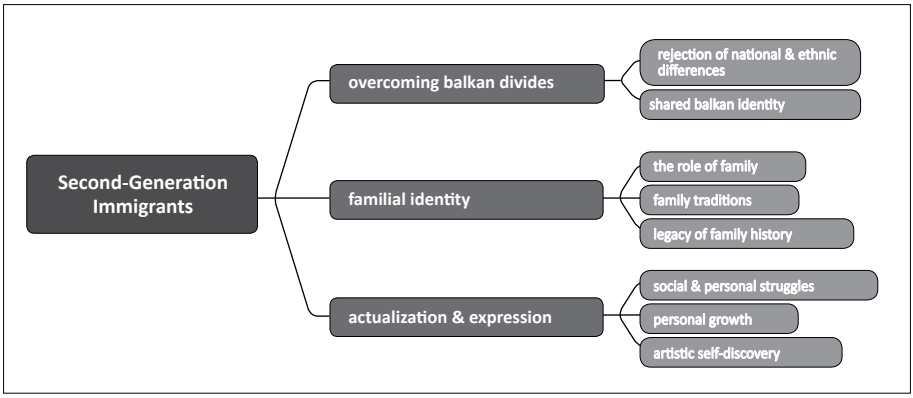
After receiving ethics approval from the relevant institutional committee, interviews were conducted via Google Meet between March and July 2024. Participants were contacted by email, provided study information and consent forms, and scheduled interviews at their convenience. The researcher, also an SGI, disclosed their background to sup-

port rapport and foster a sense of safety in the interview setting (Abell et al. 2006). Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, translated into English, and stored securely. Participants were debriefed and provided with counselling resources; no distress was reported.

3.5 Analysis

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: (1) familiarisation with data, (2) initial coding, (3) theme development, (4) theme review, (5) theme definition, and (6) report writing. Patterns were identified through an inductive approach, with particular attention to narratives related to belonging and identity construction (Maguire & Delahunt 2017). Belonging and identity were further operationalised by qualitative coding of narrative references to group identity, family influence, and identity expression.

Figure 1: Themes and subthemes from interviews with SGIs



Source: Authors' Visualization.

3.6 Ethics

Ethics approval was granted by the relevant institutional committee.[1] Participants gave informed consent and were assured of confidentiality, with transcripts securely stored. They were also provided with information on counselling resources in case of emotional distress.[2]

3.7 Quality Criteria

This study followed Williams and Morrow's (2009) model to ensure research trustworthiness, focusing on credibility, transferability, depend-

ability, and confirmability. Credibility was supported through detailed documentation of data collection and analysis, including the rationale for key methodological choices. Transferability was addressed by outlining relevant cultural and historical context, allowing future researchers to assess potential relevance to other post-conflict populations. Dependability was enhanced by maintaining a clear research trail and careful attention to translation fidelity between Serbo-Croatian and English. Confirmability was supported by grounding interpretations in participant data and engaging in reflexive practices to reduce researcher bias. The researcher's shared background with participants enriched rapport but also required ongoing self-awareness to maintain objectivity. Although not generalisable, the study offers context-specific insights into SGI identity development. Limitations, including translation challenges, small sample size, and the interpretive nature of thematic analysis, were acknowledged through critical reflection.

4. Results

4.1 Overcoming Balkan Divides

Participants described a sense of belonging to the Balkans as a broader cultural space rather than identifying primarily with individual nation-states. While acknowledging socially reinforced national and ethnic distinctions, they often framed these as constructs shaped by older generations and dominant political narratives. Several participants came from mixed backgrounds and expressed dissatisfaction with rigid ethnic and national classifications. As one participant described:

> I didn't understand why it was important whether someone was Croatian, Montenegrin, Bosnian, or Serbian. I didn't get it because I understand those people; they look and talk just like me. I didn't understand what all the fuss was about regarding these national differences (P7).

Some participants emphasised individual character over categories such as nationality, ethnicity, or religion.

> It doesn't matter to me if someone is, as we say, a Serb, Bosnian, Albanian, Montenegrin, Croat, or anything, what religion they are, what race they are, what their sexual orientation is, it's irrelevant. For me, a person is a person, whether they are good or bad is another question, but they are a person (P4).

Participant 4 further links ethnic divisions to political manipulation:

> [...] politics have meddled in absolutely everything including nationality, sense of belonging, and religion. Politics now leads the way, unfortunately, it happens that people, even educated people, raise their children to hate people from a specific national group (P4).

These perspectives reflect aspects of Social Identity Theory, particularly the role of group membership in shaping self-concept and the influence of political discourse in reinforcing social boundaries (Harwood 2020). Participants more often used the term Balkans than individual country names, suggesting a supranational identity and shared cultural ground.

> At the end of the day, all the countries in the Balkans are very similar. We have the same language, culture, humour, and mentality. I'm glad that there is a difference between older generations, who hold on to traditional beliefs and arbitrary classifications, and us young people, who grew up with technology in the digital age and had the opportunity to see what exists beyond our views and cultures (P8).

Some participants framed this shift as generational, connecting it to broader exposure to digital communication and global cultural influences.

> I was in Germany and worked there for the past two summers, and I always look forward to coming home. By all parameters, it should be better, I mean, the standard of living is much better, and people are generally happy. Somehow, it's illogical that I want to come back here, but I still have this desire to return to the Balkans, because I think it's very much a part of our mentality. Because here, people live slower, we are not in such a rush. I think we value interpersonal relationships more (P5).

These reflections suggest that cultural familiarity, values, and emotional connection outweigh economic and convenience advantages, supporting the formation of a superordinate Balkan identity.

4.2 Familial Identity

Participants described family as central to identity, citing emotional support and values shaped during upbringing. Participant narratives highlight family's continued role in everyday support and its lasting influence on identity:

> My family has contributed a lot because I believe that family is the most important part of my life. Not just the immediate family, but the extended family as well, I see them as my best friends. No one wished me well as much as they do. They have influenced my life, and they continue to do so, in my decisions, in everything (P3).

> From a young age, they tell you "Take care of your sister, look after your sisters, look after this, look after that." Then you realise when you look at other people around you that everyone actually carries their identity right from home. [...]. We're all somehow susceptible to it, so I have the values that my mother and my father have (P1).

These reflections underscore family as a blueprint for social relations. Walęcka-Matyja & Banach (2022) suggest specific family values predict adult relationship quality and long-term commitments. This may explain the strong influence of family on identity, as described by participants. Family traditions also anchored cultural continuity. Rituals such as ***slava*** (patron saint celebrations) were described as both spiritual and unifying:

> In our family, it's extremely important to respect the customs. It's like we have a rulebook; starting with the three candles, then the incense for the icon, the bread is turned three times, all that must be respected. I've known it since I was born, I know all that, and we recite The Lord's Prayer [...]. If it has that family function of keeping us together, then it's great (P2).

Some participants point out the gradual erosion of family traditions through one's lifetime as well as on a generational level:

> We have that, let's say, tradition. On a daily or weekly level, it's usually lunch … But it seems to me that the older we get, the less we do that, somehow we become different, and it's normal as we, the children, become older and more independent, and everyone goes their own way (P5).

> That's how it goes with generations – tradition is passed down less and less, that's just how it is. But I would try to preserve the most beautiful things, the traditions, and pass them on to the next generation (P3).

Omole (2024) notes that individuals from culturally rooted immigrant families may feel increased pressure to preserve traditions, while others may lean toward integration. These dynamics may explain participants' ambivalence between preserving and adapting customs. While family customs shaped identity, participants also reflected on the absence of

open discussions about pre-war and wartime family history. Such narratives were often inaccessible:

> Regarding our history and their life there, very little is talked about, so I don't know much about it. Whether it's difficult for them to talk about it or something else, I don't want to delve into that, but that's how it was (P7).

> Especially when I was younger, it was somewhat of a taboo topic at home, particularly anything related to the family's history before I was born. All of that was somehow closed off and private. Now that I'm older, I can understand why. When I was born, that wartime period was still fresh (P8).

Despite limited knowledge of family history, several participants expressed pride in their family's resilience.

> I should be proud of my heritage and of the situations my family has previously gone through. To turn to my family with pride as they managed to cope with all the situations their history brought them [...]. If they manage to cope with those things, there's no reason why I can't integrate that into my personality (P8).

Participant 8's reflections illustrate how family history can shape self-understanding, even in the absence of full narrative continuity. One interpretation of this expressed pride could involve a desire to honour past resilience by striving toward the opportunities unavailable to prior generations.

4.3 Actualization & Expression

This theme explores how participants sought to express aspects of their identity through reflection, personal growth, and creative outlets. These efforts included working through societal perceptions, navigating shifting relationships, and engaging with the arts as a means of exploration and fulfilment. Five of the eight participants engaged in artistic expression, including creative writing (poetry, stories, essays), music (songwriting, playing instruments, digital production), and visual arts (photography). Several participants described experiences of feeling excluded or marked as different due to their heritage:

> People look at you differently. You can't avoid that. Here in the Balkans, when people see you, they always say, "Oh, he's the one whose parents fled from Sarajevo." And sometimes, when I was younger, it was maybe even

> unpleasant, especially when those were pitying looks. I mean, why do you pity me, people? I was born here, there's nothing wrong with me, but on the other hand, you notice it, you just notice it and it makes you feel maybe even a bit uncomfortable in some situations. [...]. However, now, in the recent period, I've pretty much accepted it. Somehow, it's become okay. I mean, I know people don't have bad intentions. They just do it, practically, unintentionally. So, I don't blame anyone (P4).

> I definitely felt quite different because I celebrated many holidays from my mother's side ... Catholic Easter, Catholic Christmas ... or different celebrations like Simundan ... people would ask, "Who is that? What is that?" [...] I felt a certain amount of alienation ... like a stranger in many ways (P6).

Both participants described feeling alienated by others' reactions to their background. Over time, they saw these reactions as stemming more from unfamiliarity than hostility, prompting reinterpretation and emotional adjustment. Alongside these challenges, many described personal growth. This growth was influenced by external circumstances as well as personal agency:

> When I was in elementary school, I think whatever my parents told me to do, I did it half-heartedly and let it go. From physical to emotional things for someone to rely on you. I don't know how it happened that I realised in the meantime that I actually should be the person who will be a support to someone and that I should actually take things into my own hands and do them extremely well (P1).

Others recounted moments of social divergence as part of their developmental path:

> A friend from childhood, we simply ... At some point in life, you'll realise that you're just not ... You're not going down the same paths anymore ... You have nothing to talk about anymore. Literally, it came to that, and maybe the healthiest thing is to just end the relationship (P2).

Finally, participants showed growth concerning societal attitudes:

> [...] Now I'm completely, completely confident in myself, full of self-confidence, I don't care about social attitudes, or what they say, except, of course, in a professional sense, but really, I'm no longer susceptible to what others think. [...] Somehow, you get to know yourself in a way by reflecting on other people. It somehow becomes clear to you what is different about you, whether it's good or not, and you are certainly on a positive outcome because

> you can change if you don't like it or keep it if you do. You simply work on yourself (P4).

These accounts reflect an active identity process, not only adjusting to external views but also developing internal clarity over time. Artistic expression emerged as a meaningful dimension of self-actualisation. Several participants named art as a central element in their identity, describing it as both therapeutic and formative. Modalities included music, literature, poetry, drawing, and film:

> The closest element I would say is definitely art, specifically music because I've used it over the years to cope with any issues, including questions of identity. It's easiest for me to express myself through music, to concretise my feelings, and to understand exactly how I feel. I think that's what has helped my personality develop the most, to become who I am today, and to give me the value system and priorities I have. I think what meant the most to me was that I started engaging in art (P7).

> Writing has always been my escape and way of expression. As a child, I often wrote short stories and poems, which allowed me to explore aspects of my identity and find a voice through which I could communicate my experiences and emotions. [...]. Work can be unstable, even something we love can become an obligation. I'm happy that writing isn't my job because I'd be half the person I am now if I hadn't delved so much into the world of reading and writing. It's not just that I can sit and write a sentence or two, but it's actually a big part of me (P8).

Art was described as both therapeutic and formative, providing a private, uncensored space for participants to understand and assert themselves. For some, the fact that their creative work remained non-professional reinforced its freedom from external pressure.

5. Discussion

Participants' experiences reflected an interplay of cultural belonging, family history, and personal development. Their narratives suggest the emergence of a shared sense of Balkan identity that transcends national and ethnic boundaries. Family appeared central to participants' self-concepts through emotional support and the transmission of values and traditions. Several participants also described turning to artistic expression and introspection as a way to process their social position and articulate aspects of the self.

Participants often identified with the Balkans as a whole rather than with specific national or ethnic backgrounds. From a Social Identity Theory perspective, identifying with a superordinate group (e.g., the Balkans) can foster cohesion between subgroups when sufficient shared features and a recognisable group prototype are present (Wenzel et al. 2008). Unlike the regional familiarity emphasised by participants in this study, Bosnian SGIs in Western Europe often grow up in more culturally distant environments. Several studies highlight a recurring sense of being "in-between" cultures among SGIs in Germany, Switzerland, and Slovenia, as they navigate heritage within unfamiliar cultural settings (Müller-Suleymanova 2021; Sedmak 2018; Vukojević 2019). These experiences are shaped by context-specific pressures, such as Islamophobic discourse in Belgium, Germany, and Poland (Trupia 2025). While such dynamics differ in Serbia and Montenegro, they highlight how identity formation is shaped by socio-political context.

One possible explanation for this difference lies in generational exposure to globalisation and digital technologies, which may increase cultural exchange and foster cross-national connectedness. Unlike earlier generations shaped by direct war trauma, these participants approach identity from a more integrative lens. Findings from post-war BiH show that intergroup contact and identification with a superordinate "Bosnian" identity were linked to greater forgiveness between ethnic groups "Bosniak" and "Serb" (Cehajic et al. 2008). A comparison can be made regarding the use of superordinate group identification in post-war BiH. In contrast to examining different ethnicities within the higher-level "Bosnian" national group, this study's findings focus on participants' perceptions of various nationalities across the Balkans, emphasising their alignment with a broader "Balkan" identity.

While grounded in SGI experiences, identification with global culture may also reflect broader generational patterns. Cosmopolitan orientations have been observed among youth more generally, shaped by increasing digital connectivity and exposure to global media (Woodward et al. 2008). This raises the possibility that some expressions of openness are not exclusive to this population. At the same time, inclusive identifications are not always the norm. Studies on post-Yugoslav and minority youth in Europe show that SGIs may, in some contexts, draw firmer ethnic boundaries than their parents. Inherited trauma or experiences of marginalisation can reinforce in-group attachments and distance from others (Drewski & Tuppat 2021; Nandi & Platt 2020).

Most participants distanced themselves from rigid ethnic categories. Similar patterns appear elsewhere in the region. Zupančič et al. (2025)

describe how, in the decades following the war, Serbs in multiethnic areas of Croatia, where overt Serb identity can carry social risk, often adopt supra-ethnic or Yugoslav identities to ease everyday tensions.[3] Petrov (2017) similarly shows how Yugonostalgic themes in media offer younger generations a sense of shared cultural ground transcending national lines. Although none explicitly identified as Yugoslav, references to shared culture, humour, and values suggest a move toward supra-ethnic belonging. These findings point to how identity work is shaped not only by family legacies but also by the wider social and political environment.

Participants described family as shaping identity through emotional support, values, and tradition. Family provides a template for relating, extending into adult social life. Family traditions were described as fostering belonging, though some participants noted their gradual fading due to personal or generational changes. Family histories involving hardship or conflict were often difficult to discuss, but participants still take pride in their families' resilience, incorporating these narratives into their identities.

As an innate ingroup, family played a formative role unlike opt-in social groups. Children learn identity through navigating overlapping roles (child, sibling, relative) within family expectations. These roles are interwoven, influencing broader identity construction. Previous research suggests that early family experiences shape later relationships through processes such as attachment styles and other developmental mechanisms (Scabini & Manzi 2011). Family rituals have also been conceptualised as symbolic and procedural activities that reinforce family bonds and strengthen a sense of belonging (Fiese et al. 2002). Studies confirm these traditions enhance identity, self-esteem, and well-being (Crespo et al. 2011; Yang & Wang 2023).

Family history taboos emerged as a prominent subtheme in several participants' accounts. From an SIT perspective, silence may serve as a protective mechanism preserving positive ingroup identity. When participants interact with other families who share similar histories, these groups help normalise emotional experiences and reinforce affiliation. Beyond the immediate family, connections with friends and broader social circles further solidify a sense of belonging. While familial relationships shaped the foundation of identity, participants emphasised that it continued to evolve through experiences in broader, more diverse communities.

Participants described moving toward self-actualisation by working through social challenges, reflecting on personal growth, and using artis-

tic expression as a form of communication. They gradually moved from feelings of alienation toward increased confidence. Artistic expression, through writing, music, or visual media, was described as important for understanding oneself and expressing complex emotions. Participants described experiences of othering based on religious, cultural, or ethnic background, often involving stereotypes and subtle forms of exclusion that contributed to feelings of alienation. Some recall memories of confusion, not understanding the basis of their exclusion, highlighting their early difficulty in recognising social differences. Notably, some participants interpreted their exclusion as a subconscious process by the majority group, as supported by the literature (Abbink & Harris, 2019), rather than a personal attack or judgment. This framing appeared to help participants navigate these challenges more effectively, supporting a sense of internal locus of control and contributing to growing confidence and resilience over time.

An unexpected subtheme was the role of art in identity development, with more than half of participants emphasising its importance. For many SGIs, art served as a bridge for self-understanding, allowing them to articulate personal narratives in a more coherent and symbolic form. This process enabled the cathartic expression of emotions and the representation of multifaceted identities. As Emrali (2017, 117) states, "The uniqueness of individuals and artists lies underneath how they know their own cultural inheritance, as well as how they get acquainted with, accept and interpret other cultures' heritage and legacy". Beyond cultural representation, art was also described as offering therapeutic value. Art-making helps individuals reflect on their life narratives more holistically. Art facilitates the integration of the migration experience, encompassing both challenges and positive outcomes both directly experienced or inherited. These are integrated into a coherent life narrative that becomes part of one's identity without necessarily defining it, contributing to empowerment (Heller 2024).

Linesch et al. (2014) suggest that art-making can support meaning-making, communication, catharsis, and emotional regulation. Research with Latino immigrant women and youth has similarly found that art helps process emotions related to acculturation and discrimination, fostering confidence and perspective-taking. Although participants did not engage in formal art therapy, they pursued artistic activities independently and described experiencing similar benefits. Overall, these findings indicate that artistic expression may play a meaningful role in how immigrants and subsequent generations make sense of identity, culture, and emotional experience.

6. Conclusion

This study investigated how second-generation Bosnian immigrants, children of war refugees, construct their identities, develop a sense of belonging, and navigate life in Serbia and Montenegro. Three central themes emerged from participant narratives. The first reflected a shift away from national and ethnic divisions, with many participants expressing alignment with a shared Balkan identity grounded in cultural commonalities. This shift appears generational, influenced by globalisation, relative peace, and trends toward greater social cohesion. Families shaped participants' core identities, offering emotional support and preserving tradition, even when difficult histories remained unspoken. Finally, participants described artistic expression as a way to foster self-understanding and process social and emotional challenges. While the latter two themes are well-established in literature, this study identifies a potential generational movement away from rigid national and ethnic distinctions toward a broader Balkan identity. These expressions may reflect a wider generational shift and suggest the potential for new forms of post-conflict social cohesion that complicate dominant narratives of division.

6.1 Implications

This research contributes to understanding the long-term psychosocial effects of the Bosnian War by examining how SGIs construct identity and navigate belonging. As children of war refugees, they may face unique challenges, including alienation linked to family histories and broader socio-political context. Recognising these experiences may inform the development of targeted support, including culturally responsive education and counselling to address stigma and isolation. The findings may hold relevance for post-war reconciliation efforts in the Balkans. Identifying with broader social categories, such as regional or supra-ethnic identities, may support peacebuilding in post-conflict contexts. In contrast to older generations shaped by the violence of the Yugoslav wars, younger generations may be adopting a more fluid and inclusive sense of belonging to broader cultural groupings. These findings may inform efforts by educators and community leaders to promote cross-ethnic dialogue, fostering trust and cooperation among historically divided communities. Beyond the specific regional focus, this study advances theory by showing how social identity operates in constrained post-conflict contexts. It shows how individuals adapt or reconfigure

imposed identities through family and creative expression, offering a dynamic model of identity negotiation relevant to post-conflict societies.

6.2 Limitations

A key limitation is potential bias in data collection and interpretation, as the researcher shares the SGI background of participants. While this fostered rapport, it may have introduced interpretive bias. The single-researcher design also limited opportunities for intersubjective validation of the findings. Lack of triangulation further limits corroboration with objective measures. Reliance on retrospective self-reports introduces the possibility of selective recall or memory bias, which may influence how experiences were narrated. The small, homogeneous sample and snowball method limit representativeness, resulting in greater homogeneity. Another limitation is the small-N design. However, SGIs in Serbia and Montenegro form a historically and geographically distinct population whose experiences remain under-researched. The sensitivity of the topic, post-war identity and interethnic belonging, further limits access, supporting the use of a purposive, in-depth approach (Crouch & McKenzie 2006; Malterud et al. 2016). Given the sample's homogeneity and recurring themes, the study likely approached thematic saturation despite its limited size (Guest et al. 2006). As an exploratory study, the aim was not statistical inference but analytical generalisation, offering transferable insights grounded in context-specific narratives (Yin 2003, 109–116). Focusing solely on Serbia and Montenegro limits transferability to other former Yugoslav countries, despite their unique contexts. Taken together, these limitations underscore the importance of interpreting findings cautiously and situating them within their cultural and methodological context.

6.3 Future Research Suggestions

To address these limitations, future research should adopt strategies to enhance objectivity and applicability. Involving multiple researchers across stages may enhance interpretive rigor through diverse perspectives. Methodological triangulation (e.g., document analysis or surveys) could enrich narrative data. Although small-sample studies lack generalisability, larger samples could offer broader insights and enable focus on intersectionality. Future studies could explore how education, class, or religion shape identity and belonging. Expanding future research be-

yond Serbia and Montenegro to include participants from other former Yugoslav republics could offer comparative insights into how micro-cultural and historical contexts shape identity and belonging. Finally, designs could clarify how identity evolves over time and what factors shape it.

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Notes

[1] Ethics clearance was granted by the CITY College, University of York Europe Campus Ethics Committee in February 2024.

[2] Participants were informed about the study's aims, voluntary participation, the right to withdraw at any time, and confidentiality procedures. Explicit consent was obtained for audio recording and data use. Researcher contact information and details for CITY College Counseling Services were also provided in case of emotional discomfort.

[3] In this example, such identities often serve as everyday caution in multiethnic settings. In this study, they seem more affirmatively chosen, as a way of stepping outside inherited categories, though the comparison should be read with care given the differing contexts.

Oblikovanje identitete in občutek pripadnosti: študija druge generacije bosanskih priseljencev

Izvleček

Študija proučuje oblikovanje identitete in občutek pripadnosti med drugo generacijo bosanskih priseljencev v Srbiji in Črni gori, tj. otroki beguncev, razseljenih zaradi vojne v Bosni in Hercegovini. Kljub skupni balkanski kulturni dediščini se ti posamezniki v povojni družbi pogosto soočajo z zgodovinskimi sovražnostmi in nacionalističnimi napetostmi. S kvalitativnim pristopom, utemeljenim na teoriji socialne identitete, so bile s pomočjo polstrukturiranih intervjujev opredeljene tri osrednje teme: zavračanje nacionalnih in etničnih razlik v korist širše balkanske identitete, bistvena vloga družine pri oblikovanju vrednot in umetniško izražanje kot sredstvo samospoznavanja. Ugotovitve kažejo, da je identiteta priseljencev druge generacije fluidna, saj jo bolj kot podedovane delitve oblikujejo osebne interakcije. Članek ponuja vpogled v vpliv kulturne dediščine, družinske dinamike in ustvarjalnega izražanja na identiteto posameznikov in tako dopolnjuje obstoječo strokovno literaturo.

Ključne besede

oblikovanje identitete, priseljenci druge generacije, občutek pripadnosti, povojne družbe, Bosna in Hercegovina

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Nicole Dołowy

The Role of Collective Identity and Its Relation to Language in Ethnolinguistic Vitality: A Study of Collateral Language Communities in Poland

Abstract

Ethnolinguistic vitality (ELV) studies have long explored the functioning of minority communities, emphasizing the role of language and collective identity as key unifying factors. Since 2021, an ELV study in Poland has focused on collateral language communities – autochthonous groups linked to specific territories, whose languages are closely related to the dominant national language and often misclassified as dialects. These communities are typically unrecognized, and their group distinctiveness is frequently questioned. To assess their internal cohesion, a latent variable – Collective Identity – was developed within the ELV framework. This allows for evaluating whether such communities, often viewed as regional rather than ethnic groups, exhibit shared features and a sense of collective belonging. The findings indicate that collateral language communities form distinctive entities, characterized by shared language and cultural values, thus challenging assumptions about their peripheral or non-ethnic status.

Keywords

ethnolinguistic vitality, collateral languages, collective identity, latent variable, Poland

Corresponding author

Nicole Dołowy, Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences, Warszawa, Poland; **e-mail**: nicole.dolowy@ispan.edu.pl, **ORCID**: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7256-8226

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1. Introduction

Over the past decades, ethnolinguistic vitality (ELV) has been extensively explored, particularly from a social psychological perspective. Defined as the likelihood of an ethnolinguistic group to act as a distinct and active entity in intergroup situations (Giles et al. 1977), ELV was originally assessed through three objective criteria: status, demography, and institutional support. Subsequent developments in the model incorporated subjective perceptions of these factors (Bourhis et al. 1981; Smith et al. 2017). Nevertheless, research in this tradition has remained largely quantitative and reliant on questionnaires (Bourhis et al. 2019).

This quantitative focus has been critiqued by sociolinguists advocating for interdisciplinary, community-based approaches that combine quantitative and qualitative methods (Hinton 2001; Bucholtz & Hall 2008; Lewis & Simons 2016). These scholars call for a more nuanced understanding of vitality grounded in the lived experiences of speakers. Their work aligns with the principles of language ecology (Haugen 1972), which emphasizes how languages interact with each other and their environments, highlighting the need to preserve linguistic diversity and promote community agency.

As part of the effort to better assess language endangerment and guide revitalization, Fishman's Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS) (1991) introduced a practical framework centred on intergenerational transmission and language use within home and community domains. This marked a shift toward more applied, community-relevant research. UNESCO's Language Vitality Index (Brenzinger et al. 2003) further broadened the criteria by incorporating both objective and subjective factors and underscoring the need to evaluate these in combination. Lewis and Simons (2010) later expanded GIDS into a 12-level model assessing language vitality across domains of use and speaker demographics.

A significant reappraisal of ELV came with the European Language Diversity for All (ELDIA) project (2010–2013), which developed the European Language Vitality Barometer (EuLaViBar). This tool assessed vitality across four domains: legislation, education, media, and language practices. However, it notably excluded dimensions such as group identity and cohesion understood as ethnic identity of its members, and its purely quantitative approach limited the interpretability of results in terms of community impact.

More recently, Ó Giollagáin et al. (2025) introduced the Language Dynamics in Society framework, offering a more community-centred

model that considers processes such as language transmission and acquisition, socialisation and reinforced acquisition, civic expansion, and coherent ethnicization. This model emphasizes language vitality as a function of social dynamics rather than a set of isolated variables.

In this context, the Ethnolinguistic Vitality Model of Collateral Language Communities, developed within the Linguistic Diversity in Poland research project (Dołowy & Mętrak, in press), aims to further advance a sociolinguistic, context-sensitive understanding of ELV. Combining sociolinguistic theory with psychometric methodology, this model conceptualises ELV as a dynamic system of interrelated factors that shape how a group perceives itself and is perceived as a distinct entity with a common language and collective identity.

The communities under study are particularly distinctive due to the status of their languages. These collateral languages – autochthonous varieties tied to specific territories – are often considered dialects of dominant languages due to their close linguistic proximity. This often results in a diglossic relationship, despite instances of partial standardization (Eloy 2004). Usually perceived as regional rather than ethnic communities (Wicherkiewicz 2014), these groups have often had their claims to collective identity contested or dismissed. In recent years, however, they have increasingly asserted their linguistic and cultural distinctiveness. Local initiatives have sought to reclaim agency, elevate the value of their languages, and promote revitalization through standardization, expanded domains of use, and pursuit of formal recognition.

This article examines two dimensions of ELV within collateral language communities in Poland: collective identity and the relationship between language and identity. These are central to the ELV of the communities and are interrelated with its other aspects (see Dołowy & Mętrak, in press). Drawing on both quantitative survey data and qualitative ethnographic research, we argue that while ethnic boundaries may be blurred, the collective dimension of ELV remains strong. The role of language is important for the vitality of these communities; however, language practices vary significantly. Consequently, language serves as both a means of communication and a symbol of collective identity.

2. Field

Research on ELV has been conducted in five regions of Poland where collateral languages are spoken. Below, I outline the most significant characteristics of each community (for detailed information on every region, see Dołowy & Mętrak, in press).

Kashubia is a region in northern Poland, home to approximately 90,000 active speakers of Kashubian – the only collateral language in Poland officially recognized as a regional language. According to the 2021 census, nearly 180,000 individuals declared Kashubian identity, although the community itself lacks formal recognition as a national or ethnic minority. Historically, Kashubian was stigmatized as broken Polish and subjected to ridicule and discrimination, particularly before the political transition of 1989. However, strong regional mobilization in the 1990s, based on a regional rather than ethnic identity, led to the legal recognition of Kashubian as a regional language within the Act on National and Ethnic Minorities and on the Regional Language (2005). Today, Kashubia benefits from relatively strong institutional support, including state-funded education, bilingual signage, diverse local media, and numerous regional institutions and associations (Obracht-Prondzyński & Wicherkiewicz 2011).

Silesia is a large region in southwestern Poland, with nearly 470,000 speakers and over 596,000 individuals declaring Silesian identity (2021 census). Despite these numbers, Silesian has not been granted legal recognition as a regional language, and multiple attempts to amend the law have failed. The same lack of recognition applies to the Silesians as a distinct group. The region's history – including pre-WWII German governance and post-1945 persecution of inhabitants viewed as German – has contributed to deep historical trauma. Nevertheless, a strong emancipatory movement persists, drawing on the memory of Silesia's interwar autonomy within Poland. There is no state support for the protection of the Silesian language, though limited funding comes from local governments and cultural institutions. Civil society engagement is strong, with many active NGOs and local associations (Kamusella 2016).

Podhale is a mountainous region in the Tatra area. While there are no official data on speaker numbers, estimates suggest there may be up to 100,000 speakers of the local variety. The Podhalanian community is culturally vibrant but does not seek legal recognition for itself or its language, which is considered part of an ethnographic group rather than a distinct minority (Gąsienica-Giewont & Trebunia-Staszel 2022). This reluctance is partly linked to the historical trauma of alleged WWII collaboration, which continues to fuel resistance to emancipatory narratives. Nonetheless, some initiatives for language standardization and protection have emerged. Podhalanian culture, including its language, is heavily commodified by the tourism industry, a process supported by local authorities through various cultural associations and NGOs.

Masuria, once under German control before WWII, experienced massive depopulation in the 1940s–1950s due to the forced expulsion of Germans and Masurians. Those who remained have endured significant historical trauma and marginalization. Today, the number of Masurian speakers is estimated at only a few hundred, mainly among elderly "rememberers" (Wełpa-Siudek 2024). The 2021 census recorded 1,287 Masurian identity declarations. There are no state-level efforts for the legal recognition or protection of the Masurian language or community. However, despite minimal institutional support, some grassroots initiatives for cultural and linguistic revival have recently appeared.

Podlachia is an eastern Polish region bordering Belarus, inhabited by East Slavic-speaking communities whose languages are collateral to both the dominant Polish (West Slavic) and to Belarusian and Ukrainian – recognized national minorities in the area. Although literature in Podlachian does exist and there have been attempts to standardise the language (Maksymiuk 2024), the local varieties function mainly in spoken form and are often overlooked by both the Polish majority and the officially recognized minority communities. As a result, estimating the number of speakers is challenging. According to the 2021 census, nearly 19,000 people declared speaking an East Slavic variety (70% Belarusian), including about 4,000 speakers of locally named dialects. Additionally, there were 23,000 and 2,148 declarations of Belarusian and Ukrainian identity, respectively. Podlachians (*Podlaszuki*) are often affiliated with the Orthodox Christian minority. While state support exists for recognized minorities (Belarusian and Ukrainian), local East Slavic varieties receive limited support, mostly from NGOs and cultural associations (Barszczewska & Timoszuk 2016).

3. Methodology

3.1 Questionnaire

The research presented is part of a broader study on the ethnolinguistic vitality (ELV) of collateral language communities in Poland. Conducted within the project Linguistic Diversity in Poland: Collateral Languages, Language-Oriented Activities, and Conceptualization of Collective Identity, the study comprised several phases. The pilot phase, based on the first version of the Ethnolinguistic Vitality Questionnaire, took place in 2021 and included a pre-test survey and cognitive interviews. The final ELV study, which involved the distribution of questionnaires, took place between June 2022 and September 2023.

The questionnaire, available in five comparable versions corresponding to the five Polish regions studied, consisted of 61 questions (including only one open-ended question) and was mainly based on a 5-point Likert scale (for more on the questionnaire, see Dołowy-Rybińska & Mętrak 2022). We decided to distribute the questionnaires in printed form only, to avoid excluding older and digitally excluded people and to ensure broader demographic and geographical diversity. We collected the questionnaires mainly during our fieldwork, taking care not to collect too many from a single locality or homogeneous group. Sometimes we received support from local cultural institutions and activists.

To diminish doubts regarding the representativeness of the study, we conducted a reference study in which we selected one village from each region, chosen for its socio-demographic features representative of the region as a whole and for its central location, distant from major urban centres. We collected 50 questionnaires through door-to-door surveys, ideally obtaining one questionnaire per household. This enabled us to observe differences between the types of questionnaire distribution. Another challenge was that this type of survey is most likely to be completed by people involved in community and language activities. Therefore, we added a question in the metric part of the questionnaire concerning respondents' level of engagement in community and/or language activities. This enabled us to see how responses changed according to the level of engagement. We also verified other demographic factors: age, gender, place of residence, and education.

In total, we collected 420 completed questionnaires in Silesia, 389 in Kashubia, 322 in Podlachia, 246 in Podhale, and 208 in Masuria. All questionnaire versions and the raw data are accessible in the Repository for Open Data – RepOD (Dołowy-Rybińska et al. 2023).

3.2 Psychometric Approach

Based on the answers to the questionnaires, we identified two observable variables – Intergenerational Transmission and self-assessed Language Competence – and 11 latent variables constructed using a psychometric approach: Language Practices, Collective Identity, Identity and Language, Type of Identity, Ideology of Language Ownership, Ideology of Collaterality, Subordination/Affirmation, Emotions, Reluctance to Use Language in Public, Negative Experiences, and Profits. More information about the model and latent variables can be found in Dołowy and Mętrak (in press).

Latent variables were created using psychometric methods that allow general attitudes to be measured based on several observable

characteristics (Furr & Bacharach 2013). Based on the theoretical assumptions made, we assigned a number of observable variables to each latent variable. We then used item response theory analysis techniques to verify the accuracy of the measurement model and to calculate the latent variable value for each respondent.

Each latent variable was represented as a continuous (interval) variable, typically taking values between -3 and 3 across the study population, with an average close to 0. For each respondent, the value indicated the strength of a particular aspect of ELV: the higher the latent variable value, the stronger the collective identity. Conversely, these are abstract values, meaning it is not possible to identify which specific answers the respondents who have been assigned a particular latent variable value (e.g.-1 or 2) have given to specific questions in the questionnaire.

In this article, we analyze only two of the 13 ELV aspects that constitute the model we created, which can be grouped under the following five themes: (1) Identity, (2) Language transmission and practices, (3) Language ideologies, (4) Language attitudes, and (5) Perceived status. The aspect of collective identity is not more important or central to ELV in collateral communities than the others; rather, they are interrelated and mutually influential. However, questions of identity and its relationship to language as a symbol of identity are particularly interesting and therefore deserve closer examination.

3.2.1 Measurement of Collective Identity

For Collective Identity, the following empirically observable variables (questions) were used as items associated with this latent variable:

Q4A – Attachment to town/village (values from 1 – completely unattached to 5 – completely attached);
Q4B – Attachment to the region (same values as Q4A);
Q5 – Local/regional self-identification (values from 0 – lack of regional identification, 1 – regional and other (state/Europe) identification; 2 – only regional identification);
Q6A – "I have a lot in common with other Y [members of the language community]" (values from 1 – definitely not to 5 definitely yes);
Q6B – "Being Y is an important part of who I am" (same values as Q6A);
Q6C – "There are situations in which I feel more Y than Polish" (same values as Q6A);
Q6D – "There are situations in which I feel more Polish than Y" (same values as Q6A).

Our model implies that Collective Identity is a general attitude that exists as a latent variable, manifested through several observable variables. Using the analytical technique of Item Response Theory (de Ayala 2009; van Schuur 2011), we empirically tested the measurement model with the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) to confirm that the empirical data supported the theoretically derived relationship between Collective Identity and its indicator variables. The result obtained implies that the answers given by respondents to questions Q4A–Q6D are sufficiently strongly correlated to have been generated by a single latent variable. The measurement model proved to be a good fit for the data. In summary, the empirical analyses confirmed our theoretical expectations regarding Collective Identity.

The latent variable Collective Identity thus reflects individuals' belief that they form a common group with others and that this group is distinct from another (in this case, the dominant one).

3.2.2 Measure of Identity and Language

The latent variable Identity and Language reveals the role that language plays in the collective identity of the group under study. Depending on various factors, a collateral language can have different meanings for collective identity. These include its role as a means of communication, the desire to preserve it for future generations as a symbol of the group, and its community-strengthening function (see Edwards 2009).

For Identity and Language, the questionnaire contained two questions:

Q1_E: How important is it to speak X (collateral language) to be a Y (member of the community)? Values range from 0 (not important at all) to 4 (very important).

Q2_2: Does the language differentiate Y from people living in other regions of Poland? Values range from 0 (no) to 4 (yes).

An additive index was created by summing the values of these individual variables. This additive index combines multiple data points into a single, interpretable index representing a broader concept or construct (Babbie 2012). The resulting latent variable therefore shows how strongly respondents feel about the relationship between collective identity and language.

3.3 Qualitative Research

The statistical research was supported by quantitative research performed using ethnographic methods, such as participant and non-participant observations and in-depth interviews with the region's inhabitants. In total, we recorded, transcribed and coded more than 300 interviews (with at least 25 community representatives from each region), encompassing participants of different ages, genders, and places of residence within the region, as well as varying levels of engagement in linguistic and cultural activities. Metadata for these interviews are available in the RepOD repository.

The interviews were then coded using the MAXQDA programme. The coding process combined inductive and deductive approaches (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane 2006), focusing on diverse aspects of ELV. The interviews were recorded in Polish and/or collateral languages, and the excerpts used in this article have been translated into English.

In the analysis, emphasis is placed on the subjective dimensions of identity and language within the ELV of the five collateral language communities – specifically, individuals' perceptions of their sense of belonging to the community and its relationship to the language. The objective dimensions of ELV are considered here solely as contextual background.

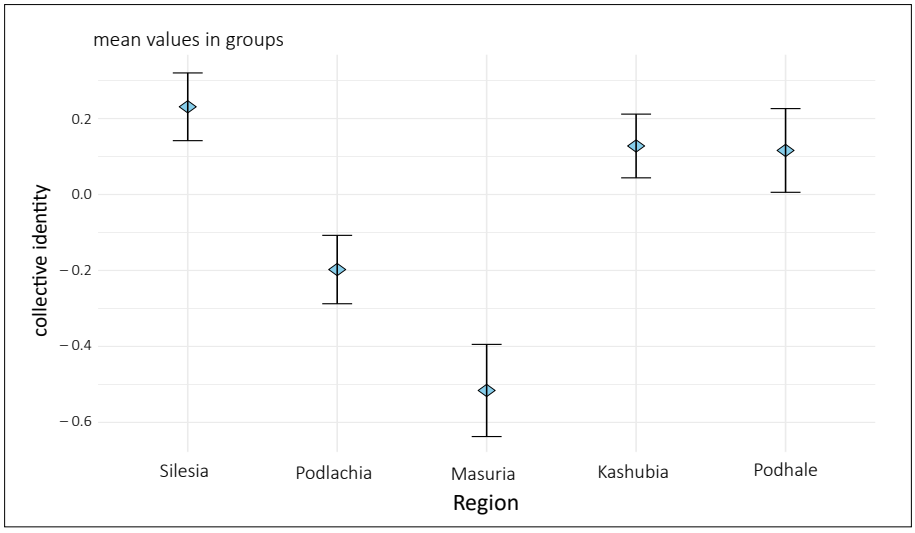
4. Results of Statistical Research

Chart 1 displays the values of the latent variable Collective Identity. The horizontal axis represents individual regions, while the vertical axis shows the synthetic scores of the variable for each region. Each diamond symbol indicates the mean value of collective identity within a region. The lines extending from each diamond represent the 95% confidence interval for that mean. This interval reflects the range within which the true population mean for that region is expected to fall, with 95% confidence. In other words, there is a 95% probability that the true average lies within this range and a 5% probability that it falls outside of it. Chart 2 was constructed using the same methodology.

The strongest expression of the latent variable Collective Identity is observed in Silesia, with an average score of 0.231. In Kashubia and Podhale, the average scores are 0.128 and 0.116, respectively; however, these differences are not statistically significant. Residents of these three regions tend to exhibit a strong attachment to their place of residence and regional identity. They are more likely to define themselves in terms of the local or regional group with which they identify, rather

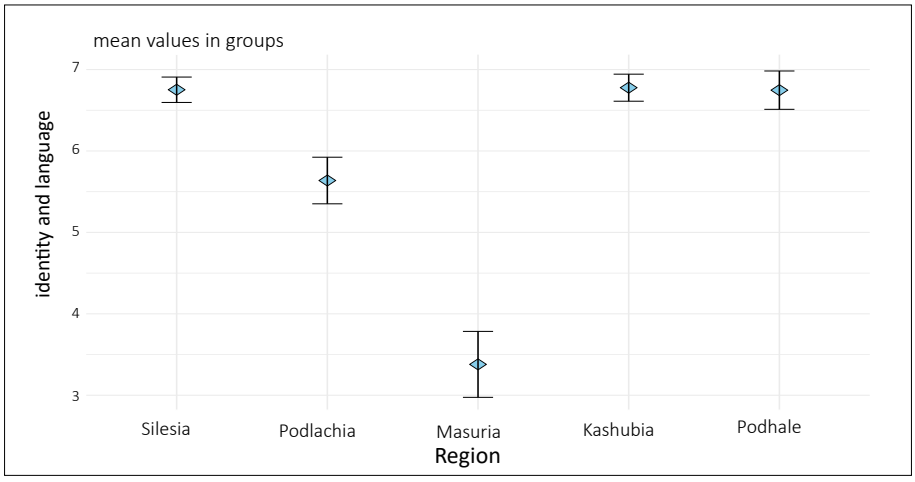
than with Poland or Poles in general. In contrast, the level of collective identity is lower in Podlachia (average: –0.198) and lowest in Masuria (average: –0.516).

Chart 1: Collective Identity – comparison across regions



Source: Dołowy-Rybińska et al. (2023).

Chart 2: Identity and Language – comparison across regions



Source: Dołowy-Rybińska et al. (2023).

In three regions – Silesia (average: 6.75), Kashubia (average: 6.78), and Podhale (average: 6.75) – there is an equally strong perceived connec-

tion between collective identity and language (latent variable Identity and Language). Language is regarded as a key bond among group members, with knowledge of the language seen as both an important marker of group membership and a distinguishing feature from other groups. The Identity and Language latent variable is slightly weaker in Podlachia (average: 5.64) and weakest in Masuria (average: 3.38).

5. Analysis of Results Informed by Qualitative Research

5.1 Silesia

In the case of Silesia, the strength of local identity derives from a deep awareness of the region's complex history as a cultural borderland – particularly its role in 20th century territorial conflicts between Poland and Germany, and between Poland and Czechoslovakia (especially in the south). From the 14th century until the end of World War I, no part of Silesia belonged to the state entities regarded as predecessors of modern Poland. The memory of Silesia's political autonomy within the Second Polish Republic during the interwar period also plays a significant role, as does the policy pursued by the Polish authorities toward the region after World War II. This policy has often been critically interpreted as a form of colonization (see Szmeja 2000; Gerlich 2010).

These historical and political factors have all contributed to the development of a strong sense of distinctiveness among Silesians – both as a regional group and, in the view of many, as a nation in their own right. The hundreds of thousands of declarations of Silesian nationality in successive censuses, along with efforts over the past decade to have Silesian recognized not only as a regional language but also to gain recognition for Silesians as an ethnic minority, provide clear evidence of this identity.

Our qualitative research in Silesia confirms Silesians' strong attachment to their region and, in many cases, their sense of ethnic and national distinctiveness. As one interviewee remarked:

> Nationality-wise, I feel Silesian. Never German, and not Polish either. We're neither Germans nor Poles, we're Silesians. I'd never say I'm Polish […] but I'd never say I'm German either. In Germany we were called Poles – 'der Pole', and in Poland at school – 'you *szwaby*!' [Krauts], 'you Germans!'. Wherever you go, you are not one of them. So I'm a Silesian, end of story (M37Sil).

In Silesia, language serves not only as a vital means of communication but also as a powerful symbol of Silesian identity. Speaking Silesian signifies a sense of belonging to the community. However, it is also possible to be considered part of the community without knowing the language, provided that other criteria valued by the group are met. As one interviewee explained:

> It is **inextricably linked, it cannot be separated**. And you know that if I did not speak Silesian, I would probably also consider myself a Silesian. [...] But **I don't see any problem if someone feels that they are Silesian but doesn't speak Silesian.** That's quite possible. [...] If someone lives in Silesia, [...] has a certain attachment to all this, feels connected to Silesian history, I would not prevent them from saying that they are Silesian. [...] On the other hand, if someone speaks Silesian... **I have never met anyone who speaks Silesian and does not feel Silesian** (M25Sil).

5.2 Kashubia

The strong sense of collective identity in Kashubia is closely linked to the long-standing Kashubian movement and its struggle for recognition, which dates back to the 19th century. The activities of Kashubian organizations – such as the Kashubian-Pomeranian Association (founded in 1956) and the Association of People of Kashubian Nationality Kaszëbskô Jednota (active since 2011) – and the ideological disputes between them have brought the issue of ethnic distinctiveness into regional discourse.

However, both qualitative and quantitative research (Synak 1998; Porębska 2006) indicates that most Kashubians identify with a dual Polish–Kashubian identity. This duality is also reflected in other latent variables of ethnolinguistic vitality, including language-related practices and ideologies. Many research participants repeatedly emphasized their dual identity and expressed frustration at being pressured by some Kashubian activists to choose between being Polish or Kashubian.

Conversely, some interviewees strongly asserted that Kashubians constitute a distinct nation or ethnic group separate from Poles – primarily, though not exclusively, those involved in the Kashubian national movement. In this context, we quote a member of the older generation who is not active in language promotion efforts, even though Kashubian is his first language:

> As an old Kashubian asked, **are you Germans? – What? Germans? – Are you Polish? – No. – Then who are you? Kashubians.** It is a deeply rooted consciousness. A Kashubian is a Kashubian. They are neither Poles nor Germans, we are Kashubians. Of course, for various reasons the Kashubians were more attracted to Poland. But in general, yes, we were Kashubians and we are still Kashubians. **It is different with young people. It is disappearing, it will not last, in my opinion** (M70Kash).

Two aspects of this statement are particularly noteworthy. First, like the Silesians (and other borderland groups studied), Kashubians have historically existed between two dominant nations – in this case, Poland and Germany – while maintaining a sense of distinctiveness from both. Second, the statement reflects a generational shift taking place in Kashubia. Our research confirmed that younger people tend to have a weaker sense of identity and are less familiar with the Kashubian language – or do not speak it at all – despite still attributing significant symbolic value to it.

Many members of the younger generation did not acquire the language through intergenerational transmission; instead, they had the opportunity to learn it at school. While few achieve fluency, the language continues to serve as a symbol of their collective identity, as illustrated by the following quote from a student:

> [Kashubian] **serves for a sense of identity, that you are so different from other Poles.** It is always a **sense of a certain pride, or a sense of belonging.** This is quite important from the point of view of human nature (M17Kash).

5.3 Podhale

In Podhale, a positive image of Highlander culture – characterized by resourcefulness and deep attachment to tradition – emerged in the 19th century and persists to this day (Gąsienica-Giewont & Trebunia-Staszel 2022). The Podhale identity is framed almost exclusively within the broader national context, without claims to ethnic or linguistic autonomy. The local language variety, commonly referred to as a sub-dialect of Polish, reflects this status. While the Polish term *gwara* often carries pejorative connotations, Highlanders use it in a semantically neutral way, though it still implies a subordinate position in relation to the dominant language. Nonetheless, Highlanders take pride in the features distinguishing their group and culture. One of our interviewees from Podhale reflected on her identity as follows:

> [...] I'm more… Highlander, Polish – rather equally… I don't want to sound like we're distancing ourselves somehow, ok? There are minorities that distance themselves, and we don't do that. [...] Well, I think we're proud to be Highlanders... I'm proud to be a Highlander, somewhere in my heart, it's always there. [...] This Highland culture has always been with us at home. [...] We are lucky to be born in a region that has its culture, a life of its own, a Highland way of life... (F37Pdh).

This paradox – whereby the group maintains a strong attachment to its region, language, and culture, perceiving them as distinctly different from those of other parts of Poland, yet simultaneously displays an almost exaggerated denial of ethnic distinctiveness and a clear rejection of any emancipatory aspirations (such as seeking minority or regional language status) – has its roots in historical experience. This dates back to World War II and the Highlanders' collaboration with the Germans under the banner of *Goralenvolk*, a concept promoted by Nazi ideologues that claimed the Highlanders constituted a separate Germanic nation. The history of *Goralenvolk* remains a taboo topic among the region's inhabitants, who are reluctant to confront it. Any notion of isolation, as the interviewee quoted above described it, evokes associations with this unwelcome historical legacy.

In Podhale, language and collective identity are seen as inseparable: Highlanders recognize one another by accent and manner of speaking. There is also a widespread belief that their language cannot be learned through study, but must be acquired from birth.

> When someone speaks in a typical Highlander way... in Goral [language], it's not that they've learnt it somewhere or something, it's probably so noticeable in that speech, isn't it? When someone speaks Goral typically it seems to me that it's so... so... so... that it has a kind of, well, that it proves that you're a Highlander (F38Podh).

5.4 Podlachia

The collective identity of the group studied – referred to here as *Podlachians* (a term rarely used by the speakers themselves, much like Podlachian for the language) – is primarily based on religious affiliation, specifically membership in the Orthodox Church. The local language variety is not identified by a single name (Woolhiser 2018) and is most often regarded as a sub-dialect (*gwara*) of either Belarusian or Ukrainian. The perceived distance from these languages is often explained by their

gwarowość (sub-dialectal nature). Moreover, Podlachia is not only the name of the area inhabited by native speakers of Podlachian, but also refers to a broader geographic region. This dual significance of the term *Podlachia* was found to influence participants' responses.

A key factor influencing the level of identification, as revealed through qualitative research, is the dichotomy between self-identification and external identification. As Orthodox Christians speaking an East Slavic language variety, the local population is frequently (and often pejoratively) labeled as *Russkies* (pl. *ruskie*), a term that does not refer to a single nation but broadly encompasses all Eastern Slavs. Although they are born and raised in Poland and feel a strong connection to Polish culture, they also experience a sense of difference from what is perceived as typically Polish. One of our interviewees described it as follows:

> I'm a Pole. A different one. And as for the fact that we've always been Polish... Yes. I'm a Pole. Whom else could I be? Well, I was born in Poland, I grew up in Poland, Poland gave me an education, Poland gave me peace and a roof over my head. I work here, I pay taxes here. You know. I am a Pole. But certainly not the kind of Pole from Kraków, Częstochowa or Poznań. [...] The Poles see us as *Russkies*, and the *Russkies* see us as Poles, but we are neither Polish nor *Russkie* (F51Pdl).

In Podlachia, the local language is primarily used for everyday communication within communities – particularly in villages with a significant Orthodox Christian population and among older generations. It is spoken at local gatherings, festivals, and church fairs, whereas official speeches and posters typically employ the literary languages of recognized minorities, Belarusian or Ukrainian. As a result, while Podlachian is highly valued as a community language, it has little prestige in the broader linguistic landscape. Despite the coexistence of multiple layers of identity, language remains one of the key markers of local identity, alongside land, tradition, and religion. As one Podlachia activist put it:

> I identify first and foremost with the land, with this place. [...] With the history, with the tradition, with the language. [...] I mean, it's all about the language, isn't it? [...] So language, language, language, but above all land, roots. Like I said, my ancestors are from here, [...] my grandfather, great-grandfather, great-great-grandfather, are buried here in the cemetery [...]. The culture, well, and the language, [...] Well, it's also a bit connected with religion, right [...] (F55Podl).

5.5 Masuria

The weakest sense of collective identity among the studied communities is found in Masuria. This is largely due to pivotal events in the mid-20th century: the post-war displacement of the Masurian population, driven by their predominantly German identity before and during World War II, the resettlement of people from other regions of Poland, which blurred the remaining linguistic and ethnic distinctiveness, and the post-war persecution of Masurians. These processes contributed to the concealment of Masurian identity and, ultimately, the population's widespread assimilation (Sakson 2005). As a result, Masurian identity has, for the most part, been forgotten.

Nevertheless, a small but growing number of individuals are seeking to rediscover their local and ethnic roots. This is exemplified by one of our interviewees, who, through his work at the Masurian Museum, has reconnected with his heritage and begun to identify as Masurian:

> There are a **handful of Masurians here at the moment. People who use some words or feel this Masurian spirit**, yeah? Well, my family is also a bit removed from that tradition. [...] I **discovered my Masurianness very late.** [...] I discovered it very late as an adult. Also, in a way, **through my work here in this museum,** right? It was then that I began to study the history of Masuria and its tradition. I started to put it all together and recall what I remembered from childhood (M58Mas).

In such cases, Masurian identity is experienced more as an individual pursuit than a shared collective phenomenon. It tends to emerge among those engaged in local cultural work or historical inquiry. Our interviewee, for instance, demonstrates a symbolic attachment to the Masurian language, occasionally using specific words associated with it. However, on a broader scale, the statistical relationship between identity and language in Masuria remains weak.

Interviewees often stress that this weakness is not only due to the break in intergenerational transmission or the erosion of community cohesion, but more significantly, to the historically low status of the Masurian language. It has never been widely recognized as a legitimate or prestigious language. Instead, it has traditionally been seen as merely a *gwara* – a sub-dialect – suitable only for informal, intra-community oral communication.

One interviewee articulated this perception clearly:

> They [didn't] care too much about it either; we were just taught that you were either German or Polish, and it wasn't like that. We were **more interested in our customs, in our religion, and not in this language,** no. Well, yes, we Masurians are not some super-educated people who would cherish our mother tongue like that. For us, **home means something different than language,** no (F51Mas).

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The role of latent variables such as Collective Identity and **Identity and Language** is important for understanding the ethnolinguistic vitality (ELV) of any language community. However, these dimensions are not more important than others – particularly those relating to language transmission and practices – and should be studied alongside all the other aspects of ELV (see Dołowy & Mętrak, in press). In the case of collateral language communities, whose internal cohesion and sense of supra-local belonging are often contested, it is equally important to analyze their dynamics in explicitly ethnic terms. However, the strength of collective identity in such communities is influenced by several interrelated factors.

First, it varies depending on the degree of cultural and linguistic assimilation to the dominant group. The communities studied here are all peripheral groups whose subjectivity has historically been denied by surrounding dominant cultures, particularly from the 19th century onward, with intensification before, during, and after World War II. In some cases – such as the Silesians and the Kashubians – these communities had developed an elite class and achieved a certain level of cultural and linguistic awareness. In others, such as Masuria and Podlachia, local representatives encouraged identification with dominant national cultures, thereby weakening the perception of their group as a distinct cultural and linguistic entity. In yet another case, such as Podhale, efforts to gain recognition sometimes resulted in collective stigma and deeper subordination to the dominant society. Nevertheless, language transmission and practices are not directly dependent on political circumstances. For example, they are notably stronger in Podhale and Silesia than in Kashubia, which is the only region where the language enjoys official recognition.

Second, the strength of collective identity is linked to processes of language and identity reclamation within these communities. This reclamation depends partly on institutional support, which in turn is influenced by local engagement and the legal or political rights granted to

the group. It also depends significantly on the activism of local leaders. Where language movements are strong and carry a political dimension – as in Silesia – community members tend to be more aware of their sociolinguistic situation and more involved in cultural and linguistic revitalization. Conversely, where group subjectivity has been historically denied (as in Podlachia) or identity has significantly eroded (as in Masuria), mobilizing community engagement is far more difficult, making it harder to strengthen the group's distinctiveness. Interestingly, a high level of collective identity may exist even when a group does not frame its identity in explicitly ethnic terms, as observed in Kashubia and Podhale.

The latent variable Identity and Language reveals a strong relationship between collective identity and language use. Like other latent variables, this relationship is complex. The distinctiveness of a collateral language from the dominant language is often questioned, reflected in the way speakers categorize their own speech – not as a separate language, but as a dialect or even a *gwara* (sub-dialect) of the dominant tongue. Nonetheless, the analysis of this latent variable allows us to explore how the relationship between identity and language is constructed and what determines it.

Identity and Language is closely linked with other core ELV variables – particularly Intergenerational Transmission, Language Competence, and Language Practices (Dołowy & Mętrak, in press). However, it also enables us to understand the collateral language not only as a practical tool of communication but as a multidimensional phenomenon – a symbol of collective belonging with which individuals identify in diverse ways. This latent variable may assume different meanings in different contexts – it may function as a means of both communication and representation (as in Silesia); a powerful, though increasingly symbolic, identifier (as in Kashubia); a key element of group cohesion (as in Podlachia); or a marker of authenticity and belonging (as in Podhale). In long-assimilated and dispersed communities, such as Masuria, it may be seen as only a minor or marginal factor.

There is also a notable relationship between a group's historical and present circumstances and the valorization of its language. Where the language enjoys greater prestige, legal recognition, or institutional support, the bond between collective identity and language tends to be stronger – even when intergenerational transmission and everyday language use are limited, as in the case of Kashubia.

Analyzing collective identity and its link to language using qualitative research frameworks provides a deeper understanding of the com-

plex interplay between these concepts – an interplay that cannot be fully captured using quantitative methods alone. The objective aspects of ELV, such as demographics, status, and minority-majority relations, provide essential context for analysis. Nevertheless, ELV demonstrates how people subjectively perceive these facts and circumstances. Fully grasping the complexity of ELV requires an in-depth exploration of the group's perception of historical experiences, its interactions with dominant cultures, and the personal narratives of its members.

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Vloga kolektivne identitete in njen odnos do jezika v etnolingvistični vitalnosti: študija sorodnih jezikovnih skupnosti na Poljskem

Izvleček

Delovanje manjšinskih skupnosti je že dolgo v središču raziskav etnolingvistične vitalnosti (ELV), ki med ključne povezovalne dejavnike uvršča predvsem vlogo jezika in kolektivne identitete. Poljska študija o ELV se od leta 2021 osredotoča na t. i. sorodne jezikovne skupnosti – avtohtone skupine v določenih delih države, katerih jeziki so tesno povezani z dominantnim nacionalnim jezikom in so pogosto zmotno obravnavani kot narečja. Te skupine večinoma ne uživajo uradnega priznanja, njihova skupnostna identiteta pa je pogosto predmet dvoma. Za oceno njihove notranje povezanosti je bila v okviru ELV razvita latentna spremenljivka – kolektivna identiteta –, s katero presojamo, ali takšne skupnosti, ki jih pogosto označujejo kot regionalne in ne etnične, izražajo skupne značilnosti ter občutek kolektivne pripadnosti. Ugotovitve kažejo, da sorodne jezikovne skupnosti tvorijo posebne entitete, za katere so značilni skupni jezik in kulturne vrednote, kar postavlja pod vprašaj prevladujoče predstave o njihovem perifernem oziroma neetničnem statusu.

Ključne besede

etnolingvistična vitalnost, sorodni jeziki, kolektivna identiteta, latentna spremenljivka, Poljska

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Gordon Cameron[1], Iain Caimbeul[1], Conchúr Ó Giollagáin[1]

A Delicate Balancing Act: Making Decisions for Scottish Gaelic

Abstract

Research on language policy and planning (LPP) decision making for Gaelic in Scotland attempted to map out the major preoccupations and identify blindspots held by those overseeing policy construction and implementation. Interviews with elite players in LPP development elicited key qualitative data which was benchmarked against core issues identified in a survey of participants in a putative Scottish Gaelic socioeconomy and social economy. The research uncovered discrepancies between official aspiration and socioeconomic reality, between benefits for individuals and help for communities, or between specific job sectors and the wider economy. More concerning, it becomes apparent that elite players are unclear on language revitalisation goals. While they understand that more needs to be done for the home and community, they lack strategic direction as to how to achieve this.

Keywords

Scottish Gaelic, decision making, language policy, revitalisation

Corresponding author

Gordon Cameron, Language Sciences Institute, University of the Highlands and Islands, Inverness, United Kingdom; **e-mail**: gordon.cameron@uhi.ac.uk;
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0006-7723-5168

[1] Language Sciences Institute, University of the Highlands and Islands, Inverness, United Kingdom.

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1. Introduction

This article examines philosophies and opinions regarding language policy decision making for Gaelic in Scotland, with reference to the positions expressed by two distinct groups. Firstly, the elite leadership in the socioeconomic and sociocultural realms pertaining to the resilience of Gaelic, and of the *Gàidhealtachd*. Secondly, those participating in the Gaelic socioeconomic marketplace who should theoretically benefit from those policy decisions if the language has a market value, and if language competency can be regarded as an asset to be exchanged in some social or socioeconomic realm (HIE 2014; Grin 2003; Hogan-Brun 2017, xii).

If Gaelic language and culture are societal assets, then, to flourish, the socioeconomic market conditions to enable this are required. Perceptions of how far language policy has gone towards facilitating these conditions forms the core of this article. Decision makers are in the unenviable position of balancing a range of competing interests against a suite of societal pressures, and there has been little in the way of language policy evaluation to identify what has succeeded for Gaelic (Jones et al. 2016 is arguably the sole example) and its speakers, and to what degree.

Furthermore, this article examines whether there is a dichotomy between the need to present coherent messaging on how Gaelic development can best be supported, and what private conversations reveal about how effective or realistic current revitalisation strategies and trajectories are judged to be.

1.1 Brief Overview of Gaelic Language in Scotland

The Gaelic language, in the Scottish civic consciousness, often remains associated with *A' Ghàidhealtachd*, which may be understood to refer to a notional "culture-region" (McLeod 2020, 11) most often associated with Scotland's Highlands and Islands, in the north and north-west of the country. The term, and its geography, has been explored in historical context (Ó Baoill 1974; Withers 1988, 40; MacInnes 1989; Dawson 1998), and has been problematised and critiqued (Murdoch 1995; MacCaluim & McLeod 2001) as alternative scholarly perspectives enter the debate around minority language revitalisation and reversing language shift in post-modernity. The north-western Highlands and Islands are still regarded as the core Gaelic-speaking region by the public (Bechhofer & McCrone 2014), despite "presentist evasion of previous

social speaker-group reality and identity" (Ó Giollagáin et al. 2020, 387). Gaelic speaker numbers in Scotland declined with accelerating rapidity during the 20th century, and speaker densities eroded not only in the so-called traditional redoubt of the language (Withers 1984; 1988; 1989), but also in the nation's most populous cities such as Glasgow, which was formerly home to perhaps around 20,000 speakers (MacKenzie 1987; Kidd 2007).

In the period since the reopening of the Scottish Parliament in 1999, Gaelic has received support from across the political spectrum. The Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005 set in train a number of actions which have raised the profile of the language nationally, amid attempts to reverse an ongoing decline in speaker (and user) numbers. Bòrd na Gàidhlig was established as the principal public body responsible for promoting Gaelic development, and for providing advice to Scottish Government Ministers. The figures from the 2022 Census for Scotland report that Gaelic speaker numbers rose by around 12,000 in the country over the previous decade to reach 69,701 (1.3% of the population) – individuals who are, almost exclusively, Gaelic-English bilinguals. A further 46,404 individuals had some other Gaelic skill (reading, writing, understanding) meaning 131,161 individuals (2.5% of the Scottish resident population) had at least some Gaelic skill. UNESCO ranks Scottish Gaelic as definitely endangered.

1.2 Sociocultural, Demographic and Theoretical Background

In considering the anthropology of policy (e.g. Shore et al. 2011), we may reflect on the function of power dynamics and the broader socio-economic and political systems in which policies sit, and on the connection of different sites and scales (micro/local, meso/regional, macro/national, and even supranational) through which policy processes are played out. It can also be instructive to consider how localised policy manifestations act as a lens for perceiving longer term changes in the organisational structures which shape our existences. In this sense, examining the outlook of policy practitioners in the Gaelic sphere can be instructive for understanding the stratification of influence and power at play in shaping the pathway for Gaelic over the next generation. While parliamentary-political cycles are relatively short, for example, the focus on Gaelic-medium education (GME) (e.g. Dunmore 2018a; 2018b; NicLeòid 2018) and supporting new speakers (McLeod 2018, 86; McLeod & O'Rourke 2015) as a means of generating numbers is

(or ought to be) a *longue durée* endeavour if learners are to be fully supported on their journeys to language use beyond the confines of statutory or adult education. It is also important to consider that the majority of the Gaelic-using population, many of whom reside in the *Gàidhealtachd*, is a substantial client group (NicLeòid 2022) requiring long-term policy support, and that this client group has a fundamental collective importance to the future sustainability of the Gaelic mission.

The last four decades have seen what some scholars and commentators have branded a renaissance for Gaelic in Scotland (Rogerson & Gloyer 1995; Macdonald 1997; 1999; McLeod 2001a), even a renaissance without planning (McLeod 2002a), despite otherwise concerning societal trends such as demolinguistic decline in the *Gàidhealtachd* (Ó Giollagáin et al. 2020). Others have pointed to recent initiatives which have fostered engagement outwith the Scottish polity, noting positive trends in online engagement through language learning apps, or contemporary developments in regions such as Nova Scotia in Canada to which Gaelic speakers had emigrated in large numbers during the 18th and 19th centuries, embedding their language in their new settings (Dunmore 2020; 2021).

Gaelic faces contemporary challenges including (but not restricted to) a weakening in intergenerational or inter-familial language transmission, and a demolinguistic decline which indicates that the proportion of Gaelic speakers living inside and outside the *Gàidhealtachd* will become more or less equal, for the first time on record.[1] Also worth noting are sub-optimal learning pathways and opportunities for potential "new speakers" across the country (MacLeod 2018; Carty 2018), and wider societal difficulties such as responding to the cost of living crisis which make competing demands on public resources.

The Scottish Government expresses its overt support for Gaelic largely through provision for Gaelic education, broadcasting, organisational language planning and more symbolic representations (through performance, culture and attempts to bolster the linguistic landscape). Despite this apparently positive promotion, several dichotomous positions expressed by respondents to recent research indicate fundamental weaknesses and blind spots in the policy architecture, which will be explored later.

Recent community-/societally-centred work on facing sociolinguistic challenges has proposed that change is needed, and that agency to make and guide change should be handed to community interests rather than to government and its public bodies (Ó Giollagáin et al. 2020; Ó Giollagáin & Caimbeul 2021; Lewin 2023). The discourse around which

approach(es) could best ameliorate the widely-acknowledged challenges facing the Gaelic vernacular community, and wider networks in Scotland and beyond, has sparked some measure of controversy (McLeod et al. 2022; Armstrong et al. 2022). The Scottish public, however, is broadly ambivalent (McLeod et al. 2022, 87): while many Gaels or Gaelic-speakers identify as Scottish, few Scots would identify as or with Gaels (Bechhofer & McCrone 2014).

The striking increase in efforts to portray Gaelic as a positive public asset for Scotland and its people indicates the presentational aspect of contemporary Gaelic language policy and planning. Such presentationalism manifests itself in several key strands:

- Portraying a positive image of progress and rejecting a "death discourse" (McEwen-Fujita 2006), or downplaying critiques or views which may be perceived as damaging to the language's "brand". This stems from concerns that deviation from positive portrayals of Gaelic's prospects fuels a self-fulfilling spiral of negativity which erodes the morale of activists and speakers (Bostock 1997; Dunmore 2021). After Ó Giollagáin et al. (2020) presented stark evidence of the demolinguistic decline in Gaelic's so-called heartland areas, those authors were criticised (McLeod et al. 2022) over sensationalised media headlines which predicted the imminent death of the language. Although this criticism ought to have been levelled more directly at the media outlets responsible, perhaps, it was predicated on the fear that overly negative reporting would affect the potential ideological discourses required to move the curious to learn the language, and to encourage those already on learning journeys to continue. These ideological concerns, however, may obfuscate the primary academic responsibility which is engaging with evidence. Media discourse around anti-Gaelic campaigning and claims that support is a waste of resources have been explored by MacKinnon (2012) such that the language inhabits a space between portrayal as a success story of revitalisation and growth that may not necessarily be true, or its existence being sustained by subsidy, which is also false.
- The representation of Gaelic in Scotland's socio-cultural linguistic landscape (e.g. Puzey 2010), which has the dual functions of the symbolic and the informational (Landry & Bourhis 1997). It may indicate that people who identify in some way with the Gaelic language are more often represented in Scotland's social spaces, however, the social realities of such language communities or clusters may not necessarily be adequately catered for, even when this sym-

bolic representation suggests that Gaelic is valued as an element in a postmodernist bilingual or multilingual repertoire (see Moriarty (2014) on Irish linguistic landscapes). The politics of repertoire have little need of a functioning collective of minority language speakers.

- Advancement of a homogenising national outlook complementing a language policy and planning architecture in which "it makes more sense to think in terms of a single, albeit substantially differentiated Gaelic community in which there are myriad interconnections of different kinds" (McLeod et al. 2022, 92). The presentation of Gaelic as a language for the whole of Scotland is an admirable aspiration, which cannot yet be truly realised due to funding and workforce constraints as much as the demolinguistic challenges, and which serves to deflect attention from reality. This means that a one-size-fits-all approach is followed, for example, in a broadly acultural Gaelic educational curriculum, rather than truly planning for the very different challenges facing different clusters and communities of Gaelic speakers and users in their specific contexts. Consequently, a somewhat *laissez-faire* attitude emerges in designing policy which lacks impact.
- The ongoing commitment to, and funding of, organisational language planning (Bòrd na Gàidhlig 2021) with limited evidence of its efficacy (Jones et al. 2016). Such efforts have a value in promoting visibility and diversity within organisations and in both internal and public-facing operational spheres, however, they appear more symbolic in that it is hard to ascertain how frequently they bring about behavioural or cultural change for an organisation and its potential stakeholders (Dunbar 2018).

Emerging from this framework of the importance of the message are questions relating to policy prioritisation and to whether public-facing messaging is supported in private by elite players.

2. Gaelic Development Background and Political Climate

When the first National Gaelic Language Plan (NGLP) was published to cover the period 2007–2012, the Highlands and Islands were identified as a key priority, particularly because the Gaelic speaker density in *Na h-Eileanan Siar* (the Western Isles) stood at 72% in 2001.[2] The islands were perceived to offer a resource which could be both bolstered to be

sustainable in the region and to act as a foundation for development efforts elsewhere, even if there were criticisms that *Comhairle nan Eilean Siar* (Western Isles Council) had not fully operationalised or optimised all potential aspects of its own bilingual policy (McLeod et al. 2022), with the implication that failing to rigorously pursue fully bilingual opportunities had contributed to a declining density of Gaelic speakers there.[3]

By 2018, observers had identified an unacknowledged, or perhaps covert, policy shift which emphasised a move towards attracting new speakers to the language, either through Gaelic-medium education for children (full immersion in ostensibly Gaelic-only settings, or opportunities for learners to study specific subjects through Gaelic-medium) or by targeting adult learners, a trajectory imbued with controversy (McLeod 2018, 86). That such a change has come about was made clear when Bòrd na Gàidhlig observed in the third NGLP: "Gaelic education is central to the ambition of Gaelic growth […]. Our clear view is that Gaelic education makes an important contribution to the aim of increasing the numbers of those speaking, using and learning the language" (Bòrd na Gàidhlig 2018, 32). This is a similar policy position held in relation to other minoritised languages, such as Upper Sorbian (Dołowy-Rybińska & Ratajczak 2019), Basque (Ortega et al. 2015) or Welsh (Welsh Assembly 2017). Peace-Hughes (2022, 338) suggests recent contemporary studies indicate "a belief that the current GME model in Scotland effectively achieves its goals, and, therefore, any amendments to policy and/or practice are not warranted." In line with wider criticisms of workforce planning issues, there are concerns over teacher support and resourcing sufficient to deliver the Scottish Government's 1+2 approach to learning modern languages in the classroom which effectively leads to Gaelic being somewhat "hidden in the wider Scottish curriculum" (Peace-Hughes 2022, 339). Effectively, Scottish Gaelic revitalisation efforts now rely on creating a virtuous and self-sustaining circle of language recruitment via access to statutory education or adult learning pathways, with little evaluation to date of (likely) efficacy (Dunmore 2018a; 2018b); on services provided under the auspices of organisational language plans; and on goodwill generated by increased visibility and symbolic representations of Gaelic on a broader, national scale. In a broader vein, McLeod et al. (2022) observe that policy may function more efficiently if Gaelic language planning is reinforced, although this is challenging in an era of constrained public finances if greater resources for increased staffing is envisaged.

2.1 GLPP Tensions and Contentions

It is in this Gaelic language policy and planning (GLPP) atmosphere that tensions have emerged in the debate on Gaelic's future, and how to secure it. Gaelic has previously assumed a "historic role as the vernacular of a regionally concentrated ethnolinguistic minority" (Lewin 2023, 155). The greatest Gaelic-speaker density, by local authority area, remains in *Na h-Eileanan Siar*, although, in 2022, Gaelic speakers there are now in the minority for the first time in centuries, at 45%. There are important numbers of speakers in major cities such as Glasgow and Edinburgh, although their distribution in these urban areas remains around the national average (a little over 1%).

The declining position of Gaelic in rural Highland and Island Scotland where speaker densities have long been greater than in cities, has led some scholars and campaign groups to advocate for greater efforts to support speakers in these areas, suggesting a shift in emphasis from planning for public agencies and increased visibility or Gaelic-language service equivalence towards provision aimed at strengthening community settings where Gaelic interactions are likely to be more prevalent or to occur (Ó Giollagain et al. 2020). It is argued that LPP which fails to adequately address the root causes of language loss, fails to support first-language speaker communities and, thus, fails to sustain a minoritised language's social salience, corresponds to "language promotion without language protection" (Ó Curnáin & Ó Giollagáin 2023). A counter argument posits, among other factors, that geographic framings of issues related to Gaelic's societal survival are unhelpful, given the Scottish Government position that Gaelic is a language for all, and fail to account for learners' and promotional efforts elsewhere (McLeod et al. 2022).

The suggestion of recognising some *Gàidhealtachd* of language-culture region officially has been criticised as detrimental to Gaelic speakers in low-density areas (Dunbar 2016). The Scottish Languages Act 2025 identifies the potential for designation of Areas of linguistic significance, however the criteria are vague and could be applied in the very broadest set of circumstances (Scottish Languages Act 2025). As Gaelic revitalisation and development efforts have been funded by central government, a putative Gaelic economy has emerged although its scale and impact are contested (see, e.g. McLeod 2001b; 2002b; Chalmers 2019; Chalmers & Danson 2009; 2012; HIE 2014). Economies of scale, infrastructural considerations and numerous other socioeconomic factors have led to the sectoral development of a cadre of jobs, often well-

remunerated, in Scotland's cities and urban Central Belt, a growth not yet matched in rural Scotland, which is a further area of contention (see Table 5 in Annex 1 for an overview of how this issue emerges in recent doctoral research). This suggests that Gaelic language skills are more readily rewarded in low-density speaker areas today, while Gaelic may have been seen as a less desirable skill in the past when seeking employment in urban Scotland.

3. Methodology

The research methodology employed for the project was three-fold: data mining of the literature; a corpus of semi-structured interviews with elite decision makers (27 individuals); and a survey of 134 participants in Gaelic's purported socioeconomic marketplace (see Tables 1–4 in Annex 1 for information on sector, location, age, gender and background information on research participants).[4] This approach allowed for the triangulation of results from the fieldwork with the existing, contemporary academic literature on Gaelic's position in Scotland and the debates surrounding the language. It further meant that the findings could be benchmarked against the main precepts and ambitions outlined in the existing NGLP, the primary language planning framework available against which to assess perceived progress.[5] All relevant Gaelic LPP materials were examined (National Language Plans, public agency language plans, sector-specific or voluntary group language plans, if available), and the growing body of academic work on Gaelic and minority language policy and planning from other polities was assessed to establish theoretical structure. Extensive scoping exercises were carried out on the two potential respondent pools to enable opinion gathering from a variety of actors operating across the full socioeconomic spectrum which impacts language issues in Scotland: media, education, governance, language development, social and economic development, and so on. This was intended to offer a wide geographic scope but to eliminate risks of institutional bias.

Data was gathered concurrently with both the interviews and the survey conducted in a seven-month block during 2019. After transcribing the interview corpus, thematic analysis was carried out to identify core issues of importance. Aggregated responses were compiled from survey participants, from which key priorities emerged. It was then possible to triangulate the findings from these two datasets with the contemporary literature, benchmarking the most salient examples of shared importance against the NGLP.

4. Thematic Findings

The research dataset provided an ethnographic picture of elite conceptions of Gaelic policy, as well as quantitative results provided by participants in Gaelic's purported socioeconomy which broadly encompasses the creative industries and media, education and language development (see HIE (2014) for estimates of Gaelic's annual economic contribution). What is provided below is a snapshot of a very rich dataset which offers many nuanced perspectives (Cameron 2023). This offered valuable opportunities for triangulating findings with other relevant studies. National Gaelic policy was viewed as effective in supporting the use of Gaelic in respondents' own occupational sectors or areas of responsibility (55.6% (strongly) agreeing), but levels of agreement in terms of respondents' local areas and regions, or nationally, fell to 35.6% and 42% respectively. This sequence of survey responses indicates a positive sectoral impact but levels of use beyond workplace domains are not seen to be as supported.

4.1 Narrow Sectoral Significance of Language Policy and Planning

Perhaps given the relatively restricted sectoral nature of the Gaelic socioeconomy, it is little surprise that elites reflected the findings above as successful policy outcomes for specific sectors. What is more concerning is that elites admit that they generally only acknowledge policy relating to their own sector. Of the interview cohort, none could offer more than a superficial parsing of the then-current third National Gaelic Language Plan (NGLP) or its aims, which suggests a concerning lack of coherence or messaging.

On enabling the use of Gaelic in more informal domains, the responses from those theoretically embedded in a Gaelic socioeconomy were less positive than would be hoped. 11.3% (strongly) agreed that use in the home is supported by current national policy, and 18% (strongly) agreed that use in community settings is enabled. These are two pivotal, yet, alarming, findings if Gaelic is to be revitalised as imagined. It is in the media and educational settings that national Gaelic policy is seen to positively contribute to use of the language. Respectively, 73.6% and 72.9% (strongly) agree that this area of policy enables use of Gaelic. Given the discrepancy between home/community use and educational use, there is unease that educational use does not extend beyond its own silo. There is also a live concern that inadequate workforce

planning, and the challenges of recruiting, training and retaining teaching staff, is a major obstacle to delivering Gaelic education at a national scale which can match parental desire for provision. In terms of media, this may be regarded as an arms-length engagement, or a more passive consumption of content rather than actively enabling the end user's own use (see Willis & Uribe-Jongbloed 2024), despite Gaelic media production receiving major funding from government amid debates about its GLPP contribution to corpus planning, use planning, learner uptake, etc. (Milligan et al. 2011; Willis 2024).[6]

One of the more intriguing results expressed in the socioeconomic survey was that current policy initiatives do not adequately promote the use of Gaelic in the workplace (18% (strongly) agree versus 49.6% (strongly) disagree), even although Gaelic policy is seen to boost sectors. This perhaps illustrates a perceived gap between use and visibility, between instrumentality and image. It also raises legitimate concerns about attempts to position Gaelic-related employment as a viable career option, if socioeconomic opportunities are limited to specific sectors.

The elite interview corpus indicated that current language policy is of limited or negligible benefit at the micro level, with opinions such as "I'm not sure how it impacts, or how the plans impact at a community level …" (C5), and "I think it's nonsense making national plans for public bodies. They should carry out action on the ground in the communities where it (Gaelic) still is […] I have lost confidence in the future as regards Gaelic" (C12) being commonplace among interviewees.[7]

The demographic and demolinguistic pressures affecting the traditionally strongest Gaelic-speaking communities are clearly understood as critical burdens on maintenance of Gaelic in community settings and on any hope that language shift can be countered.

> I suppose it's just the demographic in terms of the older population and the sort of gap in the middle … but there are good signs in terms of children entering Gaelic-medium education, that's at record levels. But it's like a bath, isn't it, where the tap isn't going as fast as the drain and there's a lot more action needed, I feel, to support the language (C27).

This is a clear and concerning acknowledgment that numbers generated by statutory education are not, currently, coming close to matching the demolinguistic loss of highly competent speakers in the older age cohorts. In essence, policy is not producing a desired outcome quickly enough. Although Gaelic-medium education is projected as benefitting

from policy, there is a private, rarely externalised disquiet with its outcomes. Most interviewees felt that it is under-resourced, inefficient and does not produce the requisite cohort of speakers. Direct criticism of GME, however, is uncommon, and is felt to be like attacking a "sacred cow" of Gaelic revitalisation (C22).

4.2 Opaque View of Policy's Revitalisation Goals

> The educational stuff [is] generally going well, but I think the wider stuff, it's really: 'What is the policy? How do you fix it?' And we probably need to look at other countries. […] We talk about supporting Gaelic in the community […] how do we actually do that, what are the things that we can do? (C27).

One of the key elements emerging from interviews with leadership was a clear lack of understanding as to the Gaelic revitalisation end goal, which could also be a blindspot of deliberate omission. Education is broadly seen to be enabled, but wider societal problems related to Gaelic (policy) are not being adequately addressed. Elite interviewees suggested that there is a lack of clarity about what is being done, and to what purpose, with repeated references to not being able to identify what the target should be for 2040 and beyond. The first NGLP contained a sequence of identifiable targets which would be aimed at for the 2021–2041 period.[8] These targets were subsequently dropped from later NGLPs. Interviewee C9 felt, therefore, that current Gaelic decision making is so vague that no future pathway is being defined. There are further concerns that uncertain longer-term planning obscures current needs:

> Some were talking about policies, plans. 'Oh, we might do this, we might do that.' I just said: 'Forget it! Tell me what you're going to do next week, tomorrow, this year. I don't care what you're thinking of doing in five years, that's no use at all. There are far too many of these people around (C24).

Coupled with an opaque outline of revitalisation goals, there is a sense of impatience with current policy aspiration, which is not seen to meet contemporary or future challenges. Among the policy class, there was a clash between acknowledging the necessity of operating within defined political, economic and statutory frameworks to bring about incremental change, and the desire for more rapid progress. As one interviewee phrased it, drawing on Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, seeking innovative ways

of disruption is needed as a catalyst to move beyond the glacial pace of government-supported efforts to reverse language shift.

4.3 Concerns Regarding Equivalence in Gaelic-Language Service Provision

> Especially if you're looking for a service, it's the service itself that you want and to a large extent it doesn't matter to you which language it's in. But there was a feeling that people ought to have the option of those services in Gaelic, well, again, it's fine as an aspiration but practically, I don't know if it's useful (C5).

There was a sense among some elite interviewees that the focus on organisational language planning attempts to solve a problem that didn't need to exist rather than focusing on other more urgent priorities which may have less obvious or readily attainable solutions. The desire to provide societal equivalence in accessing services through Gaelic (instead of, or as well as, English) has been pursued vigorously over the previous two decades. In theory, providing a Gaelic communicative platform with public agencies is valuable, however, people do not broadly communicate with those agencies unless it is a necessity. Further, if the agencies are not set up or resourced to communicate immediately, dialogue is stalled and mediated through translators. Funding could, instead, be directed more appropriately to avenues of communication which could be utilised i.e. cultural hubs in urban areas or for the support of established communities and their networks in areas of higher-density speaker coverage.

Intriguingly, one senior professional made the following observation, which appears to confirm why an organisational approach is being followed:

> I slip towards being a Gramscian, in trying to create an alternative hegemony that has strong appeal, and that people want it rather than come up with interventions, even whether there is money or whatever they do … I'm sceptical about heavy levels of intervention in home and community (C26).

If (some in) the elite cadre are sceptical about home and community interventions, this perhaps points to the adoption of covert policy positions related to attracting new speakers with little or no previous connection to Gaelic by presenting (skills) acquisition as something appeal-

ing, and by presenting cultural assets as attractive through output from the creative industries, education and more symbolic representations. The question, raised repeatedly by interviewees, however, remains: is this enough to produce competent speakers who can help to reproduce networks of users?

The dichotomy of the focus on institutional planning as advanced through Bòrd na Gàidhlig versus the concerns of the leadership which itself helps to perpetuate the contemporary direction of Gaelic LPP is laid bare in the following comments:

> I'm not convinced Gaelic Language Plans work. I think that's become too formalised, I think there is maybe a … I think that scares more people off, certainly some people who have some Gaelic. […] I don't think the policy world really touches the real communities and I don't know how you change that (C21).

> I mean, who asked the Gaelic community: 'What could we do if we had a national Gaelic agency?' Would they have said: 'Well, you've got to go through a very formal, academic language planning methodology and ram that down the throats of as many public sector organisations as you can'? (C10).

Both elite interviewees (i.e. C4 above on the family and home being the key sociolinguistic battleground) and survey participants (only 18% strongly agreeing that home use is supported by current national language policy) indicate that they are aware that there is a deficit between policy aspiration and policy outcome on home and community use of Gaelic, however, there is a reluctance to criticise official bodies in public, with the positive messaging about Gaelic revitalisation regarded as more important than accepting reality. Interviewee C9, on shaping a future pathway, simply told the researcher: "We can't handle the truth."

5. Commentary

What emerges from the dataset are beliefs about a language and its speakers that can shape a range of assumptions and reactions related to altering the circumstances in which those speakers can interact with and through their language.

Huws (2018, 302) identifies two key factors which cause non-use of a language: "a reduction in the critical mass of speakers, and the alienating effect of linguistic normalization." This lack of a critical mass prevents, as Huws observes, unmarked language use. Further, it reduces

informal opportunities to put skills into practice, a particular issue in areas of low speaker numbers and densities. It is here that the paradox of Gaelic visibility through legislation and the perceived lack of Gaelic use being enabled resides.

The formalising and organisational bent of much language planning for Gaelic means that Gaelic's revitalisation is imbued with a sense of linguistic insecurity (see the first presentationalism point noted above) which stems from the state's attempts to legislate for how individuals and groups interact with service providers, such as Local Authorities or public agencies. This linguistic insecurity often manifests as a reluctance to engage with such service provision opportunities as exist, so the state's obvious focus on formalised interaction is, perhaps counter-intuitively, ineffectual, especially if under-resourced. Evas and Cunliffe (2017) suggest a behavioural economics approach could mitigate a lack of uptake of e-services in Welsh, for example, and a similar approach may be beneficial for increasing use of Gaelic services.

If there is a lack of uptake, there is less of an imperative for service providers to hire, train or upskill individuals who can provide minority language services to (potential) users. This is a very clear issue in relation to Gaelic because fewer than 25% of public agencies with approved Gaelic language plans have a named or identified Gaelic officer.[9]

Low, or declining, take-up of services is also evident in the education sector, partly due to persistent failure of demand (not enough teachers in post, lack of availability of provision even when there is sufficient parental demand), which means systemic leakage of potential language users from the GME or learner systems. This is most common between preschool and primary one, during the transition from primary school to secondary school, and when making subject choices in the years leading up to the attainment of formal school qualifications. Effectively, a bureaucratic utopianism prioritises a risk-laden investment on creating service providers and the resources with which to cater to potential service users. There is little evidence that this is desirable rather than fulfilling a legislative requirement.

Consequently, such initiatives do not appear to facilitate increasing the use of Gaelic, except in a limited range of domains or scenarios. Alternatively, shifting policy towards more communal or familial opportunities could seal up some of the systemic leakage points noted above. This would have the advantage of not being seen to privilege the rural over the urban or vice-versa, as operationalisation would focus on actions which could also occur in networked settings. After all, as one elite respondent noted, it is in the family setting that the ultimate language

battle is being waged on a daily, persistent basis when one is trying to reverse language shift. In other words, gemeinschaft, rather than gesellschaft, domains may be more challenging to access but offer sturdier foundations on which to build viable progress.

Since the passing of the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005, there has been notable investment in organisational language planning, due to attempts to ensure identical (or near-equivalent) service provision in Gaelic and English. This means that informal domains continue to fight for attention and resourcing. A shift in focus towards planning for social domains may be necessary, such that more emphasis is placed on home and community where there can be direct inputs into familial language use. C21 suggested that as the Scottish Government has chosen the direction of pursuing numerical growth, for example through Gaelic-medium or adult learner education:

> … you're only going to get growth in the cities because the numbers don't exist in the Islands or the Highlands. […] And then if you think, well, in terms of the development in the cities, if you don't have the lifeblood, if you don't have that being fed, are you not just fighting a losing battle? Which we aren't. There are parts of Scotland that you'll never get to embrace Gaelic, but then why should they? (C21).

It has been suggested (McLeod 2022, 358) that the archetype for familial or intergenerational transmission of a (minoritised) language is an extended, traditional family

> with tight, deeply established social linkages, and ideally in a territorially bounded rural setting. Such assumptions are particularly firmly rooted in relation to regional or minority languages … and often incorporate essentialist, frequently conservative perspectives that appear to assume substantial social and cultural stasis.

This view is problematic in that it implies that regionalist or micro-localised interventions are constrained by outlooks that eschew progress. It also inadvertently undermines the notion of constructing localised network contexts in urban areas. A more accurate view, perhaps, may be that the commitment to speaking a minoritised language, which has been undergoing further minoritisation, suggests a more open-minded, nonconformist stance in a globalised and globalising society. This commitment mirrors that identified by MacLeod (2022) in relation to family language practice in the Western Isles.

6. Conclusions

Among other scholars, Dunmore (2018b, 74) has observed that "it is clear that the goal of strengthening Gaelic language socialisation in the home and community needs to be prioritised alongside developing GME as a policy objective". This is replicated in the findings referred to here in which GME policy is viewed as a qualified success, while home and community settings are pinpointed as priority areas in need of greater future investment. In reality, these findings and views dovetail with recent work on the Language Dynamics in Society (LanDS) concept which has grown out of the "significant discrepancies and divergence between empirical findings and policy aspirations inherent in formal provision for minority speakers and their communities" (Ó Giollagáin et al· 2025, 26–27).

The elites acknowledge, too, in concerns raised privately that the efficacy of GME as a sociolinguistic or sociocultural base on which to build new, resilient networks or communities is questionable, and indicate that the Gaelic policy environment needs to consider changing course. However, Bòrd na Gàidhlig itself appears reluctant to change course or focus, detailing in a briefing paper ahead of a Scottish Government committee session in 2021 that it "supports development across Scotland primarily through Gaelic Language Plans" (Bòrd na Gàidhlig 2021).

MacLeod's (2022) micro-level study on the Isle of Lewis indicates that it is possible for individuals and families to re-establish familial Gaelic practice, utilising the existing communal and societal networks around them, often with no direct support or intervention from external agencies. This idea of personal agency may not necessarily extend to those individuals themselves becoming competent speakers, indeed this may not necessarily have been desired, but the proximal infrastructure afforded their efforts by the presence and accessibility of grandparents, wider family members, friends and colleagues offers a range of opportunities. As MacLeod (2022, 69) observes:

> the experiences of this group could be relatively easily supported and replicated in threatened 'heartland' areas by informing and supporting grandparents, and the extended family and community in general, to take an active role in supporting a Gaelic language choice and repairing the damaged intergenerational transmission.

Numbers, however, do not necessarily equate to competence or regular use. Policymakers, then, perhaps ought to pay closer attention to

the possibilities afforded by even low-level interventions in areas of low population but greater Gaelic speaker densities, where societal reinforcement could, still, be accessed. This offers an alternative route to potential success and stabilisation, and, ultimately, more holistic growth. The key is language socialisation opportunities which may not always be available in settings around the national average of Gaelic-speaker density (around 1.3%), however, as per MacLeod's (2022) observations on the family, if home and community (networks) are given a greater prioritisation there is a possibility of strengthening use and transmission in a range of circumstances. What is very unlikely to work, however, is the type of *laissez-faire* non-interventionism noted above, which contributes to the societal demise of Gaelic, while interventionism for sectoral interests continues. As per Ó Giollagáin et al. (2020, 420–421), this leads to political and public bodies facing the "language-policy irony that they are promoting policy aspirations for a language which has very few vernacular speaker-groups or a recognisable communal presence in society".

In the Welsh context, community-centred solutions featuring more holistic approaches to housing availability and economic stability in more rural, higher-density Welsh-speaking areas are being examined along with recommendations on setting funding support to community groups to support medium-term ambitions (Chartered Institute of Housing Cymru, 2023; Commission for Welsh-speaking Communities, 2024). Social cohesion, identified in the Welsh context as pivotal to future aspirations, is recognised as a key concept in revitalisation approaches such as Sami language nests which aim to socialise (young) individuals through communal societal processes (Äärelä-Vihriälä 2024; cf. Ó Giollagáin et al. 2025).

Dunmore (2021) contrasts the more hopeful outlook of new speakers of Gaelic in Nova Scotia, where intergenerational transmission has all but died out, and where native speaker communities had long since disappeared, with the observation that "the decline of Gaelic communities in Scotland continues apace in the language's heartland areas, in spite of official policy to bolster second language acquisition elsewhere." This, despite repeated uses of the terminology of revival and success, allows Scotland's traditional Gaelic communities to be painted as unsalvageable and to prepare the way for revitalisation to be associated with alternative populations, and with lowered horizons of what constitutes success. In essence, policy advisors audit their own performance. McLeod (2022, 359–360) observes:

Successful language acquisition (whether in linguistic terms in relation to 'accuracy' or in social terms in relation to confidence and actual productive use) is more likely if there are multiple, diverse inputs – but this will be impracticable or even impossible in cases of advanced language shift.

Some critiques seem not to consider that in traditional language communities or settings, those multiple, diverse inputs could (still) be obtained with targeted support meeting localised needs. It is challenging to envisage how such inputs could be developed quickly enough to make a real impact in user numbers in areas of low speaker densities which calls into question the reliance in contemporary Gaelic language policy of seeking new recruits at the likely expense of communities with greater densities. Greater and expanded institutional language planning with clear objectives can be important. The elite themselves, however, indicate a clear understanding that targeted interventions supporting family units of all constructions, the home and community settings have been less realised. Achieving a more nuanced balance of these philosophical positions, if this becomes a focus, may ultimately prove the more beneficial pathway.

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Annex 1

Table 1 to 5 (own data): details on location, age, gender and sectoral affiliation in relation to elite interviewees and sectoral survey respondents.

Table 1: Location and sectoral affiliation of elite interviewees (N=27). Sectors have been aggregated for anonymity. Some interviewees were based in one location but had a job which had a nationwide remit.

Location	Sector	Participants
Highland/Gàidhealtachd	Education	5
	Gaelic Development & Public Sector	12
	Media & Private Sector	4
Lowland/Galltachd	Education	2
	Gaelic Development & Public Sector	2
	Media & Private Sector	2

Table 2: Gender and age range of elite interviewees (N=27). Age categories have been aggregated for anonymity

Age group	Number of interviewees	% of Interviewees By Age Group	Female interviewees	Male interviewees
25–44	6	22	5	1
45–54	7	26	4	3
55–64	11	41	3	8
65+	3	11	1	2

Table 3: Location of sectoral survey respondents, by Local Authority (LA), by number and percentage (N=134). Scotland has 32 Local Authorities (also known as Council Areas), but responses were only received from 15 LAs

Local Authority Area	Number of Responses	Responses (% by Local Authority)	Response Language (Gaelic only/English only/Both)
Highland	50	37.3	Both
Na h-Eileanan Siar	31	23.1	Both
Glasgow City	22	16.4	Both
City of Edinburgh	13	9.7	Both
Argyll & Bute	5	3.7	Both
Aberdeen City	2	1.5	Both
East Dunbartonshire	2	1.5	English only
North Lanarkshire	2	1.5	English only
Dumfries & Galloway	1	0.75	Gaelic only
East Ayrshire	1	0.75	English only
East Renfrewshire	1	0.75	Gaelic only
North Ayrshire	1	0.75	English only
Perth & Kinross	1	0.75	Gaelic only
Renfrewshire	1	0.75	Gaelic only
Stirling	1	0.75	English only

Table 4: Gender and age of sectoral survey respondents (N=134)

Gender	Age Range						Age not answered	Totals
	18–24	25–34	35–44	45–54	55–64	65+		
Female	3	21	13	9	13	5	0	64
Male	2	12	11	17	18	4	0	64

Prefer not to say	0	0	2	2	0	0	0	4
Prefer to self-describe	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
No answer	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	2
Totals	5	34	26	28	31	9	1	134

Table 5: Earnings by location reported by respondents to sectoral survey (N=134). For accuracy, this calculation uses historic average exchange rates (GBP:EUR) for the period in which the research was undertaken

Location	Under £12,500 (Under €14,500)	£12,500–£24,999 (€14,500–€28,500)	£25,000–£44,999 (€28,500–€51,300)	£45,000+ (€51,300+)
Urban Lowlands/ Central Belt	37.5%	25%	35.9%	50%
Urban Highlands	12.5%	4.2%	29.5%	22.7%
Rural Highlands and Islands *(Gàidhealtachd)*	50%	70.8%	34.6%	27.3%

Notes

[1] At heart, much recent debate centres on whether to pursue greater support for the "vernacular community" or the Gaelic "speaker group" existing in the *Gàidhealtachd* (Ó Giollagáin et al. 2020), or to bolster networks (from localised to international) more widely even if speaker densities may be much lower (McLeod et al. 2022; Drilseach 2022).

[2] 72% of people aged three and over in the *Comhairle nan Eilean Siar* authority area (geographically, Scotland's Western Isles) could speak Gaelic in 2001. For Skye and Lochalsh, the proportion was 43% (Registrar General for Scotland 2005). By 2022, the Western Isles had declined to 45% Gaelic-speaking (Watson 2024).

[3] *Comhairle nan Eilean Siar* represents all islands in the chain from Lewis in the north to Vatersay in the south. In 1975, the islands were brought together under one modern authority for the first time following the Local Government (Scotland) Act.

[4] The research was granted ethical approval by the University of the Highlands and Islands' Research Ethics Committee in May 2018 [OL-ETH AB-1,357] for elite interviewees; and in January 2019 [OL-ETH AB-563] for a sectoral economy survey.

[5] The fourth NGLP was published in 2023.

[6] In response to a petition for increased government funding of Gaelic language matters, the Scottish Government confirmed: "In 2024–25, of the £25.6 million of resource funding in the Scottish Government's resource budget for Gaelic, around half of this budget, £12.6 million, goes to Gaelic Broadcasting – which is the Scottish Government's contribution to MG Alba. The funding for Bòrd na Gàidhlig is £5.1 million" (SPICe 2024).

[7] Interviewees are referred to with a non-gendered identifier, and interview order number has been randomised, for disclosure and privacy reasons.

[8] The 2022 Census indicated that numerical targets for 2021 had been met, but it is unclear what levels of competence pertain to reported speakers.

[9] 12 bodies out of 57 have a "Gaelic Officer", "Gaelic Development Officer" or similarly identified role with some day-to-day operational responsibility for implementing or monitoring that body's Gaelic plan, its outputs and outcomes (Bòrd na Gàidhlig, n. d.).

Občutljivo ravnovesje: odločitve glede škotske gelščine

Izvleček

Namen raziskave o odločitvah glede škotske gelščine, sprejetih v okviru jezikovne politike in jezikovnega načrtovanja, je osvetliti področja, ki jih pristojni za oblikovanje in izvajanje teh politik pogosto spregledajo. Prek intervjujev z vodilnimi akterji so bili pridobljeni ključni kvalitativni podatki, ki so bili kasneje primerjani z vprašanji, izpostavljenimi v anketi med deležniki domnevnega družbeno-gospodarskega in socialno-ekonomskega okolja, povezanega s škotsko gelščino. Raziskava je razkrila neskladja med uradnimi načrti in socialno-ekonomsko stvarnostjo, med koristmi za posameznike in podporo skupnostim ter med posameznimi sektorji in gospodarstvom na splošno. Raziskava je obenem razkrila, da vodilni nimajo jasnih ciljev glede oživljanja jezika. Čeprav se zavedajo, da je treba za dom in skupnost storiti več, jim primanjkuje strateških usmeritev, kako to izvesti.

Ključne besede

škotska gelščina, odločanje, jezikovna politika, oživljanje jezika

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Jóni Ledo[1,2,3], Catarina Oliveira[4], Henrique Pereira[1,2]

Psychosocial Risks and Protective Factors of Roma and Non-Roma Communities Living in Poverty in Portugal

Abstract

Poverty threatens psychosocial health, especially when intersecting with minority identities such as ethnicity. Within the Roma community, discrimination, prejudice, and stigma create particularly adverse environments. This cross-sectional study compares psychosocial health between Roma and non-Roma individuals living in poverty. The sample includes 317 participants (202 non-Roma and 115 Roma), aged 18–71. Significant differences ($p < 0.001$) were found in psychological distress (non-Roma higher), self-stigma (Roma higher), social support (Roma higher), and resilience (Roma higher). Roma identity predicts lower distress. Discrimination impacts self-stigma, shaped by social prejudice. Higher resilience and social support in Roma communities act as protective factors. These findings highlight the need for public policies that address these populations' needs and help reduce stigma and discrimination.

Keywords

intersectionality; poverty; psychosocial health; Roma community; non-Roma

Corresponding author

Jóni Ledo, Department of Psychology and Education, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, University of Beira Interior, Covilhã, Portugal; **e-mail**: joni.ledo@ubi.pt; **ORCID**: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1065-0184

[1] Department of Psychology and Education, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, University of Beira Interior, Covilhã, Portugal.
[2] Research Centre for Sport, Health and Human Development (CIDESD), Vila Real, Portugal.
[3] Scientific Research Fellow, Foundation for Science and Technology, Lisbon, Portugal.
[4] Vila Real District Office of EAPN – European Anti-Poverty Network/Portugal (EAPN Portugal), Vila Real, Portugal.

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1. Introduction

Poverty impacts the levels of mental health and well-being of populations due to the stigma inherent to this condition, increasing the likelihood of suffering from mental health problems (Inglis et al. 2022). This stigma, described by Goffman (1963) as the attribution of a negative trait to an individual in an attempt to diminish their role in society, increases when people seek help. When this is combined with the intersectionality resulting from an accumulation of minority identities – that is, poverty paired with another minority condition such as ethnicity, country of origin, or gender – the risks of stress and trauma increase (Inglis et al. 2022). This intersectionality is not limited to a condition of social vulnerability, but also involves the historical, social, and cultural contexts of these populations (Hankivsky et al. 2010).

Crenshaw (1989) developed the concept of intersectionality as a way of describing the various forms of discrimination, such as racism and sexism, which can lead to different experiences of marginalisation. This effect is relevant in the Roma community, where poverty, experiences of racism, and social exclusion often accumulate.

Tyler (2020) argues that there is a deliberate neoliberal policy that is visible through social exclusion, which often dehumanises racialised and marginalised groups. According to Kapadia (2023), structural and institutional racism help explain how racism and stigma work together to perpetuate social inequalities. Roma communities, especially women, suffer from multiple and complex forms of discrimination that are not visible in conventional studies and are often ignored by public and social policies (Jovanović et al. 2015). Studies on Black communities show that access to resources and opportunities is more restricted and that racism and stigma – which are closely linked – are not merely matters of public perception but real barriers in the lives of these communities (Billups et al. 2022; Keuchenius & Mügge 2021). It is therefore clear that these communities experience similar cultural manifestations of stigma, which reinforces the link between racism and stigma and highlights its importance in understanding the impact of discrimination faced by ethnic minority and impoverished populations and its risk to their psychosocial health.

In the case of the Roma community in Europe, stigmatisation and persecution are centuries old and rooted in stereotypes surrounding these communities, which makes integration even more difficult and contributes to their marginalisation (Powell & Lever 2017). Although research on intersectionality and stigma in populations living in poverty

is emerging, it is still too scarce to provide a global understanding of the issue. Marginalisation and stigma present in society can lead to the internalisation of these prejudices within the community, increasing vulnerability and generating self-stigma that impacts their self-confidence and self-acceptance. This self-stigma has a direct impact on the mental health of these communities and further aggravates their vulnerability due to poverty, belonging to an ethnic minority, lower levels of education, poorer housing, and lower income (Corrigan & Watson 2002). According to Sum et al. (2020), self-stigma begins with the awareness of stereotypes and stigma present in society, followed by the acceptance of that same stigma and culminating in the adoption of those same prejudices by the community itself.

In turn, the paradox of self-stigma is a counterintuitive and often contradictory concept, characterised by how people respond to the internalisation of stigma. According to Corrigan and Watson (2002), individuals may react in three different ways: internalising the stigma and experiencing psychological distress, responding with righteous anger, or neither internalising nor reacting emotionally. In this sense, cultural and contextual factors are essential to understanding how different individuals cope with the same adversity.

Golay et al. (2021) argue that the paradox of self-stigma does not necessarily manifest itself in psychological problems, as some people use silence as a protective strategy, whereas others use it as a form of empowerment. It is therefore essential to understand the heterogeneity of stigma based on personal, social, or group identification factors to understand its emotional and behavioural impacts. Discrimination is commonly associated with problems related to emotional regulation, and when combined with the intersectionality of minority characteristics, it tends to increase stress levels in these communities. These minority characteristics must be addressed together in order to obtain a broader view of discrimination and the problems inherent to it (English et al. 2018). However, discrimination is not solely an individual emotional regulation issue; it is systemic and structural, perpetuated by social, cultural, and political structures and culminating in greater social inequality (Ledo et al. 2025). According to Ledo et al. (2025), reducing social discrimination requires public policies that promote inclusion through anti-prejudice programmes that foster social awareness and a multidisciplinary approach. It is essential to understand that some social structures are deeply rooted and that effective change can only occur when various actors are involved – political, academic, institutional – along with the participation of the populations that these cam-

paigns aim to serve. This is the only way to build inclusive and equitable public policies for all.

In the Portuguese case, the National Institute of Statistics (Statistics Portugal 2023) found that in 2022, 17% of the population (2.1 million people) was at risk of poverty or social exclusion. If we look at the results before social transfers, this number is even higher, corresponding to 41.8% of the resident population. Education also plays a significant role: 22.7% of the population in poverty completed only basic education, and only 5.8% completed higher education (Statistics Portugal 2023). In the case of the Roma community, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2023) reveals even more alarming data: 96% of the Roma community in Portugal is at risk of poverty – one of the highest figures in the European Union, surpassed only by Spain and Italy – which reflects the weight of intersectionality in this minority social group. The Roma community in Portugal, estimated at between 50,000 and 60,000 people (European Commission 2014), reports the highest rate of discrimination (62%) among the 12 European countries included in a study by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2023). According to Ledo et al. (2025), the Roma community reported a higher perception of discrimination compared to the non-Roma group in the Portuguese sample. These findings suggest that ethnicity plays a central role in shaping both the perception of discrimination and the coping strategies related thereto, regardless of socioeconomic status.

This intersectionality of minority characteristics among populations living in poverty involves risk factors such as stigmatisation and marginalisation. Alexiadou (2023) states that the Roma community continues to be neglected in Europe, facing greater difficulties in accessing health care and lower incomes, which contributes to greater stigmatisation and marginalisation. It is therefore essential to increase Roma participation in public policy decisions that concern them and ensure these measures are monitored to evaluate their real impact and reduce the barriers encountered by this population when seeking support.

Despite the difficulties associated with poverty and intersectionality, some factors can act as protectors for the psychosocial health of the Roma community. These include resilience and perceived social support. Resilience is a process through which people overcome adversity based on characteristics of both the individual and the environment that surrounds them, be it family, cultural, or social. It is related to how individuals use protective mechanisms to manage vulnerabilities and should not be seen as a way of avoiding being vulnerable (Ruther 1993). According to Yesilot (2021), due to the higher prevalence of diseases,

early marriage, economic difficulties, and belonging to an ethnic minority group, Roma women are more exposed to risk factors than non-Roma, although, according to Utsey et al. (2007), coexistence between these ethnic groups can be a positive factor for resilience.

Another protective factor in these communities is perceived social support. According to Chwalisz and Vaux (2000), social support includes three different dimensions: perceived support, support network, and supportive behaviours. Perceived social support concerns the subjective way in which people perceive how they are involved with the community around them and how they establish their social and interpersonal relationships. High levels of perceived social support tend to be characterised as protective factors against the onset of mental disorders, as well as good mental health in general (Grey et al. 2020). In vulnerable communities, perceived social support can serve as a protective factor for their well-being, especially because the greater the trust in the context in which people live, the greater the propensity for better indicators of perceived social support. In this sense, social policies play an important role when they meet the needs of the populations, as they generate greater trust in the support networks, which will have positive effects on the perception of social support (Sendroiu & Upenieks 2020). It is therefore essential to emphasise the potential of Roma communities so that they can develop and work, rather than focusing solely on their problems and adversities (Buzea & Dimitrova 2021).

Coelho and Pereira (2022) find that there is still little research on the impact of stigma on mental health. In their study, people with the highest suicidal tendencies were those who reported having experienced stigma, as this harms an individual's quality of life. In this sense, it is essential to invest in prevention, promotion, and education policies regarding mental health, since better information reduces the likelihood of stigmatising others.

We therefore aim to fill the gap in psychological research on this topic in Portugal and to enhance the visibility of these populations. As Powell and Lever (2017) point out, Roma communities have endured centuries of stigma and persecution in Europe. This historical context helps explain the situation in Portugal, which is similar to that in other European countries where levels of social discrimination are also high.

The main objective of this study is to compare the levels of psychosocial health between Roma and non-Roma individuals living in poverty in a municipality in Portugal, and identify risk and protective factors for the psychosocial health of these populations. Although there are studies that analyse the sociodemographic characteristics and structur-

al poverty among Roma communities, this study seeks to understand how these conditions affect their psychosocial health and what coping mechanisms these populations use when facing adversity related to belonging to an ethnic minority and living in a situation of poverty conditions that expose them to higher levels of social discrimination and stigma.

This study has some limitations. It is cross-sectional, offering only a snapshot in time. The low educational level of some participants may have affected their understanding of certain scales. Moreover, the scarce psychological research on this topic makes comparisons difficult.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The study was conducted in the municipality of Vila Real, located in northern Portugal, with approximately 50,000 inhabitants. This area was selected because it hosts the local partner organisation (EAPN – European Anti-Poverty Network), which facilitated access to Roma and non-Roma communities living in poverty. The inclusion criteria were: *per capita* income below €509.26 (which corresponds to the Social Support Index in Portugal), belonging to either the Roma community or the mainstream Portuguese community, being over 18 years of age, and being able to read and write. The study comprised a total of 317 participants: 155 (48.9%) were men and 160 (50.5%) were women, aged between 18 and 71 years (mean = 38.91; SD = 13.89). Of the total number of participants in the study, 115 identified as belonging to the Roma community and 202 as non-Roma. The higher number of non-Roma participants reflects the demographic reality of the municipality, where the Roma community represents a small minority. Although nearly all Roma residents in the area were invited and participated in the study, the non-Roma group was naturally larger. Most participants (57.4%) had children and 58.7% were unemployed. In terms of education, the Roma community had lower academic qualifications and lower income than the non-Roma community. Conversely, Roma households had a higher number of members. Exclusion criteria included having a *per capita* family income higher than the value of the Social Support Index (IAS) in 2024 or not belonging to either the Roma or mainstream population (e.g., migrants or refugees with other minority characteristics).

2.2 Instruments

Sociodemographic Questionnaire. This questionnaire, developed specifically for this research, included questions designed to collect demographic information such as age, gender, economic status, educational attainment, and ethnicity.

Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10). The K10, developed by Kessler et al. (2002), is a self-report instrument assessing the frequency of non-specific psychological distress symptoms over 30 days. It consists of a total of 10 items. The scale was translated and validated for the Portuguese population by Pereira et al. (2019), maintaining the original 10 items but revealing a two-factor structure corresponding to anxiety and depression (e.g., "During the last 30 days, how often did you feel without hope"). The rating is made on a Likert scale from 1 (none of the days) to 5 (every day). Both the original scale ($\alpha = 0.93$) and the Portuguese version ($\alpha = 0.91$) demonstrate excellent internal consistency. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha was 0.96.

Paradox of Self-Stigma (PaSS-24). The PaSS is an instrument developed by Golay et al. (2021) and translated and validated for the Portuguese population by Ledo et al. (2024). It assesses self-stigma and consists of a total of 24 items subdivided into three factors: stereotype endorsement, righteous anger, and non-disclosure (e.g., "Certain jobs should be prohibited to people with my condition"). The rating is made on a Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Both the original scale ($\alpha = 0.93$) and the Portuguese version ($\alpha = 0.95$) show excellent internal consistency. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha was 0.94.

Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS). The MSPSS was developed by Zimet et al. (1988) and measures perceived social support across three dimensions: family, friends, and significant others. The original scale consists of 12 items, rated on a Likert scale from 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree). The original version has good internal consistency ($\alpha = .88$). The scale was translated and validated for the Portuguese population by Carvalho et al. (2011) and consists of the same number of items and factor structure (e.g., "There is a special person with whom I can share my joys and sorrows"). The Portuguese scale is also scored on a Likert scale from 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree). The internal consistency values in the Portuguese version of the MSPSS are good, with a Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.87 to 0.95. In the present study, the Cronbach's alpha was 0.98.

Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale – 10 (CD-RISC-10). The CD-RISC-10 is a self-assessment questionnaire used to measure resilience, regardless of whether the individual has a psychological disorder. The scale was originally developed by Connor and Davidson (2003) and translated and adapted for the Portuguese population by Faria Anjos et al. (2019) (e.g., "I can handle anything that happens in my life"). Rating is made on a Likert scale in a range of 5 points: not true (0) to almost always true (4). Both the original and Portuguese versions show high internal consistency values. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha was 0.95.

2.3 Procedures

Recruitment was carried out with the support of the partner organisation – the European Anti-Poverty Network hub of Vila Real (EAPN), which works directly with the target populations – and through contact with other social solidarity associations, namely Vila Real Social, Núcleo Local de Inserção (*NLI*), Institute of Employment and Vocational Training (IEFP), and Between Dimensions for the dissemination and application of the questionnaire. The sampling was non-probabilistic, and the data were collected for convenience during the period between 17 January 2024 and 21 May 2024 in Vila Real.

Initial contact with potential participants was made to determine interest in participating, during which the objectives of the study were explained. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. The sample was collected in both paper and digital formats, in some cases with the researcher traveling to the collection site and in others through the participants' response via an online link. Informed consent was obtained from all participants following the ethical standards defined by the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, General Assembly 2024), ensuring the anonymity and confidentiality of participants.

2.4 Data Analysis

The data were analysed using IBM SPSS 29 statistical software, with significance set at 5% ($p < 0.05$). Descriptive statistics were used to characterise the sample, including frequencies, proportions, means, modes, medians, and standard deviation for sociodemographic variables and means and standard deviation for the variables under study: psychological distress, paradoxical self-stigma, perceived social support, and resilience. Data normality was assessed using the Shapiro-Wilk test, and homogeneity of variance was tested with Levene's test. An independent

samples t-test was performed to check for any differences between the two groups (Roma and non-Roma). Cohen's d was used to calculate the effect size of the differences between the groups, with the following interpretation: values below 0.20 indicate an insignificant effect; 0.20 to 0.49, a small effect; 0.50 to 0.79, a medium effect; and values of 0.80 or higher, a large effect (Cohen 1988). ANOVA was performed to test for differences based on the participants' level of education (up to 9th grade, up to 12th grade, and higher education). Pearson's correlation was used to verify the relationship between the variables under study. Linear regression was conducted to analyse the predictive power of sociodemographic variables, paradoxical self-stigma, perceived social support, resilience, and ethnicity on psychological distress. This combination of methods was selected because it allows for both an overall description of the data and a more detailed examination of group differences and relationships among variables. Together, these analyses provide a comprehensive picture of potential disparities between Roma and non-Roma participants.

The study employed a cross-sectional, descriptive, comparative, correlational, and predictive design to identify differences between groups and relationships between the variables under study.

3. Results

The study included a sample of 317 participants living in poverty in Vila Real (Northern Portugal). Of these, 155 (48.9%) were men and 160 (50.5%) were women, aged between 18 and 71 years (mean = 38.91; SD = 13.89). Table 1 shows the sociodemographic characteristics of the sample, divided between the two groups under analysis (Roma and non-Roma).

As shown in Table 2, the study participants presented mean values on the K10 scale that were below the expected median value of the instrument, and values very close to the median on the paradoxical self-stigma scale (PaSS). Scores on the MSPSS (perceived social support) and on the CD-RISC-10 (resilience) were relatively high and above the cut-off points of the scale.

To assess the difference in averages in the scale scores between the two ethnicities (Non-Roma and Roma), the t-test for independent samples was used. A t-test was used to see whether the differences between Roma and non-Roma participants were real rather than random, giving a clearer picture of possible disparities between the groups in the studied variables. As shown by Table 3, there are statistically significant

differences between all comparison groups, indicating that participants from the Roma community present significantly higher values than the non-Roma community on the paradoxical self-stigma, perceived social support, and resilience scales, which demonstrates higher values of paradoxical self-stigma but also greater perceived social support and greater resilience. On the psychological distress scale (K10), the differences are also significant, with the Roma community presenting lower values.

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of participants

		Non-Roma (n=202; mean age=39.25; SD=1 5.39)		Roma (n=115; mean age=38.30; SD= 10.80)		Total (n=317; age=38.91; SD=13.89)	
		n	%	n	%	n	%
Gender	Female	101	50	59	51.3	160	50.5
	Male	99	49	56	48.7	155	48.9
	Other	2	1			2	0.6
Children	Yes	92	45.5	90	78.3	182	57.4
	No	110	54.5	25	21.7	135	42.6
Professional situation	Unemployed	113	55.9	73	63.5	186	58.7
	Work for others	22	10.9	12	10.4	34	10.7
	Self-employed	1	0.5	5	4.3	6	1.9
	Work/Student	4	2			4	1.3
	Student	41	20.3	10	8.7	51	16.1
	Retired-Retired	21	10.4	15	13	36	11.4
Education	Up to 4 years	7	3.5	22	19.1	29	9.1
	Up to 6 years	9	4.5	36	31.3	45	14.2
	Up to 9 years	54	26.7	55	47.8	109	34.4
	Up to 12 years	93	46	2	1.7	95	30
	Degree	36	17.8			36	11.4
	Master's or higher	1	0.5			1	0.3
	Other	2	1			2	0.6
Number of people in the household	1 person (alone)	42	20.8			42	13.2
	2	36	17.8	3	2.6	39	12.3

	3	35	17.3	9	7.8	44	13.9
	4	72	35.6	32	27.8	104	32.8
	5	16	7.9	33	28.7	49	15.5
	More than 5	1	0.5	38	33	39	12.3
Income	Up to €509.26	82	40.6	40	34.8	122	38.5
	From €509.26 to €1018.52	45	22.3	71	61.7	116	36.6
	From €1018.52 to €1527.78	53	26.2	4	3.5	57	18
	From €1527.78 to €2037.04	20	9.9			20	6.3
	More than €2037.04	2	1			2	0.6

Source: Own data. Available upon request.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics – Averages of the general results of psychological distress, self-stigma, perceived social support, and resilience

	Mean	SD	Score variation on the Likert scale	Likert scale median values
Mean psychological distress	2.47	0.99	1–5	3
Mean_Self-stigma	3.04	0.80	1–5	3
Mean_Perceived Social Support	5.05	1.55	1–7	4
Mean_Resilience	2.49	0.96	0–4	2

Source: Own data. Available upon request.
Note: (n = 317).

Table 3. T-test for independent samples

	Ethnicity	Average	SD	P	Cohen's d
Mean psychological distress	Non-Roma	2.76	1.05	<.001	0.94
	Roma	1.95	0.62		
Mean_Self-stigma	Non-Roma	2.87	0.80	<.001	0.62
	Roma	3.34	0.72		
Mean_Perceived Social Support	Non-Roma	4.48	1.43	<.001	1.18
	Roma	6.05	1.22		
Mean_Resilience	Non-Roma	2.16	0.94	<.001	1.11
	Roma	3.07	0.68		

Source: Own data. Available upon request.
Note: (n = 317).

To analyse the differences between the variables under analysis (psychological distress, paradoxical self-stigma, perceived social support, and resilience) and the participants' education, a one-way ANOVA was conducted (Table 4).

Table 4. Differences according to educational level between the variables psychological distress, paradoxical self-stigma, perceived social support, and resilience

Variables	Education		Average	Standard deviation	
Mean psychological distress	Up to 9th grade	183	2.27	.92	<.001
	Up to 12th grade	94	2.59	1.05	
	Higher education	39	3.12	.92	
Mean_Self-stigma	Up to 9th grade	183	3.24	.82	<.001
	Up to 12th grade	94	2.69	.72	
	Higher education	39	2.92	.56	
Mean_Perceived Social Support	Up to 9th grade	183	5.36	1.62	<.001
	Up to 12th grade	94	4.67	1.39	
	Higher education	39	4.52	1.21	
Mean_Resilience	Up to 9th grade	183	2.75	.87	<.001
	Up to 12th grade	94	2.21	1.01	
	Higher education	39	1.94	.82	

Source: Own data. Available upon request.
Note: (n = 317).

As shown by Table 4, there are significant differences for all variables under analysis in relation to education: the higher the education level, the higher the levels of psychological distress, while, paradoxically, self-stigma is lower. Regarding perceived social support and resilience, the results show that the values are lower for people with higher academic qualifications.

Table 5 presents the correlation matrix between psychological distress, paradoxical self-stigma, perceived social support, and resilience scales. Significant ($p < 0.01$) negative and moderate correlations were found between the perceived social support and resilience variables and psychological distress, which means that the greater the resilience and perceived social support, the lower the psychological distress. The perceived social support also presents a positive and weak correlation

with the paradox of self-stigma, as well as a positive and moderate correlation with resilience, meaning that the higher the values on the resilience scale, the higher the values on the perceived social support scale.

Table 5. Correlation between the mean of the scales of psychological distress, self-stigma, perceived social support and resilience

Variable	Mean_Distress psychological	Mean_Self-stigma	Mean_Perceived Social Support
Mean_Self-stigma	.073		
Mean_Perceived Social Support	–.435**	.289**	
Mean_Resilience	–.532**	.199**	.565**

Source: Own data. Available upon request.

**p < 0.01

To understand the predictive effect of the independent variables (gender, age, number of children, education, number of people living in the household, income, mean PaSS score, mean MSPSS score, and mean CD-RISC-10 score) on the dependent variable of psychological distress (K10), a hierarchical linear regression analysis was conducted using three models (Table 6). In Model 1, only sociodemographic variables were included; Model 2 added paradoxical self-stigma, perceived social support and resilience; and Model 3 added ethnicity. Table 6 reflects the results of this linear regression.

The three models present significant results for some variables and show increases in explained variance, with considerable differences between them. While Model 1 explains 12.6% of the variance, with the inclusion of the means of the paradoxical self-stigma, perceived social support, and resilience instruments in Model 2, explained variance increases to 39.9% (up by 27.3%). With the inclusion of ethnicity, Model 3 explains 43.7% of the variance with an increase of 3.8% compared to the previous model. In Model 1, the number of people in the household is statistically significant (negative), which means that the greater the number of people in the household, the lower the psychological distress. With the inclusion of the three variables in Model 2, the number of people in the household is no longer significant. Instead, self-stigma, perceived social support, and resilience become significant predictors. Self-stigma shows a positive association, which implies that the greater the self-stigma, the greater the psychological distress. Conversely, the higher the resilience and social support, the lower the psychological distress. With the inclusion of the ethnicity variable, age becomes sig-

nificant (negative), that is, the higher the age, the lower the psychological distress, and the three constructs present in Model 2 continue to be significant. Ethnicity, included only in Model 3, presents significant and negative results, which indicate that belonging to the Roma community is a predictor of lower psychological distress.

Table 6. Analysis of linear regression as predictors of psychological distress (K10)

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	B	SEB	B	B	SEB	B	B	SEB	B
Gender	.032	.142	.016	.019	.119	.010	.053	.116	–.027*
Age	–.010	.007	–.110	-.007	.006	–.080	–.014	.006	–.160
Number of children	.089	.094	.090	.001	.081	.001	-.017	.078	.017
Education	.085	.082	.098	.118	.069	.136	.012	.074	.014
Aggregated_ person_number	–.235	.068	–.367**	–.026	.064	–.040	.090	.071	.142
Income	.166	.105	.143	.035	.090	.030	–.066	.092	–.056
Mean_Self-stigma				.287	.073	.250**	.306	.072	.266**
Mean_Perceived Social Support				–.174	.050	–.284**	–.148	.050	–.241*
Mean_Resilience				–.374	.079	–.372**	–.334	.077	–.332**
Ethnicity							–.711	.209	–.371**
R^2			0.126			0.399			0.437
Z			4,185			12,593			13,183

Source: Own data. Available upon request.

*<0.05; **<0.001

4. Discussion

In this study, the psychosocial health levels of people from the Roma and non-Roma communities residing in the same city, yet living in poverty, were analysed to better understand the differences between groups and the way they deal with adversity and its impact on psychosocial health. To this end, we analysed potential risk factors (self-stigma, discrimination, and marginalisation) and protective factors (resilience and social support), identifying their impact on the psychosocial health of these populations. With a sample of 317 individuals (115 = Roma;

202 = non-Roma), we analysed the sociodemographic characteristics of the participants, the overall scores on the scales, and differences between groups in the perception of psychological distress, self-stigma, perceived social support, and resilience. We performed three linear regression models to identify possible causal relationships between the variables of psychological distress.

Regarding sociodemographic characteristics, most of the participants reported having children (57.4%), and the majority were unemployed (58.7%). These results were expected given the nature of the sample, and may also reflect the way in which the data was collected, with contributions from the Institute of Employment and Vocational Training (IEFP) and Between Dimensions – institutions where most people attending training courses are unemployed. The trend in schooling is attendance up to the 9th grade (34.4%), the most frequent number of people per household is four (32.8%), and most respondents claim to receive less than €1018.52 per month per household (75.1%). These results are in line with those of the National Institute of Statistics (Statistics Portugal 2024), which reveal that there is a relationship between schooling and the risk of poverty, that is, the percentage of people in a situation of poverty decreases as qualifications increase. In fact, 22.6% of the population with only the 1st cycle find themselves in a situation of poverty, compared to only 5.8% of those with higher education. The same study reveals that 10% of employed individuals are in a situation of poverty, while in the present study, this figure was 13.9%. The household can also influence the poverty situation, since, according to the National Institute of Statistics (Statistics Portugal 2024), the poverty situation is more prominent in households with only one adult (24.9%). In the present study, these results were lower, since only 13.2% of people in poverty reported living alone, although these results are greatly influenced by the Roma community, where no participant reported living alone. Among non-Roma participants, this percentage increased to 20.8%, much closer to the results presented by the National Institute of Statistics.

In the sociodemographic results by ethnic group, despite the sample being collected in the same city and in some cases in the same neighbourhoods, there are clear differences. In the Roma community, 78.3% of the respondents reported having children, while in the non-Roma community, this figure was 45.5%. The number of people per household also differed considerably: 61.7% of the Roma community reported living in households of five or more people, compared with only 8.4% in the non-Roma community. The general trend was four people

per household (35.6%). These results are in line with recent data from international organisations, which indicate that the Roma community, when compared to the general population, has a larger family unit with sons/daughters already married and with children and continuing to live at home with their parents, contributing to larger households, while the number of children per couple is also higher (Council of Europe 2024a). The National Institute of Statistics (Statistics Portugal 2024) also indicates that 53% of people in the Roma community live in households with four or more people, while in the total population, this percentage is 33.8%. Education levels are also lower in the Roma community, with 98.3% having academic qualifications up to the 9th grade (none of the respondents reported having higher education). In the non-Roma community, the figures were quite different: 18.3% had completed higher education and 46% up to 12 years of schooling. These results are confirmed by the National Institute of Statistics (Statistics Portugal 2024), whose report indicates that 91.9% of people in the Roma community have formal education up to the 9th grade, while in the general population, this figure is 45.7%.

Incomes, although in both cases below the poverty line and with values lower than the 2024 social support index (€509.26 *per capita*), are noticeably different, with 96.5% of the Roma community receiving up to €1018.52 per household and typically sharing this among larger households, while among non-Roma the values are more dispersed, with 37.1% reporting receiving more than €1018.52 per household, although the most common value was income of up to €509.26 (40.6%). Once again, this high number of Non-Roma people receiving such a low amount can be explained, in part, by the number of people in the household, as 20.8% reported living alone.

These data relating to sociodemographic characteristics, combined with a greater experience of discrimination, create a situation of social vulnerability that can influence the psychosocial health of Roma communities, the way people see themselves and others, and the way they act. However, on the other hand, these conditions can also generate protective mechanisms to deal with adversity, such as resilience and perceived social support, which were found to be significantly higher in the Roma community.

5. Overall Sample Results

We found that the study participants presented moderate values of psychological distress, self-stigma and resilience, with values close to the

median cutoff points of the scales, although slightly lower in the case of psychological distress (mean: 2.47; median cutoff point: 3) and slightly higher in the case of resilience (mean: 2.49; median cutoff point: 2). In perceived social support, the variation is greater, with a median cutoff point of 4 and an overall sample score of 5.05. Although all these values are moderately higher or lower, they may be influenced by the ethnic groups represented in the sample and their social and cultural matrix.

This study found significant ($p < 0.01$) negative and moderate correlations between the variables assessing perceived social support and resilience with psychological distress, which means that the greater the resilience and perceived social support, the lower the psychological distress. Several studies find correlations between resilience and perceived social support, showing how these positively influence psychosocial health when both are high (Xu et al. 2023; Koelmel et al. 2017; Huang et al. 2020).

There are also significant (positive) differences in education for all variables under analysis, indicating that the higher the level of education, the lower the values of self-stigma and the higher the values of psychological distress. For perceived social support and resilience, the results show that the values are lower for individuals with higher academic qualifications. These results should be interpreted carefully because the group with higher education is smaller than the others, and because the results reflect two very different social groups, which may have influenced the results.

5.1 Differences in Psychosocial Health, Self-Stigma, Resilience, and Social Support between Roma and Non-Roma Communities

When comparing Roma and Non-Roma communities, significant differences ($p < 0.001$) are observed in all variables analysed. The Roma community presents higher values of self-stigma compared to the non-Roma, which may indicate that the intersectionality of minority characteristics (having lower income and belonging to a minority social group) may influence the way they perceive stigma and how it is internalised. These results are in line with the study by Creţan et al. (2020), who, although arguing that research on self-stigma and the internalisation of stigma by these communities is still scarce, note that the stigma present in society for centuries may entail a risk of these communities internalizing it, as they feel that they will never be able to escape the condition in which they find themselves. This generates self-stigma, through the

internalisation by the community itself of the view that the rest of society has of it.

Also, in resilience and perceived social support, the Roma community presents significantly higher values, which indicates that these can act as protective factors for this community, as they present significantly lower results compared to the non-Roma in psychological distress. Although these results may seem contradictory to what is expected for populations in situations of poverty – since, according to Inglis (2022), they are more likely to have mental health problems – when it comes to the Roma community, there are intermediate mechanisms that can act as protective factors. According to (Gorbunova et al. 2022), in the Roma community, family support can be fundamental in empowerment because the sense of belonging to a community can be a protective factor for their psychosocial health, helping them overcome adversity together and developing their resilience based on perceived social support. The Council of Europe (2024a) also argues that the Roma community has a unique vision of the family, with great proximity between its members and with larger family units, as families tend to share housing with members of their nuclear and extended family, sharing festive moments but also the most difficult ones, such as the loss of family members.

In the results of the linear regression, which allows us to infer causality, we found that among the sociodemographic variables analysed, only the number of people in the household is significant (negative), and only in Model 1, which means the larger the household, the lower the psychological distress. We found that the variables self-stigma, resilience, and social support are significant in both Model 2 and Model 3, although with different significance in the prediction of psychological distress. The higher the levels of self-stigma, the greater the psychological distress, and the greater the resilience and perceived social support, the lower the psychological distress. In this regression analysis, we cannot ignore that two distinct ethnic groups with sociodemographic realities and characteristics can explain these predictions, and in this sense, in the Model 3, which explains 43.7% of the variance, we added the variable ethnicity and found that being from the Roma community is a predictor of lower psychological distress. In the Roma community, psychological distress is lower even with high levels of self-stigma. This situation can be explained by the "minority strengths model" by Perrin et al. (2020), who argue that the situation of vulnerability and adversity that minorities experience does not necessarily lead to mental health

problems. In fact, this situation of adversity can develop mechanisms in these populations that culminate in greater resilience, perceived social support, and consequently positive mental health. This model predicts that there is a strong association between community support and a sense of belonging, and that these contribute as protective factors for mental health.

This perspective allows us to have a positive view of the way in which protective factors such as resilience and social support provide a mediation between potential risk factors and the mental health of populations in situations of poverty. It is essential to look at these results in an integrated way and understand that the two communities (Roma and non-Roma) presented quite different results in all variables, and that the Roma community, which presents higher levels of self-stigma, also presents higher results in protective factors (resilience and social support) and lower levels of distress. This can accentuate the results of mediation in the negative effect that the mediating variable has on psychological distress. Although these results may present a positive perspective on the defences of these populations to preserve their psychosocial health, it is essential to mitigate the effects of self-stigma and act on these populations from a broad perspective, contributing to reducing risk factors and enhancing these protective factors.

It is important to note that the higher resilience rates in the Roma community allow us to integrate this situation within broader structural conditions. Resilience is developed through historical, socioeconomic, and institutional factors, often stemming from systemic discrimination, intergenerational deprivation, racism, and discrimination, which paradoxically generate adaptive mechanisms in marginalised groups (Kapadia 2023). Therefore, we should not normalise inequality, as this resilience is developed in a hostile and adverse environment. According to Tyler (2020), stigma and structural exclusion can produce narratives that obscure the need for systemic support for these populations. In this sense, the observed resilience should be understood not as evidence of sufficiency, but as an indication of the need to act downstream to ensure structural responses that limit discrimination and adversity.

Discriminatory and racist behaviours are particularly recognised as important risk factors for psychological health, with long-term consequences that frequently manifest in mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Paradies et al. 2015).

6. Implications

The results of this study are relevant for a better understanding of communities living in poverty and the impact this has on their mental health, as well as for understanding the protective factors that these populations find to defend themselves from the marginalisation and stigma to which they are subject. On the one hand due to the situation of poverty itself, and, in the case of the Roma community, due to the intersectionality of minority characteristics as well as lower levels of education, more people per household, and lower incomes. The participants in this study are exclusively inhabitants of the municipality of Vila Real, which is particularly relevant in the Roma community surveyed, as it represents a large proportion of the total number of individuals residing in the municipality who can read and write. On the other hand, the comparison between communities living in the same place tends to be more rigorous because the social environment is identical, even with the specificities inherent to each of the communities.

These results are a starting point for diagnosing the hardships to which these populations are subject and for designing inclusion policies that civil society, the institutions that support them, and political authorities must address. The difficulties that these populations face are a systemic problem that must involve the entire community in its resolution, particularly the academic community, so that prejudice and discrimination can be combated, since the inclusion problems of one part of the population are a challenge for the entire community and, in this sense, combating them must be a collective responsibility.

7. Conclusion

We conclude that poverty, discrimination, and the intersectionality of minority characteristics impact self-stigma and the way people see themselves. Although the effect of self-stigma is more prevalent in the Roma community than in the non-Roma community, levels of psychological distress are lower in the Roma community, possibly because resilience and perceived social support act as protective factors and predictors of lower psychological distress in these communities. While the Roma community is in a more fragile situation due to lower wages, greater discrimination, and greater self-stigma, the effect of the community and the very close and present family networks seems to have a positive effect in overcoming adversities. These results show that protective factors are fundamental to psychosocial health, but also that the

social discrimination and stigma faced by the Roma community have very negative effects on their ability to find livelihoods, better housing, better wages, and better living conditions in general. The fact that indicators of psychological distress are lower in the Roma community does not mean less adversity. On the contrary, it shows that because this community is subject to adversity from an early age, they develop protective mechanisms that help them cope with stigma and ongoing social discrimination. However, continued research on this topic is essential to understand whether these effects are repeated and to ensure that action towards these populations is informed and equipped with scientific knowledge for more effective public inclusion policies. Combating social discrimination against minorities remains essential and must be supported by the development of public policies, starting at the community level with peer support programmes and cultural mediators, as well as through external communication campaigns to reduce social stigma. Reducing this stigma is essential for better acceptance of these communities in the labour market and for greater integration, starting with the salary increases resulting from this work and contributing to the reduction of inequalities.

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Psihosocialna tveganja in zaščitni dejavniki pri romskih in ne-romskih skupnostih na Portugalskem, ki živijo v revščini

Izvleček

Revščina ogroža psihosocialno zdravje, zlasti kadar se prepleta z manjšinskimi identitetami, kot je etnična pripadnost. Zaradi diskriminacije, predsodkov in stigme so razmere še posebej neugodne znotraj romske skupnosti. Ta presečna raziskava primerja psihosocialno zdravje med Romi in Neromi, ki živijo v revščini. Vzorec vključuje 317 udeležencev (202 Neromov in 115 Romov), starih od 18 do 71 let (M = 38,91; SD = 13,89). Ugotovljene so bile pomembne razlike ($p < 0,001$) v psihološki stiski (Neromi: 2,76; Romi: 1,95), samostigmatizaciji (Neromi: 2,87; Romi: 3,34), socialni opori (Neromi: 4,48; Romi: 6,05) in odpornosti (Neromi: 2,16; Romi: 3,07). Za romsko identiteto je značilna nižja stopnja psihološke stiske. Diskriminacija vpliva na samostigmo, ki jo oblikujejo družbeni predsodki. Kot zaščitna dejavnika se v romskih skupnostih kažeta močnejša odpornost in socialna opora. Ugotovitve poudarjajo potrebo po javnih politikah, ki bodo upoštevale potrebe teh populacij ter prispevale k zmanjševanju stigme in diskriminacije.

Ključne besede

presečnost; revščina; psihosocialno zdravje; romska skupnost; Neromi

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Danijel Grafenauer

Slovenia and Austria at the Crossroads of Mutual Relations. Slovene-Austrian Relations as Hostage of the Troubled Legacy of the 19th and 20th Centuries

Abstract

Austria and Slovenia are neighbours and friends, closely linked both geographically and historically. Over time, their peoples have developed various perceptions, stereotypes, and prejudices about each other. The rise of national movements and modern states has significantly shaped national historiographies, which have often drawn on past events in search of foundational ideas for the formation of their respective nation-states. This paper explores how this complex and sometimes troubled legacy has influenced cross-border relations.

Keywords

Austria, Slovenia, cross-border relations, history, stereotypes

Corresponding author

Danijel Grafenauer, Inštitut za narodnostna vprašanja, Ljubljana, Slovenia; **e-mail:** danijel.grafenauer@inv.si; **ORCID**: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9039-694X

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1. Introduction

Austria and Slovenia are neighbouring and friendly countries, closely connected both geographically and historically, working together in co-existence to find common interests and shared pathways. Over time, various perceptions, stereotypes, and prejudices have developed between the two countries and peoples, especially in the border areas on both sides of the Slovene-Austrian border. To analyse these prejudices, it is essential to know the history of relations on this territory, the social forces at play during specific historical periods, and the actions and political decisions of the social elites in both countries. Only through such an understanding can we explain the emergence of stereotypes and prejudices, which, it seems, have often influenced the behaviour of political elites in both countries and shaped their bilateral relations, especially over the last century.

A significant event in this context was the November 1993 meeting of the Slovene-Austrian Commission of Historians, whose Slovene/German title translates to A Neighbour Through the Neighbour's Eyes (Rozman 1995). This meeting was part of a series addressing the history and relations between the two countries and nations. For several decades, researchers from various fields – primarily historians, more so in Slovenia than in Austria – have been studying the diverse social intersections between the two countries. This paper builds on that tradition, examining how myths, stereotypes, and historical processes, alongside current events, shape generalised pictures of the other. These images often outgrow their purpose, shaping and influencing everyday life and society in general. The aim of the article is to show and explain – through an analysis of literature, research, and other sources, as well as by examining stereotypes and prejudices – how historiographical narratives influenced mutual relations between the two nations and states in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Former Slovenia's Prime Minister Janez Drnovšek (2002) observed that misinterpretation and irrational attachments to the past could fuel irresponsible populist policies. Any issues, he argued, should be resolved through reason. He emphasised the Slovene minority as a key factor in strengthening Austria's role as a partner for Slovenia and playing a crucial role in Slovenia's future integration into European structures. On that same occasion, former Austria's Prime Minister Wolfgang Schüssel (2002) highlighted the need to distinguish between the substantive and emotional aspects of unresolved issues. He argued that politicians should address the root causes of emotions and mistrust, taking the difficult but necessary steps to break existing clichés. Doing

so, he claimed, would make it easier to resolve outstanding issues between the two countries.

From a historical perspective, many stereotypes persist between Austria and Slovenia, with deeply rooted images of the neighbour often stemming from the past (cf., e.g., Bruckmüller 2002; Suppan 2002; Štih 2002; 2012; 2024; etc.). In today's context, as both countries share membership in the European Union, these stereotypes present obstacles. Consequently, discussions and dialogue between neighbours (Brousek et al. 2020) are essential to address and correct these images, highlighting those that affect good neighbourly relations and constructive coexistence in a common space. Such efforts are particularly significant for the social perception of national minorities in both countries, both the Slovene national community in Austria and the German-speaking ethnic community in Slovenia.

The purpose of the article is to demonstrate how the complex and challenging legacy between two neighbouring and friendly nations and states has influenced and continues to influence cross-border relations, both in the past and in the present. The research methodology is based on a range of methods and techniques that enable the analysis of the past and the understanding of historical processes. In addressing the topic, critical source analysis, comparative methods, the hermeneutic approach, and interdisciplinary methods were employed. These included historical, sociological, anthropological, and literary methods and techniques. Through contextualisation and qualitative approaches, diverse historical narratives were considered to interpret historical events and processes.

The article is structured into six subchapters. Following the introduction to the topic, it begins with an examination of the origins of stereotypes and myths, continues with an overview and analysis of the history of relations between the two nations and states, and includes a discussion of generalisations and imagery based on stereotypes. A significant part of the article focuses on the importance of minorities in mutual relations. The article concludes with subchapters that aim to present the most recent perceptions of neighbouring nations and, in the final section, highlight positive examples and developments of cross-border cooperation.

2. The Formation of Stereotypes and Myths

The rise of national movements and modern states has significantly shaped national historiographies, which have often drawn on past

events in search of foundational ideas for the formation of their respective nation-states (Vodopivec 2006). This process led to national stereotypes, which generalised historical and contemporary conditions and events to the extent that specific perceptions about the neighbouring nation became entrenched and embedded in national ideologies. As the latter gained social recognition and validity, the perception of the neighbouring nation became increasingly filtered and abstracted. Nationalisms, which have played a crucial role in social and political movements as well as personal lives since at least the mid-19th century (cf. Wingfield 2004), mobilised social elites and sought equality or dominance in multicultural or border regions (Judson 2006). The formation of ethnic and national identities became both a unifying and dividing force in everyday social life in the region (cf. Hobsbawm 1990; Hroch 2015; Štih et al. 2008, etc.). The perception or image of the neighbouring nation has often been shaped by social elites, which had access to the means of mass communication, including schools, the press, cartoons, various media, film, public lectures, novels, arts, historiography, and modern social networks. The histories of European nations are, to a large extent, constructs and projections, shaped in their essential features in the 19th century and representing visions of the past formulated by intellectual elites in connection with their political and national ideals. These pseudo-historical images, which also contained contemporary needs, values, and contents projected onto the past, continue to prevail in Europe at the level of historical memory and are accepted as self-evident and unquestionable historical realities, even though they are, in essence, mere representations (Grafenauer & Wakounig 2025, 528).

The past is crucial for the formation of identity, mainly because of the re-emergence of marginalised, silenced, and unacknowledged stories of suffering (Assmann 2006). Historians have observed that past events are remembered, classified, and interpreted in relation to the present (Benjamin 1965). Collective memory within a social community or a nation primarily refers to the foundational and key events in its history. Most of these involve violence but are later legitimised and celebrated as milestones. Events glorified by some may be perceived as humiliating by others (Ricoer 1998).

Stereotypes originating in the 19th century persist also today. For instance, the German-Austrian perspective portrays Slavs (including Slovenes) as a "people of servants" (Štih 2006), which, in contemporary terms, translates to distrust of their southern neighbours. For Slovenes, this aligns with their own auto-stereotype of an oppressed people with a glorious past (the era of the Carantanian princes) and a generally

hostile attitude toward the oppressive Germans/Austrians. Conversely, Austrians' auto-stereotype paints them as slightly conservative but polished, refined, and cultured (Bruckmüller 2001). Slovene literature, particularly after the First and Second World Wars, has reinforced a self-perception or auto-stereotype that drives the recent fears of Austrian economic dominance and the use of pejorative terms like yodellers or Nazis to describe Slovenia's neighbours. While these negative connotations are relatively isolated, they gain immediate resonance through mass media. Recently, however, these perceptions have begun to shift. The history of Slovenes is now increasingly viewed alongside the broader history of the Slovene territory, which has long been home to diverse identities – of which Slovene identity is just one (Štih 2001; 2002). Nevertheless, a still-contentious and potentially destabilising factor in maintaining hostile heterostereotypes is the way political elites in both countries treat indigenous, historically rooted national or linguistic communities (Jesih 2004).

The negative or hostile image of Germans/Austrians in Slovenia and Slovenes/Yugoslavs in Austria is rooted in viewing history through nationalist and nationalistic lens. Europe remains ensnared in perceptions that originated in the mid-19th century, when modern nation-states were taking shape (Štih 2002). Recent research indicates that certain events, such as the Carinthian plebiscite celebrations on 10 October, still hold significant relevance among young people in Carinthia. Slovene community members often feel excluded or boycott these celebrations, perceiving the plebiscite's significance differently than their Austrian counterparts (cf. Pirker 2013). National stereotypes play a key role in these differing perceptions (Bruckmüller 2001). While such celebrations serve as building blocks for nationalism and the popularisation of nationalist ideas and borders in Austria, the plebiscite is perceived as a national defeat in Slovenia. Therefore, Slovenia commemorates the struggle for the northern border, although to a much lesser degree (Pušnik 2011).

Slovenes' perception of their history is perhaps best encapsulated by the myth of the nation of servants, a long-standing auto-stereotype. Since their settlement in the wider territory of present-day Slovenia in the 6th century, Slovenes have experienced domination by more powerful neighbouring nations, particularly Germans (Štih & Winkler 2025, 43) and later also Italians. A brief exception was the *GLORIOUS AND INDEPENDENT* state of Carantania, symbolised by the Prince's Stone, which was used for the installation of princes and is now displayed at the Klagenfurt Landhaus, and the often mistakenly associated Duke's Chair.

This projection of national history stretches back to the settlement of Slavs in the Eastern Alps (Štih 2012). Slovenes perceive themselves as a hard-working, peaceful, and reasonable nation that has often been treated unfairly by history. The *SUN OF FREEDOM* truly shone for them only in 1918, 1945, and 1991 – dates that, today, are interpreted differently depending on the ideological viewpoint of individuals or political groups. However, one perception remains unanimous: the idea of the *1000-YEAR YOKE* under which the nation suffered at the hands of their, at least in the last century, bloodthirsty neighbours. In this narrative, Slovenes are seen as having been deprived of their own nobility and bourgeoisie, taken from them by foreigners. Language, as a constitutive element of statehood, remained central to their identity, but it could not fully flourish, as foreign rulers relegated Slovene to the language of servants and peasants. Only at the beginning of the 19th century did the situation begin to improve. Slovenia's greatest poet France Prešeren foreshadowed the nation's awakening and a brighter future in his Wreath of Sonnets, where he spoke of clearer skies and kinder stars shining upon the people of Upper Carniola. This perception, rooted in certain historical realities of the local population – such as cultural and linguistic traditions – became particularly pronounced during the formation of modern European nations. It also shaped heterostereotypes, i.e., perceptions of how other nations and their elites view Slovenes. In the multicultural Alpine-Adriatic region, the 19th century was marked by processes of identity negotiation, demarcation, and adaptation within complex ethnic identifications (Fikfak & Schönberger 2024).

The terms used to describe this historical narrative classify Slovenes as either latecomers or martyrs of history – portrayed as a people ruled by foreign masters on their own land, oppressed and governed as a nation of serfs and peasants, without a political history of their own. These conceptual frameworks began to emerge as early as the late 18th century with Anton Tomaž Linhart, an Enlightenment intellectual, and his unfinished work *An Attempt at a History of Carniola and the Other Lands of the Southern Slavs of Austria.* In this work, Linhart examined Slovenes as a distinct national whole, tracing their history back to the early Middle Ages and Carantania. While Linhart himself did not yet present Slovenes as martyrs of history, his study – later reinforced by 20th-century Slovene historiography – played a crucial role in shaping Slovene historical consciousness. As a result, the ethnic history of the nation was projected backward along the chronological timeline, retroactively attributing essential elements of 19th-century national identity to earlier historical periods (Štih 2006; 2024).

The myth of the Prince's Stone and the installation of Carantanian princes remains deeply embedded in Slovenia's society. Following the country's independence in 1991, the stone was depicted on the young country's temporary currency. This, however, triggered political tensions between Ljubljana, Klagenfurt, and Vienna. As a result, the Prince's Stone did not feature on Slovenia's official currency tolar that was used until 2006. When Slovenia joined the EU in May 2004 and strived for an early introduction of the euro in January 2007, tensions with Austria resurfaced when the Prince's Stone appeared on the two-cent coin (cf. Štih 2024; Nikolay 2010).

In essence, this forms a central axis of Slovenia's history, leaving no room for interpretation other than that the Prince's Stone is a fundamental Slovene legal monument. However, historical evidence today suggests that it is primarily a monument to Carinthian heritage, where Carantanian princes and Carinthian dukes were enthroned in Old Slovene language.

3. History of Relations Between the Two Nations and Countries, Inclusion of Generalisations and Images Based on Stereotypes

During the 19th century, but also later, particularly during the period of nation-building, the German language, supported by its broader base and more developed political thought, held greater social, cultural, and economic capital. This created a fluidity of ethnic identities in the interactions between German and Slovene speakers, with many shifting from Slovene to German – though the reverse also occurred. At the same time, an expanding circle of Slovene-minded intellectuals emerged, largely composed of individuals educated at universities across the Austrian Empire and later the monarchy. These intellectuals – including writers, poets, and scholars from various fields – reflected on the history of the Slovene nation, imbuing various tragedies with national significance and often depicting Slovenia as a key defender of Europe against the Turkish threat (Moritsch 1997; 2000; 2002).

Similar processes unfolded among German speakers, who also followed the patterns of modern nation-building. Their national aspirations included the idea that wherever German speakers lived or had strategic interests – such as access to the Adriatic Sea – German state formations should emerge. Caricatures that generalise stereotypes about Slovenes in ways accessible to the broader public (Suppan 2002)

offer a vivid illustration of how Slovenes were perceived in Austrian society. These depictions often reflected a paternalistic German attitude toward Slovene-speaking neighbours, portraying the latter as lacking the necessary attributes of a fully developed nation (no significant national achievements, language alone was deemed insufficient). The Germans adopted a patronising stance to the *PROBLEMS OF THE LITTLE NATION*, which they saw as destined to live and prosper under the influence of the German spirit (Grdina 2004, 707–732). Social organisation, power, and culture were considered privileges of the German-speaking population. This was reflected in the glorification of German culture and achievements, the emphasis on the German language as a cornerstone of intellectual and cultural life (evident, for instance, in the availability of translations of major world literature in German but not in Slovene), and the activities of various German nationalist societies advocating for the protection of German speakers in southern Styria, Carinthia, Upper Carniola, and other regions. By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, these tensions escalated into violent confrontations between members of the two nations, amplified by media coverage. The mistrust between Slovenes and Germans reached its peak after the outbreak of World War I, when, at a politically charged moment, sections of the German press accused the Slovene intelligentsia – particularly priests and teachers – of Serbophilia and anti-Austrian, anti-German, and anti-dynastic activities (Heppner 2002; Suppan 1983, 175–212; 1996; 1998; 2002; Liška 1984).

After the victory of the national principle in 1918, the development of newly defined Austrian-Slovene (Yugoslav) relations was significantly shaped by the Carinthian plebiscite and the minority question (Pleterski 2003; Grafenauer 2016a). The plebiscite's outcome and the subsequent loss of *CARINTHIA AS THE CRADLE OF THE SLOVENE NATION* understandably caused great disappointment and frustration in Yugoslav Slovenia. Gosposvetsko polje/Zollfeld was perceived as the Slovene equivalent of Kosovo Field, and the *Koroška bol* (Carinthian pain) resonated deeply among all Slovenes. This sense of loss played a crucial role in shaping Slovene collective consciousness, with the defeat framed as a national catastrophe. The pressures of Germanisation imposed by German nationalist societies and the Carinthian regional authorities on the Slovene minority in Carinthia were viewed as a profound injustice. In the minds of Slovenes in Yugoslavia, Carinthian Slovenes were seen as brothers who had not yet managed to break free from *A THOUSAND YEARS OF GERMAN DOMINATION*, while Austria was increasingly regarded as a German-oriented state. On both sides, plebiscite celebrations carried strong sym-

bolic and communicative value, reinforcing national cultural memory and identity (cf. Fikfak 2013; Grafenauer 2015). According to the Carinthian regional authorities, post-plebiscite exiles from Carinthia, who sought new livelihoods in Yugoslav Slovenia due to German nationalist pressures, significantly disrupted the good relations between the two newly formed states (Grafenauer 2010). For historical reasons, German Austrians were increasingly perceived as the fatal enemy of the Slovene nation – an image that culminated with Hitler's Germany's invasion of Yugoslav Slovenia and the substantial role Austrians played in the occupation regime during World War II. Even after the war ended, tensions persisted. The 1955 Austrian State Treaty on the Re-establishment of an Independent and Democratic Austria did not fully resolve these issues. The abolition of compulsory bilingual schools in southern Carinthia in 1958/59, the so-called *Ortstafelsturm* (the 1972 war against local bilingual signs), and the special nature of the 1976 census all further entrenched distrust between Slovenes and Austrians on both sides of the Karavanke mountains (cf. Stourzh 2005; Pandel et al. 2004; Klemenčič & Klemenčič 2010, 165–197; Grafenauer 2020; Suppan 2005).

The national tensions after 1918 also fuelled anti-Slavic sentiments and stereotypes in Austria. While the majority of Slovenes (along with other Slavic peoples of the former monarchy) found themselves in other, victorious state formations, Austria remained in the losers' circle. The prevailing sentiment was associated with the victorious interpretation of the struggle for the northern Slovene or southern Austrian border which, despite Austria's military defeat, ultimately resulted in Austria's favour. The glorification of the Carinthian defensive struggle *(Abwehrkampf)* emphasised love for the country (Rumpler 2005). The defenders were venerated, and the defensive struggle became a core symbol of German nationalist ideology, shaping Carinthia's culture of remembrance (Koschat 2010). Plebiscite propaganda also played a significant role in shaping stereotypes (Semlič Rajh 2020; Grafenauer 2016b, etc.) Conversely, Slovenia in 2005 elevated the 1918 *LIBERATION OF MARIBOR AND OTHER PARTS OF SOUTHERN STYRIA* to the status of a national holiday, officially naming it Rudolf Maister's Day. In Austria, however, Rudolf Maister is viewed negatively as the man who *CAME WITH THE CARNIOLANS TO DISRUPT THE UNITY OF THE COUNTRY*. He is also associated with Bloody Sunday, a term used to describe the January 1919 shooting of more than ten German demonstrators in Maribor (Jenuš et al. 2020). Adding to these tensions was the presence of a German-speaking minority in the newly formed South Slavic state to which Slovenia now belonged. The

once politically and economically strong German minority experienced a significant regression of its rights.

Throughout the 20th century, national perspectives on social developments in the Alpine-Adriatic region were deeply shaped by the consequences of both world wars. While these narratives are only slowly fading into the subconscious, they still resurface whenever tensions arise between the two neighbouring countries – most notably in the form of mistrust toward the other nation. For example, during the Covid-19 crisis in November 2020, an Austrian border police officer at the Lavamünd border crossing hung up a sign that read: *"Für Jugos gesperrt, da Österreicher sich auch nicht frei bewegen dürfen!" "Closed to Yugoslavs [pejor.], since Austrians are also not allowed to move freely!"* (Habich 2020). Another case occurred in late 2016 in the Austrian region of Styria, where posters appeared featuring images of Kekec, a well-known Slovene literary character and hero, accompanied by hostile slogans claiming that Kekec was an economic migrant who wanted to destroy Austrian culture and the social system and to harass Austrian women (Volksgruppen.orf.at 2016). A particularly sensitive and enduring element in this dynamic remains Austria's policies toward the Slovene national community in Carinthia and Styria (Grafenauer 2020).

4. Minorities in Both Countries: An Opportunity or an Obstacle to Cooperation in the 20th Century?

The strong Nazification of the pre-war German minority in Slovenia, coupled with the pre-war activities of the Swabian-German Cultural Association *(Schwäbisch-Deutscher Kulturbund)* in the Slovene territory, further strained relations between the populations. The relocation of the Gotscheers to the Lower Sava and Sotla valleys – areas from which some 40,000 Slovenes had previously been expelled – and the alignment of the German minority leadership with Nazi plans, alongside wartime atrocities, laid the groundwork for the final post-war reckoning with the German minority (Biber 1966). When asked about post-war rights of the German minority at the December 1945 meeting of the Liberation Front Central Committee in Ljubljana, Boris Kidrič replied that the German minority "will have no right in our country because there will be none" (Jenuš 2013). After World War II, members of the German minority largely retreated northward, fearing retaliation by the victors. Many were forcibly deported, and some perished in camps or

through extrajudicial killings (Nećak et al. 2004). These actions were compounded by the violent revolution and class-oriented confiscation of property. In Austrian society, and particularly among the descendants, there is a general perception that the Republic of Slovenia failed to provide a fair and just restitution. To this day, their memory and culture of remembrance remain primarily focused on the actions of the post-war communist authorities, while their own Nazification and role in wartime atrocities are continuously minimised (cf. Marschnig 2010). Conversely, Slovene authorities and individuals viewed the post-war period as one of justified revenge and reckoning with those who had contributed to their suffering and war crimes. Similar patterns could be observed in Austria, where, until 1991, vigilance and fear of the communist south (Ljubljana and Belgrade) persisted. The southern neighbour was perceived as untrustworthy, continuing to cast its gaze beyond the Karavanke Mountains, as it had done since the 19th century. Meanwhile, Slovenes in Carinthia and Styria were viewed as irredentists with secret ties to the south, scheming against Austria. In short, the largely expelled German minority perceives the post-war period as a time of immense injustice (cf. Karner 1998; 2005; Nećak et al. 2004; Ferenc & Repe 2004; Grafenauer 2014).

This legacy, amplified by politicians and the media, posed a challenge at the time of Slovenia's independence but was offset by Austria's strong support for Slovenia's aspirations for independence. Newly independent Slovenia and Austria began shaping their mutual relations from the outset. Or so it seemed in the milestone years of 1991 and 1992. Austria's support, particularly through the efforts of then Foreign Minister Alois Mock, left a lasting impression on the Slovene people. During his visits to the country on the sunny side of the Alps, Minister Mock was met with affection by the people on the streets (Eichtinger & Wohnout 2012, 224–249).

It is worth noting that Slovenes tend to have a much deeper knowledge of their Austrian neighbours than vice versa. Austrians, outside the federal states of Carinthia and Styria, generally know little about Slovenes and have no particular stereotypes about them. Many general opinions about Slovenes in Austria – derived from public opinion surveys after 1918 – can be attributed to the association of Slovenes with other South Slavic peoples, thereby reinforcing the perception that other Yugoslavs could be found beyond the southern border alongside Slovenes (Bruckmüller 2001). The term Yugoslavia and its derivative Yugoslavs carried negative connotations within interpersonal and family relations that persisted into the 1990s. This sentiment was reinforced

by Austria's historically ambivalent attitude toward the larger state of which Slovenia was a part. During the Cold War, mistrust persisted, driven by fears of potential escalations and uncertainty about Yugoslavia's intentions. The border was internationally recognised but was perceived in different ways, depending on the viewpoint. In the Slovene public opinion and the views of intelligentsia, the border was perceived as unjust, particularly given the Slovene national community's ongoing deprivation of minority rights and the state's lack of intervention against national intolerance, particularly in Carinthia. From the perspective of Austria's elites, the border was viewed as the minimum Austria managed to preserve while having to relinquish certain areas and the old German towns of Maribor, Celje, Ptuj, etc., once predominantly inhabited by German speakers (cf. Bister & Vodopivec 1995; Lendvai 2001; Mayrhofer-Grünbühel & Polzer 2002).

The issue of Austrian property that was confiscated and nationalised in Slovenia at the end of World War II and after 1945 further contributes to Austria's image of its problematic southern neighbour. This also affects the implementation of minority rights for Carinthian Slovenes, which were eroded during and after the two world wars, with planned Germanisation efforts and the incomplete implementation of Article 7 of the 1955 Austrian State Treaty. Austria's failure to fully implement these provisions continues to consolidate anti-German and anti-Austrian sentiments among Slovenes (Grafenauer & Jesih 2020).

A particular point of tension is the Carinthian primal fear or *Urangst* which is sometimes ridiculed in Austria but draws from historical events, particularly the two world wars and post-war territorial claims by Slovenia/Yugoslavia for a part of the territory of once Austro-Hungary and later Republic of Austria inhabited by a majority Slovene-speaking population. German nationalist organisations such as the Carinthian Homeland Service *(Kärntner Heimatdienst)* called for vigilance against the communist south during the Cold War, fostering widespread suspicion by accusing Carinthian Slovenes of covert ties to Yugoslavia and labelling them as irredentists. These accusations intensified following a series of bombings in southern Carinthia during the 1970s, culminating in the 1979 explosion at the museum in Velikovec/Völkermarkt and the arrest of two collaborators of the Yugoslav State Security Service *(UDBA)* (cf. Omerza 2011). Thus, the cycle was complete once again, with all old prejudices reinforced and enriched with new elements. All of this has caused historical traumas that have been transmitted across generations among Carinthian Slovenes (Wutti 2013, 45–54). These experiences and the transmission of trauma influence various memory

narratives, which in turn shape the memory culture of a particular part of the population. Because of differing historical narratives, the memory culture is not unified and, in the past, did not engage in processes of confrontation or reconciliation. New initiatives seek to be more inclusive and to introduce an inclusive discourse also into the educational process (Wutti et al. 2021).

The media's reinforcement of sentiments toward the south contributed to a perception in Slovenia that, during EU accession negotiations, Austria was exploiting Slovenia's small size, inexperience, relative weakness, and ultimate submissiveness when it came to Austria's interests (e.g., the issue of the Lipizzaner horses). Regarding political awareness and perception of developments in both countries, the saying *WHEN AN AUSTRIAN POLITICIAN COUGHS, THE SLOVENE PRESS CATCHES A COLD* seems particularly fitting. Historical perceptions and stereotypes continue to be shaped by the idea of the German-loyalist Austria that enthusiastically joined the German Reich in 1938 and where denazification after World War II was not carried out to a sufficient extent. Austria's own ambiguities regarding its national identity further contributed to this. During EU accession negotiations, old fears resurfaced in Slovenia – particularly the irrational anxiety that open borders would lead to a renewed state of German servitude. This fear was reflected in Slovene media headlines such as "*IS SLOVENIA ALREADY AN AUSTRIAN COLONY?"* and references to Austrian hegemonic aspirations, arrogance, sanctimony, Viennese arrogance, manipulation, and other similar notions. The fear of history repeating itself remained ever-present (Drčar-Murko 2002).

It is well known that the majority of the German-speaking ethnic group in Slovenia today is dissatisfied with the arrangements provided by the Cultural Agreement between Slovenia and Austria (officially titled 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, adopted in 2002). Article 15 thereof relates to the integration of cultural, educational, scientific, and other projects of the German-speaking population in Slovenia into interstate relations. The Austrian Parliament has repeatedly called for recognition and the regulation of their minority rights, such as those of the Italian and Hungarian national communities in Slovenia (J. R., 2020). These wishes of Austria were reiterated by Prime Minister Kurz during his visit to Slovenia in September 2020. Also, the umbrella organisation of the German-speaking ethnic community in Slovenia – the Association of Cultural Societies of the German-speaking Ethnic Community in Slovenia – has publicly called on the Slovene

government in several resolutions for constitutional recognition of its minority rights (cf. Škerl Kramberger 2018). Above all, efforts to ensure the national existence or revitalisation of the German-speaking ethnic group in Slovenia can be traced after 1991, when Slovenia became independent (Grafenauer 2014).

After Slovenia's independence and the change of the political system, relations between Slovenia and Austria became to thaw at all levels. However, certain stereotypes persist. On the Austrian side, Slovenes continue to be associated with folk music and accordion playing. Another stereotype, particularly in the southern regions, portrays Slovenes (including Carinthian Slovenes) as (former) partisans and Russophile-oriented pan-Slavists. Conversely, a common stereotype for Austrians is that they secretly sympathise with neo-Nazism, and that the German-speaking fellow countryman of Carinthian Slovenes still has his boots ready to march across the southern border and secure Germany's long-coveted access to the Adriatic Sea.

5. Recent Perceptions of Neighbours

In recent years, certain stereotypes have emerged regarding the approximately 27,000 daily migrants from Slovenia employed in Austrian companies, particularly in the border regions of Carinthia and Styria. Highly valued are Slovene nurses, nursing home staff, and 24-hour caregivers, alongside roughly 1,000 professionals from Slovenia who commute to Austria every day. Conversely, there are over 1,000 companies in Slovenia founded with Austrian capital, 760 of which are predominantly Austrian-owned. As a result, Austrian business owners and employees frequently travel to Slovenia, many of them daily. These perceptions of the neighbouring nation tend to be largely positive. Slovenes are regarded as diligent workers who share a similar cultural background with Austrians. Austrians, in turn, are seen as the employers who provide Slovenes with better economic opportunities. While occasional negative portrayals surface in public discourse, the overall relationship remains symbiotic. This positive shift is attributed to increased mutual understanding in recent years, bolstered by stronger cross-border cooperation in various fields, including economic, cultural, scientific, sports, etc. (Grafenauer & Jesih 2021).

Over the last three decades, Austrian perceptions and prejudices regarding Slovenia have been shaped by various issues, such as the debate surrounding the Krško nuclear power plant – where Slovenia was sometimes portrayed as unreliable or backward – and media cov-

erage of property restitution for the German-speaking ethnic community (in media reporting, restitution is not recognised as a complex legal issue, addressed in the Austrian State Treaty and court rulings). Additionally, Austria's view of its neighbour has been influenced by Slovenia's initiatives regarding the Slovene minority in Austria and its rights, and by some Slovene political parties' attempts to gain support from ideologically aligned Austrian counterparts. Historical events that have caused deep traumas and continue to shape a contradictory and often conflicting culture of remembrance include border disputes following World War I and the differing narratives of the border struggle (defensive struggle from the Austrian perspective versus the struggle for the northern border from the Slovene viewpoint), Nazism and the Nazi occupation of Yugoslavia, the Partisan resistance, the Yugoslav occupation of Carinthia, post-World War II border disputes, post-war executions, the communist regime in Slovenia, the rights of Carinthian Slovenes, Austrian-Yugoslav (Slovene) relations during the Cold War, and the status of the German-speaking minority in Slovenia after 1991 (Brousek et al. 2020). Numerous events have influenced and continue to influence the formation of prejudices and stereotypes, many of which are addressed by the author of this paper in the literature cited. National minorities themselves are also often triggers of tensions and creators of prejudices. More recently, this includes the illegal and disproportionate police intervention at the Peršman Homestead, a historical site preserving the memory of the partisan resistance of Carinthian Slovenes and the Nazi atrocities committed during the World War II (Bundesministerium für Inneres 2025), the incident at the football match between the Slovene Athletic Club (*SAK*) and Atus from Borovlje/Ferlach, when the assistant referee demanded that *SAK*'s goalkeeping coach speak German to a player of the opposing team and issued him a yellow card when he refused (Rustia 2025), and the latest attack on bilingual placename signs in October 2025 (Smrečnik 2025).

6. Conclusion

National antagonisms between Austria and Slovenia are gradually being overcome, particularly through cross-border cooperation in various fields – in economic, scientific, political, cultural, and sporting domains, as well as within civil society. A step toward improved bilateral cooperation was the 2001 Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Austria and the Government of the Republic of Slovenia on Cooperation in the Fields of Culture, Education and Science. This agreement

was the first official treaty in which Slovenia recognised the existence of a German-speaking ethnic group within its borders and committed to supporting its cultural and educational needs. In parallel, Austria acknowledged the cultural and educational needs of Slovenes outside the settlement area of the Slovene minority. Another key initiative toward better mutual understanding and coexistence in Carinthia was the establishment of the Carinthian Consensus Group in 2005. This group brought together previously irreconcilable opponents – the Carinthian *Heimatdienst* and a part of Carinthian Slovenes – who are now willing to engage in dialogue and reconciliation efforts. This was not a new initiative. Rather, it built upon earlier dialogue efforts between German and Slovene speakers within the Diocese of Gurk-Klagenfurt (Carinthian Diocesan Synod 1972) and the talks in the Alps-Adriatic Working Community (since 1978). The latter played a crucial role in fostering economic cooperation between Austria and Yugoslavia (especially Slovenia) and in garnering support among the German-speaking population for the Slovene national community in Austria. More recently, the Alps-Adriatic Peace Region project, founded in 2013, has continued efforts to enhance understanding, cooperation, and coexistence – not only in Carinthia but across a broader geographical area. A particularly symbolic and significant gesture of reconciliation is the annual commemorative event at the cemetery in Velikovec/Völkermarkt, where twelve Slovenes who fought for Slovenia's northern border and four Austrians who defended Austria's southern border, perished in the spring of 1919, now rest side by side. The commemoration's slogan reads: "They died believing in their respective homelands because politics failed to resolve the conflict peacefully". The cemetery in Velikovec/Völkermarkt, the only common burial site of former adversaries in Carinthia, has become a symbol of reconciliation. In 2021, a memorial plaque was unveiled listing 430 names of fighters who fell on both sides in 1918 and 1919, arranged alphabetically and without distinction of allegiance. The 2020 centenary ceremony of the Carinthian plebiscite in Klagenfurt/Celovec symbolically underscored reconciliation and cooperation, highlighted by Austrian President Alexander Van der Bellen's apology to the Slovene national community for past injustices and delays in implementing their constitutional rights ("Zgodovinsko opravičilo avstrijskega predsednika", 2020). A similar message of reconciliation is embodied in the Working Group for a Permanent Dialogue with the German-Speaking Ethnic Group in the Republic of Slovenia, established in 2021 within the Ministry of Culture of Slovenia.

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Izvleček

Avstrija in Slovenija sta sosednji in prijateljski državi, ki sta geografsko in zgodovinsko tesno povezani. Skozi zgodovino so se med narodoma oz. državama izoblikovale določene predstave, stereotipi in predsodki. Nastanek nacionalnih gibanj in modernih držav je močno pospešil tudi nacionalna zgodovinopisja, ki so v preteklih dogodkih iskala konstitutivne ideje za oblikovanje svojih nacionalnih držav. V prispevku skušamo prikazati, kako je ta kompleksna in težavna dediščina vplivala na čezmejne odnose.

Ključne besede

Avstrija, Slovenija, čezmejni odnosi, zgodovina, stereotipi

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Petra Kavrečič Božeglav

Slovenes and Italians Living in the Karst Area of Italy: Stories, Conflicts, Ignorance and Perceptions

Abstract

The paper presents the research conducted within the project Ethnography of Silence(s), focusing on the Slovene/Yugoslav-Italian border region established after the Second World War. This politically charged period was marked by ideological tensions, state negotiations, and shifting boundaries that deeply affected local communities. The study examines how individuals from Slovene and Italian communities experienced, interpreted, and adapted to these imposed conditions of coexistence and division. Emphasis is placed on lived experiences shaped by migration, deprivation, and contestation. Employing oral history methodology, the research analyses personal narratives, emotions, and memories as key sources of ethnographic insight. By foregrounding silenced or marginalised voices, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how political borders are internalised and negotiated through everyday life.

Keywords

Slovene/Yugoslav-Italian border area, contested space, memory, life stories, silence

Corresponding author

Petra Kavrečič Božeglav, University of Primorska, Faculty of Humanities, Koper, Slovenia; **e-mail**: petra.kavrecic@fhs.upr.si; **ORCID**: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2587-579X

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"Because the past is a dark, distorted mirror. You look at it, you only see your own pain. There is no room in there for someone else's pain."

»Ker je preteklost temno, popačeno ogledalo. Če pogledaš vanj, vidiš samo svojo bolečino. V njem ni prostora za bolečino koga drugega.« [1]

1. Introduction

History is complex, often difficult to understand, and never entirely objective, as it is both produced and interpreted by people. One of its key characteristics is the heterogeneity of interpretations of the past. This is especially evident in contested border regions, where historical events are viewed from different, often opposing perspectives. In such cases, interpretations are frequently one-sided, shaped by political, nationalistic, or social viewpoints. Although historians are expected to analyse rather than judge, they frequently do so, particularly when political issues are at the forefront. Recognising that complete objectivity is unattainable, historians (should) acknowledge their own limitations. No historical account can ever be fully comprehensive, as it is constrained by available sources and by personal limitations such as language proficiency. Given these challenges, historical research remains an ongoing and never fully conclusive endeavour.

With this brief reflection, I wish to emphasise that this paper is not definitive but rather aims to present the research undertaken within the project Ethnography of Silence(s).[2] This project explores various forms of silence, examining their significance and implications. In this paper, the focus is on the border area between Slovenia (Yugoslavia) and Italy, established in the aftermath of the Second World War. This period, especially the first post-war decades, was marked by intense political confrontations and negotiations, not only between two states but also between two opposite political stands. While this topic has been extensively studied in historical research, scholars from both countries have often approached it from a national perspective, frequently overlooking the viewpoints of the other side. However, in recent years and decades, historians and other scholars have adopted a more comprehensive and nuanced approach to the issue (e.g., Altin 2024, Cattunar 2012; 2014; D'Alessio 2006; Orlić 2023; Rolandi 2014; Tenca Montini 2023, and others). A significant contribution in this direction was made by ethnologists Jasna Fakin and Katja Jerman who, in 2004, presented the results of their fieldwork conducted among refugees from Istria and examined the reactions of the local population to the newcomers in their community (Fakin & Jerman 2004).

Still, historical research – despite employing various methodological approaches – rarely addresses silence. Therefore, this paper seeks to shift the research focus from events to individuals, particularly those living in areas marked by migration, deprivation, and appropriation, as well as by coexistence and conflict, communication, and ignorance. This research seeks to provide a more comprehensive perspective on the difficult post-Second World War circumstances in the contested border region, moving beyond one-sided interpretation. It takes into account diverse, often opposing viewpoints and conflicting memories. As explained by Hrobat Virloget: "These traumatic memories of the contested multi-cultural and multi-ethnic borderland region of the former Iron Curtain have been politically exploited and today compete for their exclusive victimhood" (Hrobat Virloget 2025, 189). The focus is on the impact of political changes on populations affected by war, particularly the consequences of newly established or altered borders, new political regimes and powers, migration, and life in the new communities. The central question is how immigration shaped the lives of people who left their homes, while also addressing the experiences of the so-called old communities already living in these areas. These political transformations deeply influenced individuals and communities, demanding adaptation to new realities.

Geographically, the study focuses on the Italian side of the newly established Yugoslav-Italian border after the end of the Second World War, namely the villages of the Karst area, predominantly populated by the Slovene national community. In April 2024, together with Professors Katja Hrobat Virloget[3] and Martina Tonet and a group of students, we conducted fieldwork in the Italian village of Prosecco/Prosek[4] and its surroundings. These territories have historically been – and still are – home to a Slovene-speaking community (national minority). The fieldwork partly focused on Italian emigrants who moved to these villages after leaving their homes when the territory was assigned to Yugoslavia. Most were former inhabitants of Zone B of the Free Territory of Trieste/Trst (FTT), which was officially assigned to Yugoslavia in 1954. The majority of Italian-speaking inhabitants chose to relocate to Italy, a right granted in the international agreements. They were resettled in various *campi profughi* (refugee camps) in Trieste/Trst and surrounding villages. In many cases, they were placed in areas where the Slovene-speaking population formed the majority. The Slovenes thus represent the other key focus of our research. The intent was not to analyse political strategies or abuses, but rather to explore everyday life and the possibilities for communication and cooperation between these communities.

2. Methodology

The central methodological approach of this research consists of semi-structured oral history interviews.[5] Additionally, interviews from previous research were included if they addressed topics relevant to this study. The research involved multiple generations – those who directly experienced and lived through traumatic events such as emigration and resettlement, as well as younger generations who did not witness these events firsthand but inherited an awareness of the period through parents, grandparents, or other relatives. Interviewing several generations offers a broader understanding of post-war life in the border region, revealing diverse perspectives. As the Slovene anthropologist Polona Sitar noted, such an approach allows us to see "through a generational perspective, which, on the one hand, illuminates possible generational discontinuities, and on the other hand, also common understandings" (Sitar 2021, 146).

Our main interlocutors were people who had emigrated or who had already been living on the Italian side of the new border. We were particularly interested in their personal experiences, emotions, and feelings as they faced this new reality. For Italians who left Istria and their homes, the journey into the unknown was a deeply traumatic experience, often perceived as forced emigration. In the places, villages or towns where they were born, a new and different state had been established. The border had shifted, and Yugoslavia became the new reality in those territories. For Slovenes who were already living in Italy, in the villages where emigrants and refugees were resettled, the experience was different. As members of a national minority, they felt the impact of the arrival of Italian settlers in their communities. The life stories and personal perspectives of those placed in refugee camps in Slovene-speaking villages in Italy, and who later built their lives there, form one part of the material analysed in this study. Additionally, we spoke with Slovenes from these villages about their experiences with the settlement of Italian emigrants from Yugoslavia, primarily from Istria. The aim is to give voice to both communities. Attention is dedicated to the interlocutors' understandings, emotions, and memories.

The period and territory under study represent a challenging historical moment, shaped by political confrontations and negotiations not only between two states and two nations, but also between two opposing political ideologies, all of which had a profound impact on people's everyday lives. The central question is whether – and how – members of the Slovene and Italian communities managed to adapt to the living

conditions imposed by political decisions. Their life stories and personal perspectives form the core of this study.

3. Border Disputes between Yugoslavia and Italy

As a historian, I cannot entirely step outside my comfort zone, so I will begin by briefly discussing the historical circumstances and developments that led to the formation or invention of national affiliation and awareness in the Upper Adriatic region. During the 19th century, the ideas surrounding the concept of nation significantly shaped society. With the rise of national ideologies and the revolutionary movement known as the springtime of nations, the valorisation and affirmation of group identity came to the forefront of political agendas and the creation of nation-states became a central goal. In ethnically mixed territories, however, drawing clear boundaries was challenging. As argued by the historian Vanni D'Alessio (speaking specifically about national statistics but in a way that remains highly relevant): "studying ethnic and national affiliations in multilingual settings, is that there is not, and never was, such thing as fixed identities. Identities are volatile and dependant on time and circumstances, self-ascription and attribution by others" (D'Alessio 2006, 27).

To better understand the complex situation between Yugoslavia and Italy in the years following the end of the Second World War, as well as the causes behind such significant population shifts, an explanation of the border-creation process is necessary. The border issue in the region has a long history. After the First World War, the region of the former Austrian Littoral[6] (Austro-Hungary), also known by its Italian name Venezia Giulia (first mentioned in 1863), became the subject of political negotiations. As Italy had been actively involved in the war and stood on the winning side, the territories promised in the London Pact of 1915 were assigned to it after diplomatic negotiations with the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (also allies). The region formally became part of Italy in 1920 with the signing of the Treaty of Rapallo. The Italian fascist regime, established in 1922, then had a strong impact on this territory (Kavrečič Božeglav 2024), due to the systematic process of denationalisation targeting Slovene and Croatian communities.

After the end of the Second World War, the geopolitical reality and relations in the region underwent significant changes and the balance of power shifted. The situation became particularly complex as the newly established Yugoslav state called for a revision of the border between Yugoslavia and Italy. Due to the contentious nature of this issue,

long diplomatic discussion took place. A provisional border demarcation known as the Morgan Line was established in the region of the Julian March. This line marked the boundary between two military administrations: the Yugoslav administration in the east (Zone B) and the Allied Military Government in the west (Zone A). The border issue was partially resolved in 1947 with the Peace Treaty of Paris, which introduced "the possibility of opting … granted to all those who had permanent residence in the territory assigned to Yugoslavia before 10 June 1940, and whose 'spoken language' was Italian" (Volk 2003b, 134; see also Volk 2003a).

The Treaty established the border between Italy and Yugoslavia in the northern sections of the contested territory, as well as the border between Yugoslavia, Italy, and the Free Territory of Trieste/Trst (Treaty of Peace with Italy, 1950), which was created as a new independent entity. This territory was divided into two administrative zones, similarly as the Julian March: Zone A, under the Allied Military Government, and Zone B, under the Yugoslav Military Government. In 1954, with the signing of the London Memorandum, both military administrations transferred their mandates to the governments of Italy and Yugoslavia (Troha 2018).[7] The border question between the two countries was only finally settled in legal terms in 1975 with the Osimo Agreements.

The saying paper endures everything is particularly relevant in this context. One side of history is the official, written version, documented through treaties and agreements that formally established the border between the two states. The other side, however, is the lived experiences of people affected by these decisions. As Mateja Gomboc writes in her novel Gorica (Gomboc 2023), borders divide and bring significant, often severe changes, separating families, friends, and lovers. Similar situations can be observed in other border regions. In the case of Istria, relations between the Italian, Slovene, and Croatian communities were profoundly affected by repression, violence, and resistance. The collapse of the fascist regime in 1943, followed by German occupation until 1945 and the arrival of the Yugoslav (military) authorities, created a highly complex and tense environment. These political shifts, along with the redistribution of power, ultimately led to a mass exodus from the region, primarily of the Italian-speaking population. The Yugoslav authorities were well aware that the majority of the Italian population opposed their rule. They even acknowledged this when the signature-collection campaign for annexation to Yugoslavia, held in Piran/Pirano and Koper/Capodistria in August and September 1945, resulted in a complete failure. "Virtually no one signed, not even party members," reported Boris

Kraigher to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Slovenia (Troha 1999, 267). While the Yugoslav authorities did not restrict Italian emigration, Italy (and the Allied forces in the Julian March) also encouraged it, using it as a means to highlight the perceived harshness of the communist regime.

Figure 1: Division of the zones of the Julian March

Source: US Bureau of Public Affairs, part of the US Department of State (1957).

Nonetheless, due to the high number of people leaving Zone B, which was later assigned to Yugoslavia, the resettlement of emigrants/refugees represented a great challenge. As observed by the historian Sandi Volk,

> the issue was complicated and demanding: while the Anglo-Americans welcomed the *optanti/esuli*/emigrants/refugees as a justification for seizing power in the military zone, they faced a far more challenging reality when confronted with the practical issue of their presence in the territory under their administration (Volk 2003, 132).

The planned settlement in the Trieste/Trst area was of strategic importance for the Italian side, especially for the local pro-Italian organisations and the centre-right component of the Italian government in Trieste/Trst. They assigned the *esuli*

> a significant role in the efforts of the Italian side to retain as much of the Julian March as possible within its borders … the presence of these people, who were presumed to be loyal to Italy, was of great importance in justifying and strengthening Italian claims over Trieste, as well as over Istria (Volk 2003b, 132).

Migration flows were initially directed toward Trieste/Trst and its surroundings. Organising accommodation proved challenging. One temporary solution was the establishment of refugee camps. As explained by Orlić:

> once they had crossed the border, the refugees were welcomed into various camps set up also for other war victims, and from there, over the years, they were relocated to facilities specially created throughout Italy. Those who had relatives, friends, or even mere acquaintances in Italy often ended up relying on them, later seeking independent accommodation (Orlić 2023, 176).

3.1 Migrations in Numbers

A reliable assessment of migration is difficult to make, as illegal movements were also taking place (see also Jovanović 2024). Nevertheless, some data are available. Italians had been leaving the region since the end of the war, but in the Koper/Capodistria area these movements were not as massive until the Trieste/Trst crisis in October 1953. In contrast, emigration was significantly higher from the areas annexed to Croatia in September 1947 (Troha 1999, 267).

From the enclave of the Zone B of the Julian March, Pula/Pola, migrations to Trieste/Trst began in the summer of 1946, with the main wave of immigrants arriving between January and June/July 1947. In May 1948 (continuing until June 1949 and again in late spring 1950), a mass influx of *esuli/optants* from other parts of Istria annexed by Yugoslavia began (Volk 2003b, 134). The status of refugees was often influenced by the political dynamics between the Allied forces and Yugoslavia. Although they were not initially expected to remain in Trieste/Trst, "the Istrian and Dalmatian refugees became politically significant and useful to the Italian government, which took a direct interest in them" (Volk 2003b, 136). According to data provided by the Allied forces in Zone A,

> between 15,000 and 20,000 *optants* and illegal refugees were already living in Zone A by February 1949, while by April 1950 more than 30,000 had arrived in Trieste. Although Zone A was supposed to be only a transit point on their way to Italy, the vast majority of these newcomers expressed a desire and intent to settle there permanently" (Volk 2003b, 134).

According to Volk, most of the emigrants/refugees arrived in Zone A by March 1950 and by the end of that year, around 25,000 exiles were living there. In the following year, an additional 5,587 people arrived. They were settled either with relatives or in housing specifically prepared for them by the Italian government. They were granted the permission for permanent residence, and in September 1950 the authorities of Zone A authorised the expropriation of land for the construction of a power line to the fish farm near the Timavo River. Another decree followed in June 1951, allowing further expropriation of land for the expansion of the same fish farm (Volk 2003b, 141).

The data collected by the historian Aleksej Kalc show that in 1945 the population of Zone B of the FTT was 46,350. Of these, 18,500 lived in the towns of Koper/Capodistria, Izola/Isola and Piran/Pirano, while the rest lived in villages in the rural hinterland. The population started to decline in 1949, and in 1956 it stood at 42,000 (Kalc 2019, 149). After the signing of the Memorandum of London in 1954, more than 8,000 people opted for Italian nationality and left in 1955. In the following years, another 2,200 people left. By early 1957, around 24,400[8] people had emigrated from the Slovene coastal region alone – almost 53 percent of the population recorded in the 1945 census (Kalc 2019, 151; Troha 1999, 267).

4. From One Side to the Other

The social scientists Ana Kralj and Tanja Rener, in their paper Living on the Border: Three Generations' Biographies, observe:

> The construction of the connotation of boundaries takes place through narratives, stories that provide people with shared experiences, common memories and history, making them feel interconnected. Therefore, narratives should not be understood as mere representation methods, but also as discourses that significantly shape the social practices and everyday lives of people in the way that the boundaries acquire meaning in everyday individual experiences (Kralj & Rener 2019, 4).

Throughout the conducted interviews, I aimed to follow and reflect on this statement. In my previous research on everyday life and survival strategies of the local population in the border area, I focused on the Slovene (Yugoslav) side of the border. I examined the question of continuity in a territory disrupted by a newly imposed state border that abruptly severed long-standing social, economic, cultural, and family ties. As one of my interlocutors explained:

> Back then it was one country, there were no barriers, no problems, people would go to Istria to buy goods, and women would go to Trieste to sell things … people lived side by side … men went to work … and then, when they cut all that off … everything was gone (Interlocutor 1).

The territorial discontinuity brought about by the new border severely affected the local population – not only those who remained in Yugoslavia, but also those who lived in Italy or decided, or attempted, to emigrate westward. Archival documentation reveals striking cases, such as that of Karlo Saina, whose request to opt was definitively rejected in July 1951 with the standard formula applied to all rejected applications: "of Croatian nationality and Croatian as the language of use". The reasoning states that Karlo had two sisters, Italian citizens who had emigrated from Istria in 1926, but also another sister, two brothers, and his mother – none of whom had opted and resided in Yugoslavia. In her book *Identità di confine*, the historian Mila Orlić shows that families like Karlo's were extremely numerous, and that most were divided precisely because of the option mechanism: on one side, those who chose to be Italian and took the opportunity to leave Istria for various reasons (mostly social and economic, given the dramatic post-war situation);

on the other side, those who remained in Istria (either by choice or by decision of the authorities in cases where their option was denied), who later followed different paths: nationalisation (either Croatian/Yugoslav or integration into the Italian minority)[9] or national indifference, marked by local or regional loyalties and identities, without excluding the possibility of hybrid or multiple forms (Orlić 2023, 154–155).

The causes of migration were varied, and several scholars have written extensively about them. The available archival sources indicate that in application for opting, "the most commonly cited reasons for emigration were: the intention to join relatives in Trieste/Trst, voluntary emigration, illness or a family member's illness, family conflicts and tensions, marriage, and emigration to America or Australia". Political (the new regime), economic (agrarian reforms), social, ethnic and religious reasons were usually not listed in the official applications (Fakin & Jerman 2004, 120–121).

Even so, official documents reflect only one part of the reality. It is understandable that those who applied for the option also sought to avoid political or national controversy in an already tense atmosphere. One interlocutor recalled her aunt's memories:

> She always says that her parents, so, my grandparents, had a very deep sense of what it meant to be Italian. So, they didn't hesitate. At least in her memory, it was: 'Let's go. We can't stay here, let's go because…' and so, in reality, it was seen as, yes, they had to leave everything behind, but maybe for them, since they were still young, it wasn't such a burden… My mom said, 'we left'. She also says, 'in the end, I always ended up in a better place' (Interlocutor 2).

It is well established that the exodus did not involve only individuals of Italian ethnicity. Slovenes and Croats also left, motivated by a range of factors, including economic and political conditions:

> It's true, however, that at the beginning this ***esule*** settlement seemed entirely Italian. Over the years, it became clear that there were also families of Slovenes and Croats from Dalmatia. The women, for example, spoke Croatian. My father had two friends he worked with who had Slovene surnames. They, too, left during the exodus (Interlocutor 3).

> I have a … niece, who came during the exodus. She told me that … her house had also been bombed, and when they had nothing left, her mother took the three children and came here. So, they didn't come because of some ideology or out of fear of staying in Yugoslavia, but simply because they had nothing (Interlocutor 3).

Nevertheless, leaving one's home, land, and especially family and relatives was hard, and adapting to a new reality posed further challenges. It was even more difficult for those placed in refugee camps. The temporary accommodation for refugees consisted of former Italian, German, and Allied camps, military encampments, former concentration camps and prisoner-of-war camps, barracks, abandoned factories, and even churches. These centres were inadequately equipped, and the living conditions were poor (Orlić 2023, 176–177). Similar conditions were documented in the 2004 fieldwork by Fakin and Jerman (2004, 123). One of my interlocutors (interviewed 20 years later) remembered visiting those camps as a child in the 1950s, when she accompanied her mother bringing (selling) meat to refugees. She recalled a large building, a warehouse, where people lived in rooms, one next to the other, separated mostly by cardboards or canvas:

> Mostly there were only rooms, maybe a small stove … The toilets, sanitary facilities, and kitchens were not there, probably at the end of the hall or somewhere else … it was a *magazzino* near the sea … people there didn't look poor or hungry, just sad … probably because they had to leave their homes back in Koper (Interlocutor 4).

Another interlocutor recalled her aunt's words: "We had a house, we ended up in a barrack, we had no way to keep warm, in any case, life wasn't great …" She used to cook, and then they would all go wash the pots together (Interlocutor 2). Another interlocutor remembered his own experience:

> We were living with our parents, who had also come from Istria, in something like a stable, or something like that … A bed for one and a half people. They had given us some camp cots with straw mattresses. There was a cast-iron stove, and then we'd go to collect pinecones in the woods to keep warm (Interlocutor 6).

The recollections indicate that people were well aware of the harsh living conditions in the camps. One interlocutor from previous research recalled that his wife had been eager to leave, and after they had sold their livestock, they were prepared to depart. However, upon seeing the poor conditions in the barracks "on the other side of the hill" [they lived very close to the border zones, note by author], he decided to remain. He subsequently repurchased the animals and continued living in Yugoslavia.

> So, the shack was made up of a single room, maybe one or two meters wide and about five meters long. And then we'd use cardboard to divide it and make a bedroom … We used to go over to the washtubs. We'd get water there too. We'd go with a bucket to fetch water, and then there were the toilets, and you'd wash yourself under the tap (Interlocutor 6).

Some camps did not have kitchens, and food was delivered to the refugees: "They would bring food in big pots, and we would line up. Everyone in line, and they'd give us something to eat" (Interlocutor 6).

The harsh conditions were also acknowledged by the Slovene inhabitants of the surrounding villages, though often accompanied by a bitter sense of injustice regarding their own circumstances.[10] An interlocutor interviewed by our students pointed out:

> And they also came, I think, looking for better living conditions. The first years in the refugee camps were probably hard, it certainly wasn't pleasant, you know. But later, with all those settlements – which, as you know, were deliberately created – life improved a lot for them, as you know. Those settlements in Slovene areas really improved their lives, I think. As I mentioned before, they probably had more advantages than we did at that time, especially regarding housing conditions and also jobs, you know (Interlocutor 7).

Some people and families stayed in the *campi profughi* for years, even a decade. The number of camps gradually decreased over the years as new houses or other placements (e. g. with relatives) were arranged. According to Orlić, "by the end of 1952, only 42 remained in operation, housing around 30,000 people" (Orlić 2023, 176–177). However, due to the harsh living conditions, some even decided to move back to Yugoslavia.

5. Parallel Universes

During the research and conversations with our interlocutors, several recurring issues emerged. Both the Slovene and Italian communities stressed that, even if they live in the same village, they did (or do) not truly coexist or cohabit. When interlocutors spoke about their life stories, the impression was that in the small village of Prosecco/Prosek,[11] two parallel universes existed.[12] People lived in physical proximity yet remained mentally distant. On one side were Italians and their experiences, and on the other Slovenes and theirs. In the period following the exodus from Istria, communication between refugees and Slovenes was minimal.

As explained by Fakin and Jerman, the refugees were often placed in territories inhabited by the Slovene community: "In the municipalities of Duino-Aurisina, Trieste, and Opicina, Istrian refugees were accommodated by private individuals, in camps in Padriciano and Opicina, and in barrack settlements established on the outskirts of Slovene villages on the Karst Plateau near Trieste" (Fakin & Jerman 2004, 125). In the period of the FTT (1947–1954), the president of Zone A, Gino Palutan, was responsible for allocating funds provided by the Italian government for the construction of temporary and permanent housing for exiles. He was the key figure in implementing the resettlement plan until 1952. In Santa Croce/Križ, he had 33 temporary housing units built in barracks on rented land. In Trieste/Trst, between Servola/Škedenj and Ponziana/Pončana, he oversaw the construction of 40 temporary and permanent housing units, as well as the already mentioned 20 housing units in the fish-farm area at the mouth of the Timavo River. His goal was "to settle the Istrian exiles in suburban areas to defend Italian identity" (Volk 2003b, 140–141). Hrobat Virloget similarly observes an

> intentional building of separated refugee settlements in the Trieste borderland zone that became a medium of the 'national bonification' or Italianization of territories, especially in the surroundings of Trieste, where, after this process, Slovenians became a national minority even though they had previously been the majority … Almost every larger Slovenian settlement around Trieste got its refugee counterpart in the immediate vicinity. In this process, the land (especially commons) was expropriated from Slovenians, which had not been done even during the time of fascism (Hrobat Virloget 2025, 195).

During an interview with a descendant of a refugee from Istria, born in 1973, we spoke about her father's experience as an *esule* from Pula/Pola (today in Croatia). She could not say much about his experiences, as her father rarely spoke about his past and childhood. She knew only that when he and his family left Istria, he was still a child. They were placed in a *campo profughi* around 1950 in Santa Croce/Križ, a village near Prosecco/Prosek. She decided to call her father, and the interview continued. He recalled mingling with other children from Istria and having several fights with the Slovenes. They felt like *intrusi*, intruders, since people from the village used to throw stones at the barracks in the camp:

> The contact between the two communities was minimal … this was at the beginning, slowly the situation improved and today we are all the same … back then we had separate schools … today some send their children to Slovene schools, back then it was unthinkable … (Interlocutor 5 and 6).[13]

Other interlocutors also described the situation as being characterised by very limited contact, often accompanied by a lack of appreciation for one another. Interestingly, they noted that the situation has changed and that relations have improved. On the other side, the Slovene community held a different perspective. They experienced the arrival of the Istrians as "a great injustice and a shock" (Interlocutor 8), a sentiment that persists even among younger generations.

During the first years in the barracks, refugees were given clothing and food,[14] though they had to wait in line. As already mentioned, the rooms were divided with cardboard, and the lavatories were in separate spaces: "We went there to get water. With a bucket you would go and get water and after that there were toilets and you would wash at the sink …". However, he also remembers those years from a child's point of view: "A child, I think, does not experience that trauma. He always finds an opportunity to enjoy himself" (Interlocutor 6).

> No, but I don't think anyone my age held a grudge because we didn't live it. I think resentment may remain among those who were adults at the time, but those people are now almost all gone. Seventy years have passed (Interlocutor 6).

A similar feeling emerged in another interview conducted several years ago. As part of research on the attacks and burning of occupied territories during the Second World War in what is today western Slovenia, interlocutors recounted their experiences. The events were devastating: the burning of homes and the struggle for survival left deep scars. Yet some, who were children at the time, also remembered small moments of wonder, such as sleeping outside and watching the stars.

Reactions to the refugees varied not only among the Slovene community but also within the Italian community:

> They lived in terrible misery, however, people saw them … they were treated badly, they were considered privileged by Slovenes because Slovenes had also lived through 20 years of fascism, but also by Italians, by people from Trieste … it is also understandable, I don't deny it. If a citizen of Trieste is looking for a job and I, because I am a refugee, have a few more points, it's understandable; however, one has to understand that we did not choose it, it was political … (Interlocutor 6).

A member of the Slovene national minority in Prosecco/Prosek explained his experience with the arrival of the Istrian refuges:

> … after the war, when the *Istriani* came … I was a kid … when they settled and built a new village on the hill, they called it Borgo San Nazario … first they placed them in the barracks, the Americans built them … and there was also a shop there, a church … and the people lived in those barracks. They had everything, light, carbon, wood, places to wash … they did not even want to leave from there … the state built apartments for them in Borgo San Nazario … they had everything, didn't pay for anything, they were even given money … (Interlocutor 9).

This reflection shows a different perspective and memory of the events, stated by Hrobat Virloget (2025, 188) as "conflicting memories along the former Yugoslav-Italian border, where the events throughout the 20th century have left a difficult, contested legacy – a common unifying and at the same time divisive intangible memorial heritage." One interlocutor recalled:

> Those Istrians, when they came, we had some contacts, joined some of our societies, but not at the beginning … later, yes, to meet some girls … I have a friend who married an Italian girl, they put their child in Slovene school, but she always speaks only Italian … the problem is that those who are born here, they don't learn Slovene … they don't want to … that is politics … they are still refugees … when you go to an office to ask for a job, they ask you who you are, and if you say you were born in Istria … you get two more points … they have, still today, an advantage in getting a job … for the church, it was divided, too, they didn't mix with us … in Borgo San Nazario there were pastures … also in private hands, the state took them and gave them some compensation … my kids didn't have contacts … those who came, I think, were not all Italian speaking, but here only Italian … the state gave them help, for school, clothing, house, work … they were sad, because they had to leave everything they had … but they were not rich back home either … they all got jobs and ours didn't … this is still painful … it was the situation, politics, they were not guilty, the people … (Interlocutor 9).

Another interlocutor commented on the time when the new settlers arrived:

> … they didn't welcome them [the refugees, note by author] well, because they felt they would take something from them … those, our *Ištrijani* up in Prosek [probably referring to the land where Borgo San Nazario for the *esuli* was built] … they settled on the land of our ancestors … personally, I have no contact with them … they stay up there, and we are here in the centre of the village … there is a lot … I'm not saying fascist, but they don't like us and we don't like them (Interlocutor 11).

This is the comment of a young woman in her mid-twenties. She also said: "We are a very close community [referring to the Slovene community, note by author] … we like to stick together among ourselves …" (Interlocutor 11). The question here is whether this reflects a form of precautionary behaviour.

The Slovene community often held a strong sense of resentment toward the refugees due to the status they acquired in Italy. They were perceived as privileged – not only by Slovenes but by Italians as well, as already mentioned by another refugee (Interlocutor 6). An interlocutor from the Slovene community explained her father's experience:

> But they also had certain privileges, you know. For example, in my own family there was the case of my father. My father applied to work for the railway … he passed it [competition, note by author], but the scoring system worked in such a way that whoever was a refugee automatically got extra points. And all those who had those extra points stayed in Trieste. And my father, because of that, had to go and work in Milan for eight years … (Interlocutor 7).

It is evident that in everyday life, experiences and perceptions of inequality among people and communities were present and were transmitted to subsequent generations. Another interlocutor from the Slovene community recalled an example:

> I actually remember another case, but not here in the village. It was about another person who said that when she was little … she belonged to the Slovene community … she said that when they were little they didn't live in abundance. And then, seeing someone from outside being given a house, already having a television when you yourself didn't even have one at home, or other things that at the time were considered almost luxuries … of course they experienced that as something negative … But yes, let's say that sometimes people do look down on each other and so on (Interlocutor 12).

A younger interlocutor (born in 1985) also noted the distance:

> I had an experience when I was coaching volleyball … there was the Slovene and another, the Italian girls' team … about 10 or 15 years ago (so around 2010) … most of those girls (Italian), some of them didn't even know we existed … they didn't even know [referring to the *esuli* when arriving to Prosek, note by author] that they had moved to a village where Slovenes lived … this is why I said we don't coexist … they are two different worlds … separate communities … (Interlocutor 10).

She also recalled the division in kindergarten (and later in schools): "It was the same building, the Slovene kindergarten was downstairs, and the Italian on the first floor … we didn't even stay in the courtyard at the same time …" (Interlocutor 10). Another interlocutor, whose mother was from the Italian community, also mentioned the distance:

> My mother, who went to school here in Prosek, attended the Italian section. In the same building there were both the Slovene and the Italian schools, and she told me how she never had any contact with the Slovene section. So, and now we're talking about the late Seventies, roughly, yes, something like that. And at that time … there probably wasn't any contact (Interlocutor 12).

When asked whether Italians knew anything about the stories or experiences of the Slovenes, she replied: "No, and they are not interested in them … you live here fifty years and you could at least learn how to say *dober dan* [referring to the Slovene expression Good day, when you enter a bakery owned by Slovenes] …". She mentioned some collaboration in associations (such as sports); however, she pointed out that a certain distance remains, maybe even caused by Slovenes themselves, who are "establishing a distance again" (Interlocutor 10).

6. Conclusion

As explained by the anthropologist Hrobat Virloget (2025, 190), "this border situation on the micro level … is a mirror of the difficult relationship between Slovenian and Italian national narratives of history on the macro level".

The aim of this paper was to open several research questions that will be explored further. These initial interviews give us a brief insight into the other side of history, one not characterised by political issues (border disputes, opposing political regimes, national conflicts) but by everyday life in the borderland area. The purpose was to consider different aspects, experiences, and perspectives. Our interlocutors come from different ethnic/national backgrounds. Only through such an inclusive approach can a more comprehensive understanding of difficult and traumatic events be achieved. It is important to remember that no person is an island and that we cannot fully understand relations, stories, conflicts, and perceptions if we do not consider the wider context. The world, I believe, is not black and white, and neither are human stories and histories.

Let me conclude this paper with the reflections of interlocutors from the Slovene (one with an Italian mother) and from the Italian community, interviewed by our students:

> It's just that … how should I put it? One truth doesn't cancel out another. Because if you've suffered, that doesn't mean that I haven't suffered too. And admitting certain things doesn't mean that an injustice was or wasn't done to you (Interlocutor 12).

> On the neighbouring street in our village there lived an Italian family. I don't know if they were ***esuli*** or not, but they were my age – the same age as my brother – I think there were three or four children. And we never had any contact with them. If that family had been Slovene, that girl would have been my best friend. I always found that absurd. But yes, circumstances led to us not to socialise. So, I would say that I don't know those stories (Interlocutor 13).

> There are barriers to be knocked down, yes. You have to understand what one half went through and the other half went through as well. Certainly, it wasn't easy to see outsiders arriving and occupying land that had been theirs all along – of their grandparents, parents, families. Definitely, it was difficult, I understand that, however, you have to understand what the others experienced. It's not as if they came here on vacation by choice. Desperation led them to make this choice. They lived in these not very good conditions. They also suffered. In my opinion, you have to try to go deeper on both sides. Try to understand, to open up (Interlocutor 5).

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Interlocutor 2, 1977

Interlocutor 3, 1958
Interlocutor 4, 1951
Interlocutor 5, 1973
Interlocutor 6, 1946
Interlocutor 7, 1956
Interlocutor 8, 1982
Interlocutor 9, 1946
Interlocutor 10, 1985
Interlocutor 11, 2001
Interlocutor 12, 1991
Interlocutor 13, 1993

*All interviewees will remain anonymous. The only piece of information provided is the year of birth.

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Notes

[1] Citation from the book *The Island of Missing Threes* by Elif Shafak (2022, 112) and translation in Slovene from *Otok pogrešanih dreves* (2025, 108).

[2] Ethnography of Silence(s), J6-50198, funded by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency, project leader Katja Hrobat Virloget, PhD.

[3] See also her other works: A Shared but Divisive Borderland Heritage? Silenced Memories, Suppressed Hybrid Ethnic Identities, and Parallel Worlds on the Slovenian-Italian Border (2025); Silences and Divided Memories: The Exodus and Its Legacy in Post-War Istrian Society (2023).

[4] The names of cities, towns, and villages are given in both Slovene and Italian. When a locality lies within the territory of present-day Italy, the Italian name appears first; if it is located in present-day Slovenia, the Slovene name is given first. When citing interviews, only one name is used.

[5] The field researchers were Katja Hrobat Virloget, Petra Kavrečič Božeglav, Martina Tonet, and their students: Kristina Kovačić, Monika Cergolj, Gaja Grižon, and Nikita Kuster. The research took place between 2 and 5 April 2024. Special thanks go to Sonia Covolo Ciuch for kindly suggesting the interviewees for the research. See also Hrobat Virloget (2025).

[6] The territory included the Margraviate of Istria, Gorizia and Gradisca, and the Imperial Free City of Trieste. “The name Littoral was a ‘strategic’ decision made by Vienna in order to emphasise the role of Trieste as a port city. In fact, only a smaller part of the crown land lay by the sea. The name, translated in Slovene as Avstrijsko primorje, acquired the Slovene identification of the region

as Primorska, which still today refers to the western part of Slovenia. On the other hand, the territory in question also acquired the Italian name Venezia Giulia, used after 1863 by Italian nationalists who considered this territory to be historically Italian" (Kavrečič Božeglav 2023, 93–94).

[7] For further information about the Slovene/Yugoslav-Italian border and mutual relations, see Kacin-Wohinz & Pirjevec (2000); Marušič (2004); Pirjevec (2008); Pirjevec, Bajc & Klabjan (2005); Pirjevec, Klabjan, Bajc & Darovec (2006); Slovensko-italijanski odnosi 1880-1956 (2004).

[8] According to data provided by Nevenka Troha, the number of legal and illegal emigrants until 1957 from the Koper/Capodistria district was 25,062. From Zone A of the FTT, which was annexed to Yugoslavia/Slovenia (Miljski hribi/Milje Hills), 2,748 people, mostly Slovenes, left. In total, 27,810 individuals left the area that was annexed to Yugoslavia/Slovenia in October 1954 (Troha 1999, 267).

[9] Because of the border changes in the Upper Adriatic Area from 1866 to 1954 (1975), two national minorities are now recognised: the Slovene one in Italy and the Italian one in Slovenia and Croatia.

[10] This was observed throughout our ethnographic field research and also noted in the paper by Hrobat Virloget (2025, 194).

[11] Prosecco/Prosek and Borgo San Nazario are two parts of the village. The latter is the new area, where housing for Italian refugees was built.

[12] This was observed throughout our ethnographic field research and also noted in the paper by Hrobat Virloget (2025). See also her book Silences and Divided Memories (2023).

[13] The Interlocutors were partly interviewed at the same time.

[14] "The refugees housed in the 'Reception Centres' were entitled to free accommodation, a daily allowance of 158 lire for each family member, medical and pharmaceutical assistance, the distribution of clothing, and, in exceptional cases, additional supplementary aid. However, those who managed to find employment, even if only temporary, were immediately deprived of the regular allowance, and in many cases benefited only from free accommodation" (Orlić 2023, 177).

Slovenci in Italijani, ki živijo na kraškem območju v Italiji: zgodbe, konflikti, nevednost in percepcije

Izvleček

Članek predstavlja raziskavo, izvedeno v okviru projekta Etnografija tišin(e), ki se osredotoča na slovensko/jugoslovansko-italijansko obmejno območje, vzpostavljeno po drugi svetovni vojni. To politično napeto obdobje so zaznamovale ideološke napetosti, državna pogajanja in spreminjajoče se meje, ki so globoko vplivale na lokalne skupnosti. Študija preučuje, kako so posamezniki iz slovenskih in italijanskih skupnosti doživljali, razlagali in se prilagajali tem vsiljenim pogojem sobivanja in delitve. Poudarek je na življenjskih izkušnjah, ki so jih oblikovali migracije, prikrajšanost in spori. Raziskava z uporabo metodologije ustne zgodovine analizira osebne pripovedi, čustva in spomine kot ključne vire etnografskega vpogleda. S poudarjanjem tihih ali marginaliziranih glasov študija prispeva k razumevanju, kako se politične meje internalizirajo in pogajajo v vsakdanjem življenju.

Ključne besede

slovensko/jugoslovansko-italijansko obmejno območje, sporni prostor, spomin, življenjske zgodbe, tišina

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