

85

treatises and  
documents

*Journal of Ethnic Studies*

razprave in  
gradivo

*Revija za narodnostna vprašanja*

December 2020

# Treatises and Documents, Journal of Ethnic Studies

## *Razprave in gradivo, Revija za narodnostna vprašanja*

UDC-UDK 323.15.342.4 (058) ISSN 0354-0286 (Print / Tiskana izdaja) ISSN 1854-5181 (On-line edition / Elektronska izdaja)

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### Published by / *Založil in izdal*

© Inštitut za narodnostna vprašanja / Institute for Ethnic Studies, Erjavčeva 26, SI-1000 Ljubljana  
Tel.: +386 (0)1 200 18 70, fax.: +386 (0)1 25 10 964, website: www.invs.si, e-mail: inv@invs.si

Legal representative / Predstavnica **Sonja Novak Lukanovič**

Co-financed by the Slovenian Research Agency / Revijo sofinancira Javna agencija za raziskovalno dejavnost RS.

The published articles express authors' viewpoints. / Objavljeni prispevki izražajo stališča avtorjev.

### Printed by / *Tiskarna*

**Demat d.o.o**

### Number of copies printed / *Naklada*

250

### Abstracting and indexing services / *Vključitev v baze podatkov*

CSA Sociological Abstracts, CSA Worldwide Political Science Abstract, International Political Science Abstracts (IPSA), FRANCIS, Internationale Bibliographie der Zeitschriften (IBZ), International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS), Scopus.

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Inštitut za narodnostna vprašanja / Institute for Ethnic Studies, Erjavčeva 26, SI-1000 Ljubljana

e-mail: [editortd@guest.arnes.si](mailto:editortd@guest.arnes.si)

Website: <https://rig-td.si>

### The Journal was published as follows / *Revijo smo izdajali:*

1960 – 1986: Razprave in gradivo (Treatises and Documents) ISSN 0034-0251

1987 – 1989: Revija za narodnostna vprašanja – Razprave in gradivo (Journal of Ethnic Studies – Treatises and Documents) ISSN 0353-2720

1990 – : Razprave in gradivo: Revija za narodnostna vprašanja (Treatises and Documents: Journal of Ethnic Studies) ISSN 0354-0286

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Mitja Žagar

## Impacts of the SARS-CoV-2 Virus and Covid-19 Pandemic on Societies, Sciences and Minorities

The Covid-19 pandemic, its impacts and consequences are addressed in the context of acute crises, such as environmental, ecological, climate, economic and social crises caused and/or aggravated by human impact in the Anthropocene, mainly as negative consequences of a capitalist economy and unlimited growth guided by short-term profits. Successful global crisis management, Covid-19 management included, demands coordinated and integrated approaches, strategies and policies that promote sustainable, green, ecologically and socially responsible, balanced, inclusive, solidary and fair societies, economy and development. In particular, the article addresses the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on societies, science(s), minorities and persons belonging to them, focusing on their situations, position, status, rights and protection, inclusion, integration, participation and representation.

**Keywords:** sustainable development, minority rights, protection and participation, inclusion/integration, diversity and crisis management, Covid-19 pandemic.

### Vplivi virusa SARS-CoV-2 in pandemije covid-19 na družbe, znanost in manjšine

*Članek obravnava pandemijo bolezni covid-19 in njene posledice v kontekstu lokalnih, nacionalnih in globalnih kriz, kot so npr. okoljske, klimatske, ekonomske in družbene. Te je v antropocenu v veliki meri povzročil ali vsaj zaostрил človek, predvsem zaradi negativnih posledic kapitalistične ekonomije in razvoja, ki temelji na neomejeni rasti in maksimiranju kratkoročnih profitov. Uspešno upravljanje in razreševanje kriz, vključno s to pandemijo, terja usklajene in integrirane pristope, strategije in politike, ki vzpostavljajo trajnostno, zeleno, ekološko in družbeno odgovorno, uravnoteženo, vključujočo, solidarno in pošteno družbo, ekonomijo in razvoj. Posebej se ukvarja s posledicami in vplivi pandemije bolezni covid-19 na družbe, znanost, manjšine in njihove pripadnike, zlasti na njihove situacije, položaj, status, pravice in varstvo, vključevanje, integracijo, participacijo in predstavljanje v okoljih, kjer živijo.*

**Ključne besede:** trajnostni razvoj, pravice, varstvo in participacija manjšin, vključevanje/integracija, upravljanje različnosti in kriz, pandemija covid-19.

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# 1. The Global Context and Methodological Approach<sup>1</sup>

Everything, or at least almost everything, is linked and connected, interrelated and intertwined in different and complex, often interdependent ways. These connections might be difficult to detect and understand. In our attempts to comprehend, present and interpret complex realities that we observe from our specific perspectives, focusing on a few selected dimensions, contents and characteristics, we tend to simplify, stereotype, organize and classify those realities using invented and agreed upon terminologies, definitions and concepts that we use to describe and define complex phenomena. In this context, in science and research we use standardized measures, research/scholarly approaches and methodologies, which in natural sciences are based upon experiment that should provide a certain, possibly the highest level of objectivity and enable successful repetition(s), standardization and development of research and particularly scientific experiments. Based upon divisions, organization and classifications of sciences, disciplines, scholarly and research fields, we divide known complex phenomena – all discovered, invented, imagined and defined by us – into natural and social ones. Our concepts and definitions, rather imperfect and often static, tend to overlook or ignore that all phenomena, natural and social ones alike, should be observed as complex, dynamic and continuously evolving processes – in our space-time continuum with their spatial, temporal and relational dimensions/characteristics. Often, studying specific phenomena and their selected characteristics at a specific time, focusing on a specific (static) crosscut, we isolate them from other phenomena and environment(s), ignore their temporal dimensions and fail to identify and explain how they are interrelated and interdependent with other phenomena and their environments. Regardless of claims and slogans popular in public discourse and in some political documents that plurality, diversity and complexity of realities and phenomena as well as their links and connections demand multi-, inter-, transdisciplinary and new integral approaches, researchers and scholars – trained mostly disciplinary, depending on traditional disciplinary approaches and methodologies, particularly those developed since the 1950s and focused predominantly on analysis – are ill equipped for such tasks, particularly for studying why, how and when specific phenomena and environments are interrelated, intertwined and interdependent. For this reason, often our findings and knowledge, conclusions and recommendations as well as suggested solutions to studied problems are segmental and limited in their scope. In other words, synthetic and holistic approaches, findings and knowledge are missing. Additionally, scholars and researchers often forget or fail to realize that our terminologies, definitions, concepts, theories (that we build upon them) and our perceptions of realities and phenomena are not realities (themselves), but rather approaches, tools and approximations/simplifications that we use in studying, presenting and interpreting those realities. Being proud

that sciences and research crucially contributed to (particularly technological and organizational) progress, development and standardization in all fields, recognizing that our findings, inventions and concepts have been and are used by all societies and economies, we sometimes feel omnipotent, forget the limits of our knowledge, sciences and research, and tend to believe that sciences and research can answer all questions and resolve all problems. In this context, science(s) might not be all that different from religions and myths. I agree that science(s), research and technology are key factors in resolving current and future problems and crises. However, we should realize and recognize that, directly and indirectly also science(s), research and technology have contributed to those developments, problems and crises and are also responsible for them.

Consequently, presenting and commenting on (some) possible impacts of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and Covid-19 pandemic on contemporary societies, sciences and minorities, we need to address the broader context and historic development(s) as well as their (direct and indirect, sometimes difficult to identify) impacts and consequences. Considering the complexity of those issues, arguments and limited available space, while attempting to ensure clarity and vividness of the story and language as well as to bring the text closer to a wider readership, I decided to write the following paragraphs of this section of the article as a (scholarly and literary) essay.

We can start with a few (simple) and well known facts. Corona viruses, detected and studied by researchers in various host animals, such as bats that serve as their natural reservoir, have been known for decades. It is known that viruses mutate and that they can be transferred to humans in certain circumstances, possibly infecting them and causing severe diseases and health problems. Due to the shrinking traditional natural habitats as a consequence of growing population, invasion of people in new, previously unpopulated areas, urbanization and (aggressive) economic development, the likelihood of close encounters and interaction between people and host animals as well as the possibilities and risks of (trans-species) virus transfer increase. Specific local traditions and ways of life can additionally contribute to such risks. Scholars have predicted outbreaks of diseases, similar to those known in the past. However, their warnings that pandemics are an imminent threat to humanity have not been taken seriously.

The broader context in discussing Covid-19 is very complex. Consequently, the interrelations and interdependence of intertwined phenomena, processes and actors might be less evident. For this reason, at least briefly, we need to address the current global situation, problems and crises. In doing so, we choose the concepts of development as the broadest global context. I focus on the impacts, particularly tragic social and environmental consequences of capitalist economy and development on the current global situation, problems and crises as well as, specifically, on societies, sciences and minorities. Many, including the world-famous climate Swedish teenage activist Greta Thunberg, point that our

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house is on fire and we are doing nothing to put the fire out. The climate crisis is just one of acute problems and sources of the fire that combine and worsen in the recent decades. However, it seems that we choose to ignore these problems and underestimate their effects, impacts and consequences. Or worse, in times of urgent crises, we concentrate on minor issues and tasks, such as vacuuming the carpet and dusting the house while the house is on fire. Evidently, those marginal actions, irrelevant from the perspective (of the severity) of the present situation and negative trends of development, do not address (adequately) the real problems and worsening crises that combine in the global and overall crisis. The news, reports and comments in mass media, particularly those presented by public broadcasters and other independent media that are credible and trustworthy, confirm that our world is on fire. These views and warnings dominate also the expanding social media and networks. However, lacking trustworthy editorial policies and credibility, while attempting to increase their membership and number of users, they are often tempted or used – particularly by different groups and communities of likeminded followers – to spread dubious positions, stories and conspiracy theories.

Considering recent developments, we could say figuratively that a number of fires – such as the climate, environment and ecological problems and crises, including catastrophic fires, such as massive fires, wildfires and forest fires in the Amazon region, Africa, Siberia, Australia or American West Coast, natural and human-caused disasters, mass extinction (of species), economic and social problems and crises in different environments, from local to global ones as well as epidemics and pandemics, most recently Covid-19 – are combining in a deadly blaze, fiery inferno. Following and still believing in the same capitalist ideologies that caused or at least importantly contributed to and aggravated the present problems, crises and the current situation, many choose to ignore all warning signs and turn a blind eye to the severity of the situation and its possible consequences for the future of the humankind as well as for the survival of life on our planet. Considering the human impact on the environment and climate, socially responsible scholars, researchers and experts, public opinion leaders and activists, several (new) social movements and, hopefully, a growing share of the public, including politicians, agree that to a large extent we are responsible for the present state and the future of our world. The excuse that one day we will all be dead and should thus focus on our present moment and the pleasures and gains following our short term interests and profits, is immoral and socially unacceptable, as also Pope Francis points out. Consequently, we should conclude that it is our human and moral imperative and duty to elaborate a new, very different concept of development that will replace the current one, based on capitalist ideology of permanent and unlimited growth. The new concept of development should be sustainable, balanced, green, socially responsible and fair, based upon human rights and freedoms, principles of equality, justice and



solidarity, an inclusive development. Such sustainable development is possible only if it is humane and as such human, society, ecology, nature, environment and climate friendly. Already at that point in time we produce enough and have accumulated sufficient wealth that with a just and solidary distribution we could immediately eliminate famine, malnutrition and poverty in the world. Additionally, the existing capacities and wealth, current and expected scientific and technological advancements, progress and developments, if properly directed, (re)distributed and applied, should enable successful addressing, managing and resolving of listed and other problems and crises as well as the global crisis. However, currently the predictions and expectations for future developments might not be very optimistic, if one considers recent historic developments and current social situations in diverse social environments, several divisions in societies, the rise of populism, nationalisms, racism and other exclusive ideologies. Particularly, we should expect (and, possibly, fear) the opposition of the current dominant elites, particularly proponents of the omnipotent monopoly of capitalism, capitalist ideology and the current concept of capitalist development of permanent growth that control or, at least, attempt to determine and control everything. Surely, the current elites will oppose fiercely, use all their resources and do everything possible to prevent the introduction and implementation of the alternative model of sustainable development that will reduce and, possibly, eliminate their monopolies and profits as well as their current social roles. Consequently, I expect that developing and implementing an alternative concept of sustainable development will be everything but easy.

Still, I believe we should not give up. There is no viable alternative. Consequently, aware individuals, particularly public opinion leaders and activists, scholars, researchers and experts, associations, social movements and public acting as active citizens in democratic societies should do everything possible to inform and educate the public. We should join forces with training, educational and other public institutions and systems, socially aware and responsible private and public organizations, institutions and companies as well as media, particularly the public and independent socially responsible ones. Particularly, we need to inform the broadest public, hopefully all inhabitants in our social environments, about the recent historic developments and current situation(s), human and other impacts, their negative environmental, climate and social impacts and consequences that resulted in the aggravation of problems and crises, careless and irresponsible use of natural and social resources, unequal and unjust distribution of wealth. Whenever possible, we should indicate possible solutions to these problems and crises. In my view it is very important that in the world that is currently dominated by capitalist ideology and economy promoting consumerism and the (eternal and unlimited) growth-based development the public realizes that to a large extent the existing situation, problems, critical changes and crises, including the climate ones and the global crisis, are consequences of

human impact, particularly the current concept of capitalist development and ideology of unlimited eternal growth, claimed to be a basic human necessity and need, natural and normal condition. There is no proof that growth, particularly continuous and unlimited growth, is a natural and normal condition. To the contrary, even children when they become aware of existing limits in their surrounding realize that unlimited and eternal growth can be a problematic and possibly destructive concept. However, the current capitalist ideology and practice have failed to recognize and respect the limits of growth determined by the very nature and characteristics of environments, particularly available natural and other resources, climate, ecology and society. In the past five decades, everything was and still is dominated by global financial capitalism with its logic of short-term profits determined by stock exchanges, more precisely, at least recently, by computer algorithms built upon guesses and expectations of future profits and yields. With the invention and development of new financial concepts and products, such as options and financial derivatives, the stock exchanges can trade with everything. In the pursue of ever increasing profit(s) and wealth, regardless of possible ethical/moral reservations and implications, stock exchanges attempt to financially evaluate, monetarize, sell and buy everything, including vital resources, such as drinking water or water for irrigation, expectations of survival and extinction of particular endangered species, human resources as well as their organs or genomes, etc. Betting on expected future profits and yields, the modus operandi of stock exchanges resembles pyramid games or Ponzi schemes considered illegal by most legal systems. To make the situation in particular environments and globally worse, while using public systems, services and infrastructure as well as natural resources in different environments, several economic actors, particularly global companies, often avoid paying adequate and fair taxes. Attempting to reduce their costs and taxes and maximize their profits, they move their production and other processes or (at least) their profits to environments with looser and less strict environmental and ecological legislation, lower taxes, salaries and labour protection standards. This way they avoid paying the actual and fair price for their economic activities and for environmental, ecological, natural and social resources that they use as well as fair fines and damages for the negative environmental, ecological, economic and social impacts of their economic activities. They claim that they are responsible only to their shareholders that expect profits.

Hopefully, before it is too late, a global consensus will be reached that the current economy and concept of development based on unlimited growth need to be replaced by sustainable green, responsible and inclusive economy and development built upon principles of equal rights and duties, justice, equality, inclusion and integration, solidarity and public good (e.g. Piciga et al. 2016). Sadly, at this point there is almost no coherent and concerted global effort and strategy that would address the partial crises mentioned above as well as the global crisis

they combine in. Partial crisis strategies and actions, even if they were successful in addressing particular crises, could not successfully manage and resolve the global crises. The global crisis is not just a simple sum of all different simultaneous, interrelated and interdependent particular problems and crises. Rather, it is a new quality that requires new and different global, holistic and integrated approaches, strategies, policies and (programs of) actions that far surpass a sum of simultaneous individual segmental approaches, strategies, policies and actions designed to address particular crises. As much as analyses, analytical case and comparative studies of different phenomena or their segments, including all crises, are important for our understanding of those phenomena, their characteristics, interactions and interdependence, they are limited in their scope and inadequate for the main task. In order to address particular crises and the global one successfully, we need holistic approaches and synthesis, a common ground and framework (possibly a grand theory and overarching mobilizing ideology) that could bring together all relevant actors with their segmental strategies in a concerted effort to develop and implement common integrated strategies addressing the global crisis. It is essential that all necessary and integral, interrelated and interdependent components of partial and global strategies, policies and actions are constantly coordinated, evaluated and, based upon results of a permanent evaluation, updated and developed.

Although this article focuses on the SARS-CoV-2 virus and the Covid-19 pandemic and (at least some of) their impacts on contemporary societies, sciences and diverse minorities, particularly national, ethnic, religious and linguistic ones, it also considers the global dimensions and framework, particularly the global crisis briefly described above. As already stressed, we should be aware that the global crisis is not just a simple sum of partial and particular crises, but a new quality resulting from different combinations, interrelations and interdependence of those partial and particular problems and crises. Consequently, Covid-19 crisis strategy should be considered a relevant and interdependent segment of the common integral crisis strategies. In this context, the article examines how the Covid-19 pandemic, combined with other crises and problems, could impact the inclusion, integration and participation of diverse (social) minorities, particularly national and ethnic minorities and persons belonging to them.

With regard to the methodological approaches and research methodologies that could be applied in studying those issues, it is important to note that the existing ones in social sciences and humanities might not be adequate. I would argue that in addition to and in combination with traditional disciplinary and predominantly analytical research approaches, quantitative and qualitative methods, new approaches and methods are needed, particularly synthetic ones. No doubt, analytical approaches and methods are needed and used for gathering, organizing, presenting and interpreting the necessary information, data, research findings and insights on specific contexts, phenomena and situations;

usually they focus on specific segments and dimensions of studied contexts, phenomena, relations and situations. Simultaneously, synthetic approaches that enable holistic synthesis are crucial for studying, understanding and interpreting the overall context and situations, complex phenomena that need to be observed and interpreted as interrelated, interwoven and interdependent processes and trends of development. In this context, adequately combining analysis and synthesis methodological pluralism that combines quantitative and qualitative methods and techniques of different sciences and disciplines, such as case and comparative studies as well as multi-, inter- and trans-disciplinary approaches, proves particularly useful (della Porta & Keating 2008). In the past decades, social sciences and humanities have focused on analytical approaches, methods and techniques, resulting in a huge volume of respective methodological scholarly publications. Simultaneously, synthetic approaches and methods needed for a good quality synthesis have been neglected and have not been developed. Additionally, researchers and scholars have often not been trained adequately and relevant publications are missing. If philosophers and lawyers receive some training in deduction, induction, logical, analytical and synthetic reasoning, the others seldom study classic philosophy, philosophy and theory of state and law (particularly ancient Greek, Roman, Italian, French, English and classic German philosophers and social theorists)<sup>2</sup> that contributed to the development of those methods. Consequently, to a large extent the global picture and understanding of the overall situation and trends have been blurred or even missed. In research, particularly in the presentation and interpretation of research results, findings and conclusions, we need to consider all limitations and problems, particularly those resulting from applied research approaches and methods. Additionally, we should consider the problem of objectivity in social research elaborated by Myrdal (1969) decades ago. We should be aware that values, bias and ideologies that influence sources of information as well as values, bias and ideologies of involved researchers influence, direct and condition all research, presentations, explanations and interpretations. For this reason, it is important that researchers clearly present their positionality, topics, scope and goals of their research, methodological approaches and research methods as well as all limitations and problems of their studies they are aware of (Žagar 2011–2014).

In our preliminary research studying the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on minorities and persons belonging to them, focusing on their inclusion, integration and participation in respective social environments, initially, news, media reports and commentaries published in and broadcasted by selected media, particularly the relevant global, regional and national, public and private broadcasters, news agencies and their internet services, were collected, reviewed and analysed. Additionally, we started to collect, review and organize available<sup>3</sup> public documents of different authorities and institutions, such as legislation, local and regional regulations, policies, policy and strategy papers and state-

ments of authorities that we considered relevant from Slovenia, neighbouring countries and some selected countries (e.g. USA, UK, Sweden, New Zealand, etc.). We plan to analyse them and those collected in the future in more detail in the following phases of research. In addition to the mentioned sources designed as a comparative study, our media analysis will also include selected national and local newspapers and social media, such as Twitter and Facebook, focusing particularly on contributions, posts and comments that we (will) consider relevant. In selecting the mentioned sources and in determining their relevance, we considered numerous factors and circumstances, such as their situation and social role, reach/audience/readership, status, independence, orientation, declared values and ideology, their editorial policies and practices, the ideologies and agendas of their owners and/or authorities that control them and/or can direct them. For example, editorial policies of state-controlled media tend to avoid topics that might be unpleasant for the authorities, while private media often follow specific interests and ideologies of their owners. We are aware that such practices reduce objectivity and reliability of those sources.

Our research on the Covid-19 pandemic and its impacts on the situation, position, inclusion, integration and participation of national/ethnic minorities in Slovenia, neighbouring countries, Central and South-Eastern Europe in the time of the pandemic, considering the circumstances, public health and protective measures introduced in specific environments, was rather limited, mostly utilizing our regular communication and rather informal qualitative approaches and methods. However, we still made a few trips to regions in Slovenia and neighbouring countries where minorities live in the spring and in the summer of 2020. What made our (field) research in such circumstances possible were years, in several cases decades of intense communication, relationships, trust and cooperation in research and other activities with key individuals, particularly persons belonging to the respective minorities, representatives of minority associations, organizations and institutions, researchers and scholars in the mentioned countries and regions as well as with the relevant institutions, organizations and associations, including research and higher education institutions and their formal and informal networks, governmental offices and minority councils. Since direct person to person meetings and communication were limited, we continued our communication, contacts and cooperation in the form of phone and internet communication, using e-mail and skype, occasionally also social media. In addition to our ongoing communication with persons belonging to different minorities in Slovenia and neighbouring countries, we are planning field research when travel and field work are possible that will include (personal) observation (with and without own participation), interviews as well as other qualitative and quantitative research methods and techniques.

## 2. The SARS-CoV-2 Virus, Covid-19 Pandemic, (Contemporary) Societies and Science(s)

In recent months, the SARS-CoV-2 virus and the Covid-19 pandemic have changed our reality, lives and societies. Challenges of dealing with, successfully managing and overcoming the Covid-19 pandemic seem to be new for contemporary societies, particularly considering the global spread, scope and consequences of the pandemic, unprecedented since the 1918 Spanish flu (Spinney 2017). As a threat to humanity and contemporary societies, at least to a certain extent, we can compare the current pandemic with severe historic epidemics and pandemics, like the plague, cholera, smallpox, tuberculosis and the already mentioned Spanish flu that decimated populations of certain areas and/or killed huge numbers of people globally at different historic times. However, each of the listed cases is different and was happening in a specific historic and social setting. The world in 2020 is very different from the world a century ago, and the differences increase even more if we compare it with the world in the time of pandemics in the previous centuries. Among the most important historic factors, developments and transformations that characterize the evolution of societies in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries we need to consider intense and ever faster scientific, technological, social and economic progress and development. If the twentieth century could be described as the time of competing ideologies, military alliances and blocks, in the beginning of the twenty-first century ideologies of capitalism and consumerism dominate everything.

The enormous volume of news, information, press reports and comments on the Covid-19 pandemic and its social, economic and cultural consequences broadcasted and published daily by the main global, regional and national media in the past months indicates their social relevance (e.g. 24ur.com, BBC News, CNBC News, DW, MMC RTV SLO).<sup>4</sup> It should not be surprising that in the past year Covid-19 related topics dominate public discourses in almost all environments. Simultaneously, these contents mushroom in social media as central topics of several posts and discussions promoting different attitudes and positions of authors and participants. Usually lacking trustworthy and objective editorial policies and standards, social media in addition to relevant and substantiated information and scientifically verified facts present, spread and promote also diverse fake news and facts, guesses and conspiracy theories that frequently reject and deny science and scientifically verified facts. Unfortunately, in my view, some politicians and leaders, such as US president Donald Trump, Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro and Ukrainian president Alexander Lukashenko,<sup>5</sup> public personalities and social media influencers participate in spreading and promoting fake news, false facts and conspiracy theories as well as in denying research and scholarly findings, thereby confusing, polarizing and dividing the public as well as contributing to the problems related to Covid-19. Differently, understand-

ding the importance of timely, accurate and relevant information on the SARS-CoV-2 virus and effective medical treatment(s) for the successful management of the pandemic and wellbeing of patients, medical professionals working daily with their patients and observing the results, problems and successes of treatments and medicaments as well as researchers and scholars, particularly those in the fields of medicine, natural sciences and technology based upon preliminary results of their intensified research, try to communicate their observations and findings to fellow medical workers, other researchers and the interested public through all possible channels as soon as possible. Consequently, in the past year they produced and published a huge number of research and professional reports, papers, scholarly articles and publications on the SARS-CoV-2 virus and the Covid-19 pandemic, the development of effective vaccines, drugs, and treatment (e.g. Nature Research, Science, The Lancet).<sup>6</sup> With more attention paid to these issues at most levels and increased funding, currently particularly in natural sciences and medicine, the related research and research production are likely to grow further, hopefully and at least in longer terms in all fields and disciplines.

In any case, the amount and scope of relevant information, data and facts about the SARS-CoV-2 virus and the Covid-19 pandemic are enormous and are growing daily almost exponentially in an unprecedented way. It is extremely difficult even to keep track of everything, while it seems almost impossible to organize, review, analyse and interpret the available information, data, facts and (research) findings in a short time-span. Consequently, we can expect that relevant scholarly publications, particularly in social sciences and humanities, will continue to appear in years and decades to come. However, as mentioned, already available research and publications, particularly in natural sciences and medicine, present important initial findings that continue to be complemented, improved and developed by new findings about the virus and pandemic. We all, including medical professionals, epidemiologists and (national) epidemiological institutes are learning in the process. In such process, different, possibly opposing views and suggested approaches, strategies, policies, measures and recommendations are likely. Nevertheless, defining the new normal, generally the medical profession agreed that the most effective (preventive) measures during the current pandemic should be social distancing, wearing face masks/coverings, personal and public hygiene, particularly hand, cough and sneeze hygiene, robust testing available to all, promotion of declared (obligatory) measures and recommendations as well as self-isolation and quarantine when there is a high risk of (possible) infection or when infection is confirmed by the test. Currently, the central attention of researchers, pharmaceutical industry and governments is paid to the development of effective vaccines that are hoped to end or at least neutralize the Covid-19 pandemic. Regardless of some breakthroughs and positive results in the testing of already developed vaccines in different countries, it is still uncertain how effective they will be in protecting from the infection. In any

case, we could expect that broad and global vaccination will not start before mid-2021 or 2022. Consequently, it is even more important that researchers and medical professionals, being aware of the severity of the illness, constantly develop protocols, medication and medical treatments, particularly those for seriously ill patients in intensive care units.

In this context, we shall stress the importance of public awareness and consensus that contemporary societies and states urgently have to introduce, fund and implement policies and measures as well as establish, fund and staff the necessary institutions and systems needed to control, limit and manage the current pandemic. Simultaneously, they need to develop, fund and implement robust and effective strategies, policies, systems, mechanisms, institutions and measures of crisis management that could prevent, control, limit and manage such pandemics and crises in the future.

The initial findings of our preliminary comparative research, based upon the analysis of collected media reports and public documents as well as our communication with members of different minorities in Slovenia and neighbouring countries, show that globally, at least in the first phase, tolerant, open, inclusive and well integrated environments, societies and states, built upon principles of solidarity, equality and justice, are better able to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic and various crises that it provoked or worsened. However, it could be argued that simultaneously some more closed, possibly even isolated environments and societies, particularly those with tighter control over media, social media/networks, internet and civil society, usually associated with more authoritarian leadership and systems could be equally or even more successful in introducing necessary measures and limiting (the spread of) the pandemic. In any case, adequate economic and social resources and capacities, particularly developed functional, well-equipped, trained and robust public health systems accessible to the broadest population, other robust and functional public services and systems, such as education, welfare, social security and public media, improve their capacity. Their capacity to prevent crises and/or manage them successfully further increases when they promote communication and cooperation with other environments, including international communication and cooperation. As a rule, such environments are more likely to consider the findings and warnings of researchers and scholars and follow their recommendations. Consequently, we could say that in managing the pandemic more successful seem to be the authorities and countries that

[a]s soon as possible [...] implemented general and specific health recommendations, particularly social distancing, wearing face masks, public and personal hygiene; when needed they restricted travel and free movement of people in, from and to the most affected towns, cities and regions or in the whole country to reduce and control the spread of Covid-19; when necessary they closed international borders and introduced quarantine; stressing the importance of solidarity, individual and social responsibility



they managed to agree upon, introduce and implement crisis management strategies, policies and measures aimed to assist the economy and different spheres of society; they developed specific strategies and measures that improve their capacity to overcome the crisis, reduce joblessness and increase job, individual and social security (Žagar, forthcoming).

Broad public awareness and social consensus on proclaimed crisis management are important in this context, as everybody needs to contribute by following preventive measures and recommendations of authorities and medical profession. Although usually dialogue and consensus building take time and, consequently, are not considered the most effective approaches to and tools of crisis management, in inclusive environments, including democratic ones with traditions of dialogue and consensus building, they can be done rather quickly and effectively. Effective and popular leadership can help in this process by focusing the public discourse, promoting the public awareness of the problem and by assisting coordination and cooperation needed to act immediately and effectively upon adopted crisis strategies, policies and operational plans.

Among the successful states in the first phase of the Covid-19 pandemic, I would single out New Zealand. Although integrated in the international community, as geographically (and otherwise) isolated, relatively sparsely populated islands in the northern Pacific, New Zealand might be a specific case with several comparative advantages in fighting the pandemics in comparison with other, geographically less isolated states. However, experiences during previous crises, such as the terrorist attack known as Christchurch mosque shootings during Friday Prayer on 15 March 2019 and its aftermath as well as the Whakari/White Island volcanic eruption on 9 December 2019 show that the current Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, as an excellent crisis communicator, and her government are very capable crisis managers. It seems that New Zealand and its government, in cooperation with all democratic institutions, public services and the public, did everything right and successfully handled the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic and crisis. The authorities there reacted immediately and responsibly, provided necessary, clear and scientifically founded information as the basis for a broad public discussion, mobilization of people and building of social consensus, introduced strict public health and preventive measures, including lockdown and closure of borders. Their measures and recommendations, accepted and followed by a large majority of the population, proved very successful in controlling and limiting the spread of disease. A typical example of the openness, inclusiveness and tolerance of New Zealand society was the consensual agreement to postpone the scheduled parliamentary election for a month, based upon the proposal of the opposition that explained they would not be able to prepare and lead their electoral campaign properly. Regardless of their record approval ratings and popularity because of the successful handling of the pandemic and crisis, the government immediately agreed with and accep-

ted the proposal and reasoning of the opposition. In the 2020 general election, Jacinda Ardern led the Labour Party to a landslide victory, winning an overall majority in the House of Representatives. The voters showed their support for the government and its work, particularly for its handling of the Covid-19 pandemic and crisis (e.g. BBC, DW).

At least initially, some countries and their authorities (e.g. US, Brazil, Mexico, India, etc.) ignored or underestimated the severity and scope of the Covid-19 pandemic and its consequences, possibly even denied the very existence of the pandemic or compared it to annual flu epidemics and similar respiratory viral diseases. Some authorities at national and regional/provincial level (e.g. UK, initially considering the strategy of herd immunity; Italy, Spain, etc.) underestimated the urgency to take the necessary measures and steps immediately. Consequently, they failed to implement the recommendations of the medical and science professionals, such as social distancing, personal and public hygiene, quarantine, lockdown of economy, cultural and public life in time. Media reports and our preliminary findings confirm that those countries have been less successful in managing the first wave of Covid-19. When they started to implement measures to contain the pandemic, the situation in those environments had already deteriorated, resulting in severe stresses and overload of their health systems, particularly intensive care units, as well as higher numbers and shares of patients with severe symptoms and pandemic related deaths in their population (e.g. BBC, CNBC, DW).

A specific case was Sweden. Swedish authorities, following the opinions and advices of their chief epidemiologist, opted for the strategy of herd immunity and did not decide for lockdown. However, simultaneously they promoted solidarity, personal and social responsibility of individuals in protecting the well-being of the vulnerable, particularly the elderly, and called on people to follow preventive measures. In comparison, based upon media reports, considering the number of related deaths this strategy seemed to be less effective than strategies of energetic immediate actions that in addition to personal preventive measures and some restrictions included lockdown when necessary (e.g. BBC, DW).

As mentioned, in most environments the Covid-19 pandemic provoked diverse crises and/or worsened the existing ones. At this point, we cannot predict all their possible social, economic, political and cultural consequences that will be exceptional challenges for contemporary societies and authorities at all levels. However, we can expect that they will test the capacity, adequacy and robustness of public and private institutions, services, systems and (nation)states worldwide. So far, recent developments, reactions, responses and functioning of states and their authorities, public and private organizations and institutions, systems and services showed that they have been ill prepared to deal with such crises. Obviously, the states, but also international organizations and forums, including the UN, were unprepared and failed to take seriously the warnings of medical

and science professions who warned against global pandemics and their possible negative consequences and impacts. Regardless of warnings and experiences from different epidemics (e.g. Ebola, SARS, bird-flu) in the past, even the World Health Organization (WHO) expected to coordinate the global management and containment of pandemics initially failed to present a coherent global strategy, established and operational international procedures, recommendations, criteria and protocols. To address these issues, every environment, authorities at all levels, states and the international community, particularly international, continental and regional organizations as well as public/state and private institutions and organizations, need to develop, implement and constantly update coherent, holistic, concerted, operational and effective approaches, preventive and crisis strategies, policies and measures, including the necessary medical and public health protocols. In this context, we hope that science(s) and scientists will play important roles. Although in the time of strengthening nationalism(s), populism and isolationism such calls for increased international cooperation, multilateralism and strengthened international structures might seem utopian and such developments unlikely, I believe that we have no viable alternative that would ensure successful management of and fighting with global pandemics. Consequently, all socially responsible actors, particularly scholars, are urged to present and explain to the public why such concerted global cooperation is necessary for the successful management of global crises.

Just like all spheres of life, research and science(s) are and will be impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic and its consequences. Although in this context we usually consider research, science(s), researchers and scholars key (f)actors that can contribute to the successful management and resolving of the mentioned problems and crises, we should realize that they are also a part of these problems and crises or, at least, that they might have contributed to them. Particularly, we shall question their independence and objectivity. Namely, at least to some extent research and science, including publically funded research, research and innovation strategies and policies are influenced and directed by the current authorities and elites that determine funding. When funded by private funding, particularly powerful industries, corporations and capital, we could say that research, science(s), researchers and scholars are in their service, consequently also responsible for outcomes and consequences. As already presented, it is unlikely that the current authorities and (ever richer and more powerful) elites will be willing to give up their privileges, the current behaviour patterns and power relations. We can expect that they will reject the conclusions and recommendations based upon our research in the past decades (e.g. Medvešek & Novak Lukanič 2020; Žagar 2010; Žagar 2020; Žagar, forthcoming) that in crises, including pandemics, societies and states can improve their stability, robustness and ability to survive and overcome those crises by strengthening cohesion, compassion, mutual responsibility and solidarity as well as public systems and institutions,

particularly public health systems, civil security (services and organizations), nongovernmental organizations and civil initiatives, particularly those stimulating and promoting equal cooperation, neighbourhood assistance, mutual responsibility and public good. Comparing the power and influence of economy, particularly main and most influential economic players (individuals and corporations) with the power and influence of states and authorities, we could conclude that states are no longer the most powerful global actors. Just like research, science, researchers and scholars, also states seem to be in service of economic elites that in crisis situations demand state intervention and aid, as the bailout of banks and other financial institutions during the last financial crisis showed. Consequently, it is not surprising that to a large extent, (private) capital dictates also public research and science funding and policies, thereby strengthening the dependence of research and science, including public research and higher education institutions.

This, however, does not reduce the responsibility, particularly moral and social responsibility of research, science(s), researchers and scholars for their work, findings and results as well as their outcomes and consequences. With regard to the Covid-19 pandemic, science(s) should study it, its consequences and impacts comprehensively, from all angles and considering all dimensions, interactions and interdependences. Science has known corona viruses and their potential dangers in case of possible transfers from their traditional hosts, such as bats, to humans for decades. However, due to the lack of funding and consequently interest, the related research was not intensified and consequently potential medications and vaccines were not developed proactively. Profits, particularly expectations of future profits, dictate private and public funding of research and science. Consequently, it should not be surprising that the pharmaceutical industry shows no interest in developing treatments, medications, including new, much needed antibiotics that would be effective against antibiotic-resistant bacteria and vaccines that do not bring profits or only bring small, marginal profits.

It is not by chance that a new, current geological epoch is called the Anthropocene, the Human Epoch. Considering other factors that have contributed to environmental and climate change, evolution of life and survival of species in the past, special attention needs to be paid to studying the human impact on the environment, climate, life, including wildlife, plants, fungi, bacteria and viruses as well species extinction. Consequences of the human impact, particularly the (exponent) growth of population, exploitation of environment and nature, capitalist economy and development of (unlimited) growth in the past century are predominantly negative from the perspective of environment, climate, other living species and their survival. I would add that the consequences of the human impact prove negative also for humankind and contemporary societies, considering all problems and crises, ever growing social and economic inequalities, exclusion of large sections of the population, populism, exclusive nationalism

and xenophobia. It seems that humans fail to recognize that we are an integral part of (living) nature, interrelated, intertwined and interdependent with our environment, climate and nature. Additionally, as already mentioned, we should be aware that research, science(s) and technology, particularly when in service of the ruling elites, contribute to human impact(s), both in positive and negative ways. In studying those impacts all sciences, disciplines and fields should participate and cooperate, when possible utilizing inter-, trans- and multidisciplinary (research) approaches and methods as well as methodological pluralism that combined can offer more comprehensive and holistic research and understanding of the studied phenomena. Simultaneously, ethical scientists should present and explain to the public that, often, contemporary science and technology rather than serving the people and humankind are in service of the capital and profit(s). Being aware of the responsibility and potentials of research, science(s), researchers, scholars and technology, considering the ethics and the precautionary principle followed in medicine, they should consider the complexity, interrelations and interdependence of the environment and life in it, promote and contribute to sustainable inclusive green economy and balanced development, built upon principles of equal rights, duties and responsibility, justice, equality, inclusion and integration, solidarity and public good. In this context, social sciences and humanities should point out that in order to achieve this goal, in addition to analytical and empirical approaches and analyses, disciplinary and interdisciplinary research that focus on specific phenomena and segments of society providing the necessary information, empirical data and insights, we also need holistic and synthetic approaches and synthesis that take into account and present the whole picture, interconnections and interactions as well as interdependence; such approaches are necessary to develop alternative, balanced and sustainable solutions and strategies.

### **3. The SARS-CoV-2 Virus, Covid-19 Pandemic and Their Impact on Minorities**

Everybody exposed to the SARS-CoV-2 virus risks being infected and the risk increases if the preventive measures and recommendations mentioned above are not followed. However, the first analyses of the situations and developments in different countries, such as US, Brazil, Mexico, India, UK, and South Africa, show that in comparison with the rest of the population, the poor, less educated and marginalised, diverse (social) minorities, including ethnic, racial and religious ones as well as persons belonging to them, are two to four times more likely to be affected by Covid-19, considering the numbers and (relative) shares of patients in intensive care units, deaths, increased unemployment, poverty and social exclusion (BBC, DW). These analyses are consistent with our findings regarding the impact(s) on ethnic and other minorities of diverse crises, escalated divisi-

ons and conflicts, such as the Yugoslav crisis (in the late 1980s and early 1990s), Global War on Terrorism (since 2001) and European migrant/refugee crisis (2015–2016) (Grafenauer & Munda Hirnök 2016; Medvešek & Pirc 2015; Žagar 2010). Particularly the implementation of predominantly restrictive and repressive approaches, strategies, policies and measures, particularly those limiting and/or suspending certain human rights and basic freedoms introduced by authorities at all levels to prevent crisis, instability and violence, usually failed to produce the desired and proclaimed goals and results. Several limitations and suspensions of human rights, such as increased security measures, including stricter, often excessive control(s) and security in public spaces and transportation, comprehensive excessive control of electronic and other communication that authorities declared in the name of security as partial and temporary at the time of their introduction, have become permanent and contributed to the erosion of democracy.

As mentioned, the Covid-19 pandemic escalated different crises that had already existed and caused several new ones in specific environments and globally. From the perspective of marginalized and minority communities and persons belonging to them, it is particularly important to establish how these crises, limiting and repressive approaches, policies and measures and their implementation in practice affect their social situation and status, inclusion/exclusion, integration and participation in all spheres of life. Considering the past research at the IES (e.g. Medvešek & Bešter 2010; Medvešek & Novak Lukanovič 2020; Žagar 2009), we hypothesize that the Covid-19 pandemic and crises further increase their exclusion and, consequently, have a negative impact on their participation.

Thematically, our research focuses on the situations and social processes caused and/or determined by the Covid-19 pandemic and related crises that can have an impact on effective and successful regulation and management of socially relevant diversities and asymmetries, especially ethnic, cultural, linguistic, religious and identity related ones. In this context, we study various impacts and consequences of these crises on (social) minorities, particularly national and ethnic ones, including migrants. Studying majority-minority and minority-minority relations and situation(s) in selected, internally diverse environments and globally, special attention is paid to the specific situations, status, position, inclusion/exclusion, integration, protection and (special) rights of diverse minorities, particularly ethnic/national minorities in Slovenia, neighbouring countries, Central and South-Eastern Europe. Comparing these countries, we have to stress that regardless of some similarities, the situation, status and problems of diverse minorities and persons belonging to them, their exclusion and/or inclusion, integration and participation as well as the presence and incidents of racism, xenophobia and aggressive exclusive nationalism are specific and different in every country. These specifics and differences result, among others, from specific histories and historic developments, their perceptions and interpretati-

ons, different ways of life and traditions, specific identities and socially relevant diversities that exist in respective environments, cultures, values and ethics, current economic, political, social and cultural situations, developments and future expectations as well as diverse ideologies and policies. Considering the impacts and consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic and crises related to it in different environments, we can expect that they will differ, often substantially in the following years, possibly decades. Particularly, they will depend on the specific perceptions and attitudes of the authorities and population regarding Covid-19, on chosen and implemented approaches, measures, reactions and responses, policies and strategies of authorities in respective environments as well as on their success in achieving the stated short, medium and long-term goals.

Presenting and commenting on our preliminary Covid-19 research, based upon findings of our research in the region in the past decades (Bašič et al. 2018; Žagar 2010, 2017), we should stress that the situation is specific and different not only in every country, but at least to a certain extent also in every region of the respective country where minorities live. Additionally, the situations, status and position(s) of various minorities in a respective region might differ. Moreover, each minority differs from every other minority community. We could say that each minority is a case *sui generis*. Simultaneously, diversities, different interests and asymmetries exist within every minority community. Internal pluralities, diversities and asymmetries are reflected in a number of specific situations, internal relations, organization and power distribution, diverse institutions, structures and associations of distinct communities as well as in the existence of several different, sometimes conflicting views, positions and interests. Consequently, we should be very careful in presenting and interpreting different situations, while any generalization of findings, even for a specific minority community, might be very problematic. However, already a quick initial review of media news, reports and commentaries as well as data and statements collected by our research confirm that usually those who are poorer, deprived, excluded and marginalized within respective communities, including diverse minorities, are more affected by various crises. The members of diverse national/ethnic minorities in Slovenia and neighbouring countries in our communication expressed that during the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly during the lockdown in their respective environments, they felt that they were even more isolated than the rest of the population. Their views and perceptions confirm our findings and a general conclusion that poverty, isolation and social exclusion, particularly marginalization, have an impact on the status, situation and position of individuals and distinct communities in contemporary societies. More specifically, in case of diverse minorities, including national, ethnic, linguistic and cultural minorities and persons belonging to them, they have a negative impact on their inclusion and integration as well as on their political, social, economic and cultural participation in their respective social environments.

Presenting research, results and findings, for the reasons mentioned above, respecting research ethics and our social responsibility, all researchers and scholars should list, describe, present and explain all limitations and problems regarding theoretical foundations, frameworks, concepts and (working) definitions, applied research approaches and methods, collection, organization and analysis of data and information that can be predicted and we are aware of. Particularly, we need to be cautious in the formulation and interpretation of research results and findings. In this context, in order to ensure objectivity of our research, as already pointed out by Myrdal (1969), we have to present and carefully explain our positions, values, focus and main goals. Consequently, we need to point that we are aware that already the very selection of included media, analysed materials and their contents determines the scope, orientation and results of our research, particularly our analysis and findings. Regarding the formulation and interpretation of our research findings, conclusions and recommendations, we state that our position, (social) values, main goals and intentions are to improve the position, (special) rights and protection, inclusion, integration and participation of national, ethnic, linguistic, cultural, religious and other (social) minorities and persons belonging to them.

Our communication with members of various minorities in Slovenia and neighbouring countries showed that most minority communities, especially traditional national minorities, quickly and innovatively adapted to changing situations and circumstances with their civic, economic, educational and cultural activities during the Covid-19 pandemic. Often, they concluded that the pandemic accelerated the digitalization of their communication and activities, particularly in the fields of culture, education, religion, economy, politics and social life in general. We could assume that public life of those national minorities was transformed as much, if not more, as the life of the rest of population in respective countries, the region, Europe and globally. However, all their experiences with digitalization were not positive. The changed situation and digitalization within those minority communities emphasized existing internal differences and stratifications. Particularly, the digitalization increased marginalization and exclusion of those that did not have the access to digital technologies and internet. Such problems were mentioned particularly in connection with education and distant learning, working from home as well as participation in cultural events. Especially affected were some pupils and students, particularly those from larger and/or less affluent families that did not have computers for every child who had to participate in distant learning as well as the elderly who did not have the access to adequate computers, phones, software and/or internet connection. Often the elderly and the parents expected to help their children in distant learning as well as some pupils and students lacked the knowledge and skills necessary to use computers, phones, software and internet successfully.



As mentioned, the more marginalized and poorer a minority and its members, the more they can be affected by crises, including the current pandemic. The specific situation, status and position of a respective minority and persons belonging to it influence their perceptions of situations and problems they experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic and particularly during the lockdown. The Roma have been the poorest, most isolated, excluded, marginalized, economically and socially disenfranchised minority in Slovenia, all its neighbouring countries, Central and South-Eastern Europe already before the pandemic (Bešter et al. 2017; Komac & Barle Lakota 2015). Their social and economic situations, particularly their poverty, unemployment and exclusion, further deteriorated during Covid-19. Due to their often-inadequate housing, poor sanitary and living conditions, lack of resources, such as water supply and internet access, the Roma find it extremely difficult to follow recommended social distancing, hand and personal hygiene as well as other preventive public health recommendations, while it would be virtually impossible to follow the recommendations for isolation or governmental quarantine orders in the case of possible infection. Consequently, I would suggest that the risks of their potential exposure to the virus and its uncontrolled spread increase, at least in certain settlements and communities. Considering their existing health situation, chronic problems and related health risks, if infected with SARS-CoV-2 virus, the Roma are more likely to experience severe illness, suffer severe and long-term health consequences or die. Analysing the past developments and experiences in times of crises and considering the current general social and economic situation in respective environments where they live, we could predict that their unemployment would increase further, proportionally more than that of the rest of the population, thereby contributing to their increased poverty, (social and economic) exclusion, isolation and marginalization. Consequently, discrimination – both direct and indirect – against the Roma in different fields of life could increase as well.

In our informal conversations addressing the possible consequences of Covid-19, an interesting hypothesis was mentioned, namely that it might be less likely that the Roma catch a virus, in this case the SARS-CoV-2 virus, considering the existing isolation and marginalization of their communities and persons belonging to them. However, once a single Roma is infected, the epidemic would spread rapidly due to the specific social, economic and health situation and circumstances in respective Roma communities (Žagar, forthcoming).

The lockdown and closure of international borders affected the members of diverse minorities, particularly traditional national minorities, more than the rest of the population and had additional negative impacts on their lives and activities. The closure of the borders with Italy after the spread of the epidemic there in the spring 2020 was particularly difficult for the Italians in Slovenia and Croatia

and the Slovenes in Italy. They felt isolated and cut from their traditional cultural hinterland. The closure temporarily cut or, at least, substantially limited their traditional, permanent and intense close links, communication and cooperation particularly with border regions of their kin-nation states. These links and cooperation include intense cross-border cooperation and exchange, daily commuting and visiting of cultural and other institutions and public events, such as concerts, theatre shows, exhibitions and gatherings.

Members of those minorities expressed their dissatisfaction with the restrictive measures during the Covid-19 lockdown introduced by respective authorities that did not consider the needs of minorities. They suggested that the Slovene and Austrian national authorities should have considered substantial regional differences in Italy, as border regions have not been impacted by the epidemic as much as Lombardy and some other regions. They pointed out that in the spring of 2020 the situation and spread of the virus in Friuli Venezia Giulia were similar to that in Slovenia at the time. Consequently, they believed that the government of Slovenia should have allowed the inhabitants of this Italian border region or at least the members of the Slovene minority there and the members of the Italian minority in Slovenia who live along the border to cross it. In this context, in order to prevent the spread of the pandemic, the Slovene government should have determined and enforced criteria, instructions, recommendations and measures that those crossing the border should be following (Žagar, forthcoming).

To conclude this section of the article, we address the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on inclusion, integration and participation of minorities and persons belonging to them. Inclusion, integration and participation, in this context understood as equal, full and active participation of all individuals, distinct groups and communities in social, cultural, economic and political life of societies, particularly in processes of decision-making in all walks of life, should be considered key components of successful regulation and management of socially relevant diversities. Such inclusion, integration and participation should be based upon human rights, including (special) rights of diverse social minorities, such as national and ethnic minorities and persons belonging to them, principles of equality, equal rights, justice and solidarity. In order to fully exercise their rights and full and equal social, economic and political participation, distinct communities, including minorities as collective entities and persons belonging to them as individuals, might require a certain level of autonomy, particularly in regulating and managing their own affairs (e.g. Žagar 2017, 2018). However, in most cases, discussions on participation of minorities and persons belonging to them focus on their political participation (e.g. Bešter et al. 2017; Brezigar & Vidau 2018). Much less attention is paid to other dimensions of participation, although, in my view, they are very important for their full and equal integration in their environments.

As already presented, the situations, position(s), status, rights and protection, legally determined and actual inclusion and integration in their respective social environments as well as social, economic and political participation of diverse minorities and persons belonging to them differ, often substantially. In the region of Central and South-Eastern Europe, some minorities, such as, for example, the Germans in South Tirol or the Hungarians and Italians in Slovenia, are considered to enjoy the highest standards and level of minority rights and protection, while other minorities still lack the adequate protection and often face marginalization and discrimination, such as the Roma in all countries, although their situation differs from country to country. Regardless of differences among them, however, rightly, all minorities and their members, particularly their representatives, associations and organizations, constantly complain and suggest that their status, inclusion, integration and participation are insufficient and should improve, possibly asking for the introduction of some kind and level of (minority) autonomy or, if autonomy already exists, they demand that it is increased. Among the main problems in this context, they point to the substantial gap between the regulation and legally determined rights and protection of minorities and persons belonging to them on the one side and their actual situation and position on the other.

With regard to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the situation, position, inclusion, integration, participation and representation of minorities, members of minorities and researchers agree that it causes additional problems, particularly by worsening already existing problems and crises, combining them and provoking new ones. The feeling expressed by members of different minorities is that in the time of the pandemic their voice is heard even less than before. Consequently, it is believed that the pandemic could have a negative impact on the situation, participation and representation of minorities. In this context, the referendum on the electoral reform and reduction of the number of representatives and senators in the Italian parliament was mentioned as a possibly negative example that could result in inability of the Slovene and, possibly, other minorities in Italy to elect their representatives. Consequently, several Slovenes in Italy expressed their hopes that the legislative reform will address and adequately regulate the issue of representation of minorities in the parliament in a way that will ensure the election of minority representatives. Although they would hope for the full support of the Republic of Slovenia as their kin-state in their efforts, they are not sure that Slovenia will deliver.

In our conversations, members of different minorities also expressed their fear that some positive trends and transformation of minority policies in most countries of the region in the recent decades might be slowed down or reversed, using arguments and excuses of security and prevention of the spread of the pandemic. Consequently, they stress the need to advocate the policies of multiculturalism/inter-culturalism and the immense importance of the promotion of the

concept and continuous process of the open inclusive public dialogue in diverse environments as an effective tool for the successful regulation and management of socially relevant diversities that demands the formal and actual recognition, inclusion, integration, participation and representation of minorities (Bašić et al. 2018; Žagar 2020).

#### 4. Some Conclusions

Presenting some of the most acute problems and crises at all levels, from local, regional and national to global, caused or aggravated by the current concept of development based on (eternal and unlimited) growth, capitalism, capitalist economy and logic of capitalization and (particularly) short term profits, this study establishes the broader context and framework within which the Covid-19 pandemic, its impacts and consequences, particularly different problems and crises that it worsened and escalated or caused, should be studied. It points out that all these problems and crises, such as environmental, climate, social and economic crises, are interrelated, interwoven and interdependent. They could not be managed and resolved successfully if they are addressed each separately, with separate, isolated and/or independent (segmental) strategies. This applies also to the Covid-19 crisis. Consequently, integrated and concerted approaches, strategies and policies that include effective crisis management are needed. This study suggests that this might be possible only if the current concept and ideology of capitalist development are replaced by a new concept and ideology of sustainable, balanced, green, environmentally and socially responsible fair economy and development based upon human rights and freedoms and the principles of equality, justice and solidarity. Sustainable development needs to be human, society, ecology, environment and climate friendly.

Based upon our preliminary research, this study suggests that the consequences and impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic and the related problems and crises for societies and minorities are profound, possibly also lasting. In cases of national, ethnic and other minorities and persons belonging to them they have already impacted their situations, position, status, rights and protection, inclusion, integration, participation and representation in social environments where they live, frequently in a negative way. Consequently, our research findings confirm the hypothesis that the Covid-19 pandemic and crises further increase their exclusion and, consequently, have a negative impact on their participation and, possibly, representation. These findings and detected trends should be considered in the context of securitization of contemporary societies, a concept and trend started after the events of 11 September 2001 that treat almost all social phenomena, problems and crises as security risks, suggesting that they could be managed by the introduction of additional security and restrictive measures, including temporary limitation or suspension of some human rights. In this con-

text, we should stress our research findings that such repressive approaches and measures, particularly limitations and/or suspensions of human rights, as a rule, do not achieve the goals proclaimed at the time of their introduction. Nevertheless, often these restrictive and repressive approaches and measures, including limitations and suspensions of human rights, continue for a long time or become permanent, thereby limiting and harming democracy. They can be considered one of reasons for the appearance and strengthening of some populist policies, regimes and illiberal democracies.

In the broader context, we should consider the role and responsibility of science(s) and technology as well as individual professionals and experts, researchers, scholars and scientists. When they are uncritically in service of the capital, guided by short term profits, and particularly when they promote the current concept, ideology and logic of development, they are a part of the problem as they contribute to the worsening and escalation of the existing problems and crises at all levels. In this context, negative impacts of military complex and arms industry, fossil fuel industry and other industries that contribute the most to the global and local pollution should be singled out. The responsibility of researchers and scholars is even greater when, rather than common good and regardless of the promoted and proclaimed research ethics, they plan and carry out their research in a way that the central part and goal of their research activities become generation and increase of (financial) profit. In other words, research strategies and policies, both private and public, when directed by capital and (short term) profit, tend to direct, fund and support predominantly research that could generate (financial and/or other measurable) profits, while other research of other themes and fields is not funded or is underfunded. Such approaches and logic could be blamed that, unfortunately, several topics and problems, critical also for the future of the environment, climate, humankind and survival of life in general have not been and are not researched adequately. Among such critical topics and problems that, at least recently, due to the mentioned approaches and logic have not been researched adequately, we could mention basic research of viruses, development of antibiotics and other drugs that do not bring huge profits to pharmaceutical companies, development of clean, green, environment, society and human friendly technologies that might reduce and/or endanger the profits of key current economic players and monopolies, as well as several, if not most, topics and themes in social sciences and humanities.

Simultaneously, research, science(s), technology, researchers and scholars, particularly their findings and the knowledge they generate, seem to be the only viable solution to all mentioned problems and crises. Without their contribution and engagement, the elaboration and implementation of the concept and strategies of sustainable, balanced, green, socially responsible and fair economy and development based upon principles of equality, justice and solidarity that is human, society, ecology, environment and climate friendly seem to be impos-

sible. In this context, also crisis strategies that can urgently react to and manage possible problems and crises need to be developed. Among important topics and contributions in this context that could contribute to the successful regulation and management of socially relevant diversities, thereby contributing to peace, stability, coexistence and cooperation in contemporary diverse societies necessary for sustainable development, we should also mention research of the situations, position, status, rights and protection, inclusion, integration, participation and representation of national and other minorities and persons belonging to them in social environments where they live.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Some parts of this section are based upon the text prepared for my chapter How does the Covid-19 pandemic influence peacebuilding, diversity management, the handling of ethnic conflict, and ethnic minorities, prepared for a monograph *Routledge Handbook of Peacebuilding and Ethnic Conflict* (Žagar, forthcoming) to be published by Routledge (Byrne et. al., forthcoming).
- <sup>2</sup> Reading, for example, Plato (especially his writings on Socrates), Aristotle, Marcus Aurelius, Thomas Aquinas, Thomas Hobbes, Friedrich Nietzsche and many others I do not admire and enjoy only the interesting and valuable content of their writings, but – regardless of complex terminology – also the literary nature of their texts, including their vivid, literary and rich, sometimes very personal language and its beauty.
- <sup>3</sup> In the current situation, particularly the sources available online.
- <sup>4</sup> Considering a huge number (tens, in some cases hundreds) of consulted relevant text and video posts, news, reports, articles and comments available on all webpages of cited media, particularly public broadcasters and news agencies, we decided to cite in the text and bibliography only their main webpages, where using search engines and keywords specific relevant posts can be found.

- <sup>5</sup> The listed national political leaders could be considered the most vocal and blunt in their statements, often using inflammatory language. However, the list of politicians and political leaders that underestimate the Covid-19 pandemic and spread fake news could be very long.
- <sup>6</sup> Considering a huge number (hundreds) of relevant references, scholarly and research articles, papers and reports published on the webpages of cited scholarly journals, we decided to cite in the text and bibliography only their main webpages, where using search engines and keywords specific relevant posts can be found.

## Acknowledgment

The article was written under the research program Minority and Ethnic Studies and the Slovene National Question (P5-0081) and basic research project Challenges of Immigrant Integration and the Development of the Integration Policy in Slovenia (J5-9351), funded by Slovenian Research Agency.



Damir Josipovič

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## A Comparative Demo-Geographic Perspective of Covid-19 Spread and Measures in Slovenia with a Special Emphasis on Regional Disparities and Border Areas

The article examines how the initial Covid-19 spread reached Slovenia, how the infections are distributed across the Slovenian regions, and what disparities can be traced in municipalities, especially along the Croatian and Austrian borders. Furthermore, it identifies the demographic groups most affected by the restrictive measures as well as by SARS-CoV-2 infections and Covid-19 deaths. The research hypothesis was that peripheral and border area populations, including ethnic minorities, in Slovenia suffer the Covid-19 restrictions the most. Employing interdisciplinary analyses, we conclude that the spread of Covid-19 in Slovenia and the imposed lockdowns to municipalities create new vulnerable groups and that the wholesale lockdown cannot deliver the desired results if oriented to broad populations without considering regional and local disparities.

**Keywords:** Covid-19 spread, interdisciplinary research, medical geography, mortality rates, demographic indicators, Slovenian-Croatian border area, Italy, Austria.

### Primerjalni demo-geografski pogled na širjenje covid-19 in ukrepe v Sloveniji s posebnim poudarkom na regionalnih razlikah in mejnih območjih

*Članek preučuje, kako je prvi val covid-19 dosegel Slovenijo, kako so okužbe porazdeljene po slovenskih regijah in kakšne razlike lahko zasledimo med občinami, zlasti ob hrvaški in avstrijski meji. Poleg tega opredeljuje demografske skupine, ki so jih omejevalni ukrepi, pa tudi okužbe s SARS-CoV-2 in smrtni primeri zaradi covid-19 najbolj prizadeli. Raziskovalna hipoteza je bila, da so omejitve zaradi covid-19 v Sloveniji najbolj prizadele prebivalce obrobnih in obmejnih območij, vključno z etničnimi manjšinami. S pomočjo interdisciplinarnih analiz ugotavljamo, da se zaradi širjenja covid-19 v Sloveniji in zaprtja občin ustvarjajo nove ranljive skupine ter da splošna zaustavitev javnega življenja, če je usmerjena na širšo populacijo in ne upošteva regionalnih in lokalnih razlik, ne prinaša zelenih učinkov.*

**Ključne besede:** širjenje covid-19, interdisciplinarna raziskava, medicinska geografija, stopnja umrljivosti, demografski kazalniki, slovensko-hrvaško obmejno območje, Italija, Avstrija.

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## 1. Introduction

For some time now, the public debate across Europe has been heightening in connection with the imposition of very restrictive measures, followed by further austerity in the field of free movement and physical contact, as well as quarantine. In Slovenia, both lockdowns – the one in late winter/spring and the one in the fall – involved online schooling. According to most epidemiologists, these measures were essential to slow down the spread of the ominous infection and thus gradually reduce the number of patients in need of long-term intensive care due to a more difficult progression of the Covid-19 disease.<sup>1</sup> This flattening the curve – as it was dubbed in the early stage (i.e. the first wave) of the epidemic, first thought as seasonal – is primarily oriented towards an ever-degrading health-care system in many countries. OECD data show decreasing numbers of overall and acute hospital beds ever since the 1970s (OECD 1980). The oil shock of 1973 triggered the first cuts in public expenditure (cf. Harvey 2005, 2011), and hospital facilities were the first to undergo the optimisation plans. An increasing trend towards further optimisation and privatisation of the former resumed after the last financial and economic crisis of 2008 (Humphries et al. 2019). The dismantling of the public health sector inevitably decreased the preparedness to deal with a large-scale inflow of patients to health premises, as shown especially in Italy in the early stage and Slovenia as well.

In the first wave of the coronavirus spread in Slovenia, hospitalisation times increased from 7 to almost 10 days after the first month of the epidemic, indicating a higher number of harsher disease scenarios and an increasing number of consequent deaths. The latter occasionally reached nearly 20 % of those in intensive care units daily, while the average for the first week of April 2020 was around 13 %. This was important as in Slovenia, a fifth (20.5 %)<sup>2</sup> of the population is over 65 years of age and in the spring the total number of intensive care (acute) beds was less than 200. In the second wave (after September 2020), the alarming scenario began after 50 intensive care beds were full (NIJZ 2020), notwithstanding the ever-increasing share of the elderly population and the rising pressures for hospitalisation. Between April and October 2020, Slovenia slightly decreased the total number of hospital beds (to 8,687), but increased the number of beds for intensive care to 270 (Marovt 2020). Back in 1980, Slovenia had 7.0 acute hospital beds available, while nowadays it only has about 4.2 per 1,000 inhabitants. Japan, as the most medically equipped country in the world yet with the world's oldest population – 27 % over the age of 65 – has almost twice as many beds (7.8 per 1,000 inhabitants). The situation in neighbouring Italy drastically worsened after 1980. As the country with the second oldest population in the world (23 % over 65 years), it only has 2.6 acute beds, while in 1980 it had as much as 9.3 beds per 1,000 inhabitants – more than Slovenia (OECD 2020, last available comparable data are those for 2017). It is worth mentioning that in

1980 the countries had much lower shares of the elderly: Slovenia 11.4 %, Croatia 11.5 %, Italy 13.3 %, and Austria 15.1 %, to name only a few (OECD 1980).

The current data on SARS-CoV-2 infections show that in addition to hospitals, care- and nursing homes, staff included, are the most at risk of spreading the infection. The two weeks in mid-November (9–23 November 2020) confirmed more than 1800 infections among medical personnel (Žurnal24.si 2020), which accounts for about 10 % of all currently infected.<sup>3</sup> The vast majority (75 %) of all infected are the elderly (65+). The most vulnerable are those in nursing homes where 72 % of all Covid-19 deaths occur. The mortality rate of the infected in nursing homes is 14.2 %, up to ten times higher than in the general population (NIJZ 2020). By mid-November 2020, the SARS-CoV-2 infections spread in 85 % of all nursing homes in Slovenia (Vrečar & Švab 2020). Hence, nursing homes, as pointed out in the early spread in late winter/spring, are at the heart of the problem (Josipovič 2020). Beside overcrowding, they are also facing the acute problem of air conditioning systems which, with higher humidity and temperature, can facilitate the airborne transmission of viruses.

Given the high numbers of what are known as institutionalised infections and relatively low numbers of infections circulating among the rest, the question is on what grounds are the decisions of locking down certain areas of public life and economic activity taken. On which data about the prevalence of the infection/disease should the process of co-decision in imposing restrictive measures rest?

Since wholesale measures were introduced essentially to protect the hospitals from overcrowding, the research question was who are the most vulnerable populations affected by the restrictions, regardless of the persistence of tangible threat (larger areas of confirmed SARS-CoV-2 infections). The research hypothesis is that the minority, peripheral, and border area populations in Slovenia suffer the Covid-19 restrictions the most or are the most deprived thereby.

## 2. Methodology

In approaching the research question, the article employs an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary framework to explore the possibilities of demographical and regional-geographic analysis for understanding the spatial aspects of the pandemic. Using the available medical, statistical, regional, and geographical data we sought patterns emerging from the individual outbreak districts to geographically distinct areas, for example borderlands. To produce a more comprehensive framework for explaining and understanding this pandemic, we resorted to Närman's (1997) underused approach of bridging the gap between theory and practice and developmental thinking, seeking meaningful translation of academic deliberations to public and to practice.

The underlying research for the present paper was the determination of the nature of the rapid spread of Covid-19 and its morbidity. This was done primarily by comparing Italy and Slovenia based on the available real-time data from late winter (Josipovič 2020). This research revealed the problems of quality of collected data, differences in collecting the corresponding data, their publication, and their suitability for ex-post-facto analyses of the methodological differences between the two countries back in March and April. The Italian data were timely published and included many attributive data, while Slovenia struggled with paperwork and was completely unprepared for such an amount of inflowing data on Covid-19 statuses. The comparisons were possible only by implementing the assessments based on the specific demographic and medical-geographic indices developed from datasets for previous years. With the hiatus of new infections in May 2020, the room opened for new data acquisitions and subsequent analyses.

In the prolonged spread of the first wave, it turned out as very useful for the analysis to compare the situation in Austria and Croatia, i.e. Slovenia's and Italy's neighbours, to establish the situation within a geographical sequence of the SARS-CoV-2 infection spread. The neighbouring Hungary was at that point excluded from the analysis due to a different type of the initial spread of infection not directly connected with the outbreak in Italy. With the addition of Austria and Croatia, we were able to follow the sequence in the geographical spread of SARS-CoV-2 and assess the lessons learned from the early Italian and a few early Slovenian cases.

There were multiple issues in the joint interdisciplinary analytical framework which had to be overcome with suitable methodological ameliorations. The first of them concerns the available data. The question arose on how to treat and understand the relation between the number of tests vs. the number of confirmed infections. Issues in PCR<sup>4</sup> testing procedure and other types of testing (e.g. rapid antigen tests) were revealed and the question of the reliability of testing arose. Similarly, distinguishing between symptomatic and asymptomatic or oligosymptomatic infections and the related problems of susceptibility and the conditions of contagiousness also represented an issue in relation to the quality of data. As regards Covid-19 mortality data, much remains unclear on the primary cause of death. Additionally, we do not have data on Covid-19 deaths in the second wave relative to the status of their potential infection in the first wave and the corresponding repetitive testing. Yet another potentially uncertain institutional medical data source was the occupancy and the availability of healthcare premises. Already a brisk comparison between Slovenia, Italy, Croatia, and Austria shows that due to the different approaches to testing, we have been receiving markedly deviating mortality indicators, which are subject to misinterpretation. Due to known issues of testing, the data of the second wave might be of better quality compared to the first wave.

On the side of states' responses to and measures against the spread of the coronavirus, another analytical difficulty was the arbitrary threshold of 40 infections per 100.000 inhabitants per 14-days set by the Slovenian government's specialised task-force for combating Covid-19 as an indicator of public safety. This threshold disregarded a myriad of relativisation factors, such as (a) geographical pattern of the spread (dispersed or spatially concentrated cases), (b) health-care institutions density (locations of hospitals, nursing homes, other premises), (c) share of institutionalised population per local community (e.g. municipality) and the ratio between the general municipal population and the institutionalised; (d) ethnic composition of a region or local community (minority population areas), (e) geographical position of a region or municipality (peripheral regions, border- and cross-border areas), (f) age structure and gender ratio (local demographic structure, socio-economic activity of the local population), (g) type of municipality or local community (rural, urban, with or without urban centre), (h) health issues and vulnerable populations in a spatial perspective (public health in the regional or municipal perspective).

## 2.1 Data Sources

All data collections are open-source and made publicly available. The Slovenian National Institute of Public Health (NIJZ) initially published data on the number of people tested and infected in oversized age groups, which was back then acceptable due to the low numbers. This error was soon corrected. The data are now largely displayed by 10-year age groups, but the user-unfriendly form of the 10-year age span instead of at least 5-year age-groups remains. As an effect, the current number of five Covid-19 related deaths in the 35–44 age-group does not allow us to surmise upon the real age being closer to 44 or 35. Additionally, we do not have any indication of their underlying medical problems, etc.

Contrary to Slovenia, the Italian (Ministero della Salute 2020), Austrian (GÖG 2020), and Croatian (MZRH 2020) statistics of the Covid-19 epidemic are much more detailed (by birth-year and area/region), which is somewhat not surprising given the number of cases, the size of the countries, the spatial organisation and regional distribution. After the first month of the outbreak there, we can apply a demo-geographical analysis to identify many hidden characteristics not visible in the data for Slovenia with a certain predictive value for other countries.

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 38 3.1 The Covid-19 Spread in the First Wave (Late Winter/ Spring 2020)

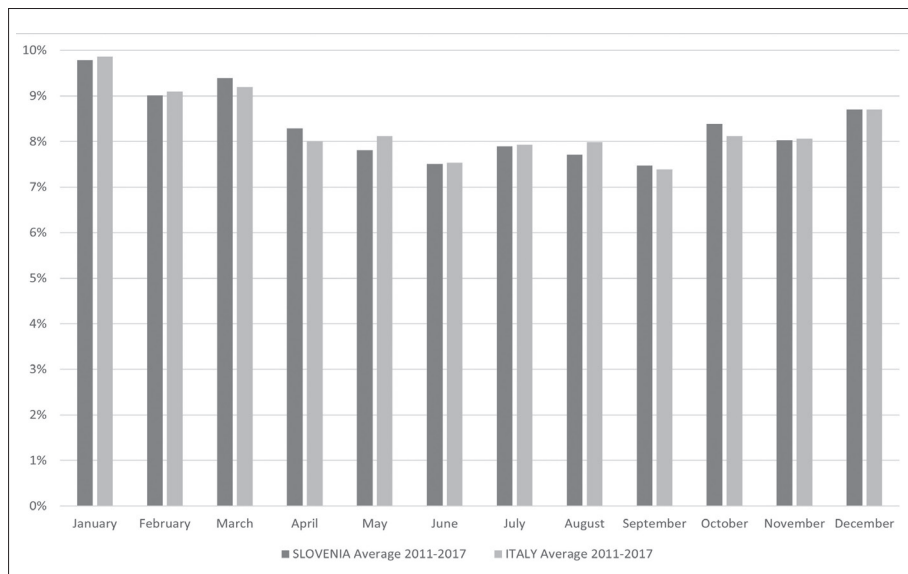
In the earlier phase of the research during the first wave, the lack of suitable time-ly data or the missing data were compensated by various methods, mostly normalisations. The distributions across the selected year-spans were normalised to render comparable month-specific death rates. The results were promising. As shown by the comparison of Slovenia and Italy in the first wave, this method produced low discrepancies:  $-0.12 / +0.21$  % of absolute and  $-3.54 / +3.85$  % of relative data variability across the months in the period 2011–2017.

As Italy was among the first countries in Europe to be severely hit by the pandemic, it was important for the spread in other countries to understand the induced mortality pattern. The analysis of mortality rates by national average, regions, and provinces in Italy show a different picture than that reported by public media. Given the size of the total population (60,551 million inhabitants), Italy experienced high daily numbers of both infections and mortality. However, this was only the first impression as per year all deaths in Italy amounted to 633,000 in 2018. Among those, the elderly aged 90 and above account for one fourth (25%) or a total of 160,000 deaths. The regional distribution showed that 15 % (almost 25,000) died in Lombardy, where the province of Bergamo, the most struck by the Covid-19 deaths, is represented with about 2,400 deaths or one tenth (9.8%) of Lombardy's deaths in this age group (ISTAT 2020).

One month after the initial outbreak in Italy, on 26 March 2020, the Covid-19 death toll was 8,165, accounting for 1.29 % on an annual basis, but at the same time representing a conditional increase of 15% of excess deaths compared to the previous inter-year monthly level, what could be called excess mortality. This monthly surplus does not constitute an unexpectedly severe deviation, though. For example, the January 2017 mortality rate in Slovenia exceeded the multi-year average by 32 % – the number of monthly deaths was as many as 2,400 deaths instead of the usual 1,800 for a few years' average (SORS 2020). Similarly, the newly published data in Slovenia show +26.8 % excess mortality in October 2020 compared to October 2019. Clearly, with a smaller population, the data and the derived indicators are also more volatile.

The Covid-19 deaths should thus be observed through this comparative demographic optics. The age-specific and month-specific mortality data are a methodological key to understanding the relationship between the number of deaths and deaths due to Covid-19. This methodological approach is important since Slovenia shares with Italy a convergent picture of the monthly mortality schedule, therefore analogue starting points for assessing potential developments can be applied to both (Chart 1).

**Chart 1: Average monthly distribution of deaths in Slovenia and Italy, 2011–2017**



Source: NIJZ 2020; ISTAT 2020.

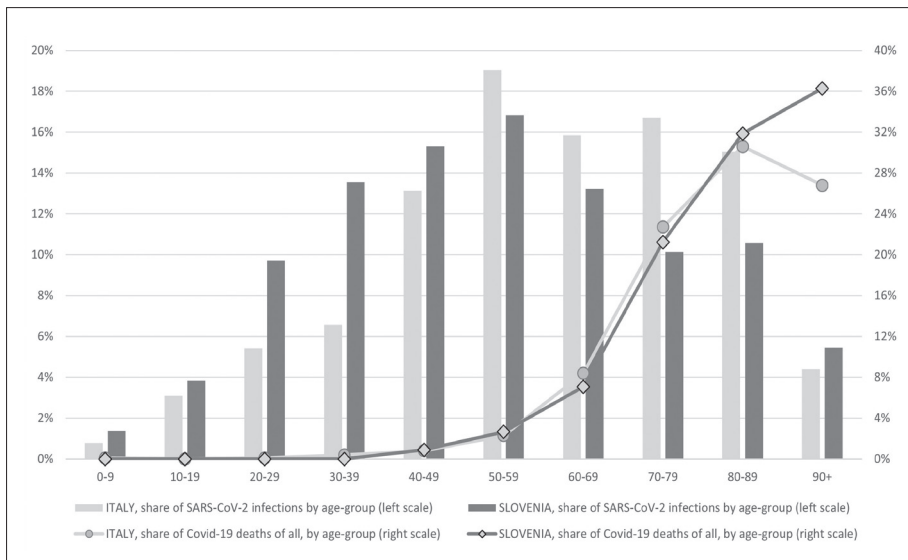
As for the interregional comparison in Italy, Lombardy had as much as 60 % of all Covid-19 related deaths. This was unusually high, especially when comparing the post-Wuhan<sup>5</sup> spread elsewhere, and it has yet to be closely examined as to what factors contributed to such a high concentration of all Covid-19 deaths in Italy. However, demographic analysis again confirms that the average annual mortality rate in Lombardy was higher only by 4.9 % , assuming all deaths are attributed to Covid-19 as a terminal cause of death. But, on a monthly basis, that number rose to 58 % and caused early deaths which would normally occur in the last months of the year. Moreover, in Slovenia, this rise was twice as much as the contribution to increased mortality by influenza and other causes in 2017, keeping in mind that in 2018 and 2019 Slovenia had about 150 deaths attributed to the flu which after March 2020 almost completely vanished (RKI 2020). So, the excess mortality per a given month does not necessarily mean a higher annual mortality rate but helps understand the seasonal changes and the redistribution across months. Thus, as regards the second wave in autumn, a higher number of deaths in Slovenia and a lower number in northern Italy might shed some light of confirmation on the aforementioned intra-annual redistribution of mortality pattern, since Slovenia had a very small death-toll in the first wave – overall less than 200 deaths (NIJZ 2020)

A closer mezzo-regional glance furthermore reveals that Bergamo (population 1.1 million) was the worst off among all the provinces of the Lombardy region (population 10.0 million). In the first wave, Bergamo accounted for 10.4 % of

all Italian Covid-19 related deaths. At a monthly level, the number of Covid-19 related deaths already exceeded the usual monthly number of deaths (+125%) which was quite remarkable. In some counties, mortality after the first month was tripled compared to normal at that time. This was a sign of markedly altered and increased mortality rates that are yet to be evaluated, for which we do not have sufficient and appropriate data, except the forerunning September and October 2020 data.

Another important analysis used for forecasting compares the mortality of people across the specific age-groups. We analysed the Covid-19 deaths and other mortality in the 90+ age group, where deaths concentrated disproportionately. In the province of Bergamo, an average of at least 214 people of this age group were expected to pass away in March 2020 based on the 2011–2017 average. This is 15% less than 249 people who died due to Covid-19, as 24% of all Covid-19 patients are those aged 90 or more. Otherwise, the Bergamo province has a total of 11,300 people aged 90 or more.

**Chart 2: Covid-19 patients in Italy and Slovenia, and the age-specific structure of deaths, first wave**



Source: NIJZ 2020; Ministero della Salute 2020.

The Covid-19 mortality in Slovenia in the first wave cannot be directly compared to Italy due to low numbers, but the proportion of victims entering intensive care in Slovenia was exceedingly high – more than one third. Two thirds (65%) of the infected were in the economically active age (25–64). If the age group 30–49 was the most infected during the first wave in spring, the centre of the infections later moved towards the age group 45–54 (NIJZ 2020). The proportion

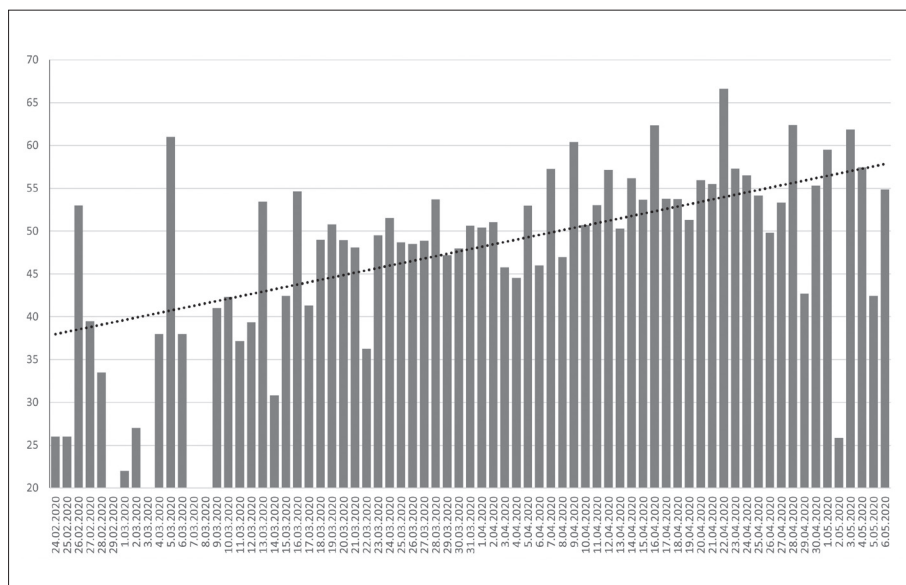


of the infected aged 60+ rose from 15 % to 30 % and is still rising. In November 2020 this group represents as much as 80 % of all Covid-19 infections in Slovenia. It is henceforth clear that the elderly population should be given particular attention as the most vulnerable population. In Italy, 96 % of Covid-19 deaths are in the 60+ age-group. Of central concern are those aged 80–89 with a 31 % chance of dying if infected. Similarly, the age groups 70–79 and 90+ share one fourth chance of dying (Ministero della Salute 2020; Chart 2). The second wave in Slovenia was much more lethal than the first. The chance of dying in the age group 85+ climbed to 40 %, but with an enormous gap between men (52 % of patients died) and women (32 % of patients died) (NIJZ 2020; Chart 6).

### 3.2 The Geographical Sequence of the Covid-19 Spread

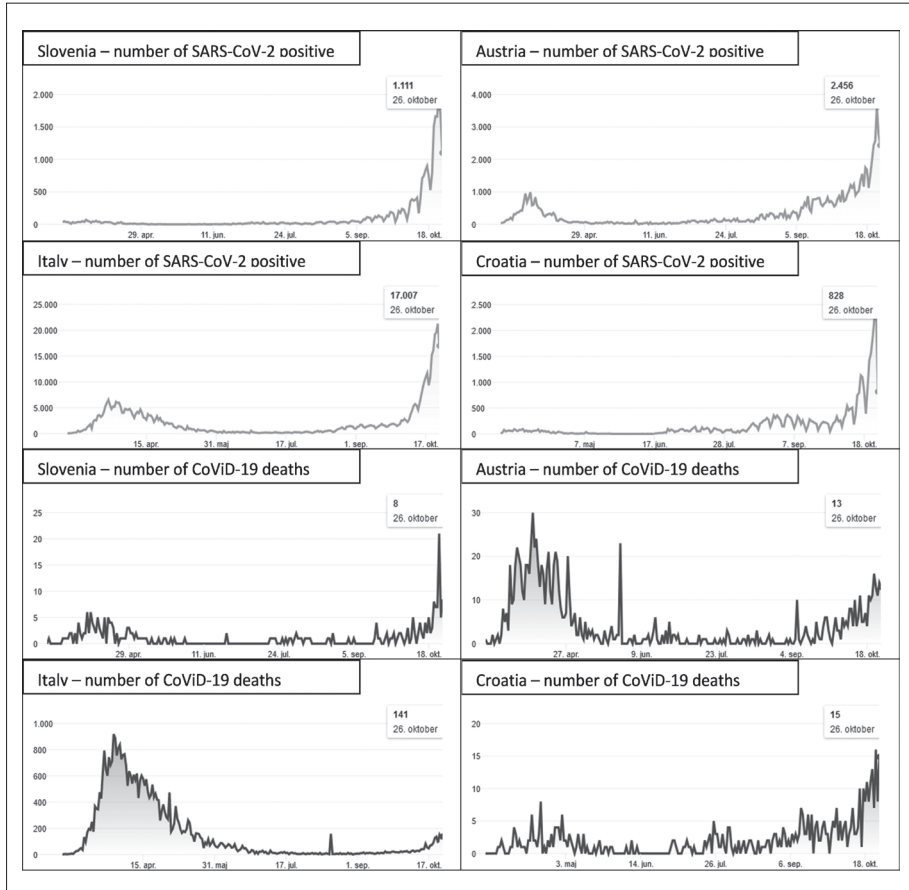
The geographical sequence of the Covid-19 spread depicts the process of a gradual change in the mean age of the infected as a direct indicator of the timing of the first outbreak. This sequence enables us to decipher the position of a given country in the progression of the spread. The spread of infections by country shows a slow trend, but gives some idea of its geographical direction. The Croatian case is illustrious since it confirms the slightly delayed spread of infections from Italy and/or Austria (or *vice versa*), first to Slovenia and then to Croatia (Charts 3 and 4).

**Chart 3: Mean age of SARS-CoV-2 positive in Croatia in the first wave from 24 February to 6 May 2020**



Source: MZRH 2020.

**Chart 4: Daily number of SARS-CoV-2 positive (above) and daily number of Covid-19 deaths (below) by country – Slovenia, Austria, Italy, and Croatia**



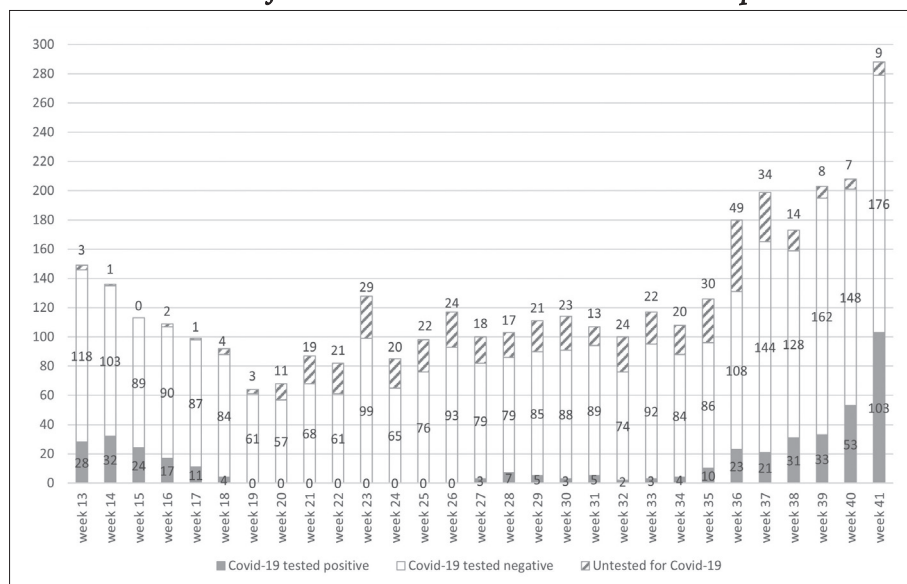
Source: NIJZ 2020; Ministero della Salute 2020; GÖG 2020; MZRH 2020.

Chart 4 shows that the earlier developments that took place in Austria and Italy (Bad Ischgl, Bergamo) resulted in the first peak (first wave) of confirmed cases and deaths. While both Slovenia and Croatia resonated the developments in the former countries with a significant delay, the chart also reveals the delayed deaths in October due to a sharp weather change from hot September to unusually cold October<sup>6</sup> and stable November (ARSO 2020). On the contrary, despite similar weather developments in Austria and Italy, both countries did not develop the echo from the first wave since the number of deaths had already been consumed earlier.

### 3.3 The Characteristics of Covid-19 Spread in the Second Wave (Autumn 2020)

The number of confirmed positive cases in the second wave shows a strikingly different picture compared to that of late winter and early spring, though the responses of all four countries were looser. In the first half of October 2020 in Slovenia, the ratio of those testing positive among all tested for SARS-CoV-2 peaked at 8 %, while the same ratio soared to 30 % in the last third of the month. Apart from this, it reveals another remarkable feature. The hospitalised SARI<sup>7</sup> patients tested positive for Covid-19 in only about 20 % of the cases compared to the number of all hospitalised for severe acute respiratory indications (Chart 5). The data unfortunately do not specify the type and kind of other strains causing these difficulties. However, Chart 5 shows that the preceding epidemic of unusual respiratory (non-Covid-19) infections lies at the core of understanding the spread of the second wave. Some authors claim that such an augmentation of hospitalised persons due to unknown or atypical respiratory diseases may have its triggering counterpart back in the early spring lockdown. The measures imposed, such as the restriction on movement, insufficient exposure to fresh air and sunlight, the lack of vitamins, rising fear, uncertainty, precariousness topped with increasing air pollution causing oxidative stress, etc., all weakened the population's resilience (Nitschke et al. 2020; Klipšteter 2020).

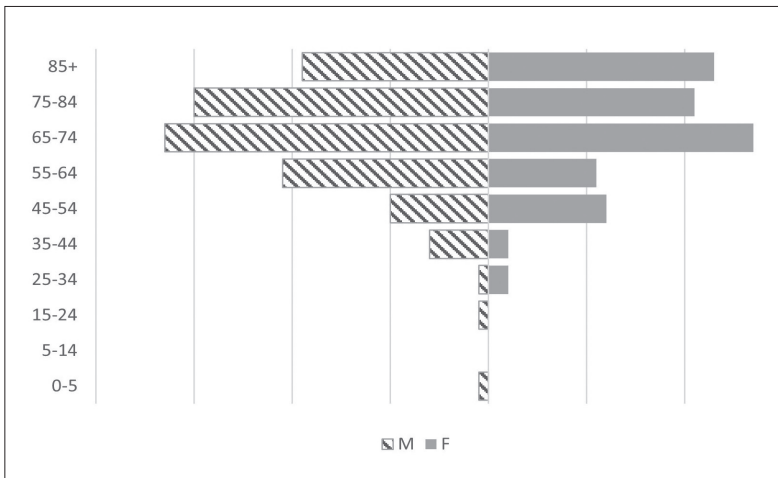
*Chart 5: The breakdown of SARI cases and the relation with SARS-CoV-2 positive 2020*



Source: NIJZ 2020.

The beginning of the new school year resonated in the slight increase toward the second week of September 2020, but then quickly decreased. This might have been due to fine weather, since with the advent of low temperatures in October the share of Covid-19 patients among all respiratory infections in hospitals rose from 16.3 to 25.5 % by 11 October 2020. Another rapid rise to 35.8 % share of Covid-19 hospitalisations occurred between 12 and 18 October 2020, but the first week of November exhibited as much as 81 % of Covid-19 positive among all SARI hospitalisations. As pointed out in the introductory part, data from Slovenian hospitals confirm high contagiousness within medical facilities while, e. g., the German average is 58 % of Covid-19 patients among SARI in the 47<sup>th</sup> week of 2020 (RKI 2020).

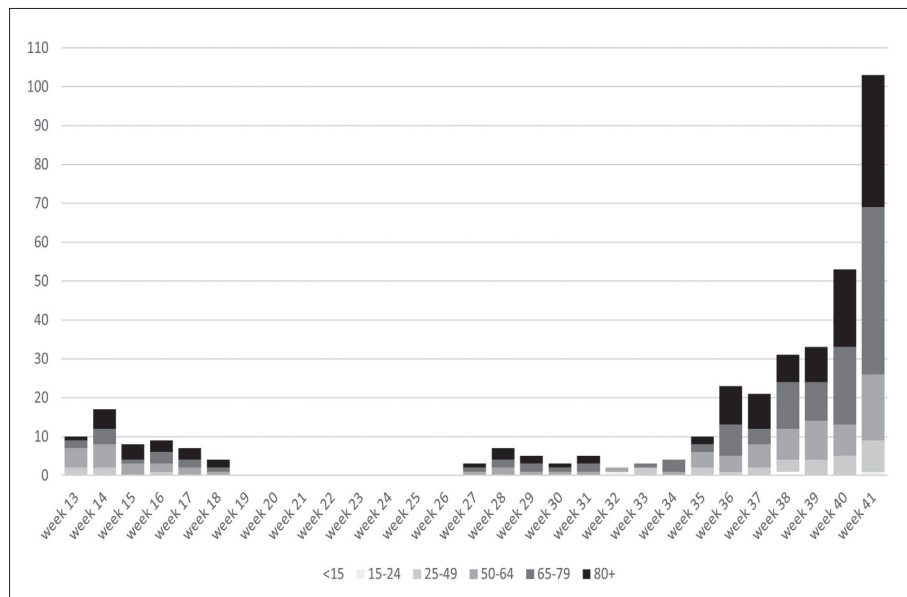
**Chart 6: Age structure of hospitalized with SARI status (including Covid-19), 21 Sep – 18 Oct 2020**



Source: NIJZ 2020.

The Slovenian case is instructive from several aspects, with the age of the infected being critically relevant. Between 21 September and 18 October 2020, only 5.9 % of SARI patients were younger than 45. Hence, it is possible to draw a logical conclusion that the closure of schools, kindergartens and even universities was less productive or of minor impact in preventing the spread of SARS-CoV-2 and Covid-19 than expected. Additionally, the numbers of infected persons kept lingering around 1,500 daily cases during the last weeks of 2020. So far, we lack evidence that those below 45 transfer the infection to the elderly population (see Chart 6). Moreover, there is evidence that children are even less prone to spreading the infection than mid- or older generations (Jenco 2020), and only 0.97 % of patients are below 25 years of age (Chart 7).

**Chart 7: Age structure of hospitalised patients with SARI status (including Covid-19) by week, March–October 2020**



Source: NIJZ 2020.

The breakdown of data per week shows another important feature that might cause problems in the interpretation as it does not distinguish between the lengths of hospitalisation. Given that the majority of patients stay in hospital for more than a week, it is analytically important to distinguish persons who are present for multiple weeks. The so-called repetitive cases should be collected and presented separately.

### 3.4 Regional Disparities and Border Areas

Given that the majority of new infections within the second wave are expected to stem from nursing homes and hospitals on one hand and from employment in general (especially where industrial and intensive group work is undertaken daily) on the other, it seems geographically illogical to introduce wholesale measures for preventing the spread from a tiny share of population being scattered across the country. On the contrary, geographical scale matters and should be included in deliberating the imposed measures, especially school closure. Those restrictions are no less justifiable even if we deduct the infected employees.

According to the NIJZ November 2020 data, about 15 % of infections came directly from cross-border workers which might involve also those employed in hospitals, clinical centres, and nursing homes, without considering the potenti-

ally infected members of their households. They mostly brought the infections from Austria (51 %), but also Bosnia-Herzegovina (13 %), Germany (9 %), Serbia (7 %), Croatia (7 %), and Italy (4 %). The data structure does not allow us to discern the nationality or citizenship of these workers, but from the geographical distribution of infections, it can be concluded that a vast majority of those living along the Austrian border and working in Austria are Slovenian citizens, while others are mainly posted workers with a significant if not major part of foreign citizens (Josipovič 2018). Henceforth, it seems that the Slovenian government does not recognise the value of a cross-disciplinary approach, nor the importance of the spatial distribution of restrictive actions, and it does not collect all the necessary data that some other European countries do. For example, Austria published data gathered from the cluster-inspected transmission of the SARS-CoV-2 infections (Table 1). Hence, if the source of infection came mainly from the households (Table 1), locking people down to their homes and municipalities could be a problem.

**Table 1: Distribution of the SARS-CoV-2 infections per source, Slovenia, Austria**

|                                  | SLOVENIA     |                 |                                | AUSTRIA         |              |                           |                 |
|----------------------------------|--------------|-----------------|--------------------------------|-----------------|--------------|---------------------------|-----------------|
| SOURCE                           | nr. of cases | % of infections | SOURCE                         | nr. of Clusters | nr. of cases | cluster reproduction rate | % of infections |
| local                            | 4842         | 55.4            | households                     | 1110            | 3181         | 2.87                      | 52.6            |
| unknown                          | 2478         | 28.3            | leisure                        | 321             | 1366         | 4.26                      | 22.6            |
| in epidemiological investigation | 666          | 7.6             | employment                     | 92              | 393          | 4.27                      | 6.5             |
| imported                         | 529          | 6.0             | education                      | 43              | 336          | 7.81                      | 5.6             |
| imported cluster                 | 186          | 2.1             | health and social institutions | 41              | 557          | 13.59                     | 9.2             |
| no data                          | 45           | 0.5             | mixed source                   | 17              | 93           | 5.47                      | 1.5             |
| TOTAL                            | 8746         | 10.0            | hotel / gastronomy             | 14              | 57           | 4.07                      | 0.9             |
|                                  |              |                 | travel                         | 7               | 17           | 2.43                      | 0.3             |
|                                  |              |                 | sport                          | 7               | 43           | 6.14                      | 0.7             |
|                                  |              |                 | commutation                    | 4               | 9            | 2.25                      | 0.1             |
|                                  |              |                 | TOTAL                          | 1656            | 6052         | 3.65                      | 100.0           |

Source: NIJZ 2020; GÖG 2020.

\*NB: data for Slovenia are for the period 1 June – 13 October 2020 while for Austria for the period 19–25 October 2020.

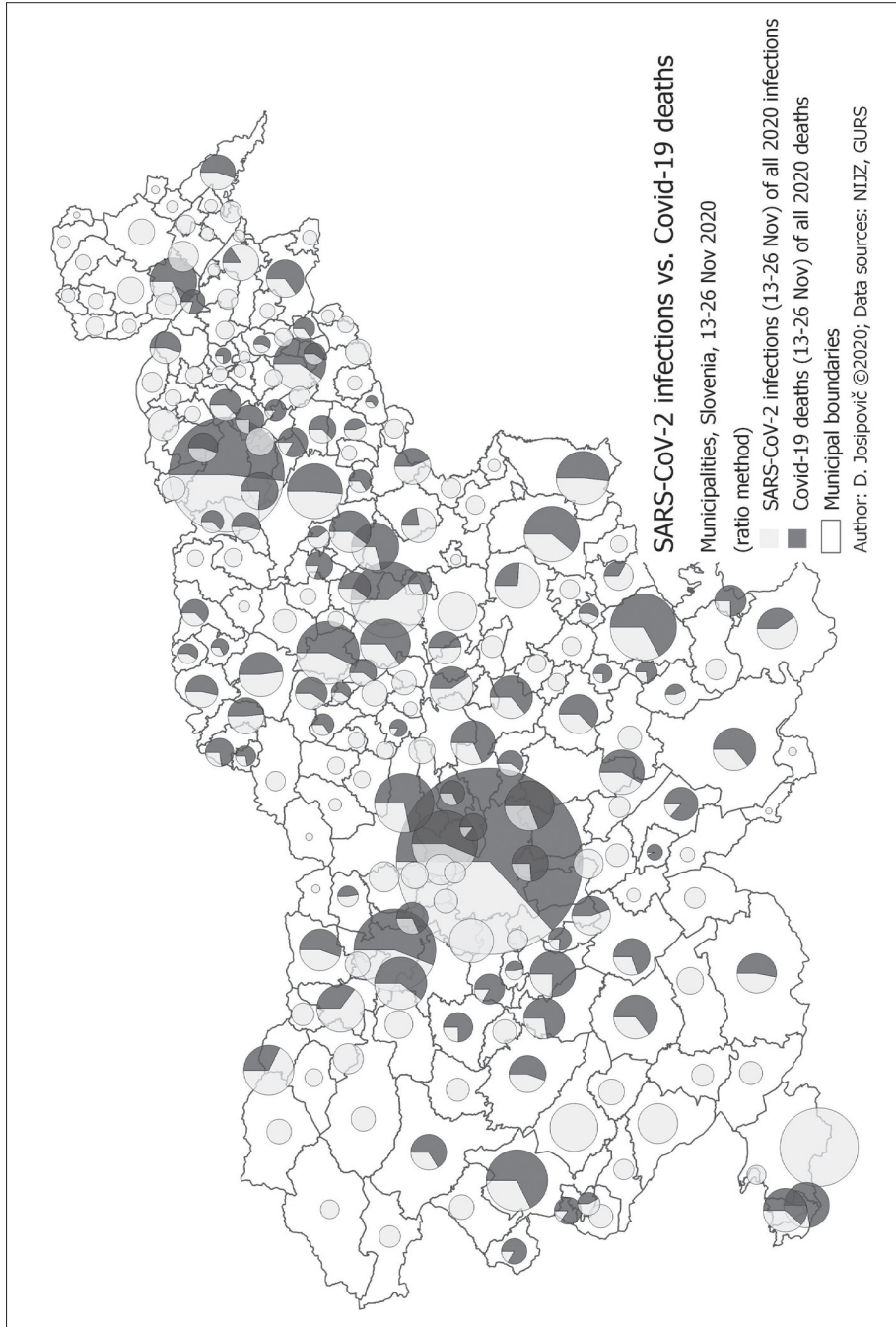
Another problem is that the Slovenian National Health Institute does not collect and publish data on the sources of infection as locality-sensitive and region-spe-

cific, which dramatically affects the regional or municipal probability of getting in touch with the infected. To address this problem, we rendered the available data at the municipal level of Slovenia. Thus, the intraregional disparities are more visible, as shown in Figures 1–4. North-eastern Slovenia and the border regions – where also a significant number of ethnic minorities' members reside (Hungarians, Croats, and Roma are traditional to the region of Prekmurje in NE Slovenia) – are much more affected by new infections, thus confirming the research hypothesis, yet the Covid-19 deaths are generally lower. Another important feature of the regional perspective is that especially the Štajerska region, with most cross-border daily commuters, suffers the most cases and deaths by place of permanent residence. Another area very much affected by the Covid-19 indicators is the municipalities hosting the seats of nursing homes and hospitals, i.e. at-risk, but relatively closed institutions. Here, again, it is possible to discern that the effect of closing people to the municipal boundaries is far from being efficient, for the majority of infections come from the patients and staff in nursing homes and hospitals, i.e. institutions with better possibilities to control the infections among staff or daily visitors.

Looking at the regional and municipal level by means of analytical maps (Figures 1–4), knowing the underlying infrastructure, the size of municipalities, the number of inhabitants, and the specific cultural and historical traits of the area enables us to conclude that smaller municipalities in border regions are generally also places where ethnic minorities reside, as in the case of NE Slovenia. The closure within municipal boundaries is – besides fewer possibilities of movement and a lower number of available public services due to smaller and rural settlements – far more harmful not only from the psycho-social point of view but also in terms of the possibility of getting infected, as shown in the case of cross-border workers.

Another look at the municipalities in terms of Covid-19 deaths renders a different picture. While some areas are pronouncedly more affected, huge areas are left blank and are Covid-19 deaths free in the last two weeks of November 2020 (Figure 3). Among them, the previously at-risk Pomurska region shows a problematic situation only in the border municipalities of Kuzma and Rogašovci, both with nursing homes with a high number of infections, and Lendava with the heart of the Hungarian minority in Slovenia. Yet, despite the considerable number of infections, a closer look reveals a very low overall number of Covid-19 deaths (Figure 4).

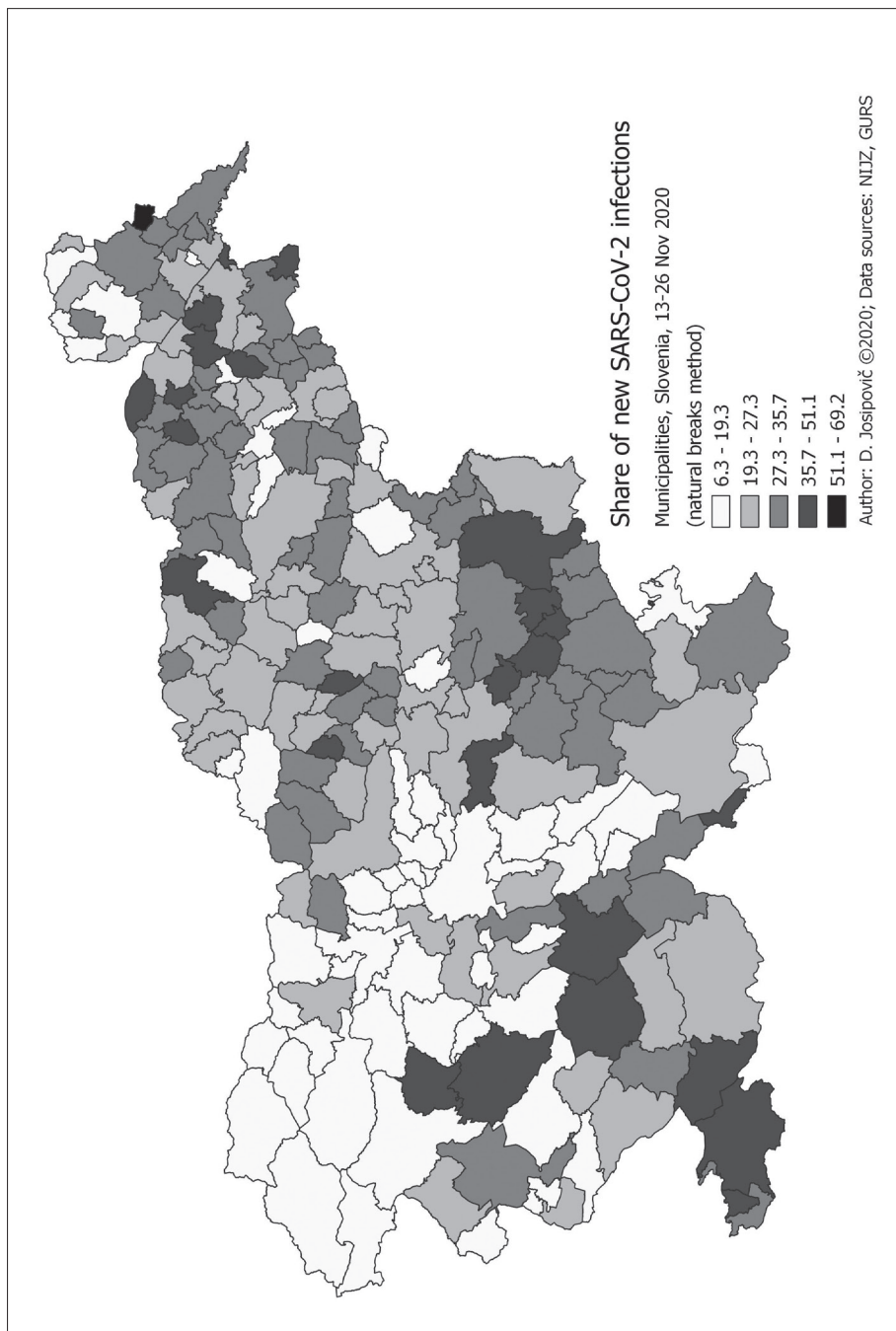
**Figure 1: Size- and area-specific distribution of SARS-CoV-2 infections and COVID-19 deaths, Slovenia, municipalities, 13–26 November 2020**



Source: NIJZ 2020.

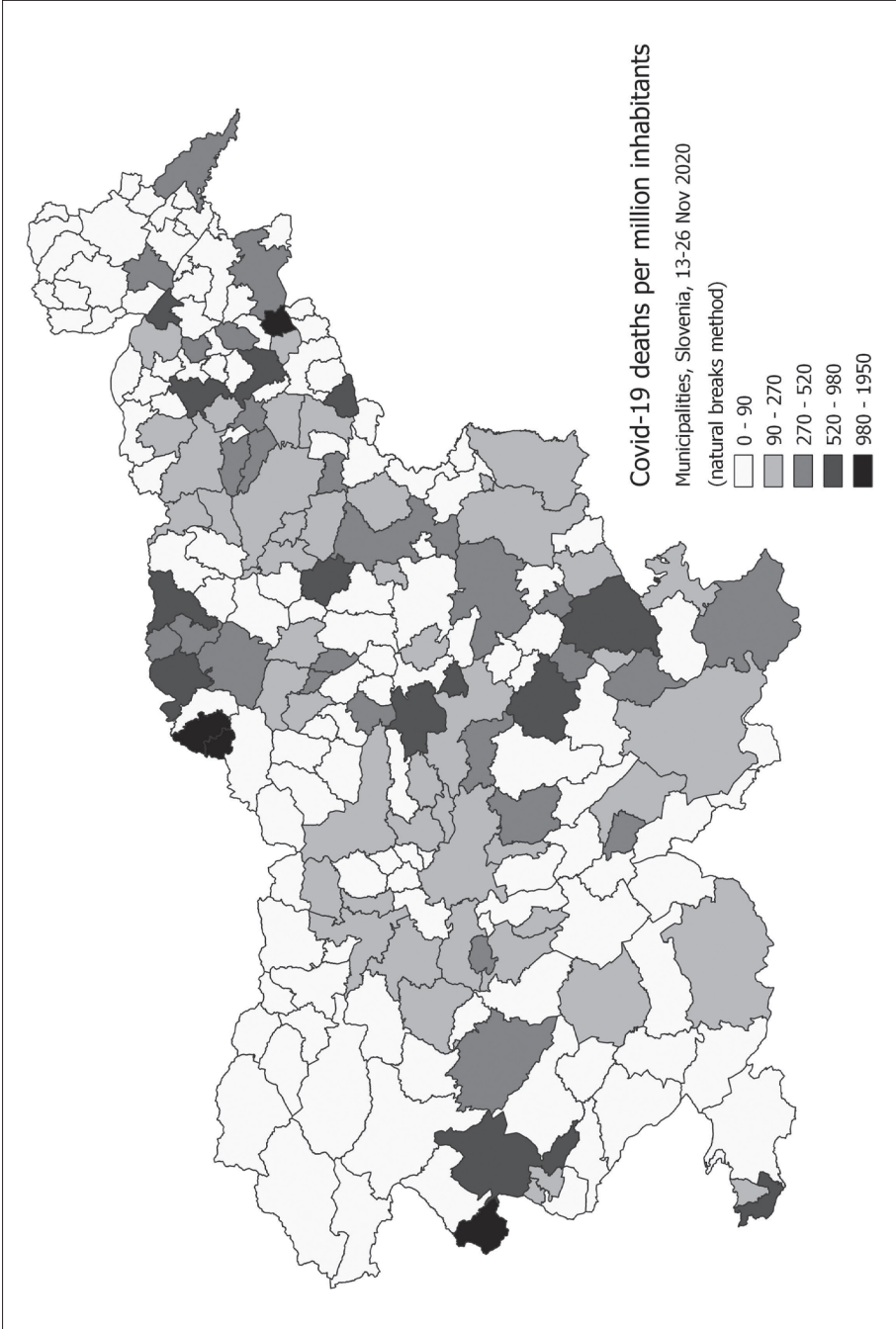


**Figure 2: Share of new SARS-CoV-2 infections of all 2020 infections within municipal populations, 13–26 November 2020, Slovenia, municipalities**



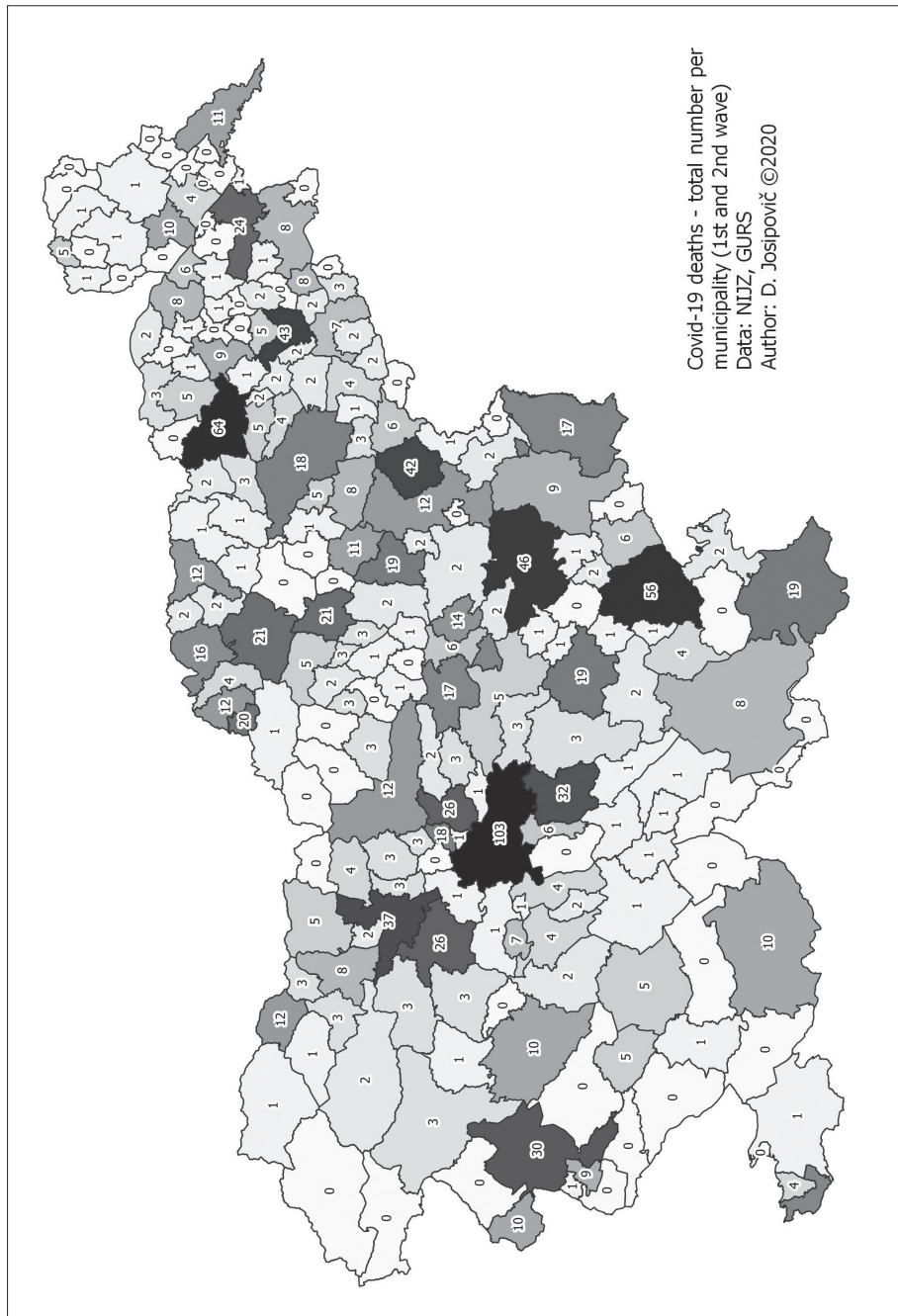
**Figure 3: Share of COVID-19 deaths per million inhabitants, 13–26 November 2020, Slovenia, municipalities**

50



Source: NIJZ 2020.

Figure 4: Number of COVID-19 deaths per municipality, first and second wave combined, 2020



Source: NIJZ 2020.

As regards other areas along the Slovenian-Croatian border, the situation is the least problematic in Istria (14 overall Covid-19-related deaths) and the Kočevska/Kolpa region (4 deaths). Bela Krajina with Žužemberk exhibits more deaths (30) as well as other parts of Lower Dolenjska and Posavje (58). The Upper Sotla and Haloze border area offer a better picture (19 deaths), but the municipalities are much smaller there. The Lower Drava region with Prekija has a slightly worse record of 33 Covid-19 related deaths (Figure 4).

Figures confirm that smaller sized municipalities, especially those locked along the Slovenian national border, experience higher shares of local infections, thus alluding to a potential transmission because of the lockdown itself. As some of the most important ethnic minorities in Slovenia reside in border territories with higher numbers of infections (Italians in Izola and Piran; Hungarians in Lendava; Roma scattered in Prekmurje and Dolenjska; Croats in most municipalities along the Slovenian-Croatian border), it is reasonable to expect their higher vulnerability, yet additional research is needed to address that question properly.

## 4 Conclusions

The interdisciplinary analysis shows that there are significant spatial, micro-regional, and age-specific disparities in the distribution of the coronavirus disease across Slovenia. Applying the combined analysis of statistical, medical, and demographic indicators, the article sheds new light on the systemic restrictions on the population travelling abroad, the elderly in nursing homes, youngsters in schools and kindergartens, and patients in hospitals.

As we witness (end 2020) the rising animosities in Slovenia between the government's top-down approach and the perceptions of the common people, it seems necessary to introduce methodologically sound approaches in analysing the spread of SARS-CoV-2 and consequently Covid-19. While having all measures primarily concentrated at preventing the healthcare systems from collapsing, in countries like Slovenia and Italy, hospitals and medical centres started to delay or postpone for an indefinite time all unnecessary surgeries and medical procedures. This way of approaching the problem of the rising number of hospitalised SARI patients and the high share of institutionalised infections, as in the case of Slovenia, reveals other strains of degradation of the public health system which could deteriorate the position of the immunity deficient, chronically ill, and exhausted, predominantly older populations, adding to higher mortality and consequent lower life expectancy.

The spread of the disease in Slovenia shows more than just a degraded and dismantled public health system as a consequence of long-lasting austerity aiming at, among other things, a systematic cutting of costs and gradual privatisation. With only a few improvements between the two waves of coronavirus

spread, it seems that Slovenia did not prepare adequately for the announced second wave. Instead, it retreated to seemingly unthoughtful measures with overall rather harmful effects on the vulnerable populations against a backdrop of mitigating the coronavirus spread.

Coronavirus-related restrictions and the lockdown to municipalities most disproportionately affected peripheral rural and border areas with predominantly elderly and traditional minority populations (Hungarians, Italians, Croats, Roma). The insufficient conditions in many hospitals (14 % infected) and especially nursing homes (26 %), topped by infected staff in general (30 % of all infected) vs. only 8 % of infections among teachers and 4 % among kindergarten staff in urban areas, is certainly a vague argument for school closure. All facets of the Covid-19 restrictions and the negative effects of online schooling are yet to be appraised, but already in the first wave, the psycho-social distress along with the overweight children rose significantly.

School closure, lack of outdoor activity, aberrant dietary and sleeping habits are likely to disrupt children's usual lifestyle and can potentially promote monotony, distress, impatience, annoyance and varied neuropsychiatric manifestations. Incidences of domestic violence, child abuse, adulterated online contents are on the rise. Children of single parent and frontline workers suffer unique problems (Ghosh et al. 2020).

Moreover, regional, and local aspects were not taken sufficiently into account. Tens of municipalities without Covid-19 deaths and with scarce infections are not allowed to return to normal in-school education. where, the misuse of the concept of equal opportunities may be surmised. Cities, in general, have a higher number of cases but lower densities and the chances of transmission can be reduced more easily than within institutions. The highest densities of infections and Covid-19 deaths are in the areas with nursing homes and urban areas with Covid-19 clinics. If we exclude the Covid-19 deaths from nursing homes off the charts, some 75 % of all municipalities become a safe area and the restrictive lockdown is deemed unnecessary.

A regional analysis across municipalities reveals the elderly population mostly in rural and peripheral areas as being the most vulnerable. Especially men (85+) experienced high mortality (52 %) compared to women (32 %), but the overall mortality (40 %) was still much higher than in Bergamo (28 % back in spring). The same goes for mortality in nursing homes and intensive care units. Along with their staff (the highest infection rates) and the industrial and migrant workers (one third of all the infected), these institutions account for 65 % of all the infected with a known source of infection. The official Slovenian data on the source of infection are of limited use or meaningless. They report 55 % to be local transmissions (households, work, vicinity) but with no data on the real source of the infection and the transmission between family members, especially the

elderly and children. An additional 28 % of the infected did not reveal or did not know the source of infection. The transmission from and to children is rare, yet children remain the target of restrictions and in the long run one of the most affected groups.

Considering the initial outburst of Covid-19, combined with the data on the geographical sequence and the increase of the mean age of the infected over days and months, it is possible to conclude that in the first wave infections were transmitted within the group of frequent travellers, especially those travelling by plane, and later concentrated on elderly stationary population with immune deficiencies receiving care mostly from the middle-aged as vehicles of infection. Comparative data from Italy, Slovenia, and Croatia confirm there is an age-specific shift of infections from the relatively younger ones to the relatively older ones. Thus, the geographical sequence in the Covid-19 spread may be discerned.

It is still to be studied how the common state of social fear and uncertainty influences the spread of infections and the disease. Dramatic developments in northern Italian hospitals during the first wave bring to the fore the underestimated role of panic among medical staff and employees during the outbreaks of infections within medical facilities.

Border areas with small municipalities suffered the highest impact of lockdown with no possibility of crossing the border, except in case of cross-border work (mostly in northern – to Austria, and south-eastern border area – from Croatia), resulting in a higher number of infections. The situation in smaller municipalities in the eastern and north-eastern parts of Slovenia is worse compared to those in central and western parts of Slovenia. The combined lockdown to municipalities and school closure were probably the two worst options to which the national coronavirus task force and the government itself resorted.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> According to Miša Pfeifer from the University Clinical Centre of Ljubljana, some 80 % of all SARS-CoV-2 infected persons have mild symptoms, with 15 % experiencing a difficult course of the disease, while 5 % have severe symptoms including cytokine storms which can also be instigated by several other infections such as influenza, pneumonia, and sepsis (Tang et al. 2020).
- <sup>2</sup> In an OECD comparison of 2017 (OECD 2020), Slovenia had 19.1 % of the population aged over 65, followed by Austria (19.2), Croatia (19.7), and Italy (23.0) with almost a fourth of the population aged over 65.
- <sup>3</sup> NIJZ collects the data on the source of infection. The average daily number of infections for the 48<sup>th</sup> week (as of 2 December 2020) was 1,463 with the weekly number of infected medical workers lowering from 1034 in the 45<sup>th</sup> week to 850 in the 48<sup>th</sup> week (NIJZ 2020).
- <sup>4</sup> PCR = Polymerase Chain Reaction is one of the main technics for testing the presence of SARS-CoV-2. Recently, the rapid antigen tests with lower accuracy are considered for population testing *en masse* (Wernhart et al. 2020).
- <sup>5</sup> The latest microbiological analyses of the old wastewater samples in Spain and elsewhere uncover RNA (ribonucleic acid representing the genome of the virus) sequences identical to SARS-CoV-2 in previous years (e.g. Thomas 2020).
- <sup>6</sup> The huge leap in the number of infected persons in Slovenia on 20 October 2020 is unusual. This break in the data series almost doubled the number from the previous day (802 : 1505). While the number of tests did not increase that much, a high rise occurred in the percentage tested positive (18.5 : 25.5 %). Thus, the last week of October 2020 with the national holidays was the peak; afterwards, the season's record of 35 % tested positive was not toppled (NIJZ 2020).
- <sup>7</sup> SARI – severe acute respiratory infection is not to be confused with the Covid-19 disease, though NIJZ includes data on SARI patients as the main pool or a macro-group of respiratory patients including Covid-19 patients.

## Acknowledgements

This publication is part of the research programme Minority and Ethnic Studies and the Slovenian National Question (P5-0081) supported and financed by the Slovenian Research Agency.



**Marija Jurić Pahor**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## 1. Introduction

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

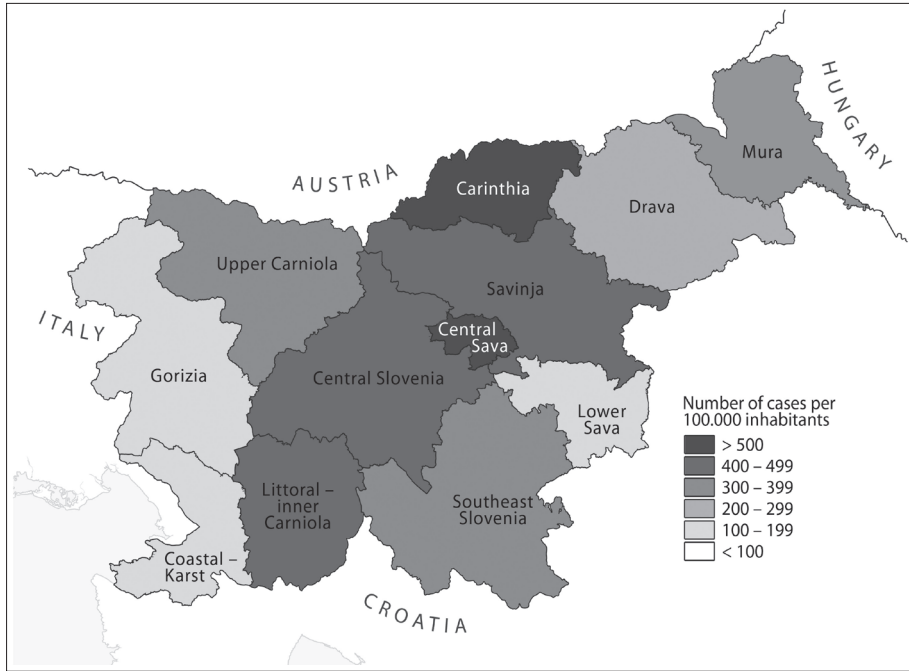
According to Mezzarda and Neilson, the phrase border as method cannot be reduced to some abstract mathematical formula separate from its material context. Quite the contrary: the method derives from material circumstances and, in the case of border, always has two sides that connect and separate, include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

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

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

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

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



Source: NIJZ 2020.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### 4. Acts of Rapprochement in Border Areas

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 5. European Union, Slovenia and the Slovene National Community

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

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

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

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

## 5. 1 Cross-Border Integration and Nationalism

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

## 6. Conclusion

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

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

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

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## Notes

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

## Acknowledgment

The article was written under the research programme Slovenhood Dimensions between Local and Global at the Beginning of the Third Millennium (P5-0409), funded by the Slovenian Research Agency.



Sara Brezigar

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## The Slovene Community in Italy and the Covid-19 Pandemic

Italy was the first country of the Western world to experience the outburst of the Covid-19 pandemic, and slowing it down required a swift and sizable adaptation of all aspects of life in Italy. Based on a preliminary qualitative study and relying on existing primary and secondary data sources, the author explores the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on the Slovene community in Italy. Although the community shared the same fate as the rest of Italy's population in terms of restrictive measures and limitations to human rights, the author argues that some of the measures had a different, sometimes disproportionate and harmful effect on the community. Similarly, the changes in *modus vivendi et operandi* of the minority and its members that appeared as a side-effect of the pandemic may alter significantly the functioning of the minority in the future, and wider integration processes in the cross-border region may be slowed down or even reversed.

**Keywords:** Slovenes in Italy, Slovene minority, Slovene community, Covid-19, border, integration, home-schooling, minority education.

### Slovenska skupnost v Italiji in pandemija bolezni covid-19

*Italija je bila prva država Zahodnega sveta, ki se je soočila z izbruhom pandemije bolezni covid-19. Na podlagi preliminarne kvalitativne študije in upoštevajoč razpoložljive primarne in sekundarne podatke in informacije avtorica raziskuje učinke pandemije covid-19 na slovensko skupnost v Italiji. Čeprav je skupnost delila usodo s preostalo populacijo v Italiji v smislu restriktivnih ukrepov in omejitev človekovih pravic, avtorica meni, da so imeli nekateri ukrepi na skupnost različne, ponekod sorazmerno večje in celo škodljive učinke. Razlike v načinu življenja in delovanja, ki so se pojavile kot stranski učinki pandemije, bi lahko pomembno spremenile delovanje skupnosti v prihodnje, procesi integracije v čezmejnem prostoru pa bi se lahko upočasnili ali celo zastali.*

**Ključne besede:** Slovenci v Italiji, slovenska manjšina, slovenska skupnost, covid-19, meja, integracija, solanje na daljavo, manjšinsko izobraževanje.

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## 1. Introduction

Italy was the first European state and the first one in the Western world to experience the devastating effects of the Covid-19 pandemic that by October 2020 resulted in 350,000 infections and nearly 36,000 deaths, with the bulk of them shocking the world in the pandemic's first wave in spring (Johns Hopkins University & Medicine, 2020). Italy found itself in the enviable position of facing an epidemic with limited knowledge of the disease and no previous experience on how to deal with it. Its only source of information (and experience) was China, which was itself facing a surge of Covid-19 cases and was barely able to contain its wave of epidemic in Wuhan, province of Hubei.

In early January, when the pandemic was developing in China, Italy strengthened its health controls and provisions at international airports. But it was not until mid-February that the first clusters of cases were discovered in Northern Italy and the Italian Government proceeded to gradually implement measures to stop and later slow down the outbreak of Covid-19 – measures that eventually resulted in a widespread lockdown of the country and brought to a complete halt of public life by mid-March.

An additional burden to the already difficult situation was posed by measures implemented by other European countries. These included national bans on selling protective equipment to other Member States (including Italy) and tighter border controls and even border closures that further jeopardized the Schengen agreements, already under strain due to years of disagreements about illegal immigrations.

The Slovene community in Friuli Venezia Giulia is one of the national minorities living along the Slovene-Italian border. As such, it was affected both by the general measures adopted by the Italian state to combat the Covid-19 pandemic and by the change of border regimes. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the hidden costs of the pandemic for national minorities have been a concern for experts and scholars alike. The Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, in its statement of 28 May, stressed that the Covid-19 crisis has exacerbated the vulnerability of certain national minorities in Council of Europe member States and deepened existing inequalities, giving rise to discrimination, hate speech, stigma, and as a side effect of the implemented measures, endangered the enjoyment of some rights and freedoms including limited freedom of expression and unequal access to education (CoE Advisory Committee 2020).<sup>1</sup> The UN High Commissioner for National Minorities Fernand de Varennes warned that minorities were being used as scapegoats, instrumentalised by opportunists, nationalists and extremists (Eurac Research 2020b). In his opinion, some right-wing groups already started using the pandemic as part of a wider strategy, once the vulnerabilities of certain minorities became evident (Eurac Research 2020b).

De Varennes' opinion is to a certain extent shared also by Joseph Marko, who maintains that the pandemic has, under the guise of pro-human rights demonstrations, created a new wave of intolerance, of nationalism and racism, as for example in Germany, where anti-Covid measures protests are led by nationalists and anti-semitists (Eurac Research 2020a). According to Marko, every pandemic provides an x-ray of states and societies and reveals their strengths and weaknesses, in our case the strengths and weaknesses of liberal democracies and pluralistic and diverse societies (Eurac Research 2020a).

From a European point of view, the pandemic brought about a break-down of multilateralism that has already been losing its importance for some time, maintains Ilze Brands-Kehris (Eurac Research 2020a). The pandemic caused the closure of borders, a revival of bilateral agreements between countries (Marko in Eurac Research 2020a), and European integration was brought down to its knees both on the (wealthier) North - (poorer) South Divide and the East-West Divide when the closed borders restricted the free movement of workers from the East to the West, thus undermining the functioning of healthcare, geriatric care, nursing homes, agricultural and other industries (Erizanu 2020; Marko in Eurac Research 2020a). In this new polarized reality, incredible levels of micro-solidarity coexist with egotism (Marko in Eurac Research 2020a), and processes of increased social distancing coexist with the needs for better social cohesion.

Ilze Bands-Kehris (Eurac Research 2020a) sees the pandemic as an opportunity to revive multilateralism, since nobody can beat the pandemic alone. In terms of the impact of these processes on minorities, Palermo (Eurac Research 2020c) warns that conflicting processes are taking place, with states heavily relying on centralization – a side-product of which were border closures that deeply affected minorities and their relationship with kin-states (cf. Sia Spiliopoulou Åkermark (Eurac Research 2020c); Sergiu Constantin (Eurac Research 2020c)) – and, at the same time, showing solidarity to one another, as in the case of Italian patients being treated in Austria and Germany.

Marko (Eurac Research 2020a) adopts a gloomier view: he suggests that we are headed towards a marginalisation of national minorities, which can already be seen in the in-existent communication of Covid-related issues in national minority languages in Austria, a concern shared also by the Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (CoE 2020), which also observed a lack of relevant (Covid-related) information in minority languages (CoE 2020). According to Marko (Eurac Research 2020a), the marginalisation of national minorities leads to segregation and assimilation which could become the new normal of national minorities in Europe, replacing processes and patterns of integration. Although Andrea Carlà (Eurac Research 2020d) agrees that minorities are generally more affected by the coronavirus pandemic in social and economic aspects of their life, including health and schooling, Roberta Windischer-Medda (Eurac Research 2020b) warns that not

all minorities are equally vulnerable, especially if we concentrate on the economic aspects of their vulnerability.

The Slovene community in Italy represents a well-integrated community, both from a social and economic point of view. In an effort to understand the effect of the pandemic on this national minority in particular and to investigate how the life of its members has changed during the first wave of the epidemic and in its aftermath, a preliminary qualitative study has been conducted among representatives of the Slovene community in Italy.

After a short methodological introduction, the first part of the paper presents a short overview of the development of the pandemic in Italy, providing a factual framework and highlighting the most relevant sociological and psychological factors to understand its possible effect on the Slovene community. The paper then proceeds to present and discuss the most salient results of the study.

## 2. Methodology of the Study

The study represents a part of a larger qualitative study aimed at understanding the processes of changes in six fields of minority's life, namely schooling, political and economic participation, language, media and free-time activities (sport and cultural activities), with six separate, but for certain interviewees combined, questionnaires.

For the purposes of this paper, 15 interviewees, answering questionnaires related to schooling (5 interviewees), political participation (5), language (2), free time activities (3) were asked to answer an additional set of Covid-related questions. It should be noted that the interviewees in this section were not constrained by the topic of the basic questionnaire (related to schooling, political participation, language, etc.), but were asked a general set of questions, pertaining to

- their personal experience of Covid-19;
- their perceptions and observations related to the challenges, changes and opportunities that this new situation provides for the community, both inwardly and outwardly, in any of the fields covered, and in any other aspects raised by the interviewees themselves;
- and their outlook for the future, in particular in terms of the impact of the pandemics on the minority.

The body of interviewees comprised seven representatives and two former representatives of minority organisations, four schooling system employees, and two experts on minority issues. An important limitation of the study – beside the scope of preliminary qualitative studies – stems from the fact that interviewees were selected on the basis of the needs of the larger qualitative study and not based on the set of Covid-related questions, which would have probably been slightly different if that were the case.

Qualitative data were arranged by transcription and thematic coding of codes, concepts and categories, which enabled us to organise the concepts by relatedness (or connection) and a comprehensive analysis of qualitative data.

In order to provide a factual framework for the aforementioned study, existing primary and secondary data were used extensively, in particular news and legal documents pertaining to the development of the pandemic in Italy.

### 3. The Covid-19 Outbreak in Italy and Its (Side-) Effects on the Slovene Community

Being aware of the close ties between Italy and China (Ceccagno 2015; Times of India 2020; Bindi 2019; Santini et al. 2011, Wu 2008, Dassu 2000), as early as 26 January, with no Covid-19 cases yet detected in Europe, the Ministry of Health strengthened its operations at the two international airports in Rome (Fiumicino) and Milan (Malpensa) (Ministero della Salute 2020), including temperature measurements. On 31 January (ENAC 2020), just a day after the first two cases of Coronavirus had been detected among two Chinese tourists in Rome (Severgnini 2020), Italy already decided to ban all direct flights from China and declare the state of emergency (Delibera del Consiglio dei ministri 31 gennaio 2020).<sup>2</sup> The decision to ban direct flights was later criticised as ineffective, since passengers simply switched to indirect flights to China (Sciorilli Borelli 2020), but the declaration of the state of emergency enabled the Government to swiftly implement measures needed to deal with the outbreak of the pandemic.

This 2 days snapshot of the beginning of the pandemic is, in a certain sense, a good predictor of what was to come in the following months in terms of Italy's response to this unprecedented challenge. Italy was unprepared, had little knowledge about the disease and proceeded mostly with a pattern of trial and error. Unlike China and other Asian and African states that in the recent past had faced previous epidemics such as SARS, MERS and EBOLA, Italy had no experience whatsoever in how to deal with an epidemic of this magnitude. And, more importantly, neither had its population.

Since the first clusters of cases were detected in mid-February, Italy's response to the challenges of the epidemic had been swift and encompassing, prioritising the health and life of its population (at the expense of its economic interests). On 21 February, the Minister of Health Speranza adopted a Decree (Ordinanza 21 febbraio 2020) requiring people of the so-called red zones to either self-isolate or be put in compulsory quarantine. On 23 February, as many as 50,000 people were put into quarantine (Decreto-Legge 23 febbraio 2020), and restrictions tightened in the following few months with the adoption of nine Prime Minister's Decrees (DPCM 1–2, 2020; DPCM 4–10, 2020) that deeply affected the lives of the Italian population and put the country in a total lockdown.

The toll of the pandemics in Italy was extremely high in spring, both in terms of the number of Covid-19 patients requiring medical assistance and the number of deaths (CSSE 2020). The Italian society was transfixed by at least two important shocks – the photos of the Italian army trucks carrying out corpses of Covid-19 victims, because the facilities to dispose of the bodies in Bergamo were unable to cope with the number of corpses (Il Giorno 2020), and the knowledge that doctors were using war protocols when deciding whom to treat and whom to let die (Mellina 2020).

The outburst of the pandemic required an unprecedented and swift change of attitudes and behaviours among the population. Its slowness to understand the gravity of the situation and to adapt to it was evident when schools were closed to contain the outbreak and there was a mass exodus towards skiing facilities (Martini 2020). A similar mass exodus happened when a Prime Minister's Decree was leaked on 7 March, prescribing a lockdown of several Northern Italian Provinces and the Region Lombardia, producing a mass flight to Southern Italy (Ratto Trabucco 2020). And also before, when quarantine was enforced in the 11 red zones in Northern Italy, attempts to flee were reported (Santarpia 2020).<sup>3</sup> These are only a few examples of the difficulties related to the required changes of attitudes and behaviours that in the following months extended far beyond limitations to personal freedom into new practices of home schooling and home-working and processes of digitalization and informatization on a massive scale in all areas of life.

For the Slovene minority in Italy, the pandemic initiated a process towards a life devoid of community interaction, including cultural and sports events and other activities that have been crucial for the maintenance and reproduction of the community itself for decades. Such activities, combined with schooling in Slovene, represent the cornerstone of the linguistic reproduction of the minority. For a considerable number of children, home schooling curtailed the opportunities to hear and speak the minority language, therefore weakening their linguistic skills and rendering the minority more vulnerable to processes of linguistic assimilation (Bogatec et al. 2020). The media of the Slovene minority in Italy provided additional educational materials and programmes as did other media in Italy and abroad (Bogatec et al. 2020), but for the Slovene minority in Italy the media space in the minority language is rather limited (Lantschner et al. 2012), which is especially true for TV contents that small children tend to consume on a daily basis. Whereas the tendency of the European countries to protect their population by tightening border controls and “retreating into themselves” resulted in Italy feeling abandoned in its time of need by its European counterparts (Indelicato 2020), the impact of the new regime on border communities, including the Slovene community in Italy, was more dramatic. It disrupted the lives of people crossing the border on a daily basis for family, schooling and work-related reasons, while the local economies on both sides of the border that had flourished



due to cross-border movement of people were put under severe strain and a decisive governmental action was required to limit the damage (Marussig 2020).

In order to gather a more detailed and in-depth understanding of the dynamics caused by Covid-19 in the case of the Slovene community in Italy, a qualitative study was carried out aiming to uncover the most salient changes faced by the minority. In the following chapters we will present the results of the study, assembled in (sets of) topics that were most frequently debated by interviewees, as well as their perceptions and opinions.

## 4. Results of the Study and Discussion

### 4.1 Specific Vulnerabilities of the Slovene Community

Most of the interviewees agree that the pandemic represented a shock for the Italian society in general and that the Slovene community faced some different or additional challenges. They identify the specific circumstances of national minorities as those defining a set of different challenges faced by the Slovene community in Italy. Interviewee 1 expressed these thoughts (shared also by interviewees 3, 5 and 6) as follows: "Covid was a great shock for the society, and especially for the Slovene minority, which is in a rather fragile and vulnerable state".

Some interviewees expressed the feeling that Covid-19 exacerbated the challenges that already existed for some time, such as the inclusion of non-Slovene speaking pupils, inadequate teaching methods for children who do not speak Slovene, a lack of didactic materials and tools, etc. (cf. Brezigar 2020; Brezigar & Zver 2019; Bogatec 2015). In this respect, interviewees seem to echo Marko's previously mentioned assessment that the pandemic provided an X-ray of our society (Eurac Research 2020a). Interviewee 4, for example, pointed out that this was by all means the case in education, where problems and challenges that had been there before became more evident and pressing.<sup>4</sup> Interviewee 7, on the other hand, pointed out another specific vulnerability of the Slovene community, namely infrastructural problems (i.e. Internet connections) that also in pre-Covid times undermined the development of the economy in border areas. During the lock-down, these problems severely undercut the efforts of the community to function and caused numerous problems in home-schooling, as well. As interviewee 1 explained it:

[T]he infrastructure is lacking exactly in this border area [...] there are a lot of grey zones [...] Dolina/San Dorligo della Valle, Zgonik/Sgonico, Repentabor/Rupingrande do not have good internet connections. The same situation is with Sovodnje/Savogna d'Isonzo, Števerjan/San Floriano del Collio, Doberdob/Doberdo del Lago, Rezija/Resia is o.k., but Benečija/Slavia Veneta is all grey. There are areas of Carnia that are well serviced, so it seems to me that this has to do with the regional policy [...] and it puts our minority at a disadvantage (Interviewee 1).

## 4.2 Home-Schooling: Its Effect and the Specific Challenges for Schools with Slovene as Language of Instruction

Since home-schooling was a major challenge produced by the pandemic, it does not come as a surprise that several interviewees touched upon it. Interviewee 11 pointed out that schools with Slovene as language of instruction (hereinafter as schools with SLI) did not have the instruments to face this situation, and since the language of instruction was different from the one used in all the other public schools in Italy, the ability of schools with SLI to rely on the ad hoc instruments prepared for Italian schools was minimal: “Secondary schools seem to have adapted more easily, whereas primary schools and kindergartens faced the most severe challenges,” explains interviewee 11, whose estimate and perception could be attributed to a greater autonomy of older children in the learning process, less need of parent involvement in the day to day learning process, and the children’s higher level of linguistic skills in Slovene which could render the adaptation to distance learning easier.

Beside the infrastructural problems that made it difficult for families to adapt to home-schooling and the challenges that were common to home-schooling in general (lack of IT equipment and skills among children and parents) (Bogatec et al. 2020), interviewees pointed out additional challenges faced by schools with SLI. One of those seems to have been “the home schooling of non-Slovene speaking children, therefore those children who at home speak another language, possibly Italian”, explains interviewee 13. According to Bogatec et al. (2020), there are roughly one quarter of children attending schools with SLI that consider Slovene as their mother tongue, and more than 40 % that have another language (mostly Italian) as their sole mother tongue. In terms of institutions from kindergarten to secondary schools, the lower the level of education, the higher the percentage of children with non-Slovene languages as mother tongues, with kindergartens having on average 55 % of children with non-Slovene mother tongue (Bogatec et al. 2020). Given this situation, it is not hard to imagine the difficulties faced by parents, who frequently themselves did not speak Slovene and were unable to help children during their home-schooling efforts, leaving them to their own devices (Bogatec et al. 2020).

Interviewee 13 summarized the consequences of this long home-schooling period – which in Italy started on 5 March (DPCM3 2020) and continued to the end of the school year, with children getting back to school only in September 2020, as follows:

Non-Slovene parents relied on other structures [such as student’s home – *Dijaški dom*, author’s note] to help their children with homework or enrolled them into full-day schooling [as opposed to half-day schooling, author’s note] exactly because they were not able to help them with their homework in Slovene. And now these arrangements fell apart and they – [...] were desperate, helpless.

Interviewee 13 suggested that because of this bad experience, non-Slovene parents may decide to enrol children into Italian schools for the next school year, just to avoid another situation like this. Interviewee 1 pointed out that these are not empty fears, citing a case in Milje/Muggia, where in a particularly vulnerable school setting a whole grade 5 class (of 5 children) already switched to an Italian school at the beginning of the school year 2021/22, and a whole class was simply – gone. Bearing in mind that the interviewee has provided an explanation for these parents' decision that might or might not be true in this particular case, other interviewees (2, 5, 6, 12) have also made recollections of cases of parents that supposedly decided to switch schools and cited home-schooling as a crucial factor in such decisions. Similarly, interviewees 2, 6, and 7 expressed their concerns that this home-schooling experience may encourage Italian speaking parents to enrol their children into schools with Italian as language of instruction – therefore choosing a safer option for the future, in case the pandemic continues in the fall.

Several interviewees highlighted the pandemic as the factor that rendered the vulnerabilities of schools with SLI more evident, citing a possible emigration of children towards schools with Italian as language of instruction. However, during these interviews, another issue emerged, more unclear, about children moving from schools with SLI in Italy to schools in Slovenia. Although interviewee 13 points out that the closure of the border will probably cause parents who have enrolled children in Slovenia to rethink their decision, interviewee 1 maintains that, regardless of border issues, some parents have already decided to enrol their children into educational institutions in Slovenia, especially in kindergartens. Interviewee 1 points out that during the coronavirus crisis parents perceived that the structures in Slovenia were better organized and better prepared, due to Slovenia's more family-oriented policies. Although it is true that in Slovenia the schools (and kindergartens) re-opened already on 8 May and that schools could rely on multiple on-line resources for remote teaching, further research is needed in order to verify the actual dynamics the coronavirus set in motion regarding education among pupils of schools with SLI.

Nevertheless, based on these interviews, we can argue that schools with SLI were not winners in this situation, which seems to support Andrea Carlà's suggestions that minorities were generally more affected by the coronavirus pandemic in certain areas of life, including schooling (Eurac Research 2020d).

### 4.3 Closure of the Border

All interviewees agree that the closure of the Slovene-Italian border was probably the biggest shock for the Slovene community in this situation:

Although I can understand the fear, based on what was going on in Italy, the measures were really drastic. We've spent two decades increasing the border flow, with more and

more people living on one side of the border, working or going to school on the other, or different family members living on different sides of the border [...] we have built a common space, also from a residential point of view, the population got mixed [...] and it puts us now right back in the past (Interviewee 2).

The biggest shock, I think, it was for the young people, who have never experienced a truly closed border or barely remember border controls. Seeing physical blockades on the road [...] it was shocking, they were horrified (Interviewee 7).

What really hurt was that the most drastic measures – piles of stones being thrown on local cart tracks and roads – were taken by local political representatives, exactly by those who should have an understanding, a sensitivity for these issues (Interviewee 1).

Some of the interviewees (2, 7, 11) expressed their concerns about the damage to the local economy that “lives off trans-border life” (interviewee 7), others (interviewees 1, 9) pointed out that the centralized approach of the countries that retreated into themselves echoed Palermo’s conclusions on centralization of state’s responses (Eurac Research 2020c). Such a centralized approach, moreover, undermined any possibility of cooperation between the Region Friuli Venezia Giulia and the Republic of Slovenia, who shared a similar epidemiologic situation, as explained by interviewee 2. “On this cooperation we need to work”, explains interviewee 1.

Stemming from border issues, two new topics of discussion were developed during the interviews: one regarding the relationship of the Slovene minority in Italy with its kin-state, and the other about the impact of Covid-19 on European integration.

#### 4.4 Relationship with the Kin-State

As regards the relationship of the Slovene community in Italy with its kin-state, most interviewees suggest that the border issue had a negative effect on such relationship. Interviewee 1 explains it in a comprehensive manner as follows:

The strong emotional ties between the Slovene community and the kin-state – at least for a part of the community – started to loosen already after the independence of Slovenia, when the border flow increased. The closure of the border with these physical barriers in the middle of the street that were circulating on media and social media didn’t help at all. [O]verall, it was a difficult year, with the new 12<sup>th</sup> June municipality holiday, then all the issues of 13 July, with the National House, Bazovica/Basovizza, the Foibe [...]. On the surface, of course we have seen a loosening of the ties with the kin-state, mistrust, unhappiness. [...] and although things were rational [made sense from a rational point of view, author’s note], from an emotional point of view it was more difficult. There is this sense of alienation from the kin-state. This feeling that in case of trouble, the kin-state will abandon us (Interviewee 1).

The feeling of abandonment is shared also by other interviewees. Interviewee 7, for example, explains that “the kin-state is far far away”, and interviewee 2 points out that “the gap between the minority and the kin-state has widened considerably”.

This situation, however, was not exceptional. As Constantin pointed out, most minorities were completely disregarded, even left out in the cold by their kin-states during the outbreak. As Palermo pointed out, Austria had little understanding for South Tyrol (Eurac Research 2020c). Constantin added that also the “most open border” in Europe between Germany and Denmark was abruptly closed, whereas Sia Spiliopoulou Åkermark from the Peace Institute in Åland Island stressed that Finland, not Sweden cut off Åland Island from the world (Eurac Research 2020c).

Although most interviewees agree that the closure of border was a low point in the relationship of the Slovene community with its kin-state, their views on the longer term impact of border closures (and subsequent introduction of border regimes) differ, with some (interviewees 2, 4, 5) pointing out that people will start making decisions on where to live, work and go to school in a different manner from now onwards, whereas others (interviewees 7, 9, 13) are more cautious about predicting any possible long-term effects.

#### 4.5 The Effect of the Outbreak on the Functioning of the Community

A final set of observations provided by the interviewees pertained to the functioning of the community during the outbreak. Apart from the already mentioned challenges regarding schooling and infrastructure, most interviewees painted a picture that was well-balanced in terms of positive and negative consequences of Covid-19 for the community as a whole. From an organizational point of view, interviewee 4 stressed that the community has become more efficient in its work; that meetings are held online and that, unlike before the outbreak, there is usually a 100 % show rate of invitees, as observed by interviewee 1, who explained: “we travel less, but we are more connected”.

Interviewee 15 points out that from an organizational point of view the community is more efficient, more focused, and that an incredible improvement took place in the quality of the way the minority works. In areas such as culture, where activities had to be dropped due to social distancing, new formulas of online events (via streaming) have developed. “Culture is moving online,” explains interviewee 1, who also points out that this might bring also more understanding and interest for forms of culture that were previously underdeveloped in the community, such as painting exhibitions.

Moreover, from an economic point of view, interviewee 10 explains that the local tourism was revived and the “local reality came to life”.

A very significant observation of interviewees 1, 2, 7 and 9 regards the crisis as a sort of catalyst that has improved the cooperation abilities of primary organizations in the community, speeding up projects that under different circumstances would have taken years to develop and giving rise to incredible synergies, such as the cooperation between the Slovene Regional Economic Union (SDGZ) and Farmer's Union (KZ), or the project Digital School (Digitalna šola), that was born from a concerted effort of the Regional Office for Slovene Schools and the Slovene Regional Economic Union, with the financial backing of ZKB Bank.

According to interviewees 1 and 5, an important source of synergies was also the Central Office for Slovene Language that provided translations of documents and materials regarding Covid-19 to be used by public authorities on the territory where the minority lives (Slovenščina v javni upravi – Centralni urad za slovenski jezik 2020). According to interviewees 1 and 5, there was a spill-over effect from the work of the Central Office to the community, because these documents and modules were available also to minority organizations, possibly representing a small step towards improving the poor linguistic landscape of the Slovene community in Italy (Mezgec 2019).

## 5. Conclusion

Windischer-Medda (Eurac Research 2020b) warned that the Covid-19 outbreak might have different effects on different minorities, because of their different degrees of vulnerability. Differences stem from their socio-political and economic status, their linguistic standing, as well as the stage of development and implementation of their minority rights. In the case of Slovenes in Italy, the outbreak on one side exacerbated pre-existing vulnerabilities of the community, especially in the field of language and education, possibly taking them closer to a breaking point, whereas on the other hand it prompted an incredibly swift change of the *modus operandi et vivendi* of the community that was inconceivable before the pandemic. In a few months the scaffolding of the community was modernized, giving also rise to new processes of much needed horizontal cooperation. It will be left to see if this snowball will continue to roll and will bring to further changes that will render both the community more adaptable to future challenges and its functioning more suitable for the times to come.

The outbreak revealed in its crudest form the challenges of the educational system of the Slovene community in Italy and exposed its structural failings to a greater degree than ever before. This experience should serve as a final call to rethink the role of schools with SLI and to invest a major effort into diminishing their marginalization and strengthening their added-value in this environment.

Finally, the closure of the border could have jeopardized years of cross-border cooperation and the creation of a common cross-border space. Since several

minorities in Europe experienced the same fate, this seems to be, indeed, a phenomenon that exceeds the Slovene-Italian dimension and opens up important questions regarding European integration in the future. Again, it could be a wake-up call to put in place stronger, more resilient structures to safeguard integration processes, as one of the interviewees suggested, or it may signal a reverse process, as Marko (Eurac Research 2020a) suggests, towards segregation and assimilation of minorities.

Regardless, the closure of the Slovene-Italian border and the subsequent border controls imposed by the Republic of Slovenia pose a significant threat to the concept of a common Slovenian (cultural) space, which includes the kin-state and neighbouring Slovene minorities: it seems that in the minds of at least a part of the minority, the concept has lost its credibility and Slovenia's commitment to it, as well. It will be interesting in the future years to observe whether the Republic of Slovenia will try to restore faith in this concept and develop it, or let it rest in ashes.

## Interviews<sup>5</sup>

Interviewee 1 – Primary organisation, answering the questionnaire on political participation.

Interviewee 2 – Primary organisation, answering the questionnaire on political participation.

Interviewee 3 – Public service, answering the questionnaire on schooling.

Interviewee 4 – Primary organisation, answering the questionnaire on political participation.

Interviewee 5 – Public service, answering the questionnaire on language.

Interviewee 6 – Public service, answering the questionnaire on schooling.

Interviewee 7 – Primary organisation, answering the questionnaire on political participation.

Interviewee 8 – Public service, answering the questionnaire on schooling.

Interviewee 9 – Primary organisation, answering the questionnaire on political participation.

Interviewee 10 – Primary organisation, answering the questionnaire on free time activities.

Interviewee 11 – Primary organisation, answering the questionnaire on language.

Interviewee 12 – Primary organisation, answering the questionnaire on free-time activities.

Interviewee 13 – Primary organisation, answering the questionnaire on free-time activities.

Interviewee 14 – Public service, answering the questionnaire on schooling.

Interviewee 15 – Primary organisation, answering the questionnaire on free-time activities.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> It should be noted that also the Chair of the Committee of Experts of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages Vesna Crnić-Grotić expressed her concerns about the impact of the pandemic on national minorities, in particular about the widespread absence of regional or minority languages from official information and communication about Covid-19 (CoE 2020), and called for a renewed commitment to protect minority rights in Europe (Crnić-Grotić 2020).
- <sup>2</sup> According to the Italian legal system, the declaration of the state of emergency allows the Prime Minister / President of the Council of Ministers to adopt Decrees of the President of the Council of Ministers (DPCM) that function as laws, but do not require the approval of the parliament. The Decrees, however, have a limited time-span of two months, after which they need to be adopted by the parliament as Decree-Law (Decreto-Legge) that has always a time-limited frame.

<sup>3</sup> See also Gastaldi (2020), The Local (2020), Il Messaggero (2020).

<sup>4</sup> On minority's challenges and problems in the field of education see Brezigar and Zver (2019), Brezigar (2020), Bogatec et al. (2020), Bogatec (2015).

<sup>5</sup> In order to protect the anonymity of the interviewees, the list includes their affiliation to either public service or minority organisations (primary organisations), depending in which capacity they were invited to participate in the wider study, from which also the data for this paper originate. Participants from primary organisations include full and/or part-time employees and (paid and/or unpaid) formal representatives of organisations. Interviewees related to the public service include employees in the state, regional, and/or local apparatus, as well as teachers and/or other school-related employees.

## Acknowledgment

Part of this study was carried out on the Institute for Ethnic Studies under the research project Analysis of the situation of the Slovene minority in Italy and its developmental perspective (Contr. Nr. Z-S-19/20), funded by the Government Office for Slovenians Abroad.

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## The Italian National Community in Slovenia during the Covid-19 Epidemic

The article presents the views and opinions of the members of the Italian national community regarding the organisation of their institutions and schools and regarding state borders with Italy and Croatia during the Covid-19 epidemic in Slovenia. The main purpose of the study, which took the form of a telephone interview, was to explore the situation of the Italian national community during this period. Given the uncertainty awaiting it in the future, the Italian national community will need to find new ways to get closer to its members.

**Keywords:** Italian national community, Covid-19, Italian Communities, schools with Italian as the language of instruction, state borders.

### Italijanska narodna skupnost v Sloveniji v času epidemije covid-19

*V prispevku so predstavljena stališča in mnenja pripadnikov italijanske narodne skupnosti glede organiziranosti narodnostnih ustanov in šol ter vprašanja državnih mej z Italijo in Hrvaško v času epidemije covid-19 v Sloveniji. Glavni namen študije, ki je potekala v obliki telefonskega intervjuja, je bil prikazati razmere, s katerimi se je spopadala italijanska narodna skupnost v tem obdobju. Glede na negotovost, ki jo čaka v prihodnosti, bo italijanska narodna skupnost morala poiskati nove načine, da se približa svojim pripadnikom in članom.*

**Ključne besede:** italijanska narodna skupnost, covid-19, Skupnosti Italijanov, šole z italijanskim učnim jezikom, državne meje.

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## 1. Introduction

The SARS-CoV-2 (Covid-19) pandemic, which started in late December last year, quickly spread from China to Europe. The country most affected by the virus was Slovenia's neighbour Italy, where hundreds of infections were reported in just one month. Seeing the situation in the neighbouring country, Slovenia began to seek solutions straightaway, adopting a national plan to prevent the spread of infections in order to avoid a possible overload of the healthcare system. The first case of Covid-19 in Slovenia was reported on 4 March 2020 and on 12 March the Slovenian government officially declared an epidemic. Kindergartens and schools were closed on 16 March, and so were non-essential services such as cinemas and fitness and sports centres. Public transport and air transport were also suspended. A temporary prohibition of public events followed on 20 March. At the end of the month, movement between municipalities was banned, with the exception of a few emergencies such as business travel or assistance to family members (Government of the Republic of Slovenia 2020a).

Within a month, social life came to a halt. As non-essential services were closed, most people found themselves at home, waiting for work or on leave, while others continued to work remotely using a variety of digital platforms. Schools had to reorganise themselves very quickly to be able to implement remote learning or teaching in online classrooms and to ensure equal access to materials, assignments and knowledge to all pupils.

Adapting to the new way of life and work changed people's priorities and daily lives. Live meetings were replaced by virtual meetings and technology became a life necessity. Moreover, the virus also changed the dynamics of socialisation and rearranged interpersonal relationships: the young, more adept at using modern technology, helped their parents in using a computer, children provided for their parents by shopping for groceries and running errands for them.

In this context, also the Italian national community had to reorganise itself rapidly in line with government measures to curb the spread of infections. Already in the first week of March, even before the epidemic was officially declared in Slovenia, many planned events such as concerts and book presentations with expected attendance from Italy had been cancelled. Italy soon became an actual hotbed of Covid-19 in Europe, with hundreds of infections recorded on a daily basis. In order to minimise infections resulting from the movement of people between neighbouring countries, the Slovenian government ordered that borders be closed. The closure of the borders with the neighbouring countries, especially Italy and Croatia, was a major blow to all residents of Slovenian Istria, particularly the members of the Italian national community who found themselves cut off from their kin-nation and from the Italian part of the population of Croatian Istria. In fact, despite being a line of separation, the border is also a connecting element where the needs and desires for cooperation are concentrated. Cross-

border cooperation strengthens neighbourly relations between local or regional communities. As such, it is not always related only to the presence of a minority in the border area, but also to the presence of the majority population. Thus, also in the Slovenian-Italian and Slovenian-Croatian border areas, these two aspects intertwine. In our case, however, cross-border relations involve three countries and, consequently, several groups on both sides of the two borders, which leads to a much larger number and diversity of relations between them, not all of which are equally relevant for interethnic relations in the border area. Yet in our case, with the Italian community at the centre of our consideration, the complexity of the established model<sup>1</sup> of the Italian national community's integration and cross-border cooperation is changing and gaining new dimensions as a result of the current situation. In such regard, the question arises as to whether all these changes can affect the vitality of the national community. Assuming they do, we ask ourselves how members of the Italian national community did and will adapt to the new situation. Will there be a new model of organisation and integration? In an attempt to answer these questions, a study was conducted, the results of which are presented below.

In order to understand the new/different reality that changes the existing patterns of contacts of the members of the Italian national community with Italy as their nation of origin and with the members of the Italian national community in Croatia, the next chapter outlines the situation of the Italian national community in general.

## 2. The Italian National Community in Slovenia

Due to its geographical and strategic location, the territory of Slovenian Istria is a melting pot of different nations and cultures. Another characteristic of this area is the frequent changing of political authority, especially from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards when the governing countries and, consequently, borders often changed, which affected the composition of its population. After World War II, the Italian eastern border became a recurrent subject of debate. With the signing of the Paris Peace Treaty (in 1947), the Free Territory of Trieste was established, which comprised two zones: Zone A, which included Trieste, and Zone B, which included Slovenian Istria and was administered by the Yugoslav Army. Following the signing of the London Memorandum (in 1954), the entire Zone B came under Yugoslav administration and a significant part of the Italian population therefore moved to Italy.<sup>2</sup> The vacated towns were settled by Slovenians from the hinterland and members of other nations. With the Treaty of Osimo (in 1975), Yugoslav sovereignty over Zone B was finally recognised. This marked the beginning of the protection of the Italian minority (Sedmak 2005, 92; Ivetic 2006).

After the break-up of Yugoslavia in 1991, the autochthonous Italian population was separated by the new state border between Slovenia and Croatia. Members of the Italian nationality from Slovenian Istria, who had already been separated from their kin-nation, thus found themselves divided between two countries. At the 1991 census, 2,959 persons identified themselves as members of the Italian national community, and 3,882 persons listed Italian as their mother tongue (SORS 1991). At the 2002 census,<sup>3</sup> 2,258 persons identified themselves as members of the Italian national community, and 3,736 people listed Italian as their mother tongue. This accounts for 0.11 % of the entire population of Slovenia. In the ethnically mixed area of Slovenian Istria, 81.5 % or 1840 persons identified themselves as members of the Italian national community, and approximately 18.5 % identified themselves as such outside the ethnically mixed area (SORS 2002). With Slovenia's accession to the European Union and the Schengen area and with the introduction of free movement, the divisions of the previous century were overcome, but the border with Croatia in Istria was strengthened, making the activity of the Italian national community much more difficult.

The constitutions of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the Socialist Republic of Slovenia already included provisions on the protection of national communities, which significantly contributed to the preservation of the Italian national community. In fact, Article 77 of the 1963 Constitution stipulated that Slovenia guarantees the free expression of affiliation, the equality of the Italian language, and the possibility of overall development and progress. The 1974<sup>4</sup> Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Slovenia guaranteed the Italian national community and its members special rights under Articles 250 and 251: free use of their language, free expression and development of national culture, the possibility to establish special organisations for this purpose, free use of their national symbols. In the ethnically mixed area, the use of Italian was equal to Slovenian, and the members of minorities were provided with education in their own language. Slovenia was committed to foster the development of the community in all areas. It also supported the contacts of the Italian nationality with the kin-nation (Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Slovenia 1974; Klemenčič & Zupančič 2004, 184).

The 1991 Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia preserves and upgrades the special rights of the Italian national community. According to Article 11, in those municipalities where the Italian national community resides, the official language, in addition to Slovenian, is also Italian. Article 61 provides for the free expression of national affiliation, while the right to use one's language and script is guaranteed by Article 62. Article 64 determines the special rights of national minorities in the Republic of Slovenia, which are: the right to use their national symbols freely, the right to establish organisations and develop economic, cultural, scientific, and research activities, as well as activities in the field of public media and publishing, the right to education and schooling in their own language.



ages, the right to foster relations with their nations of origin and their respective countries, the right to establish self-governing communities in order to exercise their rights, the right to be directly represented in representative bodies of local self-government and in the National Assembly (Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia 1991).

The position of the Italian national community is further defined in other special laws, regulations, ordinances and statutes of municipalities in ethnically mixed areas, in legal acts, interstate treaties or agreements, and in international conventions.

The establishment of the first organisation of the Italian national community matches a complex historical and political context after World War II. In 1944, the Italian Union of the Istrian District (Unione degli Italiani dell'Istria e di Fiume) was formed. As the umbrella organisation of members of the Italian national community living in the former Yugoslavia, the Union's mission was to organise social and cultural life. Under its auspices, it gathered Italian cultural circles (Circoli italiani di cultura) and supported the development of Italian cultural and other institutions, such as the Italian Drama in Rijeka (Dramma Italiano di Fiume) founded in 1946 and the Edit publishing house founded in 1952. The Italian Union of the Istrian District strived for greater independence from state authorities and for a better position of the Italian community in the society. In the 1960s, it established contacts with the kin-nation and in 1964 it started a long-term cooperation with the People's University of Trieste (Università Popolare di Trieste). These organisations were very active in the field of culture: the Istria Nobilissima art and culture contest was launched in 1967 and the Centre for Historical Research in Rovinj (Centro di Ricerche Storiche di Rovigno) was established in 1968. Over the next decade, the need arose to reorganise the Italian Union to become a cultural and political organisation. In this light, the Italian cultural circles were renamed Italian Communities (Comunità degli Italiani). In the 1980s, their activities and commitments focused on culture and education, but at the end of the decade, some intellectuals began to advocate a greater political role of the organisations of the Italian national community (Giuricin & Giuricin 2008).

Slovenia and Croatia gained independence in 1991. With the establishment of a new state border, the Italian national community was cut in two. In the same year, a reformed Italian Union was formally established, committed to preserving and developing Italian culture and Italian language and exercising the special rights of the Italian national community. Today, the Italian national community in Slovenia is organised as the Coastal Self-Governing Community of Italian Nationality (CAN Costiera), which is the umbrella organisation for the municipalities of Ankaran, Koper, Izola and Piran, where members of the Italian nationality autochthonously reside. Within these municipalities, the Italian national community is organised into municipal self-governing communities of Italian Nationality, representing the members of the Italian national community

before local communities. In each municipality, members of the Italian national community elect their own members of the municipal council and also have their own deputy mayor.

The Italian national community manages educational institutions, cultural institutions and other societies operating in the Italian language. Schools are particularly important because they enable the preservation and transmission of the Italian language and culture. Educational institutions for members of the Italian community are part of the Slovenian public system and include kindergartens, primary and secondary schools. This model meets the specifics of the environment and takes into account the cultural and educational tradition of the national community. Schools on the Coast have an adapted curriculum, which means that in schools with Italian as the language of instruction, there are adaptations for the following subjects: society, geography, history, Italian as first language, Slovenian as second language. Textbooks, workbooks and other materials are all in Italian (Novak Lukanovič et al. 2011; Zudič Antonič 2018).

The Carlo Combi Promotional, Cultural, Educational and Development Centre has been operating in Koper since 2005. Its goal is to preserve, promote and develop the identity of the Italian minority, its language and culture. Radio and Television Koper-Capodistria, which operates under the auspices of Radiotelevizija Slovenija, plays a very important role in the field of public information for members of the Italian national community. The Koper-Capodistria Regional Centre was established in 1995, while the history of radio and television in Koper dates back to the post-war period. Publishing is carried out by the EDIT publishing house based in Rijeka, which publishes the newspaper *La Voce del Popolo*, the children's monthly *Arcobaleno*, the fortnightly *Panorama*, and the magazine on culture *La Battana*.

Italian Communities (*Comunità degli Italiani*) are organised as associations of members of the Italian national community. They played an important role in the post-war period when the Italian population turned from a majority to a minority. They are mainly active in the cultural, sports and social fields. Their main goal is to promote Italian culture, language and identity, to unite their members, and to preserve customs and traditions (Diabatè et al. 2012).

### **3. Study of the Impact of Covid-19 on the Life and Organisation of the Members of the Italian National Community**

#### **3.1 Background**

In order to present how the Italian national community coped with the situation during the epidemic and to provide an assessment of the unpredictable circum-

stances, telephone interviews were conducted with selected representatives of Italian national community institutions.

The purpose of this study was to explore the views and opinions of members of the Italian national community regarding the situation of their institutions during the epidemic and to find answers to the following questions:

- How did the Italian national community organise itself during the epidemic?
- What were the challenges faced by the schools with Italian as the language of instruction?
- What is the respondents' opinion about the closure of state borders, which prevented the free movement of persons and contacts with the nation of origin?

The questions basically aimed to:

- determine how the Italian national community organised itself during the epidemic,
- identify the challenges faced by the schools with Italian as the language of instruction,
- find out what the respondents think about the closure of state borders, with an emphasis on the impossibility of free movement of persons and contacts with the nation of origin.

In the first phase, the study involved members of the Italian national community active in various areas of public life: the political council of the Italian national community, the Italian Communities, the self-governing communities of Italian Nationality, the education council, cultural and media institutions. Eleven selected individuals were included in the sample: nine were interviewed by phone and two chose to answer by e-mail. Most of the interviews were conducted in April, after which the study continued with an analysis of (mainly minority) media and of the measures and activities in the local environment. In the second phase of the study, we conducted four more interviews with representatives of ethnic institutions and repeated the interviews with selected individuals (in the field of education), whom we had interviewed in the first phase.

In order to obtain credible data, a series of questions on the organisation of the Italian national community, its institutions, bilingualism, education, the importance of cooperation with the nation of origin and the role of the state border was prepared. The methodological approach of the in-depth interview gave us the opportunity to ask additional questions with the aim of getting a clear picture of the situation.

### 3.2 Communities and Other Institutions

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Italian community institutions quickly adapted to the new circumstances. The self-governing communities of Italian Nationality and the Italian Communities cancelled all events already in the first week of March (CAN Capodistria 2020; Costamagna 2020a; Drčić 2020a; Katonar 2020), even before the official declaration of the epidemic. Two factors in particular influenced such decision. First, the situation in neighbouring Italy, of which the members were well informed as most of the events involved the participation of guests from Italy. The second factor was the fact that the events organised by the communities are largely attended by elderly members who are most at risk for Covid-19 infection.

Due to the great uncertainty at the outset, the communities followed the measures set out at the national level and complied therewith at all times. In March and April, most people worked from home, communicated by phone and e-mail and used various communication channels such as Skype or Zoom. Occasionally, some employees went to their offices to perform the necessary administrative tasks (review of incoming mail, preparation of documents to be signed, etc.). Some other employees were home waiting for work. Since May, the offices had been open to members and the public upon previous agreement and in accordance with the guidelines set by the National Institute of Public Health (Costamagna 2020b; Drčić 2020b).

The CAN Costiera continued to work on some previously planned tasks and projects that were very important for the members of the Italian national community. These included a public tender to promote investment in the economy in the area where members of the autochthonous Italian national community live. Investments are in fact very important for micro, small and medium-sized enterprises, which can use these funds to upgrade existing production. Another important project was Raising the quality of national education for the Italian national community in Slovenia and the Slovenian national community in Italy, funded by the European Social Fund and the Slovenian Ministry of Education, Science and Sport.<sup>5</sup> The project, which strengthened friendship and cooperation between two neighbouring minorities, included a didactic strategy that envisaged the presence of pedagogical experts (native speakers) in pre-school and school institutions during classes. It also provided educational courses and thematic workshops. Due to Covid-19, the project was implemented in a reduced format. As kindergartens and schools were closed in both Italy and Slovenia, the pedagogical assistants engaged in remote work, as this was the only approved and permitted method of implementing curricula considering the situation. The success of this type of work was an indicator that curricula can also be implemented by more flexible means, which confirms the fact that in the future other educational models should also be considered in addition to the classical one. The official end date of the project was 31 August 2020, but given the excel-

lent results achieved and the interest shown by the institutions, the possibility of continuing the project for another two school years is being considered (CAN Costiera 2020a).

During this period, the Council of the above institution held a correspondence meeting and adopted a draft joint ordinance on the implementation of bilingualism in all coastal municipalities. It is a joint ordinance on the implementation of bilingualism where the rules of previous ordinances have been observed, while obsolete articles have been revised.<sup>6</sup> The draft ordinance must be submitted to the municipal councils of all coastal municipalities for approval and harmonised with the municipal statutes with the consent of the self-governing Italian national communities. The ordinance regulates the use of the Italian language in the ethnically mixed area where, in addition to Slovene, Italian is also the official language in all local, public and state institutions of the municipalities. Fully bilingual road signs and adaptations of existing ones that do not comply with the regulation (CAN Costiera 2020b) are also mandatory.

All communities were in contact with their members during the epidemic, mainly by phone or e-mail. This enabled and ensured that members received up-to-date information in Italian about the Covid-19 epidemic in Slovenia, about the rules of conduct, about state and municipal measures, etc. Other means of information were also used, such as posts on community websites or social networks (Facebook).

From the outset, the communities were aware that they needed to help vulnerable groups. This was mainly provided in close circles, i.e. through friends and family members. In such regard, the cases of Piran and Ankarán can be highlighted as examples of good practice. As quarantine and social distancing can also have a strong psychological effect on individuals, the Italian community of Piran organised a virtual Zoom meeting every Friday evening, where people could meet, share their impressions and thoughts, and gain additional information and answers to their questions. Zoom meetings were also important for maintaining contacts with fellow members from other countries, e.g. in Italy, Austria, Portugal and the US, who talked about how they spent their time during the epidemic. This same community also organised a campaign to help elderly members with purchases or other errands. In the Ankarán community, attention was paid to the youngest and the sewing of protective masks for children began in anticipation of the opening of kindergartens and schools. The community contributed fabric and materials, while members volunteered to sew smaller masks tailored to children's faces.

During the epidemic, the communities did not forget to implement and respect the provisions on bilingualism, thus keeping constant attention and calling on members to report any deficiencies in such regard. At the beginning of the epidemic, there were no instructions in Italian in medical facilities and in local healthcare in general. Some municipalities initially published information

on the measures only in Slovenian, but the situation improved when the Italian communities pointed to this problem. It is important to take into account the fact that a large number of members of the Italian community are elderly people who have difficulties understanding Slovenian. It is for this reason that the communities often translated and published key information and instructions on the epidemic in Italian themselves.

### 3.3 Education

Primary school was definitely the one with the most problems, especially in the beginning. As pupils are minors, there are also certain rules that teachers must take into account, such as the fact that pupils cannot have lessons in the online environment or that they may not be recorded. The school lent some school computers to families who did not have a computer, and the National Education Institute also helped by providing modems and tablets. Younger pupils heavily relied on the assistance of the parents to work with computers. It had thus been found that many parents did not have the necessary digital skills. In addition, as one of the primary school principals pointed out, the language of instruction at school – Italian – was a barrier to communication for some parents, especially in the case of first-graders who are not yet fluent in Italian because Italian is not their first language or because they come from mixed families. It was also emphasised that teachers invested a considerable amount of time in preparing lessons and materials and in informing parents.

When the epidemic in Slovenia was officially over (31 May 2020), all pupils gradually returned to school. Schools had to follow a certain hygiene protocol: a 1.5 m distance between school desks and a similar interpersonal distance, frequent washing and disinfection of hands, no gathering in hallways and around schools, use of face masks for employees and other professionals. The epidemic also changed the assessment of knowledge and national assessments for six- and nine-graders were not carried out this year.

It was much easier and faster to organise remote learning in secondary schools. Older children are in fact more independent in the use of technology and were immediately able to adapt to the new method of work. Nevertheless, teachers had to review the content of the curricula. For families who did not have a computer or had trouble using their home computer, the school lent some school computers that students would return when the learning process would go back to normal. As repeatedly pointed out, the greatest concern was the implementation of the *matura* exam and practical training for vocational school students. The schools constantly followed and adapted to the guidelines of the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport. Fourth-year students returned to schools at the end of May to start preparing for the *matura* exam. Exam dates were adjusted to the health situation, and the first exam (a written English test)

was held on 30 May (RIC 2020). Other students finished school by remote learning.

Practical training for vocational school students was also adapted. Article 46 of the Act on Intervention Measures to Contain the Covid-19 Epidemic and Mitigate its Consequences for Citizens and the Economy (2020) states:

If, due to the epidemic, secondary school students, apprentices and last-year students could not complete practical training by working and practical education at employers, such shall be recognised as completed if they have positive grades in all professional modules in the final year.

On such basis, final-year students continued to participate in remote learning and prepare for the final exam. For students who did not attend the final years, two options opened up: the first one envisaged that, in agreement with vocational subject teachers and employers, training would be adapted in such a way that part of the practical training would be replaced by more theoretical work, e.g. preparation of project assignments; the other option was to complete practical training in the summer. In the interview, the principal of the Pietro Coppo Secondary School in Izola, which offers secondary vocational, secondary technical and vocational-technical education in Italian, said that some students completed compulsory training already in December 2019 and so the epidemic did not cause any additional problems. Students who started training in February 2020 and had to suspend it due to the health situation were able to continue and complete the training as soon as the measures began to loosen, especially in the summer.

### 3.4 Cross-Border Cooperation

The border issue can be looked at from different angles, not only in geographical terms, but also from a legal, temporal and psychological point of view. After the end of World War II, the first negotiations for the demarcation of the border between Italy and the former Yugoslavia began, which was resolved by the signing of the Osimo Treaty in 1975. After the disintegration of Yugoslavia and with Slovenia and Croatia gaining independence in 1991, a new border with Croatia was set up on the Dragonja river.

With Slovenia's accession to the European Union and the Schengen area, all internal borders between EU Member States were abolished, including the border with Italy. This implies a free and easier movement of persons and goods and indeed represents an advantage for cross-border cooperation. Although the border with Croatia still exists although Croatia is now also a member of the European Union, members of the Italian national community consider the territory from Trieste to Croatian Istria as a single or common territory without borders in which they can now move freely.

The Slovenian government decided to close the borders and to control entry into the country on 12 March. Local border crossings were closed and four checkpoints were established on the border with Italy (Vrtojba – Štandrež/Sant'Andrea, Fernetiči/Fernetti, Škofije/Rabuiese and Krvavi Potok – Pesek/Pese) for the entry of persons who were not Slovenian citizens or did not have a registered permanent or temporary residence in Slovenia. This did not apply to freight transport (Government of the Republic of Slovenia 2020b).

All respondents agreed that border closure was indeed a problem, causing difficulties at various levels and representing an issue not only for members of minorities but for the entire population. All respondents agreed that border closure had a strong psychological impact on people and affected both work and economy, but understand during an epidemic, when there is state of emergency, there must be some sort of control.

We would like to highlight the opinion of some respondents regarding the closure of the state border. One of the interviewees said he had the impression that at the beginning of the crisis, even state institutions did not know exactly what to do. Personally, he was against any border closure, especially in Slovenian Istria, where it was reasonable to expect that certain measures would be implemented differently. It would e.g. be reasonable to expect that special exemptions would apply to those who had relatives and family members across the border, perhaps even elderly, sick and dependent relatives. He added that the closure of borders caused inconvenience not only for families but also in terms of work, namely for cross-border workers. Another interviewee mentioned that it was a period of great uncertainty and instability for national communities, especially in terms of preserving their linguistic and cultural identity. A third interviewee referred to the general aspect of the cross-border area, emphasising that this territory represents a world of its own that cannot live separated between borders. In his opinion, minorities certainly suffered the most, the Italian minority in Slovenia and Croatia, as well as the Slovenian minority in Italy, as both minorities were cut off from their homeland. It is these groups that have suffered the greatest damage in terms of cultural, social, institutional and personal contacts. Hopes remain that the governments of Italy, Slovenia and Croatia will understand the specifics of this territory and mitigate the situation at the borders in the future, should similar circumstances arise again, as expected in autumn.

Due to the spread of the epidemic in nearby Italy, the coastal population may have realised sooner what was happening and accepted any new measures with understanding. As they know the Italian language and, above all, have contacts with Trieste and Italy, they acted more responsibly, especially with regard to the restriction of movement and social distancing. In the interviews, many respondents replied that for many people who had relatives, friends and associates from Italy and Croatian Istria, the closure of the border cut off their interpersonal relations.



A similarly worrying situation was seen with regard to schooling, as it was not known how teachers and pupils living in the border area, either in Italy or in Croatia, would be able to attend school if schools reopened before borders. The Ministry of Education, Science and Sport sent out a message stating that in the first week after school reopening these students would continue remote learning, after which they would have to arrange for the status of cross-border workers (Botter 2020).

The working visit of the Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio to the Slovenian Foreign Minister Anže Logar of 6 June 2020 focused on the closure of the border (Drčić 2020c). Both countries were optimistic about 15 June, when border measures could be lifted and the two countries could work together to relaunch all forms of cross-border cooperation, contributing not only to the recovery in tourism and the economy, but also to the vitality of the Italian national community. An important turning point was 13 June, when the border with Italy opened to the inhabitants of Friuli Venezia Giulia. On 15 June, also local border crossings with Croatia were opened.<sup>7</sup>

During the epidemic, a key role was indeed played by minority media, such as the daily *La Voce del Popolo* and the Italian radio and television programme of the Koper Regional Centre of RTV Slovenija, which actively reported on the epidemiological situation in the border area, i.e. the area between Italy, Slovenia and Croatia.

## 4. Conclusions and Future Prospects

Initially, three questions were posed, the answers to which were sought in the replies of the interviewees and in the views and opinions of members of the Italian national community. While trying to answer those three questions, another crucial question opened up: is the Italian national community ready for the challenges of the future?

The analysis of the replies shows that the Italian national community is active mainly in the cultural and social field and that it strives in various ways to preserve its vitality, especially in the field of culture, language and identity. Although the whole world is struggling with a state of emergency and searching for a solution to get life back on track, members of the Italian national community are also aware that they need to find additional ways to fulfil their mission.

Education was the fastest to reorganise itself during the epidemic, as it has been promoting the use of ICT for years as an effective way of teaching. However, when teaching takes place entirely remotely, problems also arise, such as difficulty of communication with those parents who do not know Italian well or do not know it well enough. For the youngest pupils, the problem is computer skills, because they are not independent. There are other problems, as well, that

need to be solved if classes were to take place online again, such as appropriate support for children with special needs and other vulnerable groups.

As regards the border and cross-border cooperation, the psychological consequences of border closure and the difficulties in maintaining family contacts were the most prominent in the respondents' answers. Members of the Italian national community identify themselves on the basis of their language and the environment in which they live, and for them contacts with Italy are vital. Respondents did not provide any specific answers to what to do in case of border closure. In their opinion, more appropriate solutions should probably be found at the national level through an active foreign policy, as well as at the regional level by maintaining good neighbourly relations, with due account of the fact that a similar situation could reoccur. It is important that the Italian national community maintains contacts with the country and nation of origin and that both Italy and Slovenia are willing to cooperate in the development of the minority. This is not only about cultural and linguistic exchanges, but about recognising the presence of the Italian national community as a proof of the presence of Italian identity in the border area of Slovenian Istria.

The circumstances in which the Italian national community found itself at the time of the epidemic reinforced the meaning of the word community, which became a fundamental point of reference for members and a connecting element between people. It showed that an individual is important only as a member of a community. The challenges posed by the new circumstances related to Covid-19, which the Italian national community will have to face in the future, are great and unpredictable. But this diversity can also offer new opportunities in the sense of finding new and different ways of working, organising institutions, opening and connecting with the general public, connecting with different generations not only in a narrow local area but in a wider geographical area. Of course, the goal of all interviewees remains to continuously look for ways to preserve the vitality of the Italian national community in the changed circumstances.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The model includes both contacts at the national level (enshrined in interstate treaties) and regional level (defined by regional agreements), as well as direct contacts, which are the most extensive.
- <sup>2</sup> The position of the Italians in Slovenian Istria has changed completely. From a large nation they turned, after 1945, to a small national minority without a strong demographic, social and economic structure (Troha 2002, 451).
- <sup>3</sup> Comparing the 2002 census with the 1991 census, statistics shows a decrease in the number of members of the Italian national community. The demographic fluctuation of the Italian population can be explained by various arguments, such as non-determination of ethnic-national

affiliation, higher death than birth rates, mixed marriages, a different methodological approach at the 2002 census, exclusion of expatriates from the census, and other reasons (Benedetti 2015, 20).

- <sup>4</sup> Following the adoption of the Yugoslav and Slovenian constitutions in 1974 and the establishment of the relevant bodies to protect national communities, the Italian minority in Slovenia was among the most protected minorities in Europe (Troha 2002, 460).
- <sup>5</sup> The project represents the only funding outside the usual form of funding for the benefit of the Italian language education system. It officially started in 2016 and in four years a number of activities have taken place, such as the distribution of interactive blackboards for primary and secondary schools with Italian as the language of instruction.
- <sup>6</sup> The Municipality of Piran does not have a decree on bilingualism, but it does have a Decree on Public Advertising (2004). In the municipality of Izola, there is the Decree on the Implementation of Bilingualism in the Ethnically Mixed Area (2001). In the Municipality of Koper, the Decree on the Public Implementation of Bilingualism in the Ethnic Area applies (1998). The municipality of Ankaran does not have a decree on bilingualism yet.
- <sup>7</sup> Already on 10 May, the border was opened for Slovenian citizens and close family members who own real estate or a vessel in Croatia, for whom quarantine was no longer necessary (Dessardo 2020).

## Acknowledgment

The article was written under the research programme Minority and Ethnic Studies and the Slovene National Question (P5-0081), funded by Slovenian Research Agency.



**Barbara Riman**

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## The Slovenian Community in Croatia during the Covid-19 Pandemic

The article analyses the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the life and work of the Slovenian community in Croatia, focusing on the attitude of the Republic of Slovenia towards the members of such community and the challenges they encountered in maintaining contacts with Slovenia. The article studies Slovenian and Croatian media reports as well as documents published in the Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia. In addition, it examines data obtained from interviewees who live in the border area and/or are active members of the Slovenian community in Croatia. The testimonies largely relate to changes of the border regime that have affected the interviewees' private and professional life. The processes resulting from the measures adopted to tackle the pandemic have indeed left a deep imprint on the lives of the members of the Slovenian community in Croatia.

**Keywords:** Slovenians in Croatia, Slovenian-Croatian border, border regime, Covid-19.

## Slovenska skupnost na Hrvaškem v času pandemije covid-19

*V prispevku analiziramo vpliv pandemije covid-19 na življenje in delovanje slovenske skupnosti na Hrvaškem. Poseben poudarek posvečamo odnosu Republike Slovenije do pripadnikov slovenske skupnosti na Hrvaškem ter izzivom, s katerimi so se pripadniki te skupnosti soočali pri vzdrževanju stikov s Slovenijo. Spremljali in analizirali smo tako slovenske in hrvaške zapise v medijih kot tudi dokumente, objavljene v Uradnem listu Republike Slovenije. Obenem smo analizirali podatke, pridobljene od intervjuvancev, ki živijo na obmejnem območju oz. so aktivni akterji slovenske skupnosti na Hrvaškem. Izsledki pričevanj izpostavljajo predvsem spremembe v mejnem režimu, zaradi katerih so bili intervjuvanci prizadeti z zasebnega ali poslovnega vidika. Procesi, ki so nastali ali so bili posledica ukrepov zaradi pandemije, so pustili močne sledi v življenju pripadnikov slovenske skupnosti na Hrvaškem.*

**Ključne besede:** Slovenci na Hrvaškem, slovensko-hrvaška meja, mejni režim, covid-19.

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## 1. Introduction

Just like many pandemics and epidemics in the past, the Covid-19 pandemic has affected the activities of nearly all social systems, both within national borders and beyond. In the first weeks of intense spread of the disease, experts advised (and still advise) social distancing as a primary means to reduce the chances of infection. Other restrictive measures included limiting public gatherings and closing schools and kindergartens, restaurants, shops selling non-food products, as well as a number of other non-essential businesses (Adolph et al. 2020). In the spring of 2020, the whole Europe was in lockdown. The cancellation of mass gatherings and social distancing had strong social and economic impacts on public morale, on national economies, and, of course, on individual livelihoods (McCloskey et al. 2020, 1097–1098). The impacts were strongly felt by the old generation, with some countries putting even tighter restrictions in place (e.g. in Slovenia, people over the age of 65 were not allowed to shop after 10 am).<sup>1</sup> Such restrictions, as well as stay-at-home orders, significantly affected everyday life despite various modern ways of communicating (computers, mobile phone applications). This applies, in particular, to the elderly population and their ways of maintaining contact with family members, relatives, and friends. Individuals who are already lonely and socially isolated found themselves in a situation where their loneliness and isolation were felt even more acutely (Gregurović et al. 2020, 8).

In order to reduce the further spread of infections, governments decided to limit population mobility and migration. Restrictions on cross-border migration and travel and the introduction of quarantine and isolation measures quickly suspended both international migration and the mobility of the population within individual countries (Gregurović et al. 2020, 1). For the first time in history, the European Union closed all its external borders in an attempt to contain the spreading of Covid-19 (Linka et al. 2020, 710). In the spring of 2020, the Union's internal borders were closed as well. From the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic until the completion of this article (late September 2020), the border regime between Croatia and Slovenia was changing on a weekly basis. This certainly affected the life of the population along the Slovenian-Croatian border as well as the life of the members of the Slovenian community in Croatia.

According to researchers, the decision to close the borders was, in fact, also a political decision, calling for the reinterpretation of the concept of nationality. Thus, while the borders were being closed to foreigners, they were opening for the repatriation of nationals, even at the cost of accelerating the spread of Covid-19 (Mégret 2020). This also meant that the EU internal borders have kept their original role. The EU internal borders continue to be controlled and managed in a way that makes the mobile population and migrants less legitimate and even undesirable in terms of internal borders crossing. The various forms of mobility



are seen as more or less justified, depending on factors such as ethnicity, possession of specific skills in the labour market, gender, etc. (Knežević Hočevar & Cukut Krilić 2019).

This is evident, as Mégret points out, first in the fact that the Covid-19 pandemic renewed a “romantic emphasis” on nationality. The focus on nationality was relentless and exclusive, narrowly reshaping the contours of “return mobility” and drawing the line between nationals and the rest. Return and also border crossing on a daily (even weekly) basis was sometimes extended to permanent residents, but not always or automatically (Mégret 2020), which further led to the separation of families, as family was no longer taken for granted. Second, diasporas regained a meaningful role, but nevertheless remain doubly vulnerable: to the host state and society which may accuse them of having imported the virus, and to the state of origin which may view their return with suspicion. Some countries (Slovenia alike) called upon their diasporas to contribute (not only financially) to the fight against the coronavirus.<sup>2</sup> Third, the countries arranged for protection and called for repatriation as if borders and territory could provide a certain immunity (Mégret 2020).

The facts stated herein reflect in Slovenia’s attitude towards the members of the Slovenian community in Croatia. Regardless of their political, religious or other conviction, what they all have in common is that they have two homelands and that to a greater or lesser extent their lives are organised accordingly. Their private and professional life is often connected with both Croatia and Slovenia, which puts them in an unenviable situation in times of a pandemic when each country protects its own nationals. Members of the Slovenian community,<sup>3</sup> regardless of whether they have Slovenian or Croatian nationality or both, often strongly feel any political and social change between the two countries. The relations between the two and the positive or negative communication at the interstate level certainly have an impact on their private and social life.

For such reason, they were hit by and still suffer the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic, mainly because their lives are strongly affected by the decisions and measures imposed by Slovenia and Croatia; as nationals of the one or the other country (or both), they often feel to be worse off than if they had just one homeland. The measures to curb the pandemic adopted by the two countries had a significant impact on the ties that the members of the Slovenian community in Croatia foster with Slovenia. Because of their specific situation, they experienced embarrassment and problems they were unable to solve. In addition to being bound by the restrictions and measures imposed by Croatia, they were also affected by the orders of the neighbouring country (Gregurović et al. 2020, 10), i.e. Slovenia.

It was the unusual challenges faced by the members of the Slovenian community in Croatia that inspired this article, aimed at presenting the life of the Slovenian community in Croatia during the spread of Covid-19 in the first half

of 2020, with a special emphasis on the regulation of the border regime. The article refers to the period when the border was closed to almost all Slovenian and Croatian nationals, as well as to the time (from 4 July 2020 onwards) when the border was partially open for certain population groups. The closure of the border and the rapidly changing measures related thereto complicated the lives of the members of the Slovenian community and their families, as they did not know which civil rights they had or did not have. A positive step in this direction was taken by Slovenia, for political reasons indeed, when Croatia was put on the red list of countries, but soft measures nevertheless continued to apply because of their neighbouring status. Although Croatia has been on the red list since 28 August 2020 (Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Slovenia 2020), certain issues still arise when crossing the border and entering Slovenia and some procedures remain unclear. This is seen, for instance, in the case of students who are given differing information about border crossing and quarantine.

The article presents the multifaceted life of the members of the Slovenian community in Croatia who, although largely nationals of Croatia or, in our case, of both countries, were subject to different measures than those applying to Slovenians who actually reside in Slovenia. During the Covid-19 outbreak, the new political authorities<sup>4</sup> did not show much support or understanding for the members of the Slovenian community in Croatia to make them feel safe and confident that their problems would be easily resolved, also with the help of Slovenia. As their life in Croatia strongly relied on their connections with Slovenia, which they could no longer enter at some point, their life and their attitude towards Slovenia or Croatia significantly changed.

The research was conducted as part of the regular activities of the Rijeka Branch Office of the Institute for Ethnic Studies within the programme group Dimensions of Slovenianness between local and global at the beginning of the third millennium. The research, which involved all Slovenian societies and examined their current situation and activity, began in early March 2020 and continued until the beginning of August when the last semi-structured interviews were held. In June, interviews<sup>5</sup> were started with individuals living along the Croatian-Slovenian border (the counties of Međimurje, Varaždin, Krapina-Zagorje, Karlovac, Primorje-Gorski Kotar and Istria) and connected to this geographical area, as well as with individuals who, given their roles and functions, had a better on-site insight into the situation. 38 persons were interviewed, including 10 members of the Slovenian community in Croatia (by e-mail) who, for various reasons, felt the measures and changes relating to the Croatian-Slovenian border particularly intensely, and 10 active members of Slovenian societies or Slovenian language teachers in Croatia. Similar methods were used in previous research by Slovenian and foreign researchers (Ramšak 2004; Meho 2006; Milharčič Hladnik 2009; Kožar Rosulnik et al. 2016). The selected individuals were active female members of the Slovenian community in Croatia who publicly declare

themselves as such. Also, they had previously pointed out on social networks that they had come across orders and measures implemented by Slovenia and that they had therefore been somewhat restricted, did not agree with the measures, or did not fully understand the measures and restrictions imposed.

The analysis also included Slovenian and Croatian media reports which further intensified the feeling of fear, sometimes even hysteria, as well as official documents published in the Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia in relation to the amendments of the Ordinance imposing and implementing measures to prevent the spread of Covid-19 epidemic at the border crossing points at the external border and inspection posts within national borders of the Republic of Slovenia (hereinafter: Ordinance). A similar research method was applied by Slovenian researchers who dealt with this topic in the first half of 2020 (Bofulin 2020).

Media reports seemed highly relevant because not much had been written about this topic. The changing border regime was mentioned in the media, but neither Slovenian nor Croatian media made any reference to the members of the Slovenian community. A rare exception was news shows specifically dedicated to minority issues. However, media reports sometimes further aggravated the already complex Slovenian-Croatian relations as are perceived within the Slovenian community in Croatia.

## 2. Challenges at the Border

The first closure of the border between Slovenia and Croatia in March 2020 affected all those who had been used to crossing the border on a regular basis. The Croatian media reported about workers from the Karlovac County who were denied entry into Slovenia and could not go to work to Bela Krajina. Hundreds of Croatian nationals were confronted with the dilemma whether to cross the border and remain in Slovenia for the next two weeks, or to return to Croatia and go into self-isolation for 14 days (Gregurović et al. 2020, 10). This concerned about 700 people. Thus, in addition to the coronavirus and the chance of infection, the problem was the closure of local border crossings and the prohibition of daily border crossing (Direktno 2020). The issue was solved relatively quickly as both sides realised that it was existentially relevant (Radio Mrežnica 2020). Soon after, however, all daily commuters who had to cross the border on a daily basis for the needs of everyday life and work found themselves in difficulty (Gregurović et al. 2020, 10).

Two of the interviewees reported:

I work in Lendava and cross the border on a daily basis. We knew that the borders would be closed when we saw what was happening in Europe. In order to be able to cross the border after closing, our company gave us the relevant certificates. They even

offered us overnight stays at the Lipa Hotel in Lendava [...]. We had bags with us every day [...] in case we would have to stay in Slovenia (Interviewee 13).

Others went to work in Slovenia illegally, through the woods and on sites where there is no wire fence (Interviewee 28).

Similar problems were perceived throughout the Slovenian-Croatian border area – it was a matter of reciprocity. There was a great deal of ambiguity in the very beginning, but then the relations settled down. The workers who were supposed to go to Croatia had to be quarantined for 14 days, and *vice versa*. After some arrangements and coordination, however, businesses provided their workers with employment certificates they needed when crossing the border (STA 2020).

But then the situation got worse again – if they wanted to keep their jobs, they had to go into self-isolation in Croatia. This meant that upon their return to Croatia, they were not allowed to leave their homes and had to minimise contact with close family members. Also, they could not go to the store or anywhere else (pharmacy, bank, etc.). The Croatian police would come at their door to check whether they observed the self-isolation order (Interviewee 1). An interviewee describes the situation as follows:

It's very complicated and very simple. Theoretically speaking, we are in contact with Slovenia every day and enclosed by Slovenia. It's a closed circle, like Facebook. One of the family members, say the husband, works in Postojna, the wife works in the city administration in Čabar, the brother is an ambulance driver, the brother's wife works in a store, and their children regularly play with other children on the street because public playgrounds are closed (Interviewee 35).

Although hardly believable, some people at first did not even know they had to go into self-isolation and discovered this by coincidence – like our interviewee, for example, who learned about it only when he presented his health card in the pharmacy (Interviewee 25).

A resident of Jelovec Voćanski said that people who were ordered self-isolation but could not stay isolated in a room because they had several children, were looking for vacant rooms in Varaždin not to infect somebody at home (Interviewee 4).

While labour migrations (daily or weekly) and some economic operations were regulated relatively quickly (off-road vehicle cordons were organised, etc.),<sup>6</sup> it took much longer to find solutions to other, more intimate matters, i.e. matters related to private life. Some temporary solutions were found with the help of the local community, but with the re-closing of the border on 4 July 2020, several issues were reopened.

One of the major problems was (and still is) funerals.<sup>7</sup> Attendance of funerals was a case where civil servants often had to ask for help. An employee of the Mursko Središče city administration pointed out that they often negotiated directly with the Slovenian police to allow people to attend a funeral (Interviewee 37). Unfortunately, this was not the case everywhere and, for example, an interviewee from Slivarsko said that her family from Slovenia was not allowed to attend the funeral in Croatia (Interviewee 11). And *vice versa* – relatives from Croatia were not allowed to enter Slovenia to go to funerals. One such case was reported by a woman who hardly made it to her brother's funeral in Slovenia. According to her testimony, the police officer was embarrassed and eventually let her go. She travelled with a Slovenian passport. Her brother-in-law and sister-in-law, however, were not allowed to attend the funeral (Interviewee 19).

Even when the measures were loosened, some requirements were added that were rather difficult to meet. Many people could not attend funerals, for example, because they could not be tested in time due to long queues at testing centres (Interviewee 7). The Ordinance was finally amended on 21 August 2020 (Ordinance Official Gazette 112/2020) and a negative test for the presence of Covid-19 was no longer necessary.

In addition to funerals, members of the Slovenian community who, for various reasons, are particularly closely connected with Slovenia also had other problems, such as “[...] graves of parents and grandparents” (Interviewee 14), i.e. they could not go to the cemetery. A member of the Slovenian community from Zadar could not go to Novo Mesto to visit her parents' grave. As she was unable to travel by herself due to the long distance (a six-hour drive), her husband – a Croatian citizen – would need to take her to the cemetery, but according to the new Ordinance he could not enter Slovenia. Even if he were allowed to enter, he would have to submit a negative test for the presence of Covid-19, but this is not financially acceptable for pensioners because it costs too much (initially EUR 200, later EUR 90) (Interviewee 27).

A similar testimony was obtained from a Slovenian from Zagreb. Besides the wish to visit her father's grave, she has several other problems:

The measures taken by Slovenia and Croatia regarding Covid-19 have had a very negative impact on my life, especially because they are not the same for Slovenian and Croatian nationals. I am Slovenian, but I have lived in Croatia for 35 years. I have never given up my Slovenian nationality, but after my Slovenian documents expired and Croatia joined the EU, I just did not renew them. Thus, I have problems [...], I can't visit my mother who is in a retirement home [...], I can't air my mother's house [...], I can't work as a tourist guide [...]. Even if I had Slovenian documents and were allowed to freely enter Slovenia, my husband, who is a Croatian national, would certainly have restrictions and would not be able to come with me [...]. We can share a home 24 hours a day, but we cannot travel to Slovenia together (Interviewee 23).

Agricultural land owners who have one part of their property in one country and another part in the other country have been having difficulties ever since the border was introduced in 1991. As border crossings were closed, some farmers, confused by all the measures, decided to cross the border illegally, in the woods, where there are no border crossings or where these were not closed. Some were even fined for illegal crossing (Interviewee 4). Elsewhere, problems with crossing the border were even more accentuated. In Mlini near Buzet, for example, one of the interviewees called the Koper police every time he had to cross the border with his tractor, but they did not want to come to open the fence to let him in (Interviewee 10).

Similar was the situation at the Vele Mune – Starod border crossing, a crossing used every day by over 40 local border traffic permit holders. Even there, border police were reluctant to always come to open the gates that were closed after the outbreak of the coronavirus in March this year. One of the interviewees mentioned that she learned from an informal conversation with the police officers who opened the gates on 8 August 2020 that the gates would remain down at least until the end of the year (Interviewee 29). Slovenian police officers locking local border crossings with a chain was not a case only in Istria or Kvarner, but was common practice in the entire Slovenian-Croatian border area. This was confirmed also by an official person in Lepoglava (Interviewee 12).

Problems were experienced also by individuals who had health insurance in Slovenia and who also had their physicians there. Many were unable to get their medicines and had to look for someone in Slovenia to get the medicines from the pharmacy and bring them to the border, where Croatian and Slovenian police officers stood together (Interviewee 38). The owner of a retirement home also spoke about the difficult access to medicines, emphasising the many problems they faced and explaining that medicines were brought to the border and that even police officers helped them (Interviewee 2). The positive attitude and the humanity of police officers was highlighted also by interviewee 9 who mentioned that one of the risk groups was the pensioners who were unable to withdraw their pensions from Slovenian banks. At two border crossings (Trnovec and Gibina), the police allowed their families (children) to bring pensions and medicines to the border (on the Slovenian side) and the police took them over to the Croatian side of the border (Interviewee 9).

The Slovenian and Croatian public were unaware of the problems mentioned here. People who found themselves in difficulties sometimes did not know who to turn to. Slovenian and Croatian media would not report on this. Interviewee 12 told:

I called the Croatian radio and television every day to report – as did other mayors of smaller and larger towns – that although Minister Božinović assured that the borders were open, this was not the case. Free passage to Slovenia was not possible.

The situation got better with the opening of the borders in May, although a 7-day self-isolation followed by a coronavirus test were still required (Glas Istre 2020). After 15 June, local border crossings with Slovenia were opened as well. Not even a month later, following a new ordinance of the Slovenian Government, Croatia was placed on the yellow list, which again changed the border regime (Maribor24.si 2020). Difficulties reappeared, although the then and current Prime Minister of Croatia Andrej Plenković said that Slovenia's decision, considering the changed border crossing regime introduced on 4 July, would not change the conditions for Croatian nationals entering Slovenia. When asked if anything would change for Croatian nationals going to Slovenia, he said that "it will not. They will say that they are going to Slovenia, where they are going and for what reason. That will be all" (Vrečar 2020). There were many changes that the Croatian media – and the Slovenian media alike – failed to properly present to the public. Owing to a misunderstanding of the new measures and the lack of information on border crossing, numerous questions arose among the members of the Slovenian community who, while running private errands, were stopped at the border and often had to stay on the Croatian side.

As highlighted in the interviews conducted among female members of the Slovenian community in Croatia, the border and the crossing thereof indeed had a significant impact on the feeling of isolation and on the fact that they felt like second-class citizens. They felt frustrated because in certain difficult situations they had to choose between Slovenia on the one hand and the family in Croatia on the other. The fact is that the women included in this research could not go to Slovenia with their immediate family members as the latter did not have Slovenian nationality or a registered temporary residence in Slovenia. The Ordinance in force from 8 June to 20 July 2020 did not foresee this category (Ordinance Official Gazette 100/2020).

A Slovenian woman from Pag recalled that she intended to visit her parents and because of her father's illness she wanted to visit them with her children. She had heard about the changes regarding border crossing, but her friends from Slovenia holidaying on Pag kept telling her that that was not true. So, she inquired with the border police and was told that she and her older daughter could go to Slovenia, but her 3-year-old son and her husband could not because they were not Slovenian nationals. She said that she had been trying to obtain Slovenian nationality for her son for four days, but due to the lack of knowledge of the official in charge her request was refused and she was asked to present an international birth certificate. Eventually, she turned to the Slovenian Embassy in Zagreb, where she received proper advice and could arrange at least for her son to go to visit her parents as a Slovenian national. As she repeatedly pointed out, that feeling of frustration would continue for a long time. She said that she expected to feel safe in Slovenia, but on the contrary, she experienced great shock and di-

sappointment. In those two weeks, her father passed away, without being able to say goodbye to his grandson (Interviewee 7).

Interviewee 30 from Rijeka reported the following negative experience:

Everyone I have is in Slovenia: my mother, my father, my brother and his family, aunts, uncles. According to the new law, I cannot go see them because I don't have a Slovenian ID. I didn't think I needed to have two. My parents are old, they are 88 and 83. My dad calls me every day asking when I'm coming, but I don't know what to say. The contacts with my loved ones are cut off because I just can't afford the cost of EUR 90 for a coronavirus test for one visit, as required from me at the border. After an hour of waiting at the border, I was politely turned back to Croatia [...]. I was very disappointed, frustrated. I didn't know about the new law because it had barely begun to apply. I felt like a second-class person. The police officer kept my ID until I turned back.

Although the interviewee emphasised that it was, in a way, her fault because she did not seek information and did not renew her Slovenian documents, this was not an isolated case. M. R., who was born in Croatia in 1946 and has more than half of her family in Slovenia, reported that although she felt Slovenian and was a Slovenian national, she never thought of having two IDs. When the new Ordinance was adopted, she would not be able to attend anyone's funeral because she could not prove her Slovenian nationality with a Croatian ID (Interviewee 21).

The changes caught by surprise also a Slovenian from Dubrovnik who planned a vacation in Slovenia with her family of five:

In the spring, information on border crossing in the media was more accurate, which was not the case during the second wave of the holiday period. Due to the inaccuracy of information and partly also due to our failure to seek such, we as a family had an unpleasant experience with the Slovenian border police and separate holidays [...]. [...] Despite being angry at myself and at Slovenian politicians, I kept a cool head and with a sad heart drove my husband to get a flight for Dubrovnik. Embarrassed as a Slovenian, I felt the injustice we are doing to our neighbours. In addition, the children were shocked and frightened because their father could not join us for a holiday in our country on the sunny side of the Alps (Interviewee 32).

According to the border police at the Rupa – Jelšane border crossing, nationality could only be proven with a Slovenian identity card or passport. Asked whether an extract from the birth register besides the Croatian ID would be acceptable, the border police replied that this would not suffice since nobody would know for sure if the applicant had not given up Slovenian citizenship meanwhile.<sup>8</sup> An interviewee reported that she received contradictory information from the border police and that “the actual problem are the different interpretations” (Interviewee 16). Other interviewees gave a similar response. Interviewee 23 stated:



The border police gave a different answer each time, so I got the feeling that it mostly depends on whether the person you come across at the border is having a good or a bad day [...] everyone is their own boss and interprets the measures in their own way.

The interviewee from Zagreb said that she lived in Zagreb and that she was the only one visiting her parents in Ljubljana because her husband could not enter Slovenia. She also mentioned that now, during the second closing of the border at least, the suppliers would bring their goods to the Slovenian side and she would cross the border to pick them up. She felt bad about it: "It's awful, like I'm forced into prison. We are free and yet we are not [...]" (Interviewee 16).

Other interviewees had not experienced the new measures yet and a Slovenian living in Labin reported:

I went to Slovenia for the first time in July and I didn't have any problems, I also had visitors from Croatia (my daughter and her boyfriend) for the weekend. We are going to Slovenia soon and we're afraid that not everyone (my husband and my daughter's boyfriend) will be able to cross the border. It's still to see how I'll cross the border myself (Interviewee 31).

As already stated, other interviewees, too, felt angry and frustrated because they did not know how to solve their problems. They often pointed out that even Slovenians in Slovenia knew nothing about those measures and that they were disappointed, humiliated, sad, and feeling rejected by Slovenia.

A testimony to the attitude towards Slovenians living in Croatia and their spouses or partners is the story of a family from Rijeka – the father was not allowed to enter Slovenia because he had Croatian nationality. He wanted to drive his son and his wife, both Slovenian citizens, to Slovenia for the child to get medical therapy. According to the Croatian daily *Novi list*, "[...] the father will not be allowed to enter Slovenia, even if he submits a negative test for Covid-19" (Vesić 2020).

After Croatia had found itself on Slovenia's red list, the Slovenian Government extended the Ordinance to include the following:

If the Government of the Republic of Slovenia, in accordance with the previous paragraph, places a neighbouring country or one of its administrative units on the list of countries with an epidemiologically high risk of contracting the infectious disease Covid-19 (red list), Article 9 of this Ordinance shall also not apply to:

1. a person who is a national of the Republic of Slovenia or a foreign national with permanent residence in the Republic of Slovenia and owns real estate or a residential vessel in the neighbouring country from which they enter the Republic of Slovenia and prove this with appropriate documents, and their immediate family members, provided they return to the Republic of Slovenia within 48 hours;

2. a person who is a national of the Republic of Slovenia or a foreign national with permanent residence in the Republic of Slovenia and has the right, based on a rental or other contract, to use real estate, a residential vessel or a plot in a camping in a neighbouring country from which they enter the Republic of Slovenia and prove this with appropriate documents, and their immediate family members, provided they return to the Republic of Slovenia within 48 hours (Ordinance Official Gazette 112/2020).

This means that Slovenian nationals can enter Croatia every weekend, while Slovenian nationals living in Croatia cannot access their real estate and visit their families in Slovenia, which again proves that the Republic of Slovenia does not offer equal protection to all its citizens.

### 3. The Activity of Slovenian Societies in Croatia

An important aspect of the life of the Slovenian community is its (self) organisation. There are currently 15 Slovenian societies operating in Croatia, gathered under the Association of Slovenian Societies in Croatia. Their activities mainly include social gatherings and events. Their most active members are elderly Slovenians, who are also at higher risk for the disease. It is worth mentioning that the activities of these societies mainly take up traditional forms, such as choirs, drama groups, folklore groups, etc. They are attended by several members, which further increases the risk of infection.

E-mail correspondence with the presidents of Slovenian societies revealed that the activities of the societies were suspended in mid-March 2020, i.e. on the onset of the pandemic. Their secretaries<sup>9</sup> worked from home and accessed the societies' premises only if necessary, for example to carry out some urgent tasks (collection and payment of invoices or other specific administrative work). The events planned for this period were cancelled and postponed to September and October 2020.

The societies resumed their regular operations in May (Interviewee 36), ensuring that all activities complied with epidemiologists' recommendations and safety requirements. Nevertheless, some traditional events organised by local institutions were cancelled. The president of the Slovenian society from Osijek reported:

Like any other social event, the measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus pandemic also affected the operation of SKD Stanko Vraz in Osijek. All activities scheduled from March onwards (e.g. presentation of minorities' Easter customs) were cancelled or postponed, as were other activities planned in cooperation with the City of Osijek – a lecture in March, the choir performance during the Slovenian Days in Slavonia. The Slovenian Days in Slavonia, which traditionally took place in May, were postponed for an indefinite period of time (Interviewee 26).

Some of the societies nevertheless managed to organise major events, such as celebration of Slovenia's Statehood Day with the participation of about 200 Slovenian community members from all over Istria. The Istrian societies also gathered on 4 July 2020 at Učka (Istarski.hr 2020). Currently, activities take place with a reduced number of participants and with due account of the measures to curb the spread of infections, such as measuring temperature, collecting data on participants, etc. (Interviewee 36). Activities that have become traditional (such as the Days of Slovenian Culture in Istria (Interviewee 22)) will be carried out as planned.

Although the societies were closed down, their bulletins (Mavrica, Planika, Sopotja and Novi odmev) were published as usual (Interviewee 24), but their contents reveal how much Covid-19 has affected the life of the Slovenian community.

Many societies are concerned they will obtain less funding for their operation. They are also concerned about the financial support provided by the Government Office for Slovenians Abroad for next year. They estimate that the consequences of the pandemic on the economy will also reduce financial support in the field of culture. For the time being, there have been no reductions in the funding of cultural associations, yet local authorities have already announced a revised budget and a decrease in the funding intended for some councils and representatives of the Slovenian minority. Thus, next year, the Council of the Slovenian Minority of the Istria County will receive EUR 1,260.00 instead of EUR 2,000.00 (Interviewee 17). The societies are also concerned about next year's project financing by the Government Office for Slovenians Abroad. In such regard, they welcomed the positive practice established by Croatia whereby 80 % of the allocated funds can be spent on infrastructure works (Interviewee 6).

The societies' presidents kept contact with the members and were familiar with the situation within the Slovenian community in their societies (Interviewee 6; Interviewee 5; Interviewee 36; Interviewee 31; Interviewee 33). The situation varies. Some societies moved their activities to virtual platforms (e.g. training for bobbin lace teachers and Slovenian language courses in the Slovenski dom Triglav in Split), while others already resumed the rehearsals. A large number of members are still reluctant and not sure whether to come to the rehearsals or whether to even continue to participate. Presidents see a difference between the time before the pandemic and the current situation. Thus, one president emphasised: "I have the feeling that everyone has become anaemic, uninterested and that there is a lack of momentum that had been there before." (Interviewee 20).

The presidents also have difficulties organising work so as to meet the epidemiological requirements (Interviewee 36). The greatest challenges are faced by the societies that do not have adequate premises as the measures to curb the spread of infections have completely prevented their normal operations.

Slovenian language teachers, who teach according to all models,<sup>10</sup> also encountered great difficulties. The school year terminated online, with the teachers sending out materials (Interviewee 8) or meeting students in virtual classrooms (Interviewee 34). In some societies (SKD Split), Slovenian language courses continued online, while in most other societies teaching resumed in physical form. Some teachers decided to do so following the requests made by their students, even if they were at higher risk (Interviewee 18). One way or the other, all teachers agreed that teaching Slovenian in this way was very difficult, while the students' attitude towards such varied. Some decided not to learn Slovenian anymore, while others were given even more impetus. The basic problem in Slovenian language courses are face masks, as they prevent teachers to show students the proper position of their lips, tongue, correct pronunciation (Interviewee 34). A further problem is teaching Slovenian according to the C model under which students cannot be mixed into one single group – thus, in the Kozala primary school in Rijeka, instead of having two joint hours with class 3a and class 3b, the teacher has two hours with class 3a and two hours with class 3b, although class 3a only has three students. This further complicates the school timetable and the teacher presumes students will also have courses in the afternoon (Interviewee 15). The latter will further reduce the interest in learning Slovenian and possibly reduce the number of students of Slovenian language in Croatian schools.

The changes within the Slovenian community in Slovenian societies and the challenges faced by Slovenian language teachers in Croatia will certainly have a negative impact on the number of active members of the Slovenian community in Croatia.

## 4. Conclusion

The Slovenian-Croatian border is an interesting phenomenon, where people live a peaceful border life (Stiperski & Kochi Pavlakovich 2001, 124) while the relations between the two countries reflect in the tightening of the border regime. Slovenia and Croatia had lived without a physical border for decades, but this changed after 1991. The Covid-19 pandemic showed how difficult it was to live in the border area, and this was probably even more difficult for the members of the Slovenian community in Croatia. When the situation got difficult, when talks and findings about the virus that causes Covid-19 had just started, the members of the Slovenian community in Croatia hoped that Slovenia would help them, but ran up against a closed border instead. The situation did not change much even in the summer months. It is clear from the interviews that the Slovenian and Croatian media did not report on the main problems. Due to the constant change of measures as well as poor information and general inability to find such online, the members of the Slovenian community often experienced rejection instead of acceptance and felt pushed away by their or their ancestor's country of

origin. The issues mentioned and analysed here testify to the fact that everything Mégrét (2020) states also applies to the Slovenian community in Croatia, which found itself in an even more difficult situation because of its emigrant status (diaspora), its way of life between the two countries, and its coping with the fact that their immediate family members were not allowed to enter Slovenia.

The people living in the border area as well as the members of the Slovenian community in Croatia will learn to deal also with the measures imposed by Slovenia. The latter failed to offer equal protection to all its nationals during the Covid-19 pandemic. In those times, each country did what it thought best for its nationals, yet it seems that in certain cases Slovenia forgot about its nationals, who felt as if they were second-class citizens.

The experience of the Slovenian community in Croatia during the pandemic will, as elsewhere, leave a mark on the further life, activity and existence of its members in a community where membership is declining sharply and which, in the years since Slovenia has gained independence, has been the most forgotten or ignored of all communities in the neighbouring countries.

## Interviews

Interviewee 1 – A. M., Prezid, 2020.

Interviewee 2 – B. A. V., Varaždin, 2020.

Interviewee 3 – B. G., Buzet, 2020.

Interviewee 4 – B. H., Jelovec Voćanski, 2020.

Interviewee 5 – C. Š., Split, 2020.

Interviewee 6 – D. A., Pula, 2020.

Interviewee 7 – D. C., Pag, 2020.

Interviewee 8 – D. H. Ormož, 2020.

Interviewee 9 – D. K., Štrigova, 2020.

Interviewee 10 – D. U., Mlini, 2020.

Interviewee 11 – Đ. P., Slivarsko, 2020.

Interviewee 12 – H. K., Lepoglava, 2020.

Interviewee 13 – I. T., Mursko Središće, 2020.

Interviewee 14 – J. K., Zagreb, 2020.

Interviewee 15 – K. K. L., Rijeka, 2020.

Interviewee 16 – L. L., Zagreb, 2020.

Interviewee 17 – M. B., Pula, 2020.

Interviewee 18 – M. C., Zagreb, 2020.

Interviewee 19 – M. M., Rijeka, 2020.

Interviewee 20 – M. P., Poreč, 2020.

Interviewee 21 – M. R., Rijeka, 2020.

Interviewee 22 – M. T. D., Pula, 2020.

Interviewee 23 – M. T. K., Zagreb, 2020.

Interviewee 24 – M. T. S., Pula, 2020.

Interviewee 25 – N. T., Mursko Središće, 2020.

Interviewee 26 – P. M., Osijek, 2020.

Interviewee 27 – R. Š., Zadar, 2020.

Interviewee 28 – S. C., Budinščak, 2020.

Interviewee 29 – S. G., Vele Mune, 2020.

Interviewee 30 – S. L., Rijeka, 2020.

Interviewee 31 – S. V., Labin, 2020.

Interviewee 32 – T. B., Dubrovnik, 2020.

Interviewee 33 – V. S., Lovran, 2020.

Interviewee 34 – V. S., Rijeka, 2020.

Interviewee 35 – Z. O., Prezid, 2020.

Interviewee 36 – Z. S., Rijeka, 2020.

Interviewee 37 – Z. T., Mursko Središće, 2020.

Interviewee 38 – Ž. K., Nedelišće, 2020.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The Ordinance adopted on 9 April 2020 allowed persons over 65 as well as other vulnerable groups to shop between 8 am and 10 am and during the last working hour of a store. It raised many concerns, as it implied freedom of movement for this (elderly) social group as well as age discrimination. The government abolished this measure on 29 April 2020 (Svetina, 2020).
- <sup>2</sup> Immediately upon assuming office at the Government Office for Slovenians Abroad, Minister Helena Jaklitsch and State Secretary Dejan Valentinčič addressed a letter to all expatriates to help their homeland, if possible (Jaklitsch & Valentinčič 2020).
- <sup>3</sup> More in Kržišnik-Bukić (1995, 1998, 2006), Pajnič (2018), Riman and Zver (2020).
- <sup>4</sup> During the Covid-19 pandemic, there was a change of government in Slovenia, with Janez Janša succeeding Marjan Šarec as Prime Minister.
- <sup>5</sup> The interviews were conducted by Barbara Riman and Filip Škiljan as part of their work in the Rijeka Branch Office of the IES.
- <sup>6</sup> The Ordinance, which entered into force on 20 July 2020, provides that a cross-border daily labour migrant who is employed in one of the EU Member States or other state of the Schengen area for which he has proof or a signed declaration, has a valid reason to cross the border as a daily labour migrant and is not subject to quarantine or required to submit a negative SARS-CoV-2 (Covid-19) test when crossing the border (Ordinance Official Gazette 100/2020).
- <sup>7</sup> It is worth mentioning that certain Croatian villages in the Rijeka hinterland still have cemeteries on the Slovenian side of the border and that crossing the border and attending funerals had been complicated even before the pandemic (Riman & Markelj 2014). The situation further deteriorated due to Covid-19.



- <sup>8</sup> From the interview with the chief police officer at the Jelšane border station, 4 July 2020.
- <sup>9</sup> Not all Slovenian societies in Croatia have secretaries, which strongly affects their operation. The societies that employ secretaries include: SKD Istra, Pula; Slovenski dom KPD Bazovica, Rijeka; Slovenski dom Karlovac, Karlovac; SKD Triglav, Split.
- <sup>10</sup> In Croatia, Slovenian is taught under several models: remedial lessons of Slovenian, Slovenian language and culture in the Varaždin county, and Slovenian language teaching according to the C model.

## Acknowledgment

Funding: The article was written under the research programme Slovenhood Dimensions between Local and Global at the Beginning of the Third Millennium (P5-0409), funded by Slovenian Research Agency.



Romana Bešter, Janez Pirc

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## Impact of Remote Learning during the Covid-19 Lockdown on Roma Pupils in Slovenia

The article analyses the impact of remote learning during the Covid-19 lockdown on Roma pupils in Slovenia. Roma are one of the most marginalised and vulnerable groups in Slovenia. Most of them record poor inclusion and performance in education, which is why the suspension of regular school activities is likely to have much broader negative consequences for these pupils. Based on the outcomes of the study that included surveys among Roma assistants and teachers, the article analyses the technical conditions available to Roma pupils for remote learning during lockdown, the establishment of contact between teachers and Roma pupils in such period, and the collaboration of Roma pupils and their parents with schools. The article also provides a comparative perspective of the position of Roma and other pupils and draws attention to the possible long-term consequences of remote learning for Roma pupils.

**Keywords:** Roma, Covid-19, education, remote learning, Slovenia.

## Vpliv izobraževanja na daljavo v obdobju karantene zaradi covid-19 na romske učence v Sloveniji

*Članek analizira vpliv izobraževanja na daljavo v obdobju karantene zaradi covid-19 na romske učence v Sloveniji. Romi so ena najbolj marginaliziranih in ranljivih skupin prebivalstva v Sloveniji. Na področju izobraževanja večina beleži slabo vključenost in uspešnost. Zato ima lahko prekinitev rednih šolskih dejavnosti za te učence še precej širše negativne posledice. S pomočjo rezultatov raziskave, ki je vključevala ankete z romskimi pomočniki in učitelji, članek analizira tehnične pogoje, ki so jih imeli na voljo romski učenci za učenje na daljavo v času karantene, načine vzpostavljanja stikov med učitelji in romskimi učenci v tem obdobju ter sodelovanje romskih učencev in njihovih staršev s šolami. Članek mestoma izpostavlja primerjalno perspektivo položaja romskih in ostalih učencev ter opozarja na možne dolgoročne posledice izobraževanja na daljavo za Rome.*

**Ključne besede:** Romi, covid-19, izobraževanje, izobraževanje na daljavo, Slovenija.

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## 1. Introduction

Being one of the most marginalised and vulnerable groups in Slovenia and Europe alike, Roma encounter considerable difficulties in terms of education. Practice and research show lower inclusion and poorer performance of Roma children in the educational system (Save the Children 2001, 20; Clavería & Alonso 2003; Krek & Vogrinc, 2005; Stoica & Wamsiedel, 2012; 16; Baucal et al. 2005; Vonta et al. 2011; Jazbec et al. 2013; Peček et al. 2013). School attendance of Roma pupils is often irregular, the drop-out rate is extremely high, and few individuals continue schooling after completing compulsory education. The reasons for such are several and intertwining, one of them being the poor socio-economic status of many Roma families and the unfavourable living conditions in the environment in which they live. Research (Coleman et al. 1966; Baker et al. 2002; Peček et al. 2006; EREBUS International 2005; Selcuk 2005; OECD 2001, 2004, 2007, 2011) shows that pupils who come from socio-economically weaker families and live in less stimulating environments achieve poorer learning outcomes than others, are less involved in the educational process, and stop attending school earlier. Another important factor is the pre-school socialisation of Roma children, which usually takes place in a different cultural environment than the pre-school socialisation of other children (Smith, 1997). Also, a considerable share of Roma children is not included in formal forms of pre-school education. When entering school, Roma children often have poor command of the language of instruction or none at all, which is perceived in pedagogical circles as a key cause of Roma children's failure at school (Réger 1999; Tancer 1994, 75–76; Vonta et al. 2011, 76). Due to these and other factors, the school results of Roma children are often well below the average results of their non-Roma peers (e.g. Peček et al. 2013, 77), the share of Roma children enrolled in schools with a special programme is higher compared to the share of other children,<sup>1</sup> and Roma children are less likely to successfully complete primary school and even less likely to continue schooling at higher levels. The Slovenian school system envisages various forms of additional assistance by which teachers and Roma assistants help Roma children with school work and integration into the educational system,<sup>2</sup> but school work alone is not enough to substantially improve the situation.

Over the past few decades, a significant number of projects concerning work with Roma children outside school, especially in Roma settlements, has been implemented in Slovenia. Such activities complement school work and help to remove the perceived obstacles and deficits of Roma children in education. However, the problem is that these activities do not take place on a regular basis but are rather implemented for shorter periods of project funding. Both teachers and project operators as well as other stakeholders involved in the process of Roma education report that any major interruption of regular (school or project) activities with Roma children pushes this population backwards, sometimes almost

back to the starting position. One such interruption was lockdown during the Covid-19 pandemic. Schools were closed and teaching and learning shifted to virtual learning environments.<sup>3</sup>

The purpose of the article is to explore the following questions: How did this shift affect Roma pupils, who often live in remote settlements, separate from the rest of the population, in homes without computers and internet access, some even without electricity? How did it affect the role of Roma parents, who were suddenly supposed to help educate their children at home, while they themselves have low level of education or no education at all and are often even (at least computer) illiterate? How did schools establish contact with Roma pupils and their families, with many of whom they had no (regular) contact even before the pandemic? Did Roma pupils participate in education at all or did their education stop during lockdown? Did Covid-19 lockdown increase inequalities between Roma and other (non-Roma) pupils in terms of education?

Further on in the article, the research methodology is described, followed by the presentation of results by individual thematic sections. In the first section, we will look at how well Roma children were provided with computers and other technical equipment they needed for remote learning during lockdown, and how well they knew how to use such. In the second section, we will check whether and in what way teachers were able to establish contact with Roma pupils and, if not, why not. In the third section, we will delve into the actual participation of Roma pupils in the lessons during lockdown, to which we will add a comparison with other children. The fourth section will address the involvement of Roma parents in the schooling of their children during lockdown. In the fifth section, we will discuss the possible consequences of remote learning for Roma pupils and the possible impact of such learning format on the increasing inequality between Roma and other pupils.

## 2. Methodology

The research carried out between June and September 2020 included online surveys among primary school teachers and Roma assistants. The online survey among Roma assistants and the online survey among teachers working in schools with Roma assistants were carried out under the Together for Knowledge project run by the Centre for School and Outdoor Education.<sup>4</sup> The online survey among teachers in schools without Roma assistants was conducted within the research programme of the Institute for Ethnic Studies.<sup>5</sup>

In all cases, the open source application IKA was used for online surveying. Roma assistants were addressed directly by e-mail, while teachers were addressed indirectly through the school principals, to whom we sent an e-mail requesting to forward to the teachers the invitation to participate and the link to the online survey.

The online survey for Roma assistants<sup>6</sup> involved 23 Roma assistants working in 27 primary schools in different regions of Slovenia, namely 7 in Pomurje, 3 in Podravje, 1 in Central Slovenia, and 12 in Southeast Slovenia. The online survey for teachers in schools with Roma assistants involved 297 teachers from 25 primary schools:<sup>7</sup> 37 % from Pomurje, 7 % from Podravje, 9 % from Central Slovenia, and 46 % from Southeast Slovenia. Among them, 43 % were class teachers, 42 % were subject teachers, and 15 % performed other technical and/or managerial work (principals, assistant principals, specialist teachers, counsellors, etc.). The online survey for teachers in schools without Roma assistants included 90 teachers from 18 primary schools: 20 % from Pomurje, 28 % from Podravje, 13 % from Central Slovenia, 15 % from Posavje, and 24 % from Southeast Slovenia. Among them, 33 % were class teachers, 38 % were subject teachers, and 29 % performed other technical and/or managerial work.

### 3. Technical Requirements for Remote Work and Learning of Roma Pupils

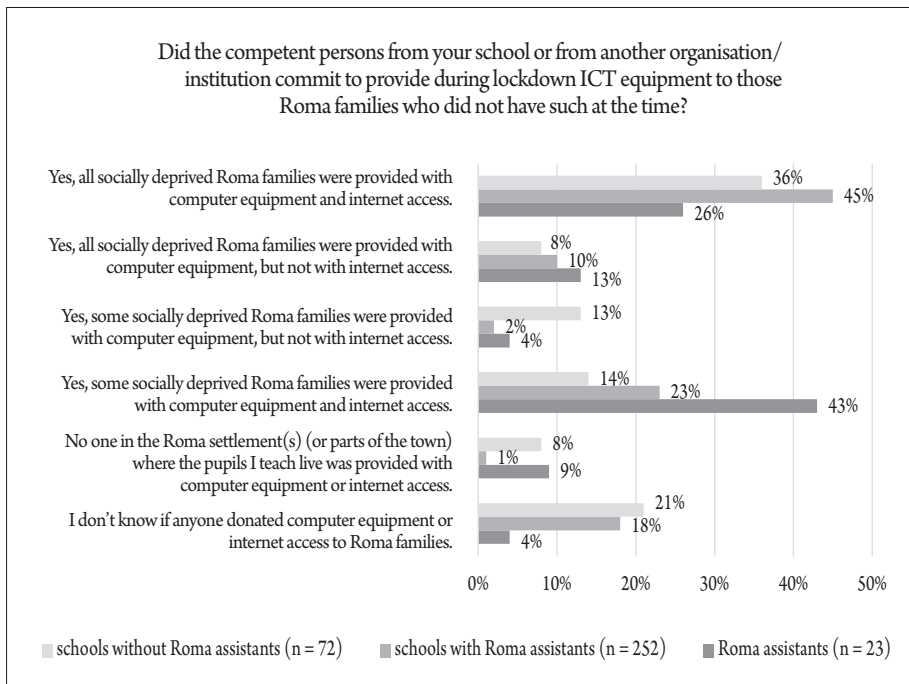
During lockdown, education moved from classrooms to an online environment. Specific prerequisites (including ICT<sup>8</sup> equipment, internet access and computer skills) were needed for the successful implementation of such remote learning. As noted by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights in a publication on OSCE States responses to the Covid-19 pandemic (OSCE ODIHR 2020, 144), some Roma pupils lacked the minimum requirements for remote learning (e.g. quiet room, computer access, and internet connections).

The purpose of the research was to explore how many Roma children in Slovenia had the ICT equipment needed to participate in remote learning at the beginning of lockdown. Answers to this question were sought from Roma assistants, who are most in contact with Roma pupils and often know their home situation better than teachers. The results show that the situation varied from settlement to settlement. In some urban areas, virtually all Roma children had computer equipment and internet access. In most cases elsewhere in Slovenia, however, the situation was quite different. For about a third of the schools where Roma assistants work, the latter estimate that 80–95 % of Roma pupils did not have adequate computer equipment and/or internet access at the beginning of lockdown. In other schools, this share ranged between 20 and 70 %. Some Roma families had at least mobile phones with more or less functioning internet access, but this was usually not sufficient for the smooth participation of Roma children in remote learning.

Given the poor socio-economic status of many Roma families, there were institutions, associations, companies or individuals in practically every community who helped provide computer and communication equipment for Roma families who were unable to do so on their own. In this way, after some time,

most (but not all) Roma families had the technical equipment necessary for the children to participate in remote learning (Chart 1). Although the partial report of the National Education Institute titled *Analysis of Remote Learning during the Covid-19 Epidemic in Slovenia* states that during the epidemic the Ministry of Education and Sport, in cooperation with the Education Institute, provided “all pupils who did not have access to a computer” with computers and other equipment (Rupnik Vec et al. 2020, 10), Roma assistants report that even at the end of lockdown, in at least six Roma settlements there were Roma families without the necessary technical equipment and/or internet access.

**Chart 1: Shares of Roma families equipped with ICT by schools or other institutions during lockdown**

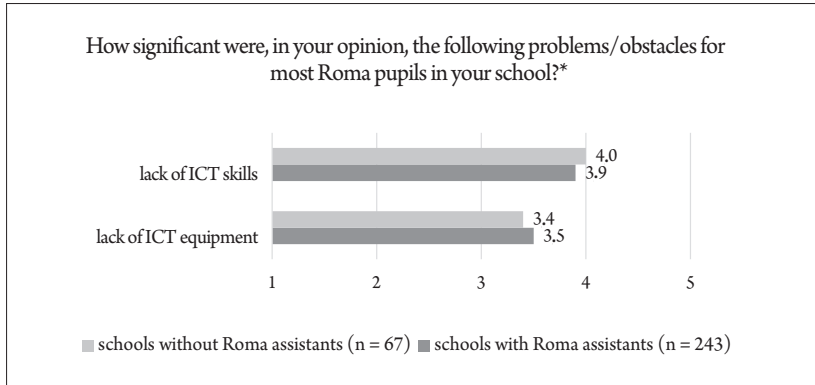


Source: aggregate data from surveys among teachers in primary schools with Roma assistants, among teachers in primary schools without Roma assistants, and among Roma assistants.

Even if families had been given the necessary equipment, this did not solve all the problems related to participation in remote learning. Many Roma pupils and their parents were not skilled in using the equipment provided. On average, teachers described the lack of ICT skills among Roma pupils as a big problem (Chart 2). In fact, also the Advocate of the Principle of Equality draws attention to the inaccessibility of the necessary ICT equipment and the lack of ICT skills among Slovenian children. In his recommendation from August 2020, he

mentions the above problems in the context of the finding that not all pupils in Slovenia – especially not those from vulnerable groups, such as Roma – had equal opportunities to obtain education during the period of remote learning (Advocate of the Principle of Equality 2020, 1–3).

**Chart 2: ICT related problems/obstacles for Roma pupils**



Source: aggregate data from surveys among teachers in primary schools with Roma assistants and among teachers in primary schools without Roma assistants.

\*1 = no problem at all, 2 = small problem, 3 = medium problem, 4 = big problem, 5 = very big problem.

Also under some open-ended questions, teachers repeatedly highlighted in surveys the lack of skills for using computers and various online communication tools among Roma pupils:

They lack ICT skills – they have extremely powerful smartphones, but they don't know how to use them as learning tools.

Pupils don't know how (don't want) to use a computer or a tablet. Most of their communication takes place on smartphones.

The level of digital literacy is very low.

Pupils didn't know how to sign in to online classrooms, they didn't know how to send emails.

They were given tablets but didn't know how to use them. No one in the family knew how to help them.

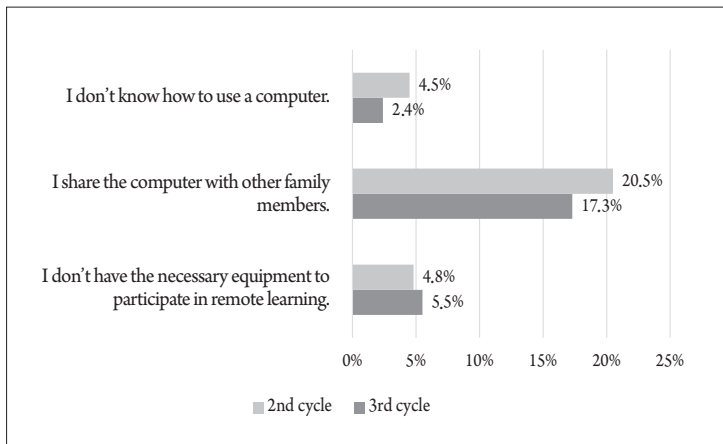
The lack of appropriate ICT equipment and the lack of skills for ICT use were identified as a problem also among the wider population of pupils in Slovenia, not only among Roma. In the Analysis of Remote Learning during the Covid-19 Epidemic in Slovenia carried out by the National Education Institute on a broad



sample of Slovenian pupils, students, teachers and principals during the period of remote learning,<sup>9</sup> pupils of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> educational cycle reported to have also encountered the following difficulties during remote learning (Chart 3):

- I don't have the necessary equipment to participate in remote learning (computer, headphones, printer, internet connection, etc.);
- I share the computer with other family members, so I can rarely use it;
- I don't know how to use a computer (Rupnik Vec et al. 2020, 57).

**Chart 3: Problems encountered by pupils of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> educational cycle during remote learning\***



Source: Rupnik Vec et al. (2020, 57).

\* The numbers for these replies are as follows (2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> cycle, respectively): a) I don't know how to use a computer: 392 and 169; b) I share the computer with other family members: 1,799 and 1,218; c) I don't have the necessary equipment to participate in remote learning: 423 and 386 (Rupnik Vec et al. 2020, 57).

In our online survey, in addition to the lack of ICT equipment and lack of ICT skills, teachers highlighted some other technical obstacles that made it difficult or impossible for Roma pupils to participate in remote learning, such as the fact that some Roma families did not have electricity, many Roma children did not have adequate room for work or study, and some did not have the necessary school supplies.

Living conditions: they don't have electricity, they all stay together in one room where they can't study and work for school. Their parents can't help them, as they are mostly illiterate (although quite a few pupils practice home schooling!?).

The problem with one of my pupils was that there were several children who used only one phone. They also didn't have school supplies (we even had to send them coloured pencils by post).

## 4. Establishing Contacts with Roma Pupils

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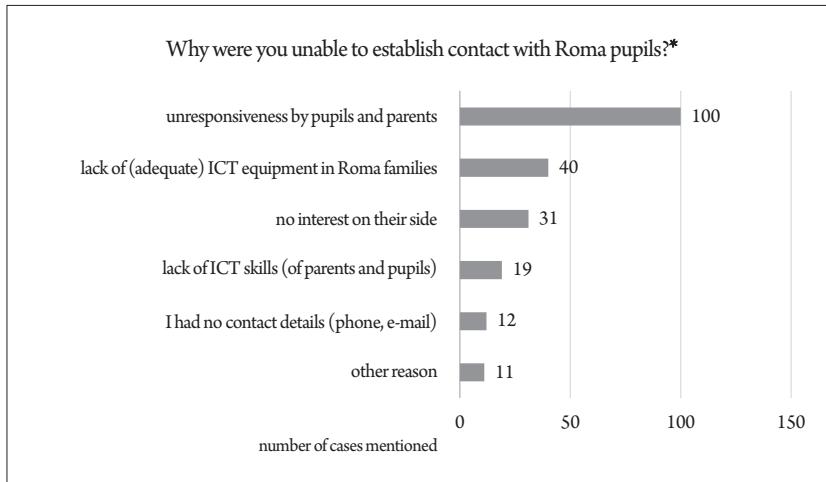
In the publication *Education in the Republic of Slovenia in Circumstances Related to Covid-19*, the authors state that “in conducting remote learning [...] it is necessary to make sure that we reach all or as many pupils and students as possible” (Kustec et al. 2020, 14). According to teachers in our survey, this was not the case during lockdown – as many as 53 %<sup>10</sup> of teachers could not establish contact with all their pupils. Most teachers spoke of just one or two pupils, but some reported much higher numbers, up to 30 (in one case as many as 40) pupils. Among the latter, Roma pupils prevailed. As many as 90 % of teachers who were unable to make contact with all their pupils responded that also (or mostly) Roma pupils were out of reach.

We asked the teachers who were unable to establish contact with (individual) Roma pupils why contact could not be established. In the survey, we included an open-ended question to which they were free to answer as they wished. We categorised their answers into six groups, as shown by Chart 4. All teachers said that failure to establish communication had to do with the Roma community. None of them had any doubt as to whether they, on their part, had done everything possible to make contact. The most common reason given by teachers for not establishing contact was the unresponsiveness of Roma parents and pupils. The vast majority of teachers pointed out that Roma parents did not answer the phone, did not answer e-mails, and many did not even respond to communication by post. 12 teachers reported that they did not have (accurate) contact details of Roma families (neither phone numbers nor e-mails). Other teachers also mentioned that Roma parents’ phone numbers were often out of reach: “The phone numbers they gave us in class were not available because both Roma pupils and their parents often change their phone numbers.” Another frequent reason for not establishing contact was the lack of adequate ICT equipment among Roma families. Some teachers said that even after receiving a computer or a tablet, some Roma families could not use them because they did not have adequate electricity or a strong enough internet connection. Some teachers associated the unresponsiveness of Roma parents and pupils with the lack of skills to use a computer and the internet, some with illiteracy or lack of education of the parents (did not know how to read instructions or did not understand them), while most teachers attributed the unresponsiveness of Roma parents and children to their lack of interest in education and school work.

About three quarters of the teachers who established contact with Roma pupils reported that their way of communicating with Roma pupils differed from the way they communicated with other pupils. They communicated with Roma pupils (and their parents) much more frequently by phone. They called them or texted them several times. In this way, they encouraged them to learn and do their homework as, according to some teachers, Roma pupils needed more encouragement to do at least part of what the teachers expected of them. They also

often communicated with them via Facebook and Messenger. Many teachers prepared special printed materials for Roma pupils, which were sent to them by post or handed over to Roma assistants, social workers, specialist teachers, or employees of various organisations helping Roma in Roma settlements, who passed them on to Roma pupils (and later back to teachers). Some teachers also personally visited Roma pupils in their homes to deliver materials and instructions for work.

**Chart 4: Reasons for failure to establish contact between teachers and Roma pupils**



Source: aggregate data from surveys among teachers in primary schools with Roma assistants and among teachers in primary schools without Roma assistants.

\* Showing aggregate replies of teachers from primary schools with Roma assistants and primary schools without Roma assistants; n = 169.

The role of Roma assistants proved to be very important during lockdown. They represented an important link between Roma pupils and the school. About half (49 %) of teachers reported that their school turned to a Roma assistant more often than before to help establish and maintain contact with Roma pupils during lockdown. Roma assistants' perception was similar: 78 % of them estimated that schools sought their help in establishing contact and communicating with Roma pupils more often than before lockdown. Quite a few teachers wrote that without Roma assistants, many Roma pupils would not have been reached during lockdown at all, or that without the support and encouragement of Roma assistants, many Roma pupils would probably not have participated in remote learning at all. Others felt that, without Roma assistants, the school would have had to make much greater effort to establish contact with Roma pupils and Roma pupils would not have done as many assignments and participated in lessons equally, and consequently their grades would have been worse.

## 5. Roma Pupils' Participation in Remote Learning during Lockdown

One of the aims of the surveys was to explore Roma pupils' responsiveness and participation in remote learning during lockdown, also in comparison with other pupils. Teachers were therefore asked to rate selected statements related to the above, separately for Roma pupils and other pupils.

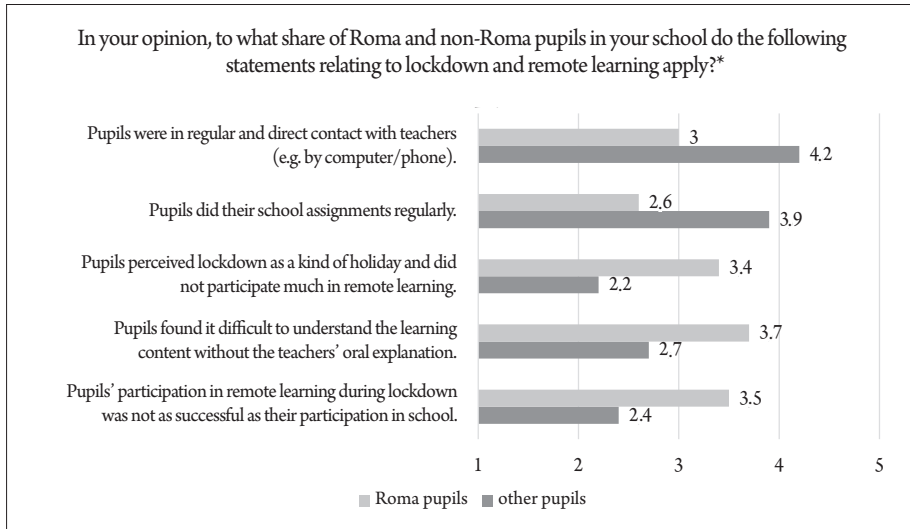
A comparison between the replies of teachers in primary schools with Roma assistants and teachers in primary school without Roma assistants generally presents a very similar picture for both types of schools (Charts 5 and 6). The main difference is that the range between the average values of the replies relating to individual statements for Roma and for other pupils is greater in primary schools without Roma assistants. In the latter group, Roma pupils seem to be slightly more disadvantaged compared to other pupils than in primary schools with Roma assistants. This might be attributed to the smaller sample of teachers of primary schools without Roma assistants; likewise, the slightly better situation of Roma pupils in primary schools with Roma assistants might be due to the efforts that Roma assistants make to help them.

About half of Roma pupils from both groups of primary schools were in regular contact with teachers during lockdown. The share of other pupils was much higher, as the vast majority thereof (the average value is 4.2 for both groups of schools) were in regular and direct contact with teachers. It is also interesting to note that nearly half (average value 2.6) of Roma pupils from primary schools with Roma assistants were in contact with the school only through Roma assistants.<sup>11</sup> The situation is somewhat worse for both Roma and other pupils when it comes to regular school assignments. According to the respondents, the average share of Roma pupils in both groups of primary schools is somewhere between small and a half, while the majority of other pupils (the average is 3.9 in both groups of primary schools) performed their school assignments regularly.

According to teachers from both groups of schools, more than half of Roma pupils perceived lockdown as a kind of holiday and did not participate much in remote learning. Given the above statement that the vast majority of other pupils were in regular and direct contact with teachers, it is not surprising that only a small share of other children felt remote learning as a holiday.

It turned out that most Roma pupils found it difficult to understand the learning content without the teachers' oral explanation. In such regard, the share of other pupils was also relatively high – just under half. Similarly, the teachers estimated that for the vast majority of Roma pupils their participation in remote learning was not as successful as their participation in school. With non-Roma pupils this was the case for less than half of them.

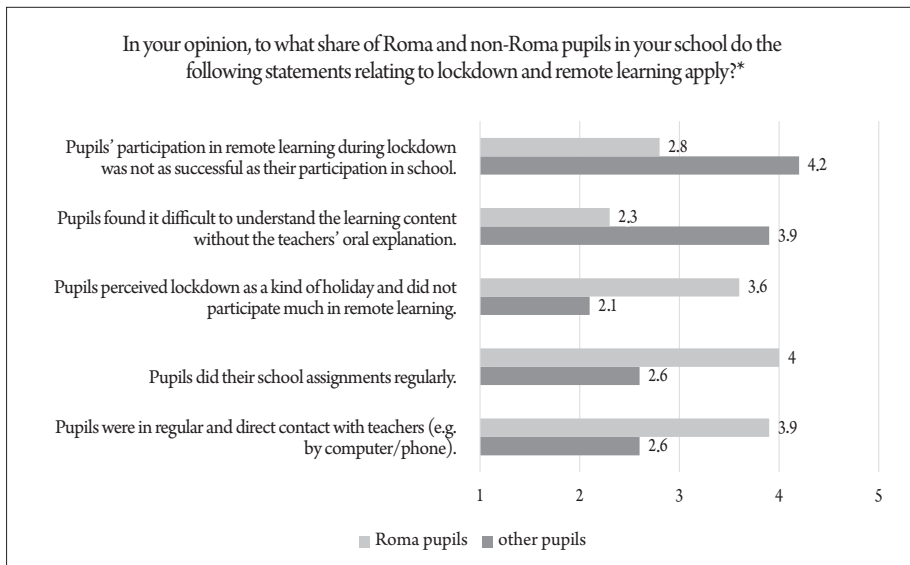
**Chart 5: Responsiveness and participation of pupils of primary schools with Roma assistants in remote learning during lockdown**



Source: aggregate data from the survey among teachers in primary schools with Roma assistants.

\*1 = no one, 2 = a small share, 3 = half, 4 = most, 5 = all; n = 233.

**Chart 6: Responsiveness and participation of pupils of primary schools without Roma assistants in remote learning during lockdown**



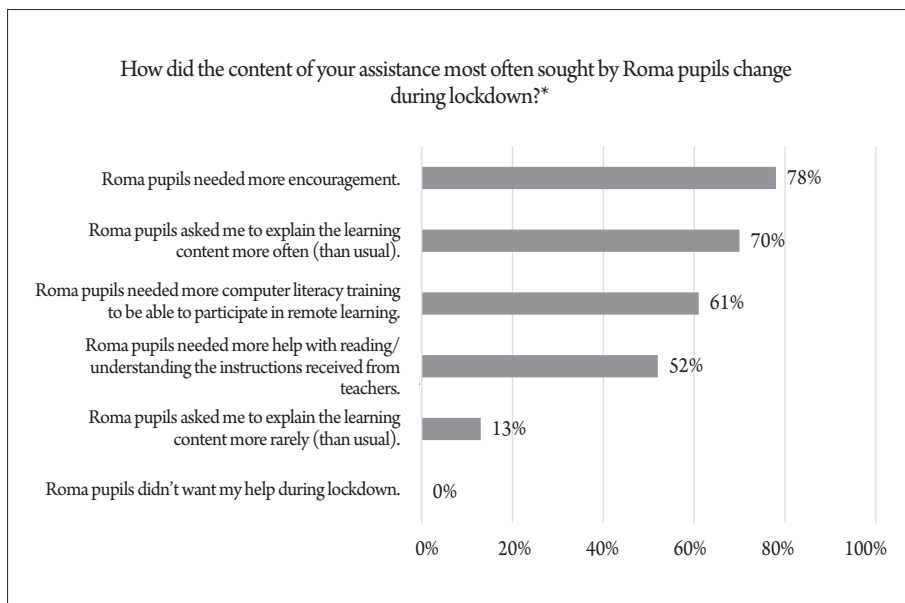
Source: aggregate data from the survey among teachers in primary schools without Roma assistants.

\*1 = no one, 2 = a small share, 3 = half, 4 = most, 5 = all; n = 63.

Lower participation, greater unresponsiveness and irregular contact with teachers, as well as difficulties in understanding the learning content among Roma pupils may also be the result of less favourable factors or circumstances, more specifically problems and obstacles that Roma pupils encounter more often than their non-Roma peers. Among such circumstances, the article has already highlighted the lack of ICT equipment and the lack of ICT skills.

In addition to the above, teachers from both groups of primary schools pointed to the following problems and obstacles which they considered to be a medium or big problem for Roma pupils in remote learning: low learning motivation, unstimulating home environment, and lack of understanding of the learning content due to lack of knowledge of individual subjects. The lack of possibility of socialising and cooperating with classmates and the lack of understanding instructions and learning content due to the lack of knowledge of the Slovenian language were also perceived as small to medium problems. Besides the mentioned factors, teachers further reported low-educated or even illiterate parents and (consequently) the lack of their help, support and motivation for their children in remote learning, which is closely related to parents' unresponsiveness to teachers' communication. Considering all the above problems and obstacles, teachers from both groups of schools believe that the position of Roma pupils in the Southeast is less favourable compared to Roma pupils in Northeast Slovenia.

**Chart 7: Changes in the content of assistance provided by Roma assistants during lockdown**



Source: aggregate data from the survey among Roma assistants.

\* Multiple answers possible; n = 23.

As mentioned above, nearly half of Roma children in primary schools with Roma assistants maintained contact with the school only through Roma assistants. When asked how the content of their assistance that Roma pupils most often sought during lockdown changed, Roma assistants most often replied that Roma children needed more encouragement for work (Chart 7). As many as three-quarters of circled this answer, which is certainly a reflection of the lack of encouragement and support in the home environment in the changed circumstances of education. Only a slightly smaller share of Roma assistants answered that Roma pupils turned to them more often than before lockdown to help them understand the learning content. Due to aforementioned problems with the lack of ICT skills of Roma pupils, many assistants (61 %) answered that these pupils needed more computer literacy training to be able to participate in remote learning. A good half of the assistants also agreed that the Roma pupils needed more help with the instructions received from teachers.

## 6. Collaboration of Roma Parents

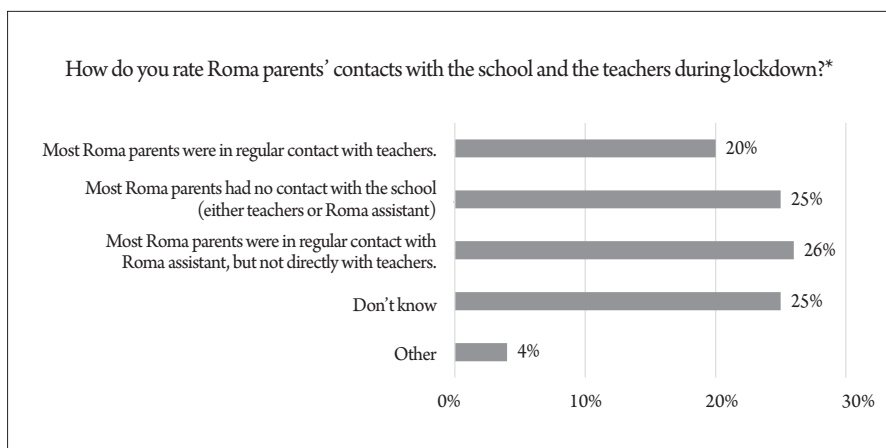
The role of parents in the education of children is already significant in normal circumstances when children actually go to school, and gains further importance in remote learning. The school provides, in principle, equal conditions for all pupils, while remote learning is likely to increase the inequalities between them due to the unequal circumstances in which pupils live. Roma pupils in Slovenia often come from an environment that is quite unstimulating when it comes to education.<sup>12</sup> They mostly live in what are known as Roma settlements which, according to Zupančič (2015, 75), are “the reason for both personal and collective (local community, neighbourhood) marginalisation and exclusion”, while living in these environments “is considered one of the main reasons for failure to integrate into the educational system”. The material standing of Roma families living in such settlements is usually extremely poor, and the lack of encouragement from the environment further contributes to the low level of education and high unemployment of members of the Roma community.

Such a home environment cannot equally replace the school environment, nor can it offer pupils equal opportunities for remote learning compared to other pupils living in a more supportive home environment. Research shows that longer absences from school (either during the summer holidays or in the case of home schooling) have more negative effects on pupils from socio-economically weaker families (Di Pietro et al. 2020, 12–19; Raudenbush & Eschmann 2015). The role of parents is crucial here, as they are usually the ones who provide children with both tangible (digital equipment, adequate room, nutrition) and intangible (assistance in learning and understanding the learning content, emotional support and encouragement) learning conditions.

This part of the article will focus on the role of parents in providing intangible conditions for home schooling, especially in terms of encouragement to study, organisation of school work, interpretation of instructions and learning content, assistance in solving tasks and communicating with teachers. A survey conducted among parents of primary school children by the Association of Parents' Councils of Slovenia (Meden 2020, 16–17) shows that parents of children in the first few grades spent an average of 3–4 hours a day on remote learning, while parents of ninth-graders spent 2 hours a day. This time was spent on providing materials from e-mails, printing materials, explaining instructions, checking the correctness of home assignments, checking what was learned, helping to find information and helping to deliver the assignments to teachers. In doing so, parents encountered many problems, among which they most often pointed out the difficulties in communicating with the school or teachers in terms of clarity of instructions or clarity of communication in general. They reported that communication was too one-way, merely written, vague (Meden 2020, 17). We can assume that these problems were even greater for Roma parents, who often had neither access to ICT nor the skills to use it, and some of them were even illiterate. In addition, a significant share of Roma parents had not been used to cooperating with the school and the teachers even before lockdown.

In the survey among teachers in schools with Roma assistants, a quarter of the 233 respondents estimated that during lockdown most Roma parents were not in contact with the school. A quarter of teachers answered that Roma parents were mostly in regular contact with the Roma assistant, but not with the teachers. Only a fifth of teachers said that Roma parents were in regular contact with teachers (Chart 8).

**Chart 8: Roma parents' contacts with the school/teachers during lockdown**



Source: aggregate data from the survey among teachers in primary schools with Roma assistants.

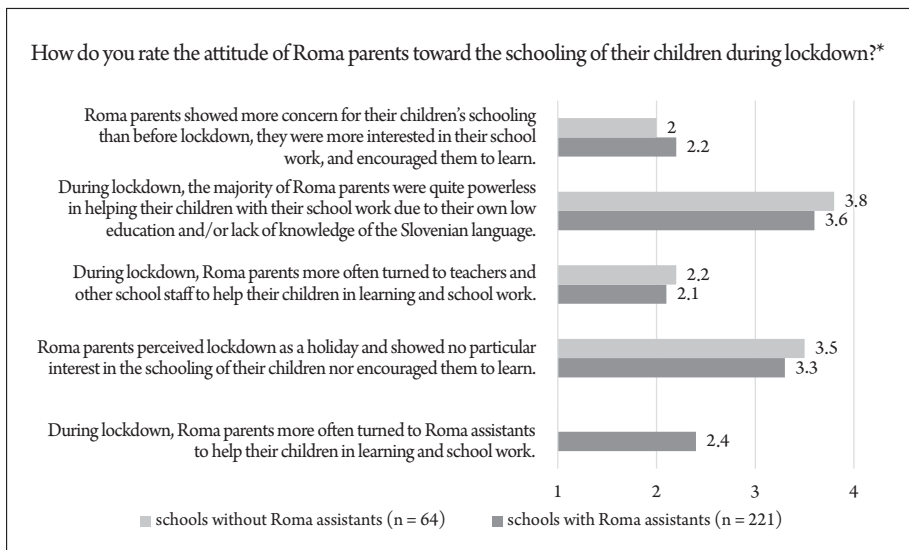
\*n = 233.



Teachers who chose the answer Other added that Roma parents were only occasionally in contact with teachers, Roma assistants or specialist teachers, or that only a part of Roma parents, but not the majority, were in contact with the school.

The teachers were asked if they had noticed any changes in the collaboration of Roma parents with the school during lockdown compared to the period before lockdown. The largest share (43 %) of teachers in schools with Roma assistants reported that collaboration remained the same as before lockdown. Just over a tenth noticed an improvement, and about a fifth noticed a deterioration. In such regard, another question arises, namely what was the collaboration of Roma parents before lockdown. This question was not posed to the teachers, but some of them nevertheless wrote that there was no collaboration before or during lockdown. The responses of teachers in schools without Roma assistants were very similar.

**Chart 9: Roma parents' attitude toward the schooling of their children during lockdown**



Source: aggregate data from surveys among teachers in primary schools with Roma assistants and among teachers in primary schools without Roma assistants.

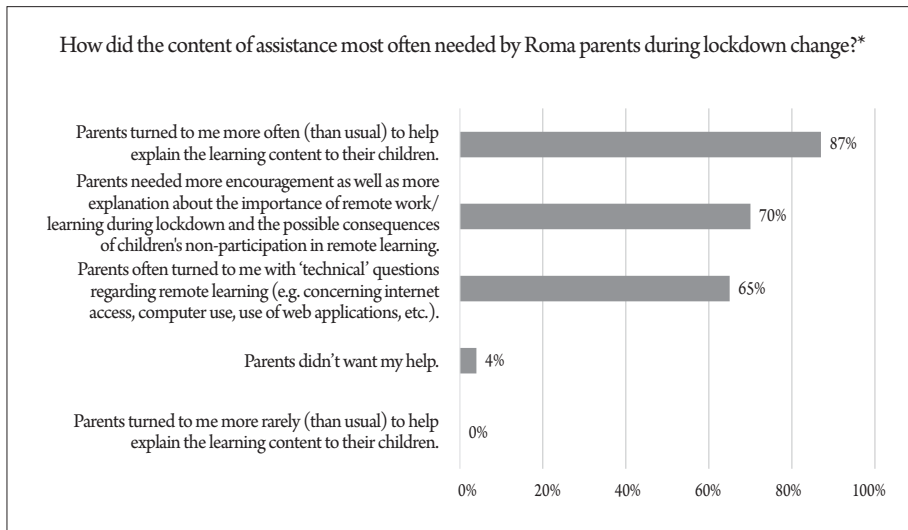
\*1 = no one, 2 = a small share, 3 = half, 4 = most, 5 = all.

The survey also included some statements in relation to which teachers were asked to assess the share of Roma parents for whom these statements apply (Chart 9). The prevailing opinion among teachers was that the majority of Roma parents were quite powerless in helping their children with their school work during lockdown due to their own low education and/or lack of knowledge of the Slovenian language. They also estimated that most Roma parents experienced

lockdown more as a holiday and not as serious work, they were not interested in their children's school assignments, and did not encourage them to learn. Only a small share of Roma parents showed, according to teacher's estimates, more concern for their children's schooling than before lockdown, they were more interested in their school work, and encouraged them to learn. A similarly small share of Roma parents more often turned to teachers or other school professionals to help their children learn and do school assignments. The share of Roma parents who more often turned to Roma assistants for help was slightly higher.

Roma assistants, too, perceived that parents turned to them for help and information more often during lockdown (Chart 10). The majority (87 %) of Roma assistants reported more frequent requests from Roma parents for help in explaining the learning content that their children had to process. Many (70 %) Roma assistants reported that during lockdown Roma parents needed more encouragement as well as more explanation about the importance of remote work/learning and the possible consequences of children's non-participation in remote learning. A significant share (65 %) of Roma assistants also received purely technical questions from Roma parents regarding remote learning (e.g. concerning internet access, computer use, use of web applications, etc.).

**Chart 10: Changes in the content of assistance provided by Roma assistants to Roma parents**



Source: aggregate data from the survey among Roma assistants.

\* Multiple answers possible; n = 23.

Roma assistants also reported that Roma parents turned to them with questions related to the coronavirus and the possibilities of protecting themselves from infection. They were concerned about how to protect children when they would

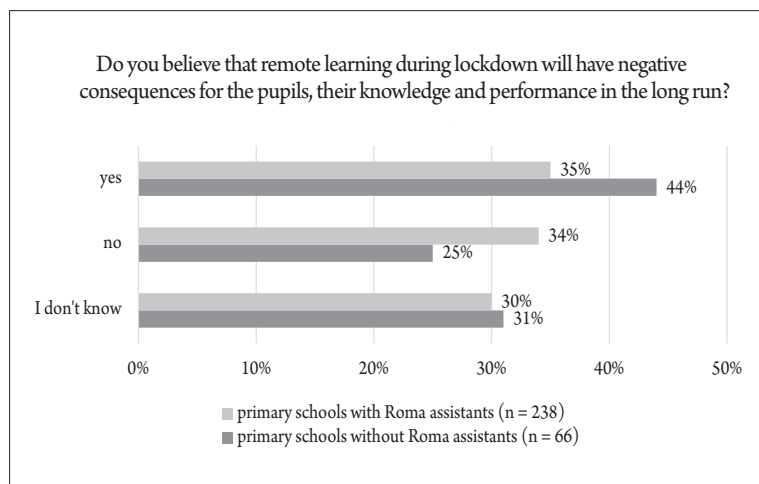
return to school, as well as how assessment would take place and how children would finish school.

## 7. Consequences of Remote Learning during Lockdown for Roma Pupils

The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights expressed concern that extended school closures and potentially new waves of the pandemic are likely to widen and deepen the educational gap for Roma pupils, resulting in even higher dropout rates and loss in employment opportunities over the long term (OSCE ODIHR 2020, 144). Similar expectations about the deepening of the educational gap for Roma children are reported also by the teachers who participated in our online surveys.

Due to the changed schooling conditions during the pandemic, the respondents expressed concern for all pupils in general, not just Roma. As teachers' responses show, most of them believe that remote learning during lockdown will have negative consequences for the pupils, their knowledge and school performance in the long run (Chart 11). In primary schools with Roma assistants, the share of teachers who believe that such a way of schooling will have negative consequences is almost equal to the share of those who believe that there will be no negative consequences. Among the teachers from primary schools without Roma assistants, the share of those who believe that remote learning will have negative consequences for pupils is notably larger.

*Chart 11: Possible negative consequences of remote learning during lockdown for pupils' knowledge and performance*



Source: aggregate data from surveys among teachers in primary schools with Roma assistants and among teachers in primary schools without Roma assistants.

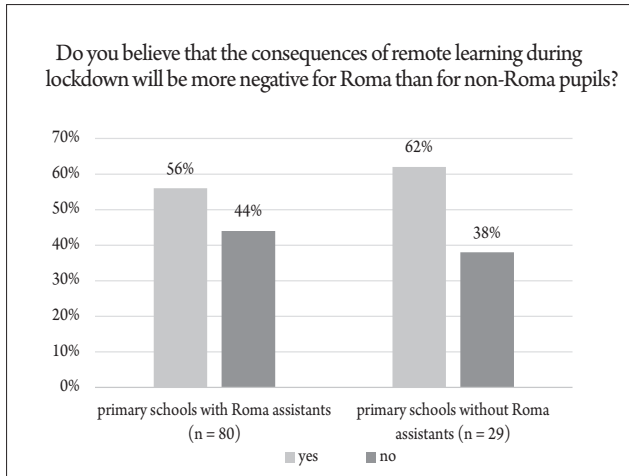
Considering the arguments on which teachers based their replies, they can be divided into two groups – the first one comprises those who expect negative consequences, and the second one those who do not expect negative consequences. The two groups reported the following arguments:

- 1) remote learning will have long-term negative consequences for the pupils
  - a) unconsolidated and poor knowledge of the pupils: the most common answers by teachers from primary schools with Roma assistants and primary schools without Roma assistants were that during remote learning pupils did not consolidate and repeat the learning content. Some added that pupils also did not work independently enough, had too many distractions and more opportunities to cheat when learning at home. Mention was also made of reduced pupils' motivation for school assignments;
  - b) remote learning is not the same as learning in class: a slightly smaller share of teachers than under the previous answer thought that the impact on pupils would be negative because remote learning cannot replace learning in class. The main reasons for such are that teachers cannot check the knowledge of all pupils on an ongoing basis, that pupils need more help in interpreting or understanding the materials, that non-verbal communication, consolidation and repetition of learning content in class cannot be replaced, as well as peer socialisation.
- 2) remote learning will not have long-term negative consequences for the pupils
  - a) delays due to remote learning can be made up for: many teachers felt that lockdown or remote learning did not last that long and that learning content covered during this period could be repeated and consolidated at the beginning of the new school year. Some of them added, however, that negative consequences were expected if such remote learning were to be repeated in the future;
  - b) negative consequences will be felt only by some pupils: a slightly less common response was that only those pupils who did not do their assignments regularly would feel the negative consequences in the long run. Teachers said that the frequency of work and the (non)motivation of pupils largely depended on the supervision and support of their parents.

Over a half of the teachers from both groups of schools believe that the consequences of remote learning during lockdown will be more negative for Roma pupils than for other pupils (Chart 12).

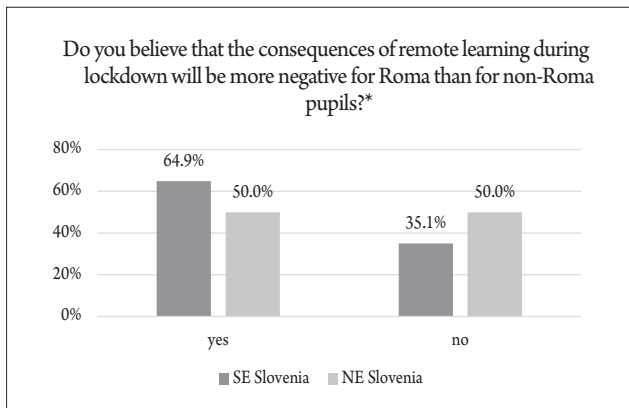
There are some differences between Northeast and Southeast Slovenia (Chart 13). The share of teachers who expect that remote learning during lockdown will have more negative consequences for Roma than for other pupils is higher in Southeast Slovenia (64.9 %) than in Northeast Slovenia (50 %).

**Chart 12: Negative consequences of remote learning during lockdown for Roma pupils**



Source: aggregate data from surveys among teachers in primary schools with Roma assistants and among teachers in primary schools without Roma assistants.

**Chart 13: Differences between Northeast and Southeast Slovenia regarding teachers' expectations about the negative consequences of remote learning for Roma and other pupils**



Source: aggregate data from surveys among teachers in primary schools with Roma assistants and among teachers in primary schools without Roma assistants.

\* n = 109.

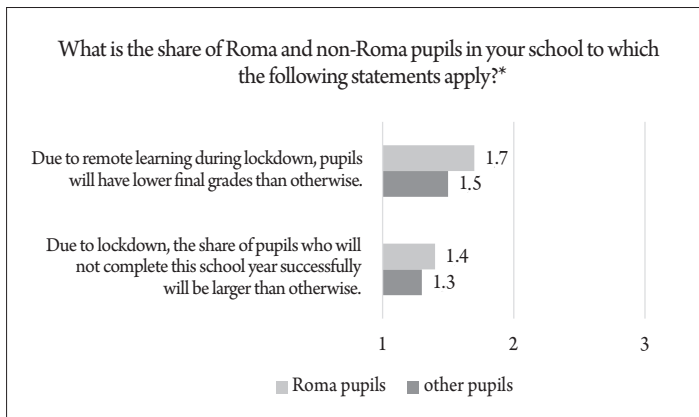
Teachers who thought that the consequences of remote learning would be more negative for Roma pupils believed that this was due to a combination of the following:

- rather discouraging home environment for Roma pupils and more supportive environment for other pupils,

- lack of motivation and responsiveness of Roma pupils due to lack of parental support, lack of understanding of learning content, lack of ICT skills, and lack of (appropriate) ICT equipment.

Teachers who thought that the consequences would not be more negative for Roma pupils explained that in principle the same applies to all pupils – those who had developed appropriate work habits before the onset of remote learning were successful and they also worked regularly at home, regardless of whether they were Roma or not.

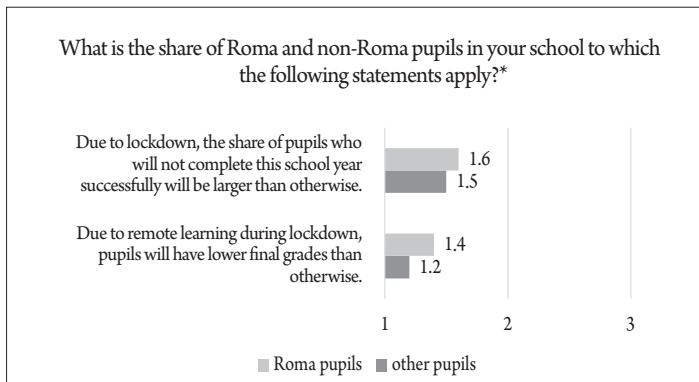
**Chart 14: Consequences of remote learning for pupils in primary schools with Roma assistants**



Source: aggregate data from the survey among teachers in primary schools with Roma assistants.

\*1 = no one, 2 = a small share, 3 = half, 4 = most, 5 = all; n = 233.

**Chart 15: Consequences of remote learning for pupils in primary schools without Roma assistants**



Source: aggregate data from the survey among teachers in primary schools without Roma assistants.

\*1 = no one, 2 = a small share, 3 = half, 4 = most, 5 = all; n = 63.

Teachers from both groups of primary schools similarly commented on two statements that apply to all pupils: that due to remote learning pupils will have lower final grades than they would otherwise have, and that due to lockdown, the share of pupils who will not complete this school year successfully will be larger than otherwise (Charts 14 and 15). According to teachers, both statements concerned a small share of pupils – both Roma and others. A larger, but still small share, relates to Roma pupils, who might have worse grades due to the above mentioned circumstances.

## 8. Conclusion

As one of the most marginalised and vulnerable population groups in Slovenia, the Roma generally record a low level of inclusion and performance in education. Negative factors or obstacles for Roma pupils are numerous, closely intertwined, and interdependent – from social and living conditions in the family and living environment to the educational level of parents and the social norms in their immediate and wider community. Therefore, it is all the more important that pupils who live in such conditions are provided with a stable educational environment and the possibility to regularly perform school and other related activities. With the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, remote learning was established – in principle, it was carried out by means of ICT, but physically took place in the family environment. The shift from established patterns of education brought new challenges to many Roma pupils and their families that most of their non-Roma peers did not have to deal with.

The study of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the education of Roma children included all major stakeholders involved in the remote learning process: Roma pupils and their parents on the one hand, and primary school teachers on the other, as well as Roma assistants as an intermediate link between schools and the Roma community. The article presents the results of the analysis of data in five areas that are relevant in the process of remote learning: technical conditions for remote learning and work, establishing contacts between teachers and Roma pupils, participation of Roma pupils and parents in remote learning, and the consequences of such form of education during lockdown for Roma pupils.

A prerequisite for the smooth implementation of remote learning in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic was the availability of ICT and the skills to use such. Although at the onset of the pandemic schools, other institutions and organisations made sure that the vast majority of Roma families were provided with computers and other necessary technology, by the end of this period there were still some Roma families who did not have all the necessary equipment or had various other problems. An even bigger problem was the lack of ICT skills among Roma pupils and their parents. In many Roma families outside urban areas, this is also a direct consequence of other factors, such as a general lack of

infrastructure and poor living conditions in Roma settlements, and the low level of education or even illiteracy of Roma parents.

Also the next chapter on the establishment of contacts between teachers and Roma pupils shows several closely interconnected factors that negatively affect the inclusion and performance of these pupils in education. As many as half of the teachers in our study were unable to make contact with all their pupils during lockdown – the vast majority of them were Roma. Teachers reported unresponsiveness and lack of interest of Roma children and their parents as well as lack of appropriate ICT equipment on the Roma side as the main reasons for this problem. Due to the listed obstacles to remote communication, several teachers had to make additional efforts and show some ingenuity in providing school materials to Roma pupils. An important role in establishing and maintaining contacts with Roma pupils was played by Roma assistants.

According to teachers, the collaboration of Roma pupils and their parents with schools during lockdown was, on average, modest. However, generalisation is not appropriate here, as there were differences between them, too. Teachers found that most Roma pupils were less responsive than their non-Roma peers, that they performed their assignments less regularly, and that they had more difficulty understanding the learning content. It needs to be reiterated that such a situation is also the result of less favourable factors and circumstances, more specifically the problems and obstacles that Roma pupils face more often than their non-Roma peers. This is especially true for Roma pupils from Southeast Slovenia. In alleviating these problems, as in establishing contacts, the role of Roma assistants was important as they provided additional explanations of the learning content, encouragement for school work, etc., thus significantly contributing to better participation and performance of Roma pupils. This statement is supported by the teachers from schools employing Roma assistants. According to their estimates, almost half of Roma pupils were in contact with the school only through Roma assistants, and a quarter of the teachers from these schools believed that Roma parents were in regular contact only with Roma assistants and not with teachers.

According to the answers of teachers from all schools covered by the survey, about a third are convinced that remote learning during lockdown will have negative long-term consequences for all pupils in general, for their knowledge and school performance. A good half of teachers from both groups of primary schools believe that these consequences will be more negative for Roma than for other pupils. Such opinion is more widespread among teachers in Southeast Slovenia than among teachers in the Northeast. The reasons for lower expectations regarding Roma pupils can be found in the already mentioned factors – especially in the unstimulating home environment, lack of motivation and responsiveness by Roma pupils due to lack of parental support and encouragement, lack of understanding of school materials, and lack of ICT skills or lack of appropriate equipment.



In view of the above, courses to raise computer literacy or even basic literacy of Roma families should be organised even when schools operate normally, and parents and children should be constantly made aware of the importance of education through various methods. In the long run, it is necessary to provide for appropriate infrastructural equipment in Roma settlements and for a rearrangement of the unsuitable living conditions some families live in, in order to provide children with more appropriate room for study. These measures go beyond the domain of education alone. They require long-term plans and close inter-ministerial cooperation between ministries as well as cooperation between other institutions in the field of social affairs, spatial planning and the environment, employment, etc.

In practically all the above areas, conditions were critical in a large part of the Roma community in Slovenia even before the Covid-19 pandemic. Predictions as to whether the pandemic will worsen the position of Roma pupils in education vary among teachers. As some of them pointed out, remote education in the second half of the 2019/20 school year was not long enough to have long-term negative consequences for most Roma pupils. However, due to unforeseen circumstances in connection with the said pandemic, more permanent damage could be expected in the event that longer-term remote learning needs to be re-introduced in the future.

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## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> This applies to Slovenia (Bešter & Medvešek 2007, 134–135) and other Central and Eastern European countries (European Roma Rights Centre 2004; Kontseková & Košťál 2011, 23–24; OSCE ODIHR 2012).
- <sup>2</sup> More on policies and measures to include Roma children into the Slovenian educational system in Bešter and Medvešek (2007), Brezovšek et al. (2008), Nečak Lük and Novak Lukanovič (2011).
- <sup>3</sup> Full closure of educational institutions in Slovenia was in place between 16 March and 18 May 2020. After such date, primary schools gradually reopened (Kustec et al. 2020, 10).
- <sup>4</sup> The project Together for Knowledge – Implementing Activities of Supporting Mechanisms for Acquiring Knowledge for Members of the Roma Community is co-financed by the Republic of Slovenia and the European Union from the European Social Fund. The project is run by the Centre for School and Outdoor Education on several locations throughout Slovenia. More at internet site Skupaj za znanje (2020).
- <sup>5</sup> Research programme Minority and Ethnic Studies and the Slovene National Question.
- <sup>6</sup> The term Roma assistants refers to individuals who work with Roma pupils in selected primary schools in Slovenia under the Together for Knowledge project. They represent a link between members of the Roma community and educational institutions. In addition to schools, they also work in kindergartens and partly in Roma settlements (Pirc 2016, 6). More about the tasks of Roma assistants, their work under the projects preceding the project Together for Knowledge, and the occasional ambiguity of the concept and responsibilities of Roma assistants in Bešter et al. (2016, 6–7).
- <sup>7</sup> In this case, branches of schools are added to main schools.
- <sup>8</sup> Information and Communication Technology.
- <sup>9</sup> The National Education Institute only states on its website that data were gathered by means of online surveys until and including the first week of June 2020, and does not indicate when the research started (National Education Institute Slovenia, 2020).
- <sup>10</sup> The share was similar in schools with Roma assistants and in schools without Roma assistants.
- <sup>11</sup> These data are not shown in Charts 5 and 6 as they refer only to Roma pupils attending primary schools with Roma assistants.
- <sup>12</sup> However, this does not apply to everyone. Some Roma families have a more favourable socio-economic position. Munda and Peček (2013, 152), for example, write about Roma in Maribor and point out that their “socio-economic position [...] is more comparable to the families of the majority population than the Roma average.” Vonta et al. (2011) point out in the National Evaluation Study on the Performance of Roma Pupils in Primary School that there are differences between Roma families and that the valuing of education and support of Roma parents for their children’s education differ from family to family.

## Acknowledgment

The article was written under the research programme Minority and Ethnic Studies and the Slovene National Question (P5-0081), funded by Slovenian Research Agency.

**Katalin Munda Hirnök**

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## Impact of the Covid-19 Coronavirus Disease Pandemic on Slovene Organisations and Institutions in the Raba Region

The article provides an analysis of the activities of Slovene organisations and institutions in the Raba Region during the first wave of the Covid-19 epidemic. Initially, the author points to the vulnerability of the Slovene national community, which is closely related to historical circumstances. The study of articles published in electronic media and the analysis of the results of online surveys and semi-structured interviews with Slovene minority organisations and institutions in the Raba Region suggest that the Slovene national community adapted to the new normality and coped with the challenges brought by the epidemic relatively well. The closure of border crossings between the Raba Region and Goricko cut cross-border contacts, thus affecting the Slovene minority in all areas of life and stirring discomfort and criticism among the Slovenes from the Raba Region. Due to the unpredictable course of the Covid-19 epidemic, it is not yet possible to anticipate any long-term consequences thereof for the activity of Slovene organisations in the Raba Region.

**Keywords:** Raba Region, Slovenes from the Raba Region, Covid-19, pandemic, Hungarian-Slovenian border area, Hungary, Slovenia.

## Vpliv pandemije koronavirusne bolezni covid-19 na slovenske organizacije in institucije v Porabju

*Prispevek prinaša analizo delovanja slovenskih organizacij in institucij v Porabju med prvim valom epidemije Covid-19. Avtorica najprej pokaže na ranljivost slovenske narodne skupnosti, ki je tesno povezana z zgodovinskimi okoliščinami. Spremljanje člankov v elektronskih medijih ter analiza spletne ankete in polstrukturiranih intervjujev s slovenskimi manjšinskimi organizacijami in institucijami v Porabju nakazuje, da se je slovenska narodna skupnost več ali manj prilagodila novi normalnosti in se razmeroma dobro spoprijela z izzivi epidemije. Z zaprtjem mejnih prehodov med Porabjem in Gorickim so se čezmejni stiki prekinili, kar je prizadelo slovensko manjšino na vseh področjih življenja in izzvalo nelagodje in kritike s strani porabskih Slovencev. Zaradi nepredvidljivega poteka epidemije Covid-19 še ni mogoče predvideti njenih trajnejših posledic na delovanje slovenskih organizacij v Porabju.*

**Ključne besede:** Porabje, porabski Slovenci, covid-19, pandemija, madžarsko-slovenski obmejni prostor, Madžarska, Slovenija.

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## 1. Introduction

The Slovenes from the Raba Region largely live in eight villages along the Hungarian-Slovene-Austrian border (Andovci/Orfalu, Dolnji Senik/Alsószölnök, Gornji Senik/Felsőszölnök, Sakalovci/Szakonyfalu, Slovenska ves/Rábatótfalu (a part of Monošter/Szentgotthárd since 1983), Števanovci/Apátistvánfalva, Verica-Ritkarovci/Kétyölgy) and Monošter/Szentgotthárd, which is also the regional, administrative, economic, educational and cultural centre of the Raba Region. Moreover, they live in some larger cities such as Sombotel/Szombathely, Budapest and Mosonmagyaróvár. The Slovene national community is the smallest national community in Hungary, as well as the smallest Slovene national community in any of Slovenia's neighbouring countries. At the 2011 census, the Slovene national community in Hungary had 2,385 members (Központi Statisztikai Hivatal 2014), but their number is believed to be higher, i.e. around 4,000.

During the Covid-19 epidemic, the Slovenes from the Raba Region shared the fate of all Hungarian citizens and were required to adapt to the measures in force in Hungary. Following the outbreak of Covid-19, the Hungarian government declared on 11 March by a decree a state of emergency to contain the spread of infections (40/2020 (III. 11.) Korm. rendelet). Under the then applicable Hungarian law, a state of emergency could only apply for 15 days and any prolongation was subject to parliamentary approval. Therefore, on 30 March, the parliament passed a new law regarding the state of emergency, giving Prime Minister Viktor Orbán special powers to rule the country by means of decrees for an indefinite period of time or until the state of emergency is lifted. This law – although widely criticised both in Hungary and abroad<sup>1</sup> – was in force until 17 June when it was unanimously repealed by the parliament (282/2020. (VI. 17.) Korm. rendelet; Čibej 2020, 6).

In order to curb the epidemic, measures restricting people's everyday lives were introduced in Hungary as well as in most other countries. The measures were quite similar all over the world and differed only in terms of adoption dynamics and severity, both of which depended on the epidemiological situation in a given country. The same applied to their gradual loosening or lifting. During the epidemic, the Hungarian economy recorded a significant decline, with tens of thousands losing their jobs. Also educational, cultural, sports life, etc. had been fully suspended for several months.

As is commonly known, the life of Slovenes from the Raba Region has been marked by the border for a hundred years, from the demarcation of the border after World War I and the erection of the Iron Curtain in 1948, up to the gradual opening of the border area and joining the Schengen zone in 2007 (Munda Hirnök & Slavec Gradišnik 2019, 31–42). The marginalisation of the border area and hence of the Slovene minority, the unsatisfactory legal protection of minorities (including Slovenes) in the past, the relatively new organisation of

the Slovene minority, its small number, the economic underdevelopment of the area, etc. (Kozar-Mukič 1984; Zupančič 2000; Munda Hirnök & Vodopivec 2016, 835–838) are all factors that define the Slovenes from the Raba Region as a vulnerable community. As such, they were significantly challenged also by the outbreak of the Covid-19 epidemic.

The article attempts to answer the following research questions:

- How did the changes following the outbreak of the Covid-19 epidemic and the adoption of measures to curb such affect the activity of the main minority organisations and institutions in the Raba Region?
- How did the closure of the border and the respective difficulty of crossing it affect cross-border contacts?
- Which aspects of cross-border cooperation were the most affected and/or suspended?

As regards methodology, the article primarily analyses data obtained from electronic media, namely newspaper articles, discussions and other contributions published in Hungarian, Slovene and other media between March and July 2020. In May, an online survey was conducted among the heads of minority organisations and institutions (Association of Slovenes in Hungary, editorial board of the weekly *Porabje*, editorial board of the TV show *Slovenski utrinki*, editorial staff of *Radio Monošter*),<sup>2</sup> followed by semi-structured interviews (with the heads of the Association of Slovenes in Hungary and of the National Slovene Self-Government, and the Slovene Advocate in the Hungarian parliament) at the end of July when the health situation improved.

Based on the obtained data relating to the period from 11 March to the end of July 2020, the article aims to document the situation in the first months of the epidemic. As the epidemic is not over yet (a second wave is underway while this article is being drafted), its long-term consequences for the life of the Slovene minority cannot be assessed yet.

## 2. Activity of Minority Organisations and Institutions after 11 March

The article focuses on the two umbrella Slovene organisations in Hungary, i.e. the Association of Slovenes in Hungary (1990) (hereinafter: ASH) and the National Slovene Self-Government (1995) (hereinafter: NSS).

Due to measures to curb the spread of Covid-19, the ASH opted for a rotating work schedule. The ASH President was present at all times, while other employees mainly worked from their homes. Twice a week, they would meet to coordinate the activities. The planned ASH programmes for the period between March and the second half of June were either cancelled (e.g. participation of

the Chamber Choir in the choir contest *Primorska poje*, a theatre play for primary school children from the Raba Region performed by the Maribor Theatre in Monošter/Szentgotthárd, children's week in Raba Region kindergartens with the motto *Movement for play, health and fun*), suspended (e.g. Slovene language course for beginners and advanced students, rehearsals for amateur cultural groups), or postponed to a later date (e.g. presentation of Feri Lainšček's book to August 2020, celebration of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the theatre group *Veseli pajdaši* of ASH Števanovci/Apátistvánfalva to 2021).

According to Interviewee 1, the first months of the epidemic were a "suitable time" to engage in other activities. Thus, they started drafting the Strategy of the Slovene Raba Region for the next decade (there has never been such a strategy before). The Strategy covers every important aspect (media, culture, economy, education, employment policy, youth) of the social life of the minority. The document is currently in its drafting stage (the priority areas have been defined and the goals and solutions outlined), which will be followed by coordination with other minority entities.

The ASH engaged in helping the population in the Raba Region as well as in Slovenia. In April, when face masks were already recommended in Hungary, the ASH and the staff of the Development Agency *Slovenska krajina*<sup>3</sup> organised the sewing of 5,500 reusable protective masks. Of these, 2,000 were intended for Slovenia and handed over to the Murska Sobota Civil Protection Service. The handing over of masks was attended also by the Minister for Slovenes Abroad (Eöry 2020a, 2). With the help of culture professionals and members of cultural groups, the remaining masks were distributed to Slovene families in the villages of the Raba Region and in Monošter/Szentgotthárd (the possibility of picking up the masks at the ASH headquarters was advertised on Radio Monošter). "If this is to contribute to staying healthy, we've already done something" (Interviewee 1).

Remote learning was introduced in primary schools on 16 March. Socially disadvantaged Slovene families who did not have a computer (or did not have a sufficient number of computers) were able to borrow computers from ASH leading members. In addition, some used computers were bought by the ASH with the funds raised from a lucky draw at the Slovene Ball in *Slovenski dom* on 15 February. Access to internet was provided by the municipalities.

The new circumstances required constant adaptation from minority organisations. The ASH thus decided to organise (or co-organise) language camps for pupils from the Raba Region. Between 22 and 26 June, the Development Agency *Slovenska krajina* organised an Ethics Camp under the *Ethosland* project (SIHU190), which is co-financed by the Interreg V-A Slovenia Hungary programme.<sup>4</sup> The ASH also organised a Slovene Summer Camp from 20 to 24 July. Speaking of the importance of language camps, Interviewee 1 highlighted:



Language camps are important for children. One cannot learn a language by remote learning and the loss outweighs the gain, especially if the child has no contact with a living language. They don't speak Slovene within the family. For them, the three months they were home were probably the hardest, as children need company. This is the time of socialisation. When they are around other children, they learn from each other. Older children learn how to take care of the younger ones [...] younger ones consider the older ones as their role models [...].

Likewise, research shows that the use of the Slovene language within Slovene families in the Raba Region is at risk, and the intergenerational transmission of Slovene is interrupted. Hungarian is increasingly becoming the language of communication within the family (Nečak Lük 1998, 240–248; Munda Hirnök & Novak Lukanovič 2016, 210–213). There are more and more mixed families where no Slovene is spoken. Language camps are therefore an important factor in learning Slovene.

In May, the ASH published the online contest Online greetings from the homes of Slovenes from the Raba Region, calling on all generations to take photos, make short videos, or draw what surrounds them and what they like to do during the epidemic. The best contributions were awarded (Porabje 2020c).

On 23 May, an event entitled Honey Afternoon took place at the Slovene Model Farm in Gornji Senik/Felsőszölnök on the occasion of World Bee Day. The event was organised by the Consulate General of the Republic of Slovenia in Monošter/Szentgotthárd and the ASH. It was the first event during the epidemic, which undoubtedly had a positive effect on people's mood, as stated in the weekly Porabje: "We all enjoyed being together, talking, meeting each other, because this is what we probably missed the most in the long weeks when we were closed in our houses and apartments" (Sukič 2020b, 2).

Due to the unpredictable situation in the coming months, the ASH did not carry out the investments planned for 2020 around the Slovene Cultural and Information Centre. The manager of the facility, which also includes Hotel Lipa and the restaurant, is the company Porabje d.o.o., founded by the ASH. Efforts were made to preserve jobs at the time the hotel and the restaurant were closed. They took advantage of state aid, which provided 75 % of the salary, while 25 % was covered by the ASH.

Sure you can fire someone, but then – when you want to restart the activity – what, will you go 'hunting'? This is about the relationship between the employer and the employee. The employee will be just as you are. If you fire him as soon as the first problems arise, what can you expect from him? [...] (Interviewee 1).

In parallel with many European countries which, in the second half of April, began to ease the previously adopted restrictions in order to mitigate economic

damage, Hungary began to loosen the measures on 4 May. As most Covid-19 infections and deaths occurred in Budapest and Pest County, the measures remained in place there, while in other parts of the country the restrictions on movement were lifted, the terraces of restaurants and cafes were re-opened, weddings and funerals could be organised, as well as sporting events without spectators. The loosening of the measures made it possible to open the Hotel Lipa and the restaurant (first the terrace, and soon later also the inside) in Monošter/Szentgotthárd. Data for July showed an 80% occupancy and the outlook for August was encouraging.

Since the outbreak of the epidemic, the ASH had kept regular contacts (online, by telephone) with culture professionals from the Raba Region (including mentors from Slovenia), the Office of the Government of the Republic of Slovenia for Slovenes Abroad, etc. It tried to help Slovenes from the Raba Region obtain special permits to cross the Slovene-Hungarian border.

The activities of the Development Agency Slovenska krajina were not suspended during the epidemic and work on the cross-border project Ethosland continued (establishment of a network of socially responsible tourism services providers). The Agency is the owner and manager of the Slovene Model Farm<sup>5</sup> in Gornji Senik/Felsőszölnök, which also comprises a restaurant and accommodation facilities. The farm employs three people who luckily kept their jobs during the epidemic. An advantage of the farm during an epidemic is mainly its location (unspoiled nature, proximity to the three borders). Tourists are in fact looking for such places for prevention purposes. Due to the above mentioned factors, the farm was well visited in July (Hotel Lipa included), but as it was explained: "This is actually a three to four-month period of financial loss, and if one wants to have full capacities again, more time is needed [...]" (Interviewee 1).

Just like at the ASH, some NSS employees worked from home while two were at work all the time. Their work continued as usual (drafting of contracts, investment offers, etc.; they even took over financial supervision). Cultural programmes were cancelled (e.g. Slovene Raba Region Day, i.e. the traditional meeting of Slovenes in Hungary)<sup>6</sup> and the Kühar Memorial House (Slovene Collection)<sup>7</sup> was closed.

Due to the epidemic, the implementation of the Development Programme of the Slovene Raba Region,<sup>8</sup> whose partner on the side of the Slovene national community is the NSS, had been delayed for several months. It is encouraging, however, that the Hungarian government discussed the development programme on 15 July and adopted a decision on its implementation (1411/2020. (VII. 15.) Korm. Határozat). Also worth mentioning is that, despite the deteriorating economic situation, the Hungarian government did not reduce the funding for the programme.

The NSS also engaged to help Slovenia. It helped, for example, a Slovene company that needed to transport fabric for protective masks it had ordered

from Budapest. The NSS transported the fabric to Slovenia and handed them over to a company representative (Porabje 2020a).

Due to the outbreak of the epidemic, Hungary (just like other European countries) introduced remote learning. Yet, as already mentioned, it turned out that not all pupils or families had computers. The NSS as the manager of both bilingual primary schools (Jožef Košič bilingual primary school in Gornji Senik/Felsőszölnök and the bilingual school in Števanovci/Apátistvánfalva, as well as kindergartens)<sup>9</sup> distributed 10 to 15 computers to Slovene families (some laptops were purchased before the schools closed, while others were lent by NSS leading members). Some families had problems because they did not have access to the internet, while others had problems because the internet infrastructure in certain parts of the village was unsatisfactory. Childcare was provided at both schools. At the beginning, there was no need for such, but later on each school took care of 3–4 pupils whose parents had to work also during the epidemic.

According to the principal of the Gornji Senik/Felsőszölnök school, remote learning took place without any major problems and the teachers were well prepared for it. The assignments were sent to the pupils either by the class teacher (in lower grades) or the subject teachers (in higher grades). The assignments found in textbooks and workbooks were often available on the internet. The use of the internet was especially appreciated in Slovene language classes, and video conferences were organised occasionally. A similar system applied to bilingual subjects (Porabje 2020b). At the school in Števanovci/Apátistvánfalva, remote learning took place in a similar way. Teachers uploaded assignments and exercises into a common Cloud or Drive where each class had its own folder. Pupils then sent their assignments back to the teachers. Teachers also used interactive assignments or conducted lessons online (Porabje 2020b). The advantage of both schools is certainly that both are attended by a small number of pupils (64 at Gornji Senik/Felsőszölnök and 41 at Števanovci/Apátistvánfalva), so everyone knows each other well (teachers, students, parents). Knowing the children helped teachers in assessing them. At the end of the school year, a primary school prom was held for the eighth-graders at both schools (on 12 June at Gornji Senik/Felsőszölnök and on 18 June at Števanovci/Apátistvánfalva), with due account of the strict safety regulations.

The Covid-19 epidemic also affected the activities of the Slovene minority media. The online survey among editors and journalists revealed how they coped with the new circumstances. Even after the outbreak of the epidemic, the editorial board of the weekly *Porabje*<sup>10</sup> operated as usual, at least in terms of the physical presence of full-time employees (three persons). The staff came to the office regularly, while external associates discussed their articles by phone and e-mail. Information was also obtained from the internet (Facebook). The editorial board had to adapt the content to the new situation: if it had previously reported on forthcoming events, it was now reporting on which event was to take place

and which not. Compared to pre-epidemic times, less information on current events was reported. The weekly published several literary contributions or contributions by occasional authors. Since the weekly is printed in Murska Sobota, there had been problems with delivery for a few weeks (it was delivered only up to the border). Later on, the Bajánsenye-Hodoš border crossing was used, which brought higher costs and required more time. Despite all the difficulties, all the issues of the weekly were published in the usual volume.

The staff of Radio Monošter,<sup>11</sup> which broadcasts four hours a day, decided to work from home during the worst period of the epidemic, with a maximum of two or three editors in the studio. The programmes News and Current Events provided the audience with information on the epidemiological situation in Hungary and neighbouring countries (Austria, Slovenia). Covid-19 also made the work of the editorial board much more difficult. As it cut off personal contacts with clients, the staff relied on ICT (e-mail, phone, Messenger) when drafting the articles. As also border crossing was prohibited and controlled, cross-border cooperation was reduced to a minimum (communication with external associates by means of ICT). Due to the interruption of personal contacts, no reportage could be carried out in person. Border closure also led to cancellation of scheduled events, which negatively affected the amount of radio material to be broadcast.

In the first two months of the epidemic, the TV show Slovenski utrinki<sup>12</sup> aired mainly portraits of various award winners and national leaders that had been interviewed before lockdown. In mid-May, it aired an interview with the principals of bilingual primary schools about remote learning, and in June it reported on the prom at Gornji Senik/Felsőszölnök. Also in June, it aired an interview with the ASH secretaries about ASH activities during lockdown and about the plans for the gradual organisation of events. Some events were in fact held in summer and the editorial board took the opportunity to report on them. It also provided some specific information, such as a museum catalogue, a Slovene language course in Monošter/Szentgotthárd organised by the ASH, a Slovene coach leading the Körmend basketball team. Moreover, it reported on the visit of the Minister for Slovenes Abroad and on the visit of the President of the Republic of Slovenia to Budapest. During summer, the editorial board engaged in preparing longer articles, mainly due to the limited number and lack of topics in the Slovene villages of the Raba Region. Since the March lockdown, no one has been allowed to travel abroad (including Slovenia).

### 3. Closure of the Slovene-Hungarian Border, Special Crossing Regimes, Limited Cross-Border Contacts

Following the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic, countries began to close their borders. The Hungarian government decided to close the border with Slovenia

to all passengers except Hungarian nationals on 24 March 2020 at midnight. The Slovene-Hungarian border could thus be crossed at three crossings only (Pince, where the transit corridor could be used continuously, the former border crossing Pince R1/232, where crossing was only allowed to Slovene and Hungarian nationals, and Dolga vas). The border crossings Martinje-Gornji Senik/Felsőszölnök<sup>13</sup> and Čepinci-Verica/Kétvölgy<sup>14</sup> (on the territory inhabited by the Slovene community in Hungary) remained closed, which caused dissatisfaction and discomfort among the local population. Being cut-off from Slovenia made the Slovenes from the Raba Region, especially the older generation, recall the traumatic memories of the 1950s – the times of the Iron Curtain, political repression, etc. (Munda Hirnök 2013, 202–205).

Thanks to the Consul General of the Republic of Slovenia in Monošter/Szentgotthárd, diplomatic talks on the opening of the border between Slovenia and Hungary began. The ASH, the NSS and the Slovene Advocate in the Hungarian parliament all joined the efforts to open at least one border crossing between the Raba Region and Slovenia (Goričko). The Consul General, for example, spoke to the Hungarian Commissioner for Neighbouring Countries and stressed among the arguments for the opening of the border the historical heritage of the border area. Following such interventions, the Slovene Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade eventually agreed by phone on 31 March to respond to the motions to facilitate the crossing of the border in the border area. Thus, on 2 April, the Hodoš – Bajánsenye and Čepinci – Verica/Kétvölgy border crossings were opened. The opening of the Čepinci – Verica/Kétvölgy border crossing was mentioned also in the weekly *Porabje*: “Nevertheless, the opening of the Čepinci – Verica/Kétvölgy border crossing, which at least symbolically ended our isolation from the kin-nation, is a small ‘victory’ for all who strived for it [ ... ]” (Sukič 2020a, 12).

The opening of the aforementioned border crossing raised the hope that strict rules would eventually be loosened and that things would turn for the better. At the mentioned locations, crossing was possible between 6 am and 7 pm only for the following citizens of Slovenia and Hungary: cross-border workers (to be proven with a certificate issued by the employer) and agricultural land owners who had one part of their property in one country and another part in the other country (to be proven with the relevant extract from the land registry). Transit of passengers or freight traffic was not allowed. Restrictive measures made the life on both sides of the border quite difficult, especially when it came to visiting relatives. Thus, for example, a Slovene who lives in Čepinci was not allowed to cross the local border crossing to go visit her sick father who lived on the other side of the border in the Raba Region (Eöry 2020b, 4).

On 16 April 2020, the Hungarian authorities closed the Čepinci – Verica/Kétvölgy border crossing again. The official reason stated by the Hungarian authorities was that there was not enough traffic, as only one person per day had

actually been crossing the border (Vestnik 2020a, b). Just as they did 30 years ago, the Slovenes from the Raba Region had to use the Hodoš-Bajánsenye crossing, which was open 24 hours a day, every day of the week. They informed the Government Office for Slovenes Abroad about the situation. The efforts to reopen the Čepinci – Verica/Kétvölgy border crossing continued.

Dissatisfaction with the closure of border crossings between the Raba Region and Goričko among the local population was described by Interviewee 1:

When the epidemic started, we heard in the media what can be expected and that everything will need to be closed straight away [...]. At the time when the Slovene-Hungarian border was closed, our people understood that this needs to be done to prevent the spread of the epidemic. But no one expected that we would come to a point where decision-makers didn't even think about reopening it. We were actually closed in Hungary, it was worse than thirty years ago, because then everyone could use the Bajánsenye-Hodoš<sup>15</sup> border crossing [...]. Having the border closed for a week, ten days, twenty days, fine. But when one sees that it is a long-term decision, when one doesn't know when it's going to end, that's when people start realising that something is wrong. And also because we saw that in other border areas in the country border crossings were being opened, yet we had no infections. Not here and not on the other side of the border. People longed for family contacts, seasonal workers who used to go to work to Slovenia could not go. There was some dissatisfaction among the people and they demanded that the border be opened. People turned to umbrella organisations and also to the Consulate General of the Republic of Slovenia in Monošter [...].

Strict control of the border area triggered unease and insecurity among people.

There was a lot of control of the border area [...] at the beginning there were policemen, then members of the air base. They drove big military cars [...]. Like in a war! They strictly supervised the border area. Everything was very formal. We felt like having the border again, even though we had already forgotten what a border is. We felt uncomfortable with the soldiers standing there again. I found it strange that the closing and opening of the border took place at night [...], when no one was there. I wouldn't say I was scared, but I just somehow felt what it was in the past when there was still a border. This was worse than in the 1990s when the border was closed. At that time there was a gate at the border, and we could open the gate a few times a year. Now there was concrete [concrete technical barrier, author's note], there was no way getting to the other side. We didn't know when we'd be able to go. We didn't know what it was going to be like with the epidemic, maybe it would get worse and we'll be locked up for a year. This uncertainty, when one doesn't know how it's going to be [...] (Interviewee 2).

Based on an agreement between the Slovene Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the border between Hungary and Slovenia was reopened on 28 May, without quarantine. Traffic at the Verica/Kétvölgy – Čepinci border crossing, which was only briefly released in early April, was released again on 26 May (Eöry 2020c, 2).

We were interested in how the closed border or difficult crossing due to the special border regime affected cross-border cooperation between Slovenes from the Raba Region and Slovenia (especially Goričko) during the first wave of the epidemic. In fact, data show that after 1990, and especially after 2004, their contacts with Slovenia revived and developed in almost all areas – culture, education, science, media, sports, religion, etc. (Munda Hirnök 2009, 320–321). After the abolition of borders, personal and informal contacts (visits by relatives, friends, visits to cultural and sports events, shopping, etc.) were re-established, too, which is also confirmed by the results of the field research on the mobility of Slovenes from the Raba Region (Munda Hirnök & Medvešek 2016, 101–102).

The outbreak of the epidemic, which resulted in the closure of the state border, interrupted cross-border cooperation between the Raba Region and Slovenia overnight. Data on the impact of border closure or difficult border crossing on cross-border contacts show that almost all aspects of cross-border cooperation were affected and interrupted. The closure prevented Slovene organisations from fully implementing the programme that relied and even depended on Slovene mentors and groups. The new situation prevented the arrival of teaching staff (teachers-assistants and educators) from Slovenia. The students from the Raba Region studying at the University of Maribor were affected and, given the situation, studied online. Journalists of the Slovene minority media, as already mentioned, were not able to perform field work on the other side of the border, and there were problems with the delivery of the weekly *Porabje*, which is printed in Murska Sobota.

Border closure also complicated the work in the fields and forests in the Raba Region. Residents from Goričko, who had been helping the people of the Raba Region for many years with their machinery, could not cross the border. Family and kinship contacts were also affected. As Interviewee 2 stated: “There are many women from Andovci and neighbouring villages who moved to Slovenia, Goričko, because of marriage. They were not even allowed to visit their mothers. They could not help their parents in the fields, etc. [...]” It needs to be mentioned that only sporadically does someone from Prekmurje move to the Raba Region after marriage; usually, it is the other way around, individuals from the Raba Region moving to Prekmurje (or somewhere else in Slovenia). People could not visit their friends and acquaintances on the other side of the border, or use various services, go shopping, etc. Young people were affected, too, as they were not allowed to attend parties and various gatherings (cultural, sports, etc.) on the other side of the border on Saturdays and Sundays. Border closure caught them by surprise. This was something completely new for them, while the middle and older generations already had some experience with a closed border.

People have always resisted the border, either by using shorter routes, by finding a way to their loved ones, by smuggling, and so on. This was also the case during the epidemic, which was confirmed by field data. People on both

sides of the border agreed over the phone and met at a concrete barrier (some even walked across). The people from the Raba Region delivered masks, food, dog food, etc. to friends and acquaintances from Goričko, as there were no such goods available on the Slovenian side as during the period of restrictions on movement between municipalities in Slovenia.

## 4. Conclusion

The study of the impact of the Covid-19 coronavirus disease on the activity of the main Slovene organisations and institutions during the epidemic shows that despite the state of emergency, activities were not fully suspended, yet several scheduled programmes were cancelled or postponed to a later date. New forms of work and new contents were introduced, whereby the population tried to at least partially mitigate the consequences in areas that are vital for the further development of the Slovene Raba Region (e.g. education – teaching of Slovene).

The Slovenes from the Raba Region are still struggling with the heritage of their peripherality, which is still evident today in almost all areas, especially in the economy since during the times of the Iron Curtain this border area was left out of all development plans. During the epidemic, especially after the closure of the border crossings between the Raba Region and Goričko, the Slovene national community became even more aware of the positive effects of the Slovene Raba Region Development Programme on the life of the population. The implementation of this programme is some kind of a guarantee that the Slovene national community would be able to cope more easily with the consequences of any future epidemics, including border closure.

We must work to deepen or extend the economic contacts in this Slovene-Hungarian area, to have more and more daily migrants, to develop joint projects so that what happened – the Verica-Čepinci border crossing being closed due to the small number of crossings – does not happen again [...] (Interviewee 1).

Members of the Slovene national community are critical of the lack of flexibility on the part of the Hungarian authorities in closing border crossings. They are also dissatisfied with the strict measures at the border.

Living by the border is a special situation for people on both sides of the border. Due to historical facts, decision-makers could be more flexible and could make some exceptions here and there, which would contribute to people's well-being [...] (Interviewee 3).

Cross-border communications and the advantages arising therefrom, which the population of the Raba Region had to get used to, especially after the opening of



the border area (EU, Schengen), were interrupted or hindered due to the special regime of border crossing between the Rába Region and Slovenia.

The obtained data show that the Slovene national community coped relatively well with the challenges of the first wave of the epidemic. However, long-term consequences of the coronavirus disease on the activity of Slovene organisations and institutions in the Rába Region cannot yet be anticipated at the time this article is completed. A similar conviction was also expressed by Interviewee 1: "It's not known yet. We are working to be able to continue where we left off at the beginning of March [...]". Therefore, it is necessary to further monitor the situation of the Slovene national community in Hungary during the second (and possible any further) wave of Covid-19.

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## Interviews

Interviewee 1 – President of the Association of Slovenes in Hungary, interviewed in Monošter/Szentgotthárd on 23 July 2020.

Interviewee 2 – President of the National Slovene Self-Government, interviewed in Monošter/Szentgotthárd on 24 July 2020.

Interviewee 3 – Slovene Advocate in the Hungarian parliament, interviewed in Monošter/Szentgotthárd on 24 July 2020.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Among critics received from abroad, the European Commission for example expressed concern over the indefinite duration of the state of emergency, while the European Parliament's Committee on Civil Liberties emphasised the need to respect fundamental freedoms, the rule of law and democratic principles when taking emergency measures in relation to the new coronavirus pandemic (Siol.net 2020).
- <sup>2</sup> The answers to the online survey were not sent to us by the editorial board of Radio Monošter until September.
- <sup>3</sup> The Development Agency Slovenska krajina was founded in 2006 by the ASH. It is a non-profit organisation whose basic goal is to obtain funding from European and state funds to contribute to the development of the economy, agriculture and tourism in the Slovene Raba Region.
- <sup>4</sup> The second Ethics Camp, organised by the Development Agency Slovenska Krajina, took place between 17 and 21 August in Markovci, at the Peterlauk holiday home.
- <sup>5</sup> The Slovene Model Farm was set up in 2015 and was financed by the Republic of Slovenia.
- <sup>6</sup> The event entitled Porabski dan (Raba Region Day) is organised by the ASH and the NSS on a rotating basis.
- <sup>7</sup> Kühar Memorial House was opened in 2010 and is managed by the NSS.
- <sup>8</sup> The development programme was approved by the Hungarian government in October 2019 (A Kormány 1618/2019. (X. 28.) Korm. határozata).
- <sup>9</sup> The NSS has managed the primary schools and kindergartens in Gornji Senik/Felsőszölnök and Števanovci/Apátistvánfalva since 2012, and the kindergarten in Sakalovci/Szakonyfalu since 2018.
- <sup>10</sup> The Porabje newspaper has been published since 1991, first on six pages, then on eight pages, and since 2017 on twelve pages. It became a weekly in 2005. It is also available online at <http://www.porabje.hu>.
- <sup>11</sup> Radio Monošter started to air in 2000 with an eight-hour programme. Since 2012, it has been airing for 28 hours per week. The radio programme is also available online at <http://radiomonoster.hu>.
- <sup>12</sup> Slovenski utrinki is an informative show on the Hungarian TV for the Slovene minority. In this article, we mention it in order to gain a comprehensive overview of the minority media landscape at the time of the epidemic. The show was created in 1992 and now airs twice a month. It lasts 26 minutes and is also broadcast on RTV Slovenija 1. It is also available online at <http://www.mediaklikk.hu/musor/slovenskiutrinki>.
- <sup>13</sup> The interstate border crossing Martinje – Gornji Senik/Felsőszölnök was opened in 1992; in 2005, it was upgraded to an international border crossing.
- <sup>14</sup> The border crossing Čepinci – Verica/Kétvölgy was opened in 2002.
- <sup>15</sup> The international border crossing Bajánsenye –Hodoš was opened in July 1977.

## Acknowledgment

Funding: The article was written under the research programme Minority and Ethnic Studies and the Slovene National Question (P5-0081), funded by Slovenian Research Agency.



Attila Kovács, László Göncz

## The Hungarian National Community in Slovenia and the Covid-19 Epidemic

Based on interviews and newspaper and internet sources, the study explores the impact of Covid-19 and the related measures on the life of the Hungarian national community in Slovenia during the first wave of the epidemic, i.e. from 12 March to 31 May 2020. Members of the Hungarian national community and their respective institutions, as well as all residents of the border area, were directly affected mainly by border closure, since following the democratic processes after the 1990s, and especially after accession to the European Union, life in the border zone had changed in both qualitative and quantitative terms. In the last decade, residents of the border area on both sides of the border have been integrated in the economic, transport, educational, cultural and sports life of the neighbouring country, their homeland.

**Keywords:** Covid-19 and ethnic minorities, Hungarian national community in Slovenia, Hungarian Self-Governing National Community of Pomurje, Institute for Hungarian Nationality Culture, Népiújság, Hungarian radio of Pomurje, TV studio Lendava, bilingual schools in Prekmurje.

### Madžarska narodna skupnost v Sloveniji in epidemija bolezní covid-19

*V študiji je s pomočjo intervjujev ter časopisnih in internetnih virov predstavljen vpliv bolezní covid-19 in z njo povezanih ukrepov na življenje madžarske narodne skupnosti v Sloveniji v času prvega vala epidemije, to je od 12. marca do 31. maja 2020. Pripadniki madžarske narodne skupnosti in njihove ustanove ter vsi prebivalci obmejnega območja so bili neposredno prizadeti predvsem zaradi zaprtja meja, saj se je po demokratičnih procesih po devetdesetih letih prejšnjega stoletja, posebej pa po priključitvi tega območja k Evropski uniji, bivanje v tako imenovanem obmejnem pasu kvantitativno in kvalitativno bistveno spremenilo. Prebivalci obmejnega območja na obeh straneh meje so v zadnjem desetletju integrirani v gospodarsko, prometno, prosvetno, kulturno in športno življenje tudi sosednje, tako imenovane matične države.*

**Ključne besede:** covid-19 in narodne manjšine, madžarska narodna skupnost v Sloveniji, Pomurska madžarska samoupravna narodna skupnost, Zavod za kulturo madžarske narodnosti, Népiújság, Pomurski madžarski radio, TV studió Lendava, dvojezične šole v Prekmurju.

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## 1. Introduction

At the end of 2007, when Slovenia joined the Schengen area, members of the Hungarian national community as well as other residents of the north-eastern part of Slovenia felt very optimistic about the free movement of people, goods and services across Europe's internal borders. The new millennium opened a whole new world for many generations of Prekmurje (and the Raba Region on the Hungarian side) and their descendants who, at the time of the Iron Curtain following the Yugoslav-Hungarian conflict in the aftermath of 1948, had been almost hermetically sealed in a narrow and strictly controlled border zone. Upon the abolition of border controls within the Schengen area, state borders "have become symbolic" (Göncz 2015, 367).<sup>1</sup>

The significance of the abolition of borders is evidenced by the fact that on the eve of the abolition of border control at land and sea borders within the Schengen area, the umbrella self-governing political organisation of Hungarians in Slovenia – the Hungarian Self-Governing National Community of Prekmurje (PMSNS) – organised a ceremony with fireworks at the Dolga vas – Rédic's international border crossing. The PMSNS president József Kocon addressed the participants at the ceremony with the following words (Bence 2007, 5):

I think it's clear and understandable for every Hungarian in Prekmurje that we are witnessing an event that has no precedent in the past 100 years. All those who feel Hungarian or sympathise with Hungarians should be at the border on Thursday, for one thing is certain: the existence and the proximity of the border have made the lives of many, both members of the majority and the minority, difficult. Of course, the abolition of borders also means joining the Schengen area. We can indeed understand that some people will see its only benefit in the fact that they will no longer need to present an ID and will be able to move freely in the border area. Border control will be replaced by internal control. Yet for us – Hungarians – this should have an added value, and we want to celebrate this 'added value' tonight on our common, soon-to-be abolished border.

The PMSNS president's words clearly suggest that the Hungarian national community in Slovenia saw a great opportunity in the expansion of the Schengen area. By opening the borders, which in the 20<sup>th</sup> century had shaped the fate of the border population, the long present negative consequences were mitigated or annulled. As a result of positive changes, especially in the last decade, cross-border communities have formed and have been co-shaping the living space in the border areas regardless of national affiliation. Within such areas, assets were shared; cultural events and programmes were designed and attended by all border residents, educational institutions became accessible to pupils and students from both sides of the border, economic and trade ties intertwined in many ways. The findings are similar when assessing the personal contacts of

the population on both sides of the border, as the lives of the people along the border are intertwined and linked to the neighbouring country in all areas of life. People have slowly learned to live along and with the border and to take advantage of living in a border area. The importance of the border for the local residents – and especially for members of the Hungarian national community in Slovenia (Prekmurje) and for the Slovene minority in Hungary (Raba Region) – is evidenced by the fact that it has been a recurrent topic at the meetings of the Slovene-Hungarian Joint Commission (SMMK) established on the basis of the Agreement on Ensuring the Special Rights of the Slovene National Minority in the Republic of Hungary and the Hungarian National Community in the Republic of Slovenia. After the political changes in Hungary in 1989–1990 and Slovenia's independence in 1991, both countries sought to re-establish road and rail links and open new border crossings. This was important both in terms of ensuring free and direct contacts of minorities with the kin-nation and its state and public institutions, and in terms of promoting the economic and general development of the border area. For this reason, until 2003 (until the accession of both countries to the European Union (EU) in 2004), the following border related topics regularly appeared on the SMMK agenda: opening new border crossings and expanding existing ones, simplifying border crossing procedures, establishing the Lendava – Rédics rail link, and constructing and establishing the rail link between Slovenia and Hungary on the Murska Sobota – Hodoš route (Bešter & Pirc 2018, 147–154).

Due to all the above, the Hungarian national community in Slovenia (as well as the entire population along the Hungarian border) was severely affected by Slovenia's declaration of the Covid-19 epidemic, which lasted from 12 March to 31 May 2020. Although the restrictive measures arising therefrom were the same for all citizens of Slovenia, the border population was additionally affected by border closure or restricted border crossing. Among them, a special emphasis is on the members of the Hungarian national community and their institutions, which were particularly disadvantaged during the epidemic due to their strong attachment to their home country and various cross-border contacts.

The impact of the epidemic and related measures on the life of the Hungarian national community in Slovenia during the epidemic will be presented in more detail below. The emphasis will be on the activities of political entities, self-governing national communities and public institutes involved in information, culture and education. The organisation of education was a particular challenge also in the ethnically mixed area. In order to present the problems and hardships of members of the Hungarian national community in Slovenia as illustratively as possible, and to shed light on the impact of the coronavirus emergency from several angles, extensive talks were held in the second half of April with representatives of Hungarian self-governing national communities in Prekmurje, with selected mayors of municipalities in the bilingual area, and with representatives

of Hungarian nationality public institutions and bilingual schools. In addition to interviews with prominent representatives of the Hungarian national community, media and Internet sources were also consulted in writing this article.

## 2. Briefly on the Hungarian National Community in Slovenia

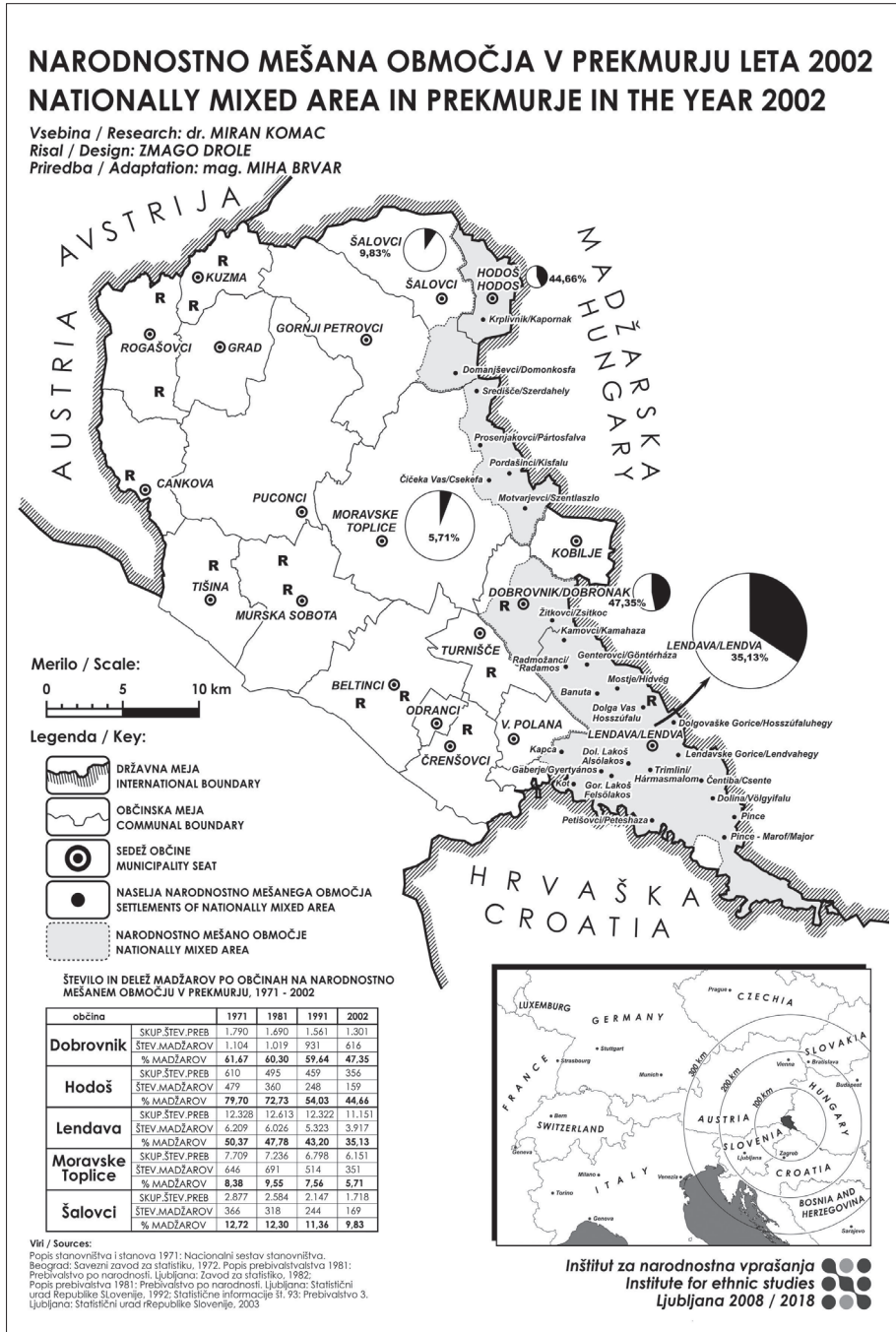
The settlement area of the autochthonous Hungarian national community in Slovenia is spatially compact and extends over a narrow strip of territory along the Slovene-Hungarian border, dividing the area of the settlements of Kobilje, Strehovci and Bukovnica with Slovene population into a northern and a southern part. The northern part comprises eight settlements and covers an area of 65 sq. km, while the southern part comprises 22 settlements and covers 130 sq. km, i.e. 195 sq. km in total.<sup>2</sup> Within this area is also the settlement of Benica, which *de facto* is not part of the ethnically mixed area to which the legal and institutional protection of the Hungarian minority in Slovenia mainly relates.<sup>3</sup> The Hungarian national community belongs to the circle of minority ethnic communities whose exercise of special minority rights is tied to a specific territory traditionally inhabited by members of the said national community. As regards local government, the area covers the territory of five municipalities (Hodoš, Šalovci, Moravske Toplice, Dobrovnik and Lendava), whereby it should be stressed that the territory of the ethnically mixed area is specifically defined in the statutes of individual municipalities and made up of territories of the settlements of an individual municipality where members of the autochthonous Hungarian national community live (Komac 1999, 25, 38).<sup>4</sup>

Regarding the number of members of the Hungarian national community, we only have data from 2002, and even these are shown only for municipalities. As revealed by Table 1, the 2002 census in Slovenia listed 6,243 persons who identified themselves as having Hungarian nationality and 7,713 persons with Hungarian mother tongue. In the ethnically mixed area of five municipalities, 5,212 persons with Hungarian nationality and 6,237 persons with Hungarian as their mother tongue were registered. About 16 % of the members of the Hungarian national community at that time already lived elsewhere in Slovenia, outside the ethnically mixed area.

After 2002, there has been no census in Slovenia that would also cover ethnic and religious affiliation or mother tongue of the population. For this reason, we only have estimates of the Hungarian population. Based on the decline in the population in the ethnically mixed area as deriving from the 2002 census, the number of people who would identify themselves as Hungarian today is estimated between 4,600 and 4,800 in the ethnically mixed area, or between 5,500 and 5,800 at the national level (Kovács 2011, 18).



Figure 1: Nationally (i.e. ethnically) mixed areas in Prekmurje in 2002



Source: Komac and Vizi (2018, 345).

**Table 1: Number of persons with Hungarian as mother tongue and Hungarian nationality in the bilingual municipalities of Prekmurje and in Slovenia in 2002.**

|                               | Total population | Hungarian nationality | Hungarian mother tongue |
|-------------------------------|------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| Hodoš municipality            | 356              | 159                   | 210                     |
| Šalovci municipality          | 1,718            | 169                   | 188                     |
| Moravske Toplice municipality | 6,151            | 351                   | 424                     |
| Dobrovnik municipality        | 1,307            | 616                   | 725                     |
| Lendava municipality          | 11,151           | 3,917                 | 5,216                   |
| <b>Total</b>                  | <b>20,683</b>    | <b>5,212</b>          | <b>6,237</b>            |
| Other Slovene municipalities  | 1,943,353        | 1,031                 | 1,476                   |
| <b>Total for Slovenia</b>     | <b>1,964,036</b> | <b>6,243</b>          | <b>7,713</b>            |

Source: SORS (2002, 20–23, 28–30).

### 3. Covid-19 in Figures

Below, we briefly present the number of people infected with SARS-CoV-2 virus from the official declaration of the epidemic in Slovenia until it was declared over, i.e. from 12 March to 30 May 2020, with special emphasis on the Pomurje region that includes the ethnically mixed area inhabited by members of the Hungarian national community.

Based on statistical data, 1,473 people tested positive for this virus in Slovenia between 4 March 2020 – when the first case of infection was confirmed – and 30 May 2020, with 80,161 tests performed. Out of a total of 1,473 cases throughout the country, 188 (i.e. 164 persons per 100,000 population) were registered in Pomurje (Covid-19 Tracker).

Infections were reported in three out of five ethnically mixed municipalities of Prekmurje, namely Lendava, Dobrovnik and Šalovci. By 30 May 2020, there were no cases of infection in the municipalities of Hodoš and Moravske Toplice (Nemeš & Vrbjak 2020).

## 4. Activities of Political Entities and Hungarian Self-Governing National Communities during the Covid-19 Epidemic

### 4.1 Introduction

Pursuant to Slovene electoral legislation, members of the Hungarian and Italian national communities have the right to representation at all levels of decision-

-making, from the local level (municipal councils) to the National Assembly. Members of the Hungarian (and Italian) national community have the right to cast two votes each in the elections to the National Assembly or local government bodies (municipalities). One vote is given to the candidate that matches their ideological political affinity, while the other is cast to elect a representative of the national community. The two autochthonous national communities in Slovenia therefore have a dual right to vote. Based thereon, members of the Hungarian national community elect their representative to the Slovenian parliament and to municipal councils (Komac 1999, 57–65).

Below is a presentation of how the organisations and institutions of the Hungarian national community in Slovenia (municipal Hungarian self-governing national communities and their umbrella organisation) and the Hungarian deputy responded to the Covid-19 epidemic and how they tried to help community members through their work.

#### **4.2 Municipal Hungarian Self-Governing National Communities and the Umbrella Organisation of Hungarians in Slovenia (Hungarian Self-Governing National Community of Pomurje) during the Epidemic**

The establishment of self-governing national communities as co-decision-making organisations of the Hungarian (and Italian) national community is provided by Article 64 of the Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia, while their organisation, relations with local and state bodies and tasks are determined by the Self-Governing National Communities Act and statutes. Pursuant to this Act, municipal self-governing national communities are established in each municipality where members of the autochthonous national community reside. In Prekmurje, the members of the Hungarian national community established five municipal self-governing communities, namely in the municipalities of Lendava, Dobrovnik, Moravske Toplice, Šalovci and Hodoš. The Act also stipulates that municipal self-governing national communities join into their umbrella national community, in this case the Hungarian Self-Governing National Community of Pomurje (PMSNS). The declaration of the Covid-19 epidemic caught the Hungarian national community in Slovenia at a very unfavourable time. In fact, in March, Hungarians around the world celebrate a major national holiday (15 March), commemorating the revolution and the liberation struggle in 1848–1849. In Prekmurje, too, they were preparing for this holiday as they had been doing for decades already. In all five ethnically mixed municipalities, the municipal Hungarian self-governing national communities, together with the relevant Hungarian nationality institute (ZKMN), cultural organisations and bilingual schools, organised various events to mark this day. Two of them were still able to carry out the celebration on 6 March (in the municipality of Hodoš) and

8 March (in the municipality of Šalovci) (Abraham 2020a; Abraham 2020b), while the central ceremony scheduled for Friday 13 March as well as the events planned by the municipal Hungarian self-governing national communities of Moravske Toplice (14 March) and Dobrovnik (15 March) were cancelled due to the declaration of the epidemic (Lőrincz 2020a). The formal addresses by the presidents of the abovementioned Hungarian self-governing national communities as well as by the presidents of PMSNS and the Pomurje Youth Association were thus delivered online (Muravidéki Magyar Önkormányzati Nemzeti Közösség 2020 a, b, c, d).

In order to curb the spread of the epidemic, very strict measures were introduced on Monday 16 March 2020, bringing public life in the country practically to a halt. The self-governing and other organisations and public institutions of the Hungarian national community complied with the new measures, introducing remote work or on-call duty (Népújság 2020a). In larger organisations, where several persons are employed (PMSNS, Hungarian Self-Governing National Community of the Municipality of Lendava, Institute for Hungarian Nationality Culture (ZKMN), the editorial board of Hungarian RTV programmes, Institute for Information of the Hungarian Nationality (ZIDMN)), on-call duty was organised the whole time. For all those who sought contact or help from the competent municipal national communities, the staff was available online even in smaller self-governing national communities. In most cases, the secretariats operated at all times, although there was no direct physical business. This was confirmed by the presidents of the municipal Hungarian self-governing national communities and PMSNS, the director of ZKMN, the editors or heads of ZIDMN, the Hungarian radio of Pomurje (PMR) and the Hungarian TV studio (the dates are indicated under the references).

On the same day when strict measures were introduced in Slovenia to curb the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, i.e. on 16 March 2020, the foreign ministers of Slovenia and Hungary, Anže Logar and Péter Szijjártó, met in Ljubljana. The ministers focused primarily on measures relating to various border crossing regimes, both for freight and passenger transport, and agreed that Hungary would not impose a ban on transit freight transport (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia 2020a). Nevertheless, on 17 March 2020, Hungary closed all border crossings for foreign nationals, i.e. also for Slovenes, including members of the Hungarian national community (Embassy of the Republic of Slovenia in Budapest 2020). This meant that from 17 March, no Slovene citizen was allowed to enter Hungary – including members of the Hungarian national community in Slovenia.

Shortly after the introduction of measures to curb the spread of the virus, the Hungarian radio of Pomurje conducted a telephone interview with the president of the central umbrella organisation of Hungarians in Slovenia (PMSNS) Ferenc Horváth, who is also the representative of the Hungarian national com-

munity in the National Assembly. In the interview published on 26 March 2020, the PMSNS president said that in his opinion there were minimal chances for the life of the Hungarian community to get back to normal before August 2020. At the same time, the president promised that PMSNS and ZKMN would contact the Hungarian associations and offer them assistance in resuming their activities as soon as possible (Fehér 2020). This promise was kept and a few days later, the PMSNS president and the ZKMN director sent a letter to all Hungarian minority associations, announcing that they were forced to cancel cultural and other events due to the epidemic and that during this transitional time they would focus on programme planning. With this letter, they also informed the associations that the Hungarian Government Office for National Policy, which provides material support for the implementation of certain programmes abroad, would not organise or support any event until 31 August 2020 (MNMI / ZKMN 2020).

Hungary thus closed its border crossings to passenger traffic on 17 March, with the exception of daily migrants from border areas and Hungarian nationals returning home from abroad. As the only two open border crossings were on the southern part of the Slovene-Hungarian border, the inhabitants of Goričko and the Slovenes living in the Raba Region had to make a long turn to cross the border. For this reason, at the initiative of the Hungarian national community of Prekmurje and the Slovene minority in the Raba Region, the foreign ministers of Slovenia and Hungary agreed to open additional local border crossings, namely Hodoš – Bajánsenye and Čepinci – Verica/Kétyölgy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia 2020b).<sup>5</sup>

At the beginning of April, the PMSNS and the municipal Hungarian self-governing national communities distributed face masks to all households in the ethnically mixed area. On this occasion, they also issued the following joint statement (Muravidéki Magyar Önkormányzati Nemzeti Közösség 2020e):

In order to curb the spread of the coronavirus pandemic and based on the Ordinance on the temporary general ban on movement and gathering of people in public places and areas in the Republic of Slovenia, and the consequent mandatory use of face masks in enclosed public spaces, the Hungarian Self-Governing National Community of Pomurje, together with the Hungarian National Self-Governing Community of the Municipality of Lendava, the Hungarian National Self-Governing Community of the Municipality of Dobrovnik, the Hungarian National Self-Governing Community of the Municipality of Moravske Toplice, the Hungarian National Self-Governing Community of the Municipality of Hodoš, the Hungarian National Self-Governing Community of the Municipality of Šalovci and the Hungarian Youth Association of Pomurje, will deliver one reusable face mask to every household in the ethnically mixed settlements of Prekmurje. Preparations have begun today. It is expected that in a week or two, each household will receive the corresponding package.  
Stay at home, take care of yourself and others!

Due to the Covid-19 epidemic, the municipal Hungarian self-governing national communities also suspended their general activities. As already mentioned, events in honour of the Hungarian national holiday on 15 March were cancelled in the bilingual municipalities of Lendava, Dobrovnik and Moravske Toplice. In addition to the above, the municipal Hungarian self-governing national communities were also forced to cancel other programmes. Thus, the Hungarian Self-Governing National Community of the Municipality of Lendava (MSNSOL) cancelled the traditional event in memory of György Zala, a renowned sculptor born in Lendava. The epidemic also affected the works on the currently largest investment of Hungarians in Lendava, i.e. the renovation of the ethnographic house in the settlement of Dolina. According to MSNSOL President Judit Vida Törnár, only 25–30 % of the planned renovation works would be carried out in 2020 due to the health situation. The Hungarian Self-Governing National Community of the Municipality of Dobrovnik (MSMSOD), too, was forced to cancel one of its traditional events, the exhibition of Easter eggs. In addition, it had planned to build a barn at the György Dobronoki Ethnographic and Tourist House by June 2020, which, according to the MSMSOD president, was postponed until October (Tomka 2020). The Hungarian self-governing national communities in Goričko faced similar problems as Lendava and Dobrovnik. Due to the epidemic, traditional events such as the demonstration of wheat threshing in Domanjševci (municipality of Šalovci), the meeting in Krplivnik – the already traditional opening event of Őrség day for the wider region, especially Hungary (municipality of Hodoš) – and the *bograč* cooking competition in Pordašinci (municipality of Moravske Toplice) were all cancelled. Due to the epidemic, also the restoration works at Škerlak's house in Krplivnik, where the ethnographic museum is located, were postponed to the summer of 2020 (Abraham & Horvat 2020).

During this time, several members of the Hungarian community asked their respective organisations (especially the umbrella political organisation) for help or contacted them with various questions. Due to the start of spring field work, there were several requests for finding a solution to cross the border since every day matters when it comes to work in the fields.<sup>6</sup> Their interventions were successful and the farmers were able to carry out the necessary field works. There were also several requests from individuals from both countries, i.e. Slovenia and Hungary, in the first days after the border closure to ensure border crossing for work purposes (Interviewees 9–14).

Representatives of national communities assessed mutual cooperation during the epidemic as constant. They also had a similar opinion about cooperation with Hungarian nationality institutions, although they also said that professional institutions could have done more in finding contacts with municipal self-governing national communities. Municipal self-governing national communities also

expressed satisfaction with the cooperation with municipal leaderships. However, according to the representatives of the Hungarian minority, the response of health care institutions was not always appropriate (Interviewees 9–14).

### 4.3 Activity of the Deputy of the Hungarian National Community in the National Assembly of the Republic of Slovenia during the Epidemic

Since the deputy of the Hungarian national community in the National Assembly has also been president of the central umbrella organisation of Hungarians in Slovenia (PMSNS) since 2018, only the activities carried out by Ferenc Horváth in his office as deputy are listed below.

Just like other organisations of the Hungarian national community, Ferenc Horváth's office informed the population through the Hungarian minority media in early March 2020 that any personal contacts were suspended and that the office was only available by phone or e-mail until further notice (Népújság 2020a, 12).

As deputy of the National Assembly, Ferenc Horváth intervened with the competent Slovene and Hungarian authorities asking for the possibility of crossing the border in case of agricultural activities, daily migrants, and in some other cases. He was also in regular contact with the leading officials of the neighbouring counties of Vas and Zala and with representatives of the Slovenes of the Raba Region (Ferenc Horváth was interviewed twice).

On 10 April 2020, the Hungarian foreign minister Péter Szijjártó announced to the public that Hungary would provide medical equipment to Hungarian border communities and areas where these communities live, as well as to Prekmurje Hungarians i.e. Prekmurje. Medical aid, including surgical masks, goggles, protective clothing, protective gloves, hats, visors, protective footwear and a large amount of disinfectant, was transported to the General Hospital of Murska Sobota. Ferenc Horváth (Lovrić 2020) helped to establish contacts between the hospital and the Hungarian government.

In the columns published in the form of parliamentary diary once a month in the weekly Népújság, the newspaper of the Hungarian national community, Ferenc Horváth wrote on 21 May that due to the epidemic, the cooperation agreement between the government and coalition partners on the one side and the deputies of the Italian and Hungarian national communities in the National Assembly on the other had not been signed yet, but the text of the agreement was in the final phase and would contain, in addition to the general part, eight specific short- and medium-term tasks (Horváth 2020).

## 5. Activity of the Institute for Hungarian Nationality Culture and Cultural Societies during the Covid-19 Epidemic

The organisation in charge of promoting Hungarian culture in Slovenia is the Institute for Hungarian Nationality Culture (ZKMN), which also runs the Bánffy Centre housing a Hungarian bookstore and a café. The Institute coordinates and directs the work of 29 societies from the ethnically mixed area promoting Hungarian culture.

The ZKMN, like other Hungarian minority institutions, informed the public on 13 March 2020 that it would close its doors to external visitors until further notice. It closed exhibitions and cancelled performances, events, roundtables, trainings, literary activities, etc. Giving the problems with the delivery of newspapers and books from Hungary, the Bánffy Centre and its bookstore were also closed on Monday 16 March 2020.

The ZKMN was among those institutions of the Hungarian national community in Slovenia that faced the greatest problems due to the epidemic, as cultural life was suspended in all areas, especially in amateur activities where the work of societies and cultural sections was interrupted. A special emphasis is to be placed on the interruption of once daily professional contacts (e.g. cooperation in the preparation of ethnographic exhibitions, drama productions, etc.). Due to the situation, there were insurmountable difficulties in carrying out amateur, ethnographic and other activities in the field of culture which, according to the Institute, would have far-reaching consequences. They partially managed to carry out the national Hungarian language competition Petőfi Sándor, but were forced to cancel the trip won by the pupils from bilingual schools. As a substitute for the cancelled programmes, they also tried online recitation to attract the younger population, but there was not much interest (Interviewee 1).

The Bánffy Centre with its bookstore and café only reopened on 6 May 2020. Thus, the purchase of Hungarian books and Hungarian newspapers published in Hungary was again possible. On this occasion, ZKMN director Mihály Soós presented to the national media the current situation in culture and spoke about plans for the summer. He said that no event would be organised by the Institute in May, but various scenarios had been prepared for the time when life returned to normal. Thus, they had already started planning summer camps for children to take place in Prekmurje, if the state would permit it. They had also started planning minor events for numerically smaller groups. Moreover, they had considered postponing some of the events cancelled in spring to the fall (Bence 2020).

Some organisations and individuals easily adapted to the new circumstances and tried to establish contacts with members of the Hungarian community



(also) via social media. As already mentioned, the exhibition of Easter eggs in Dobrovnik was cancelled due to the epidemic, but the organisers adapted to the new conditions and set up an online exhibition of Easter eggs on the Facebook page of the Dobrovnik House of Handicrafts. As the programme manager Anna Berden told in the show *Hidak – Mostovi* (Bobovec Szabó 2020a):

We need to adapt to the current circumstances and since the Facebook page of our House of Handicrafts already has many followers, we have decided to extend our offer with this programme. I can say that the response is good, with currently 73 exhibitors from Slovenia and other European countries, and even from the United States, posting photos of Easter eggs.

The possibilities offered by social and other online media were primarily used by members of the younger generations. Thus, in April, the Hungarian Youth Association of Pomurje (PMMD) started broadcasting a series about the adventures of a young boy named Kar Anthony during the epidemic. From 18 April 2020 when the first episode was aired on the Association's Facebook page, to 6 May when Kar Anthony "found out that the restrictions had been lifted", a total of six episodes were aired (MMISZ / PMMD 2020).

Prior to the onset of the coronavirus epidemic, evangelical priestess Judit Andrejek had been conducting regular music workshops in bilingual kindergartens in the ethnically mixed area. As kindergartens were closed upon the introduction of restrictive measures in March, the priestess, assisted by the umbrella organisation PMSNS, produced virtual music workshops for toddlers and their parents (Andrejek 2020).

Despite the described initiatives by younger members of the Hungarian national community, the fact remains that the epidemic greatly influenced the cultural life of the national community, which also involves much older members. The latter are less skilled in the use of ICT that would help them overcome the difficulties encountered in organising cultural activities. Another problem was the fact that cultural groups in which elderly people participate (embroidery knitting, folk choirs, drama groups, etc.) required joint rehearsals with mentors, which was not allowed under the measures in force.

## 6. Prekmurje Bilingual Schools during the Covid-19 Epidemic

A distinctive feature of bilingual (Slovene-Hungarian) schooling in the bilingual area in Prekmurje is that it is compulsory for all children in this area. In other words, there are only bilingual schools in the ethnically mixed area and no monolingual Slovene or Hungarian schools (Komac 1999, 46–49). In the 2019/20 school year, the ethnically mixed area of Prekmurje comprised nine bilingual

kindergartens, five bilingual primary schools and one bilingual secondary school with various educational programmes. The tertiary level of education in Hungarian is provided by the Department of Hungarian Language and Literature at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Maribor.

In the 2019/20 school year, the bilingual primary schools of Prekmurje were attended by 803 pupils, while the bilingual secondary school in Lendava was attended by 284 pupils. More than half of primary school pupils attended the bilingual primary school I in Lendava (536 pupils), while others attended the bilingual primary schools in Genterovci (80 pupils), Dobrovnik (81 pupils) and Prosenjakovci (82 pupils). The bilingual primary school II in Lendava (with an adapted curriculum) had 24 pupils in the 2019/20 school year (Király et al. 2019).

After the introduction of the Schengen regime at the borders, a new practice developed, namely the enrolment of pupils from Hungary into bilingual educational institutions in Prekmurje. Initially, there had been few such cases, but later the number of pupils from Hungary increased considerably. In the 2019/20 school year, 55 pupils from Hungary attended bilingual primary schools in Prekmurje, with the Prosenjakovci bilingual primary school (in the municipality of Moravske Toplice) standing out with as many as 35 children from the neighbouring Hungarian settlements. In other primary schools, the number of children from Hungary was as follows: 12 at the bilingual primary school in Genterovci and 8 at the bilingual primary school Lendava I (Interviewees 2–5).

On 16 March, all educational institutions in Slovenia, including bilingual ones, shut down and remained closed for two months, until 18 May 2020. During this time, classes were held remotely, online, in virtual classrooms. In such regard, bilingual schools faced similar challenges and problems as all other educational institutions in Slovenia. According to the principals of bilingual schools, pupils from Hungary had no major difficulty with remote learning and contacts were maintained by e-mail and via virtual classrooms (Interviewees 2, 4, 5). The principal of the bilingual primary school of Genterovci pointed out the problem of remote learning for Roma children because they did not have computers or Internet access. In such cases, the school's janitor would deliver teaching materials to their homes once a week. The principal also pointed to the problem of smaller schools or rural communities, as many parents did not know how to help children with remote learning because they themselves lacked computer skills (Interviewee 3).

Hungarian self-governing national communities indeed responded to the closure of educational institutions. To ensure the conditions for a smooth running of remote learning, all municipal Hungarian self-governing communities provided free printing, copying and scanning for pupils and students for school and study purposes (Néptújság 2020b).

As already mentioned, educational institutions reopened on 18 May 2020. Schools prepared for the resumption of the teaching process on the basis of the instructions provided by the National Institute of Public Health, but their practical implementation posed many challenges. A special problem for bilingual schools in Prekmurje was the closed state borders. When schools reopened in mid-May, the border between Slovenia and Hungary was still generally closed and only three border crossings were open, namely Dolga vas, Pince and Hodoš. Parents of Hungarian pupils who attended bilingual primary schools in Lendava, Genterovci and Prosenjakovci were issued certificates of attendance and were thus able to cross the border with the children to take them to school. For pupils who attended primary school in Lendava and Genterovci, there were no problems in coming to school, as their parents could use the border crossing Réedics – Dolga vas (Bobovec Szabó 2020b). But there were problems for pupils attending the bilingual primary school in Prosenjakovci. Before the pandemic, their parents would drive them to school through the Magyarszombatfa – Prosenjakovci border crossing, but this border crossing was still closed in May, so they had to travel many kilometres to the much more remote Bajánsenye – Hodoš border crossing to bring children to school in Prosenjakovci. In some cases, families travelled over 100 km. The situation was resolved by the school sending a bus to the Bajánsenye – Hodoš border crossing. There, the children boarded the bus that took them to Prosenjakovci school. After classes, the same bus would take them back to the border crossing Hodoš – Bajánsenye, where their parents were already waiting for them. Some of the pupils from Hungary who lived far from the Bajánsenye – Hodoš border crossing stayed at home and received the necessary materials via e-mail. This situation lasted just over two weeks, until the beginning of June, when the Slovene-Hungarian border was reopened and border crossing and school attendance returned to normal (Interviewee 4).

## 7. Hungarian Nationality Media during the Covid-19 Epidemic

The Hungarian national community in Slovenia runs three media that provide information in its mother tongue. In addition to the weekly *Népújság*, which falls under the auspices of the Institute for Information of the Hungarian National Community, there are also two media operating under the national television: the Hungarian radio of Pomurje (PMR) and TV studio Lendava.<sup>7</sup>

The above media responded to the epidemic according to their nature or the way they operate. Thus, the weekly *Népújság* continued to be published without any major problems, according to the already established scenario. In fact, the weekly's employees managed to perform a considerable share of work remotely, from their homes (Interviewee 8).

In case of media operating under RTV Slovenija, i.e. PMR and TV studio Lendava, the situation was different. The Hungarian radio and TV programmes provided for some journalists on duty, while other journalists possibly worked remotely. Another problem was the fact that some employees had permanent residence in Hungary and were unable to come to work due to closure of the Hungarian-Slovene border. Eventually, after a few days, they were able to reach their place of work based on interim interstate agreements. PMR, which broadcasts 24 hours a day,<sup>8</sup> aired up-to-date information on the epidemic in Hungarian, also those received from central news agencies, relevant government departments, Hungarian state authorities and other sources. It also prepared talk shows on the current situation in Prekmurje, both in the ethnically mixed area and in the wider Slovene-Hungarian border region. After 15 April, it resumed some of its regular shows (Interviewee 6).

Hungarian television shows, which are broadcast four times a week, have also been aired; the gap was bridged by repeating some of their high-profile content recorded before the epidemic (Interviewee 7). As regards broadcasting TV programmes in the Hungarian language, the national television unfortunately took a unilateral decision that went to the detriment of Hungarian television programmes. Immediately upon the introduction of the measures to curb the epidemic, television broadcasts in Hungarian language were moved from channel 1 of RTV Slovenia to the regional programme. RTV Slovenia director justified such decision by saying that due to the epidemic, the entire channel 1 was reprogrammed for the needs of a wider audience, including children who stayed at home due to the closure of schools. The editorial board of TV studio Lendava and the programme council of Hungarian RTV programmes opposed this decision, but remained hopeful that when the epidemic was over, these programmes would return to the usual TV agenda. As pointed out by the assistant director general of RTV Slovenia for Hungarian nationality programmes (Lőrincz 2020c):

Great damage was done to the programmes during the epidemic as our viewers, who were also at home at that time, could not watch the shows on the usual channel at the usual time. This damage cannot be repaired.

Despite the epidemic being declared over in May 2020, TV shows in Hungarian language were still not aired on channel 1 of the national television. Hungarian nationality organisations reacted decisively and demanded that the management of RTV Slovenia return Hungarian TV shows to the main channel of RTV Slovenia. Eventually, as of 23 June 2020, Hungarian TV shows were broadcast again on channel 1 at the usual time (Interviewee 7).

## 8. Instead of Conclusion

On 31 May 2020, the Republic of Slovenia finally declared the Covid-19 epidemic over. Thereby, life gradually began to return to normal. After 73 days, Slovenia and Hungary re-established the free movement of people between the two countries. This was announced by the foreign ministers of both countries at a press conference held at the border crossing Dolga vas on 28 May. As Hungarian foreign minister Péter Szijjártó said on this occasion: “From this moment on, Slovene and Hungarian citizens can travel freely between the two countries for any purpose – for any honest purpose, of course.” His Slovene counterpart Anže Logar added: “[W]e have concluded an important episode that to some extent restricted the free movement of people, and thus together achieved important progress in diplomacy.” Five border crossings were reopened on the border between Slovenia and Hungary, namely Čepinci – Kétyölgy, Hodoš – Bajánsenye, Dolga vas – Rédic and two border crossings between Pince and Tornyszentmiklós (Lőrincz 2020b).

On this occasion, the Hungarian foreign minister also met with representatives of the Hungarian national community in Slovenia. They discussed the free movement of people between the two countries. In this regard, Ferenc Horváth, president of the umbrella organisation of Hungarians in Slovenia, said (Lőrincz 2020b):

I have told the minister that it would be wise to reach an agreement between the two countries – should, God forbid, a similar situation reoccur – to automatically set up a border crossing regime so that we do not have to wait for days or weeks to find an optimal solution for crossing the border. The minister thought the proposal was good and supported it.

Other representatives of the Hungarian national community in Slovenia also pointed out the problems related to border closure. In general, the respondents were of the opinion that the closure of state borders was necessary in the given circumstances, but was also strongly felt by the residents of the border area. Members of national minorities were thus prevented any contact with their kinship. Representatives of the Hungarian self-governing national communities unanimously stressed that in recent years the EU had missed the opportunity to establish clearer conditions for the Schengen regime in a crisis situation, forcing countries to take partial action, which was most felt by border residents and minorities. Some added that the measures taken by the home country (Hungary) were too harsh and not flexible enough. The answers and opinions of the leaders of Hungarian minority organisations and institutions related in particular to the psychological consequences of border closure, which will certainly have a negative impact on the preservation and development of national identity. Some be-

lied that if borders were closed for too long or if such events reoccurred several times, this would have irreparable consequences for a community as small as the Hungarians in Prekmurje in terms of preservation of national identity. One interviewee even spoke of an “accelerated end of small communities” (Interviewee 11). For this reason, the interviewees believed that it would be necessary to ensure greater flexibility of cooperation in the border area in emergency situations, such as the Covid-19 epidemic. According to some representatives of the Hungarian national community, a unilateral closure of state borders causes national minorities to “denationalize” or “makes their development even more differentiated and partial” (Interviewees 10, 12, 13). It was especially pointed out that when the border was closed, members of the Hungarian minority “did not have access to a single book or newspaper in their mother tongue published outside Prekmurje” (Interviewees 9, 10).

Representatives of the Hungarian national community also pointed out that in recent years cross-border cooperation flourished in all areas of life. Children were enrolled into educational institutions in the neighbouring country, people registered permanent residence on the other side of the border, etc. All this now presented a similar problem as prior to the entry of the countries of our wider region into the EU or the Schengen area. Border settlements have woven close links over recent years, jointly planning development, cultural and other projects. These settlements experienced border closure – although justified in terms of public health – as unnatural and harmful. As some respondents pointed out, it took decades for border communities to improve the situation and the life along the border, yet it took a lot less to destroy what had been built. For this reason, members of Hungarian self-governing national communities pointed out that they would politically engage in the issue of border closure immediately after the situation calmed down and would submit their views and demands to the competent state and European authorities (Interviewees 9–14). Anže Logar, Slovenia’s minister of foreign affairs, said some encouraging words in such regard (Lórinč 2020b) at the opening of the border in Dolga vas on 28 May 2020: “I look forward to our good cooperation in the future and I am confident that the issues raised will be resolved with dialogue, for the benefit of the people on both sides of the border.”

## Interviews

Interviewee 1 – Director of the Institute for Hungarian Nationality Culture, 15 April 2020.

Interviewee 2 – Principal of the bilingual primary school I in Lendava, 15 April 2020.

Interviewee 3 – Principal of the bilingual primary school in Genterovci, 15 April 2020.

Interviewee 4 – Principal of the bilingual primary school in Prosenjakovci, 16 April and 23 October 2020.

Interviewee 5 – Principal of the bilingual secondary school in Lendava, 16 April 2020.

- Interviewee 6 – Editor-in-chief of the Hungarian radio of Pomurje, 16 April 2020.
- Interviewee 7 – Editor-in-chief of TV studio Lendava, 16 April and 27 October 2020.
- Interviewee 8 – Editor-in-chief of the weekly *Népújság*, 17 April 2020.
- Interviewee 9 – President of the Hungarian Self-Governing National Community of the Municipality of Lendava, 18 April 2020.
- Interviewee 10 – President of the Hungarian Self-Governing National Community of the Municipality of Dobrovnik, 18 April 2020.
- Interviewee 11 – President of the Hungarian Self-Governing National Community of the Municipality of Moravske Toplice, 19 April 2020.
- Interviewee 12 – President of the Hungarian Self-Governing National Community of the Municipality of Šalovci, 20 April 2020.
- Interviewee 13 – President of the Hungarian Self-Governing National Community of the Municipality of Hodoš, 20 April 2020.
- Interviewee 14 – President of the Hungarian Self-Governing National Community of Pomurje, 16 and 21 April 2020.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> It needs to be emphasised that upon Slovenia's joining the Schengen area, border controls with three out of four neighbouring countries (Italy, Austria and Hungary) were abolished. Border controls with Croatia remain in force although the southern neighbour became a full member of the EU on 1 July 2013, as it has not yet joined the Schengen area.
- <sup>2</sup> The northern part of the settlement area includes Hodoš/Hodos, Krplivnik/Kapornak, Domanjševci/Domonkosfa, Središče/Szerdahely, Prosenjakovci/Pártosfalva, Pordašinci/Kisfalva, Čikečka vas /Csekefa and Motvarjevci/Szentlászló. The southern part comprises Dobrovnik/Dobronak, Žitkovci/Zsitkóc, Kamovci/Kámaháza, Genterovci/Göntérháza, Radmožanci/Radamos, Mostje/Hídvég, Dolga vas/Hosszúfalva, Dolgovaške gorice/Hosszúfaluhegy, Lendava/Lendva, Lendavske gorice/Lendvahegy, Čentiba/Csente, Dolina/Völgyfalu, Pince/Pince Marof/Pince-Major, Benica, Petišovci/Petesháza, Trimlini/Hármasmalom, Dolnji Lakoš/Alsólakos, Gornji Lakoš/Felsőlakos, Gaberje/Gyertyános, Kapca/Kapca and Kot/Kót.
- <sup>3</sup> A settlement established in the 1920s by the Slovenes from the Primorska region.

- <sup>4</sup> Of these five municipalities, only Hodoš is entirely an ethnically mixed area. In the remaining four municipalities, the ethnically mixed area covers different proportions of the municipal territory.
- <sup>5</sup> The border crossing Čepinci – Verica was closed soon afterwards as the Hungarian authorities reported that the interested persons crossed the border less than once a week.
- <sup>6</sup> Quite a few Slovene citizens rent and cultivate large agricultural areas on the Hungarian side of the border.
- <sup>7</sup> More details on the history of the weekly *Népújság* in Zágorec-Csuka (2006, 224–250); on the history of the Hungarian radio of Pomurje and TV Studio Lendava in Zver (2008, 27–126).
- <sup>8</sup> The show is broadcast live from 5.30 am to 7 pm; overnight, the radio plays Hungarian music or repeat shows.

## Acknowledgment

The article was written under the research programme Minority and Ethnic Studies and the Slovene National Question (P5-0081), funded by Slovenian Research Agency.

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## Impact and Consequences of Covid-19 on the Functioning of Minority Institutions of the Slovene National Community in Austria

Crucial for the development and survival of minorities and persons belonging to them is that their situation and position are taken into account in the countries' measures and policies and are not aggravated thereby. This is particularly relevant in times of crisis, such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Social interaction within the minority and the active contact of a national community with its kin-state - currently limited as a result of the measures to contain the coronavirus - are of the utmost importance for all minority national communities. Thanks to its organisational capacity, the Slovene national community in Austria was able to properly respond and adjust to the restrictions imposed, but the cancellation of traditional events and closure of bilingual schools raise questions among the community as to how its identity will survive if it cannot be expressed. There is concern that these consequences, especially since the epidemic continues unabated in the second wave, are likely to have a long-term impact on ethnic vitality.

**Keywords:** Slovene national community in Austria, Covid-19, culture, politics, measures.

## Vpliv in posledice bolezni covid-19 na delovanje manjšinskih inštitucij slovenske narodne skupnosti v Avstriji

*Za razvoj in preživetje različnih manjšin in njihovih pripadnikov je ključno, da ukrepi in politike držav upoštevajo njihovo situacijo in položaj in ju ne poslabšujejo. To je še posebej pomembno v času kriz, kakršna je pandemija covid-19. Izjemnega pomena za vse manjšinske narodne skupnosti je socialna interakcija znotraj manjšine in živi stik narodne skupnosti z matično državo, oboje pa je zaradi ukrepov za zajezitev koronavirusa omejeno. Slovenska narodna skupnost v Avstriji se je zaradi dobre organiziranosti primerno odzvala in prilagodila na omejitve, vendar odpovedovanje tradicionalnih prireditev in zapiranje dvojezičnih šol tudi pri slovenski narodni skupnosti v Avstriji sprožajo vprašanja, kako naj identiteta preživi, če se ne more izraziti. Obstaja bojazen, da bodo posledice, še posebej, ker se epidemija v drugem valu ne umirja, dolgoročno vplivale na etnično vitalnost.*

**Ključne besede:** slovenska narodna skupnost v Avstriji, covid-19, kultura, politika, ukrepi.

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# 1. Introduction

Covid-19, the social and economic crisis caused by the pandemic, and its consequences are challenges that countries and societies have not encountered for over a century (Spinney 2018; Arnold 2018). The developments between March and November 2020 and the countries' and population's responses showed that there are no prescriptions in medical books as to what the political and societal response to an epidemic should be. Following epidemiologists' recommendations, state authorities proposed and applied various policies and measures (physical distancing, restrictions on social gathering, protective hygiene) to prevent the spread of the pandemic, some of which encroach upon human rights. The governments of European countries, in particular, adopted a series of measures to help the economies minimise the consequences of closing down societies and slowing down economic activities. The depth of the scars left by the pandemic at collective and personal level will depend on how efficiently countries and societies will endure the virus in the health and social spheres (Žerdin 2020). Meanwhile, Austria believed that a society where cooperation between central government and federal states was well developed could withstand the pandemic better than a more centralised society (Bußjäger 2020).

The article focuses on how Covid-19, its consequences and the respective measures (e.g. border closure in the spring of 2020 that prevented cross-border contacts and cooperation and the restrictions on movement, socialising and activities we are witnessing again in the second, autumn wave of the disease) affect the Slovene national community in Austria and attempts to answer the following research questions:

- How do the changed conditions of life and work of minority organisations and institutions during and after the crisis affect minorities, their organisation, social, economic and cultural life, cross-border integration (e.g. in culture, media, economy, and sport) and cooperation?
- How did the Covid 19 pandemic affect the activities of the umbrella cultural and political organisations of Carinthian Slovenes? What was the vulnerability of the minority community (when the epidemic was declared in the spring), what were the consequences?
- How did umbrella organisations replace the activities involving large numbers of performers or spectators/listeners? How do they plan their work in the future?

Semi-structured in-depth interviews with representatives of minority umbrella cultural and political organisations were conducted to obtain answers to the above as well as to some purely organisational questions relevant to their operation:

- Do you think that additional systemic financial measures are necessary for the normal functioning of minority organisations? What kind of measures?

- Is digitalisation of work and transition to online contents the right response during the Covid-19 pandemic? How important and necessary is active contact with the audience and cross-border contacts for the Slovene national community in Carinthia?

The research was based on methodological pluralism, taking into account and combining various disciplinary, multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches and methodologies. The key research techniques included case studies, i.e. the study of media publications, professional and scientific literature and documents (at various levels – from local to global) on the Covid-19 pandemic, its consequences and responses thereto, comparative research, and targeted comparisons on the case of the Slovene national community in Carinthia. An important source for the analysis of developments in Carinthia was the minority weekly *Novice*, which regularly reported on individual events, decisions and actions of Austrian federal and provincial authorities, as well as on the reactions of the national community to such. In addition to the analysis of sources and documents and desk research, semi-structured in-depth interviews were held with the leading representatives of institutions of the Slovene minority community, i.e. the umbrella political organisations – the National Council of Carinthian Slovenes (NSKS) and the Association of Slovene Organisations (ZSO) – and the umbrella cultural organisations – the Christian Culture Association (KKZ) and the Slovene Cultural Union (SPZ) from Klagenfurt – to supplement the respective questionnaires. The analysis of the four questionnaires involving several representatives of the above organisations was followed by semi-structured in-depth telephone interviews. The results of both methods provide a fair illustration of the situation. The interviews and short questionnaires were conducted before the outbreak of the second wave of Covid-19.

## 2. The Slovene National Community in Austria

The population structure of today's ethnic territory of Slovenia, which extends to all four neighbouring countries, is the result of historical developments following the First and Second World Wars. In the areas of autochthonous settlement of the Slovene national community in the Austrian states of Carinthia and Styria, the share of Slovenes is in constant decline – primarily due to assimilation and partly also due to emigration from rural and border areas. A consequence thereof is the expansion of the settlement area and the concurrent numerical decline of the minority community, as well as a lower relative number of its members in the area of autochthonous settlement. Urbanisation and suburbanisation changed the traditional settlement concept of the Slovene minority from a predominantly agricultural and rural to a non-agrarian one. The cost of such transi-

tion was a considerable degree of statistical and actual assimilation. A significant part of the minority moved to cities far from their original area of settlement due to employment (Zupančič 2000).

Nowadays, belonging to a minority has become a competitive advantage, an economic category. Opportunities of cooperation for members of the minority living along the border are as follows (in the case of Slovenia): the minorities can act as initiators and bearers of cross-border cultural exchange, as buffers in international relations (or, in certain cases, aggravating them if their status is not regulated) and promoters of economy and cross-border cooperation, they play an important role in translation services, promote tourist events, know how to take advantage of local resources, support cross-border contacts and projects in the economic, cultural, social and sports fields. Thus, for instance, from 1991 to the beginning of the new millennium, members of the Slovene minority in Carinthia were regularly involved in Austrian investments into companies in Slovenia with at least 150 employees (Zupančič 2000; Brezigar 2005).

The majority of the autochthonous Slovene national community in Austria lives in the southern parts of the state of Carinthia. A minor part thereof also lives in the state of Styria. According to estimates provided by institutions in Slovenia, there are between 30,000 and 50,000 Slovenes or Slovene-speakers in Carinthia and around 1,500 in Styria (Grafenauer 2010a). Some Slovene and Austrian researchers, however, estimate that Slovenes or Slovene-speakers in Austria are a few tens of thousands more, i.e. between 40,000 and 60,000 (Stergar 2003; Klemenčič & Klemenčič 2006; Reiterer 2000, etc.).

The interests of Carinthian Slovenes are represented by three umbrella political organisations: the NSKS, presided by Valentin Inzko, the ZSO, presided by Manuel Jug, and the Community of Carinthian Slovenes (SKS), presided by Bernard Sadovnik. The NSKS and the ZSO gather a number of associations, organisations and societies, the most important being the two umbrella cultural organisations: the KKZ and the SPZ. The Slovene national community publishes two weeklies: *Novice*, managed by the NSKS and ZSO, and *Nedelja*, which is the church newspaper of the Gurk diocese. A part of Carinthian Slovenes gathers under the Slovene political party known as Unity List (*Enotna lista*, EL). Among the minority organisations, mention also needs to be made of the Vienna Centre of Austrian National Communities (CAN) and the Community of South Carinthian Farmers (SJK). Individual members of the national community are also members of political parties of the majority nation (social democrats, the greens, the people's party, the communists, the liberals). Taking into account also their organisation in the fields of culture, sports and economy, one finds that Carinthian Slovenes, despite their statistically small size, present an outstanding institutional organisation in all areas of social life (Jesih 2007; Grafenauer 2010b; Wutti 2017).

### 3. The Covid-19 Pandemic and the Slovene National Community in Austria

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The Institute for Ethnic Studies (IES) conducted preliminary analyses of the impact of the measures adopted by Slovenia and neighbouring countries on Slovene national communities in the neighbouring countries and for minority and ethnically mixed communities in the border area in general. The studies prepared by IES researchers at the time when the measures to curb the Covid-19 pandemic were in place (e.g. Žagar, forthcoming) show that the pandemic is better managed and coped with in the environments that have a good healthcare system and are more inclusive and tolerant. Particular attention was paid to the proportionality of restriction of human rights in the adoption of protective measures. We therefore reviewed how national communities and minority institutions, as well as some research organisations and European control mechanisms, responded to the crisis and how they managed ethnic diversity. The first publications in such regard appeared in social sciences and humanities (e.g. Wintersteiner 2020a, b; Eurac Research 2020a; Josipovič 2020, etc.). Wintersteiner (2020a, b) argued that in the spring, countries responded to the virus from a narrow, national(istic) position, as they closed state borders rather quickly. The European Union (EU) did not provide the right answer either. The lack of solidarity within the EU was first observed when the virus spread widely in Italy. Wintersteiner reflected on the implications of such situation for refugees and marginalised communities, pointing to the proliferation of nationalist approaches, practices and discourses (the use of the phrase war against coronavirus across Europe) and the need for critical observation. He suggested political cosmopolitanism as the answer to this problem and highlighted the cooperation among health professionals as the beginning of global solidarity (Wintersteiner 2020a, b).

FUEN<sup>1</sup> felt the consequences of the epidemic very early on as the European Cup, the European football championship of national minorities scheduled for the summer 2020 in Carinthia, was postponed to the summer of 2021. The event is hosted by the National Community of Carinthian Slovenes (FUEN 2020). The consequences that the Covid-19 pandemic is likely to have for national minorities, mainly due to suspension of classes in schools and pre-school education, were highlighted also in a statement issued by the Council of Europe's Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities on 28 May 2020 (CoE Advisory Committee 2020).

The Eurac Research, a research centre from Bolzano/Bozen, South Tyrol, and its Institute for Minority Rights organised ten online workshops between 13 May and 14 July 2020 dealing with the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic and the many challenges it brings to national minorities. Researchers from various institutions and collaborators of selected monitoring mechanisms for the implementation of minority rights focused on the general consequences of

Covid-19 on minorities, territorial and transnational management of minority issues, equality and discrimination during the pandemic, gender issues and religious minorities, borders, economy and diversity management, and on possible post-Covid-19 scenarios for the minorities. The ninth online workshop, entitled *Economy, Minorities and Covid-19*, was attended by Valentin Inzko.<sup>2</sup> Presenting the situation of Carinthian Slovenes in the first, spring wave of the epidemic and the measures taken by the countries, Inzko pointed out the discontent among Slovenes in Austrian Carinthia at the closing of borders,<sup>3</sup> especially since Austria left its borders with Switzerland and Germany open without restrictions. The Carinthian Slovenes protested against the closure of the border between Austria and Slovenia (EL – Enotna lista / Einheitsliste 2020; Volksgruppen ORF. at 2020, etc.) and in a joint effort with some mayors of border municipalities eventually achieved that border measures were mitigated (Novice 2020a, 3). At the beginning of April 2020, at the initiative of the population on both sides of the border, the foreign ministers of the two countries agreed to open the Holmec border crossing as it would be crossed by many of the 2,000 Slovenes from the Koroška region commuting to work to Austrian Carinthia on a daily basis (Ranc 2020; VK 24 2020).

Inzko also pointed to Article 17 of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (1998), whereby the Parties undertake

[n]ot to interfere with the right of persons belonging to national minorities to establish and maintain free and peaceful contacts across frontiers with persons lawfully staying in other States, in particular those with whom they share an ethnic, cultural, linguistic or religious identity, or a common cultural heritage.

Slovenes in Austria were of the opinion that restrictive border-crossing measures prevented traditional cross-border contacts (e.g. visits to family members and other relatives, funerals). Inzko also stressed the cultural consequences for the minority (music teachers from Slovenia who teach at the Slovene Music School of Carinthia were unable to cross the border, puppet theatres could not perform outside their seats, etc.). With the exception of a few online events, cultural life came to a complete halt. This hit hard on the small minority national community, which normally records over 1,000 cultural events per year. Regarding the economic consequences, Inzko mentioned the problems in logistics and the difficulties of Slovenes commuting to work to Styria and Carinthia<sup>4</sup> who were subject to special border crossing regimes. Many Austrians and Slovenes from Austria also work in Slovenia, especially Ljubljana, in the service sector (bank employees, tax advisors, etc.). Slovenia plays an important role in the Austrian export economy and is the world leader in terms of imports of Austrian goods and services at EUR 1,700 per capita. Despite a population of only two million, Slovenia is Austria's 11th most important foreign market. Among the EU



members, Austria is the most important buyer of Slovene products (for more on economic relations, see Austrian Embassy in Ljubljana 2020b). In terms of per capita, Slovenia is more important for Austria than e.g. Japan or Scandinavia, according to Inzko. He concluded that the restrictions had a strong impact on the Slovene national community in Carinthia in many areas (culture, economy, tourism) and hoped that the borders would remain open<sup>5</sup> (Inzko in Eurac Research 2020b). At the outbreak of the second wave in late October and early November 2020, economic organisations promptly responded and warned both governments that declaring an epidemic in Slovenia and later on in Austria should not lead to another closure of the borders between the two countries, which would be even more detrimental for the economy. The new situation was pointed out in a press release by Benjamin Wakounig, president of the Slovene Economic Association (SGZ) from Klagenfurt. Wakounig highlighted the trade between Slovenia and Austria, which amounted to about six billion euros per year, and

[a]round 23,000 daily migrants from Slovenia, who are an important pillar of many Austrian companies, especially in the border area of Carinthia and Styria. Also important are Slovene nurses and caretakers in nursing homes and 24-hour care service, as well as around 1,000 professionals from Slovenia who perform their services in Austria every day.

He did not forget to mention that there were more than a thousand companies in Slovenia with Austrian capital,

[o]f which 760 companies with majority Austrian capital. As a result, owners and employees visit their companies every day, and many Austrians migrate to Slovenia on a daily basis. Just as the prime ministers recently confirmed in Brussels that the borders between EU countries must remain open, the SGZ urges not to close the borders either (Volksgruppen ORF.at 2020).

The Eurac Research launched a blog on its website entitled Covid-19 And Beyond, a think tank on the coronavirus crisis. Its purpose is to make science heard, participate in shaping the after-coronavirus world, and offer a platform for a constructive confrontation of ideas in order to shape a common future. The posts originate from several countries and deal with various themes (e.g. borders and border regions, cross-border cooperation, minority media, minority rights, federalism, nationalisms, etc.) and topics such as languages and digitalisation during the coronavirus crisis, fake news, schooling during the pandemic, refugees and minorities, etc. The blog points to the High Commissioner for National Minorities' recommendation to nation states that authorities also use minority and regional languages when informing people about measures to curb the Covid-19 pandemic and measures to protect health (Röggla 2020). It was especially evident in the spring and partly, but to a much lesser extent, also with the bor-

der measures between Slovenia and Austria in late October and early November 2020, that the level of mobility established along the process of European integration was completely eroded. The four fundamental freedoms of the European Union – the free movement of goods, services, capital and persons, which meant that EU citizens could live and work on an equal footing in any EU country were undermined. Thus, for example, as a result of restrictions related to the Covid-19 pandemic, Germany recorded a strong demand for healthcare workers, as many citizens of other countries who had been working in German healthcare stayed at home due to the health situation and for family reasons. These and similar mobility issues will need to be much better considered in the future (Crepaz 2020). Pechlaner and Gruber emphasise that the borders became visible with the refugee crisis and that the coronavirus crisis exacerbated this issue in countries such as Germany, Austria and Denmark. They analyse how and to what extent the policies of populism, nationalism and protectionism affect mobility in the EU (Pechlaner & Gruber 2020). Many workers in healthcare and care for the elderly working in Austria come from Slovenia. They, too, had problems in the spring months. Engl (2020) pointed out that the border hindered cooperation in the Tyrol-Südtirol-Trentino Euroregion and that the central government had severely interfered with the daily lives of the population on both sides of the border when closing the Brenner border crossing. Engl also highlighted some examples of good practice (e.g. at the French-Spanish border where a green belt was established with the cooperation of medical staff and the police).

Moreover, the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic were addressed by the European Centre for Minority Issues (ECMI) located in the German town of Flensburg along the Danish-German border. Despite a small number of contributions, their message is clear: minority communities live and prosper because of interaction, culture and social life, and contacts, which are now hindered by the measures imposed, by the cancellation of traditional minority events, and by minority schools closure. All the above raises questions about how the minority identity will survive if it cannot be expressed. It can be concluded that the coronavirus crisis has a direct negative impact on the lives of minorities across the world. Governments and the media need to avoid misusing the pandemic to stigmatise and increase pressure on minorities (Pettai et al. 2020). The OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities Lamberto Zannier pointed out that states and individuals need to remember that only cohesive communities are strong societies. He reminded governments that emergency measures during the coronavirus crisis need to include the needs of everyone in society, including persons belonging to national minorities and other marginalised communities (Zannier 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic prompted bad governance around the world and acted as an accelerator of pre-existing conditions of populism and authoritarianism. This coincided with the actions of some governments which imposed a state of emergency to bypass democratic and constitutional rules and

regulations. They introduced forms and tools for the surveillance of citizens, disguised as necessary emergency actions to protect public health. A particular problem was the insufficient communication of the measures to the population. Such actions were observed by Marika Djolai, editor of the Minority Blog, in the Western Balkans and Hungary (Djolai 2020).

#### 4. Consequences for and Responses by Carinthian Slovenes to the Covid-19 Pandemic

Sharing the fate of other Austrian citizens, the minority and its institutions had to adapt to the measures in force in Austria. From this point of view, the position of the minority did not differ considerably from that of the majority. As elsewhere in Europe, in the spring of 2020 all cultural events in Carinthia were cancelled or postponed due to measures adopted to curb the spread of the novel coronavirus. They were mostly moved to early fall. In mid-March 2020, *Novice*, the weekly of the Slovene national community in Carinthia, reported that most of the events organised by Slovene societies and national community institutions were cancelled due to the coronavirus and postponed to a later date. Not only cultural and sports events (volleyball and basketball leagues, football, hockey) but also traditional events (e.g. economic fairs in Pliberk/Bleiburg and Celovec/Klagenfurt, Jožef's fair in Eberndorf/Dobrla vas and Ferlach/Borovlje, etc.) were cancelled (Novice 2020b, 16). *Novice* reported about all events in Carinthia being cancelled due to measures to curb the spread of the coronavirus on 20 March 2020, informing the readers that as a result thereof the next issue would not be published until 17 April 2020 (Novice 2020 c, 1–2). Janez Stergar wrote in *Korotanske e-novice*<sup>6</sup> that schools in Austria would remain closed even after the Easter holidays and that the new Bishop of Gurk-Klagenfurt, Jože Marketz, a Carinthian Slovene, cancelled all public religious ceremonies to protect against infection. The same happened with the cultural events in the framework of CARINTHIJA2020 held under the auspices of the state of Carinthia to mark the 100th anniversary of the plebiscite of October 1920 determining the national affiliation of the southern part of Carinthia. Due to the closure of some border crossings and the extreme difficulties in crossing the state border, as well as measures to prevent the spread of the virus, interpersonal contacts were interrupted and stopped in an instant. Correspondence took place online and by phone. Carinthian Slovenes were eager for the measures to be released to resume their cultural, economic and sports events. Especially because active contact of a national community with its kin-state is of the utmost importance for any minority national community.

In late April 2020, the weekly *Novice* was yet unable to properly assess the consequences for the economy, but assumed that the protective measures would

severely affect the entire Austrian economy. It highlighted the problems in the hospitality and tourism sector, while a survey among Slovene businessmen in Carinthia revealed that individual industries coped with the consequences very differently (Novice 2020d, 5). Novice was also asking how come the Carinthian economy paid so little attention to cooperation in the field of tourism and to guests from Slovenia, who come to Carinthia in significant numbers (Novice 2020e, 3).

The umbrella cultural organisations of the Slovene national community in Carinthia, the SPZ and the KKZ, managed to shift to online services rather rapidly (already in March 2020). At a joint website, they offer the video channel *Kino v karanteni* (Cinema in Quarantine), a digital collection of Slovene cultural artists in Carinthia. At the same link one can find theatre performances, choral recordings, films, projects and more. Societies, cultural institutions, organisations and individuals are encouraged to post their videos on this channel. Moreover, both organisations began to offer new cultural products (e.g. *Umetniški kotiček na spletu* (Online Art Corner) of the KKZ or *Kultura za dnevno sobo* (Living Room Culture) of the SPZ). Certain projects continue with an extended submission deadline (e.g. *Pisana pomlad* (Colourful Spring), etc.). The key in such context is the greatly increased variety of cultural topics on the websites of both umbrella cultural organisations, where they offer recording of events of their own past production (e.g. *Koroška poje* (Carinthia sings)) or provide access to virtual visits of many other events (e.g. *Drama od doma* (Home Drama), puppet theatres, etc.) (see KKZ and SPZ website).

After the initial closure of all minority institutions (cultural centres, libraries, bookstores, some economic and other institutions) in mid-March, certain institutions partly reopened in mid-April (cultural centres, bookstores, some minority economic institutions) and mostly operated with shortened working hours. Businesses and other economic operators adapted very differently to the restrictions (Novice 2020d, 3–5). During the lockdown, Novice prepared new websites (Novice 2020f, 2), while study programmes for bilingual classes in primary schools in the summer semester were adapted as appropriate (Novice 2020g, 4).

After two months of suspension of many activities, individual economic, cultural and sports events partly resumed after 15 May 2020, but some restrictions on gathering and socialising were still in place (Novice 2020h, i). Tourism, too, got a new impetus in late May 2020 (Novice 2020j, 14). The full opening of the border between Austria and Slovenia, for which representatives of Carinthian Slovenes repeatedly intervened, was scheduled for 15 June 2020. The main criticism by Carinthian Slovenes was that the Austrian authorities did not treat Slovenia equally to some other countries (e.g. Germany and Switzerland). At the beginning of June 2020, both countries opened their borders completely and no quarantine and coronavirus testing were required for crossing the border (Novice 2020k, 4), but it was clear that cultural events in the second half of the year

would take place in light of a possible new wave of Covid-19. The summer theatre and puppet workshops, which have a decades-long tradition in Carinthia and are important for the preservation of the Slovene language of young Carinthian Slovenes, were moved from Ankaran to Carinthia (Novice 2020l, 12). Styrian Slovenes had their first post-quarantine exhibition at Pavlova hiša in Laafeld/Potrna only in mid-July 2020. Many visitors from Slovenia noticed that the border was not (yet) completely free to cross, as they had been asked by the Austrian border authorities (police officers and soldiers) to present their IDs (Novice 2020m, 3). At the beginning of the new school year, bilingual schools in Carinthia were also subject to the traffic lights system that determines how classes are conducted (normal, compulsory face masks, flexible remote learning, introduction of quarantine and remote learning) (Novice 2020n, 4–5). The commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the plebiscite was held in Klagenfurt under restrictive and protective measures (face masks, social distance) (Novice 2020o, 1–7).

## 5. Interviews and Analysis of Short Questionnaires with Representatives of Cultural and Political Umbrella Organisations of Carinthian Slovenes

The Slovene minority in Carinthia has a rather diversified cultural and other activity. The closedness of society, as witnessed during the Covid-19 pandemic, undoubtedly affects the society as a whole. Social interaction is much more important for the survival of the minority than for the majority, as the minority language is limited to a narrow community and mainly used within families and rare public institutions (cultural societies, churches, minority schools) where bilingualism is still present. The cultural offer – which the majority of the population now receives via electronic media as a substitute for live events – is very limited in case of the minority community. This is likely to affect the level of ethnic identity in the long run.

The actual consequences were assessed based on the analysis of the responses to the short questionnaire sent to some leading individuals from central minority organisations and semi-structured in-depth interviews that followed the questionnaires. They were asked to assess the consequences of the pandemic when the Austrian society, too, was almost completely closed down. It is clear from the answers that the minority, just like the majority population, was faced with unprecedented challenges. The pandemic paralysed cultural activity, as from March 2020 on all cultural events had to be cancelled. The cancelled events were held only in the summer, in a reduced format, taking into account protective measures – the number of visitors decreased by 70 %, some of the events were cancelled or postponed to a later time (e.g. theatre as well as various workshops and traditional cultural events). Cultural and other societies regu-

larly informed about the regulations issued by the Austrian government at regular intervals regarding the epidemic. Work in the offices was also suspended as they were temporarily closed. All the necessary office work was done from home. However, the publishing activity continued uninterrupted. During the summer months, some activities were resumed to a limited extent, possibly on larger premises. The respondents believe to have done everything possible at the time, proceeding from the assumption that

[p]eople, especially members of the minority, socialise and meet at events, which for some are the only opportunity to come into contact with the Slovene language and members of the same nation, which strengthens their affiliation and their feeling of belonging to the national community. For many, events are the only place where they can speak their language without reservation. They are starting to realise that simply cancelling all activities is not the right solution (Interview 4).

The interviewees mostly find that there were no major consequences, but they are afraid that the first wave will be followed by a second one (which has already started in the meantime), so they will not be able to carry out the events that were postponed from spring and summer to autumn. However, there is also uncertainty about how the pandemic will develop further, which negatively affects the interest in cultural activity. “Potential visitors are afraid of getting infected at events. Nevertheless, people yearn for gathering and social contacts” (Interview 2). There is also the fear that some people may not consider cultural activity and attending cultural events as important as they did before, and might therefore carefully consider which, if any, cultural events they will attend in the future. It is therefore important

[t]hat culture does not fall silent, but paves new paths. There can be reruns for certain events (e.g. theatre plays and puppet shows) in order to reach at least approximately the same number of people as before the pandemic. The societies are also trying to organise several minor events so that cultural life does not dry up completely. We have also increased our online performance – with special promotions, competitions and selected contents for the general public (Interview 4).

## 5.1 Finance

The epidemic also generated concern about the financial effects on the activities of minority organisations. It can be concluded from the answers that the epidemic itself has so far not caused major consequences in the financial field, while the general financial situation – the increase in costs due to its continuation – causes more concern. Thus, one of the interviewees concludes that “[t]here is no such need due to the epidemic. However, the financial situation is not favourable

or pleasant. Austria has not increased its support for Carinthian Slovenes since 1995” (Interview 3).

I don't think this is necessary just because of Covid-19. Yet, it is necessary if we look at the whole perspective. Austria has not increased its support for the national community since 1995. In this period, costs increased significantly. Therefore, it would be necessary for the national community to have a larger sum at its disposal, because only in this way will it be possible to continue working at this level (Interview 1).

They are also worried about the future: “The coronavirus will only make things worse since other subsidies will also be reduced.” (Interview 2).

If the overall crisis also affected subsidies, this would be a problem and a detriment for cultural activities. It also depends on how long we will have to live according to the given guidelines. If this lasts for too long, the situation will certainly become difficult for individual societies and organisations. It will be necessary to find new possibilities for action and plan such events that are easier to implement in a given situation. An increase in funding would certainly help (Interview 4).

In its plebiscite promises made in October 2020, Austria doubled its funding for minorities, so at least to some extent less concern about the poor financial situation is expected (Novice 2020p, 7). It is also a fact that at least the umbrella organisations are well organised and relatively well equipped and have been able to reorganise their activities without major financial investments.

## 5.2 Digitalisation

Like the majority of the population anywhere, the Slovene national community in Austria and its organisations replaced part of their regular activities with digital formats and addressed their members in electronic forms. This was all the easier because digitalisation was already present in their work to some extent. The respondents state that they were already very open to digitalisation,

[w]hich we introduced in recent years in various music and theatre projects. At the beginning of the epidemic, we were proactive and immediately offered free use of e-books, Slovene films (Cinema in Quarantine), theatre performances and other online content for Carinthian Slovenes. We also introduced video conferencing. This is definitely a positive effect of the epidemic (Interview 3).

It is also clear that digitalisation will accelerate digital forms of activity and business.

Of course, we must open up to digitalisation, without which nothing is possible today. I think that as a society, we have learned a lot over the past months on how to communicate digitally and also how to reach people by digital means. I think that this would not have happened without the coronavirus crisis (Interview 1).

However, they are aware that digitalisation is not the solution to the problem, but merely a complement to overcoming it, and certainly not in the long run.

In part, programmes and content can be transmitted in digital form, but in the long run they can in no way replace personal contacts at live events. Culture also lives from interpersonal interaction and from direct contact between performers and spectators/listeners. The exclusively digital consumption of cultural content can only be an emergency solution, but in any case, digitalisation can support and complement live cultural life. In this sense, we also use the current situation to thoroughly consider how we will create, prepare and transmit cultural life in the future (Interview 4).

Nevertheless, we note that digitalisation, especially after the tightening of measures in the second wave, will be a particular problem, especially since the e-offer will be diverse for each individual and it cannot be taken for granted that those directly related to the minority will be appropriate.

### 5.3 Cross-Border Cooperation

All interviewees are concerned about the restriction of cross-border cooperation.

What matters in this sense is the contact with Slovenes from the wider common cultural and economic area and the information on Slovene national communities in other countries of our Central European region. Cross-border contacts make it easier to get to know and understand each other, especially if we can communicate in the same mother tongue (Interview 4).

They are particularly concerned about the loss of active contact between minority members: “That is why I find the moments one spends in good company even more valuable. Cross-border contacts are important for the Slovene national community, as we live abroad and constantly visit Slovenia” (Interview 1).

In any case, cross-border cooperation, especially with Slovenia, means much more for the minority than just socialising. This is explained very clearly in the following answer:

Cross-border cooperation is of elementary importance for the Slovene national community. Linguistic and cultural identity can be developed and strengthened only if cultural cooperation with Slovenia takes place on the basis of elements that define Sloveneness in connection with a modern, open and communicative society. We need



to participate in projects that prove substantive knowledge. To this end, a significant investment based on professional criteria is required. This should be an investment in projects that will, in essence, show a positive proliferation and promotion of the Slovene language and culture. Something is already happening, but not enough. We miss systemic cooperation, such as the one relating to theatre subscriptions of Carinthian Slovenes (to performances by professional theatres from Slovenia) (Interview 3).

## 5.4 Consequences

Interviewees see the consequences of the pandemic for the minority also in activities that are not directly related to the minority, such as the economy and tourism. They are concerned that other areas, too, require contact and socialising.

The greatest risk would be if we no longer missed it and buried our heads in the sand, or retreated within our own four walls. Because we know the cultural field best, we can only reiterate that cultural life has slowed down greatly and that countless events have been postponed or cancelled. This is fatal for the national community in two ways: on the one hand, people are less involved in the Slovene language, and on the other hand, the Slovene language remains hidden from the general public. We believe that culture is the most convincing factor for the proper affirmation of the Slovene language and its speakers among the neighbouring nation in our state (Interview 4).

Some people even fear that the pandemic will have political consequences in the long run.

The coronavirus will affect the Slovene national community in Carinthia in general, as the government in Vienna as well as the government in Klagenfurt are fighting a pandemic requiring high amounts of money, which will lead to austerity and consequently affect the minorities in Austria. For example, the proposal for amending the National Communities Act is on the table. The question is to what extent the government in Vienna will deal therewith under the given circumstances? (Interview 2).

It can be concluded from the above answers that minority organisations came out of the first wave without major consequences. The latter can be attributed to their good organisation and their ability to adapt, as they promptly replaced the activities curtailed due to restrictions.

## 6. Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic has shown that different professions, sciences, politics, countries and different social systems are relatively ill-prepared for such challenges and the associated crisis that has crippled life and societies in individual

countries. Although science has been pointing out that societies need to prepare for the challenges of epidemics, countries and societies have been globally and locally surprised by the scale of the crisis and its consequences (Ivanuša et al. 2009; Arnold 2018; Popov 2018, etc.). Research confirms that ethnicity is an important dimension of the complexity of societies and an important factor and layer of human identity, while the study thereof is one of the key dimensions of the development of scientific thought at the beginning of the 21st century. Exploring the consequences of the pandemic for the Slovene national community in Carinthia which, due to its nature, has a deep significance in social life in general (e.g. cultural activities, education, connections with the kin-nation and resulting economic contacts and cooperation between countries, daily labour migrations, etc.), showed that the consequences of the measures to contain the pandemic can already be felt by the minority. Due to good organisation, the national community responded appropriately and adjusted to the restrictions, but in the case of longer restrictive measures, the consequences will be much more visible. Another question is how the changed conditions of life and work of minority institutions after a long period of restrictions will affect the functioning of the minority in terms of organising various events, especially from the point of view of cross-border integration. This is an area that will require special attention in the future, otherwise the assimilation might as well increase further.

## Interviews

- Interview 1 – Interview and survey questionnaire with a ZSO representative conducted in September 2020, by phone and online.
- Interview 2 – Interview and survey questionnaire with a NSKS representative conducted in September 2020, by phone and online.
- Interview 3 – Interview and survey questionnaire with a SPZ representative conducted in September 2020, by phone and online.
- Interview 4 – Interview and survey questionnaire with a KKZ representative conducted in September 2020, by phone and online.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> FUEN (Federal Union of European Nationalities) is the largest umbrella organisation of European autochthonous national minorities and ethnic and linguistic groups. It gathers over 100 organisations from 25 European countries. Its current Vice-President is Angelika Mlinar, lawyer and politician, a Carinthian Slovene from Austria and former minister in the government of the Republic of Slovenia. Members of the FUEN are also the umbrella political organisations of Carinthian Slovenes, the NSKS and the SKS.
- <sup>2</sup> Valentin Inzko has been president of the umbrella political organisation of Carinthian Slovenes, the NSKS, since 2010, and the UN and EU high Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina since 2009.
- <sup>3</sup> The two countries established a special border crossing regime when the first infections were recorded in March 2020. Not only on the border with Croatia, but also on the internal Schengen

borders (with Italy, Austria and Hungary), Slovenia introduced certain (temporary) traffic restrictions and changed entry conditions for foreigners and exit conditions for Slovene citizens. These measures were adapted to the epidemiological situation. On 4 June, most of the restrictive measures regarding border crossings were released (Police RS 2020; SGZ 2020; Austrian Embassy in Ljubljana 2020a, etc.)

- <sup>4</sup> According to estimates, there are 20,000 to 25,000 daily migrants. Most daily cross-border migrants come from the Štajerska region in Slovenia.
- <sup>5</sup> The online workshop was held in the summer of 2020 when restrictions were no longer in place.
- <sup>6</sup> Janez Stergar, a retired researcher of the Institute for Ethnic Studies and president of the Carinthian Slovenes Club in Ljubljana, has been sending the weekly Korotanske e-novice to around 1,400 addresses for more than a decade, informing about cultural events organised by Slovene national communities in all four neighbouring countries, with particular emphasis on cultural and other events of Carinthian Slovenes. From March 2020 until the late summer months, there were noticeably fewer announced events. At the end of the summer, the number of events started to rise, but they were suspended again in October and November.

## Acknowledgement

The article was written under the research programme Minority and Ethnic Studies and the Slovene National Question (P5-0081), funded by Slovenian Research Agency.

Sabina Zorčič

## Dimensions of Remote Learning during the Covid-19 Pandemic in Minority Language Schools (The Case of Austrian Carinthia)

Based on a survey conducted among teachers in three schools in Austrian Carinthia where the language of instruction is (also) Slovene, the article examines the impact of remote learning between March and June – i.e. during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic – on a possible deterioration of students' language skills. The results also bring new data and insight into teachers' language accommodation. The results confirm the predominance of reading and writing communication with a minimum use of audio-video technology. The lower input of verbal communication mainly affected students with (strongly) unbalanced linguistic competence in both languages of instruction. Education is an important factor in reducing inequalities in society; thus, as long as remote learning increases inequality, this form of education should be pursued with some reservations.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, remote learning, minority language, language accommodation, language input.

## Razsežnosti pouka na daljavo v času pandemije covid-19 na šolah z manjšinskim jezikom (primer avstrijske Koroške)

*V članku na podlagi opravljene ankete med profesorji na treh šolah na avstrijskem Koroškem, na katerih je učni jezik (tudi) slovenščina, preverimo, kakšen učinek je imel pouk na daljavo od marca do junija, tj. v času prvega vala pandemije covid-19, na morebitno poslabšanje jezikovne zmožnosti pri dijakih. Obenem rezultati prinašajo nove podatke in vpogled v jezikovno prilagajanje učiteljev. Rezultati potrdijo prevladovanje bralno-pisne komunikacije z minimalno uporabo avdio-video tehnologije. Manjši vnos govorne komunikacije je pustil posledice predvsem pri dijakih z (močno) neuravnoteženo jezikovno kompetenco v obeh obravnavanih učnih jezikih. Izobrazba je pomemben dejavnik za zmanjševanje neenakosti v družbi, zato bi morali biti, dokler bo šolanje na daljavo neenakost povečevalo, do te oblike izobraževanja bolj zadržani.*

**Ključne besede:** covid-19, pouk na daljavo, manjšinski jezik, jezikovno prilagajanje, jezikovni vnos.

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## 1. Introduction

The emergency related to the Covid-19 pandemic produced an unprecedented situation in which schools around the world were closed as a result of public health measures, leaving over 91 % of pre-school, primary and secondary school children confined at home (UNESCO 2020a). School closure is a common-sense measure to prevent the spread of the disease, especially if one considers the rather convincing evidence of previous influenza outbreaks. A systematic review thereof shows that school closure is likely to have the greatest effect if the virus has low transmissibility ( $R < 2$ ) and, in particular, if attack rates are higher in children than in adults, which however is not true in the case of Covid-19 (cf. Viner et al. 2020). Given the evidence on the unaffectedness and lower transmission frequency among children, the closure of educational institutions thus raises certain ethical issues (Silverman et al. 2020), especially in terms of justification and proportionality of this measure in relation to its impact and consequences for very young children and those from marginalised and deprived environments. At the same time, data reveal the enormous economic and social effects of school closure both in the short term (drastic decline in the domestic product, the loss of healthcare staff to childcare duties, which is felt throughout the healthcare system) and in the long run, as the education of the population is one of the strongest predictors of the health and the wealth of future taxpayers and the impact of long-term school closure on educational outcomes, future earnings, young people's health, and productivity of individual national economies has not yet been quantified (Viner et al. 2020).

The unexpected interruption of the learning process in schools forced decision-makers, teachers, students, and parents into a prompt adjustment related to the introduction of remote learning at all levels of education. The latter should serve as a good lesson for all participants, as the following months have shown both the advantages and the disadvantages of the rapidly introduced remote learning method, which could be a good basis for introducing better, more open, inclusive, and flexible educational systems for post-pandemic times and in anticipation of subsequent pandemics.

Based on a survey among teachers, the present article will explore the situation during remote learning in three schools in Carinthia, Austria, where the language of instruction is (also) Slovene. The emphasis of the research is on the perception of a possible deterioration of knowledge of the languages of instruction (Slovene and German) in the above schools. The introductory part will be followed by a review of the relevant literature on remote learning with an emphasis on its positive and negative consequences and the school systems' preparedness to switch to remote learning and cope with the new situation at all levels of the educational system. The next chapter presenting the methodology used and the results of the survey will be followed by data interpretation and discussion and



by a conclusion containing suggestions for better management of the situation in the event of a possible new pandemic.

Research on minority education is important from several aspects, primarily of course for members of the minority who, thanks to the possibility of education in their first language, are enabled comprehensive development and equal opportunities compared to the majority. At the same time, it is necessary to pay attention to the changing circumstances that posed challenges to minority education even before the introduction of remote learning due to Covid-19 (Zudič Antonič 2018; Baloh & Bratož 2019; Zorčič 2019). In view of the new situation, the present research sheds light on the problems currently faced in minority education (in Austrian Carinthia).

## 2. Remote Learning and the Consequences Thereof

Remote learning is characterised by temporal and/or spatial separation, which is compensated by the use of media and technology. Communication and exchange of materials in the learning process take place through printed learning material, one-way transmission on radio or television, and/or through online exchange via social media channels or learning platforms. However, remote learning requires a high level of self-guided learning and learning skills on the part of the learner, as well as the use of new techniques and learning and guidance strategies on the part of the teacher, all aspects of the readiness for remote learning, which consists of (1) technological readiness (technological capacities in the form of equipment and digital environments that enable the transfer of learning content, and (excellent) Internet access), (2) content readiness (accessibility of curricular learning content on learning platforms, programmes), (3) readiness for pedagogical and learning support to remote learning (teachers' willingness to adapt, parents' or guardians' competence and ability to ensure effective remote learning), and (4) monitoring and evaluation of readiness (monitoring the process, participation and results of remote learning) (UNESCO 2020b). However, the rapid transition to home-schooling in spring did not allow quality remote learning, which could otherwise, if well prepared, be fully successful. According to Hodges et al. (2020), the type of remote learning witnessed would better be called emergency remote teaching (ERT). In an interview, Dr. Štefanec, a Slovene expert in pedagogy and didactics (2020), points out that teachers largely provided distance teaching, i.e. passed out assignments and provided guidelines and instructions to pupils for work from home, while there was less actual remote learning – i.e. contact and knowledge transfer between teachers and students. Data on schools' teachers' and pupils' preparedness for the shift that took place practically overnight (on 16 March, education in both Slovenia and Austria shifted to remote learning) were provided also by the OCED (Albiser et al. 2020), which assessed the preparedness of schools, teachers, and students from individual co-

ountries for the transition to remote learning based on various studies (TALIS, PISA) from the time before the pandemic. Data for Austria (Albiser et al. 2020) showed lower preparedness (especially among teachers) than the average of the countries involved in the research. For Austrian students, data showed above-average results (95 % of students reported having a computer – 88 % from the bottom quartile of the socio-economic distribution; 96 % reported having a quiet space to study – 93 % from the bottom quartile of the socio-economic distribution). The reason for the academic support from parents to students in Austria being below the OECD average is to be sought in the fact that academic support is hindered by language barriers, as according to the same report, in Austria 20 % of the students report that the language used at home most of the time is different from the language of the PISA test (OECD average: 12 %). This is the case for 41 % of the students coming from the bottom quartile of the socio-economic distribution (OECD average: 19 %) (for more see Albiser et al. 2020). The extraordinary efforts made by parents to provide support in remote learning during the pandemic to children whose family language is not the same as the language used in school are highlighted by numerous studies (e.g. Sayer & Braun 2020), and similar conclusions were drawn by researchers in Slovenia, too (e.g. Bešter & Pirc 2020; Sorgo & Novak Lukanovič 2020; Brezigar 2020). Extreme inequalities between students during remote learning associated with economic status (and other related factors: low parents' education and their involvement in schooling, inaccessibility of the internet, a computer, or a place to study) detected in some European countries (cf. Blaskó & Schnepf 2020; Reay 2020) are not that noticeable in the environments in Austria and Slovenia from which the majority of students covered by the research come from. The presented data are therefore only partially applicable to the schools where the research was conducted as they show the situation in the entire country, whereas this article only studies three specific schools in Austrian Carinthia. However, it is important to keep in mind the connection with the language barriers of the parents and/or lower socio-economic status of the family. In Carinthia, schools with Slovene as the language of instruction are also attended by German-speaking students, who on average have lower economic capital than their classmates who use Slovene at home (Zorčič 2020). Attending a bilingual school is one of the ways to raise their cultural (bilingual *matura* exam) and economic (e.g. greater competitiveness in the local labour market) capital in the future (Zorčič 2019), while for students from Slovenia the situation is reversed, as those who enrol in Austrian schools are normally those with higher average economic capital who can afford the costs of living and studying abroad (Zorčič 2020). Also in this study we presumed that as a result of exclusion from the school environment during remote learning and holidays, the language input of the second language will be much lower in both groups of students with (strongly) unbalanced linguistic competence in one of the languages of instruction, i.e. students from Slovenia and Au-

stria (see below). As the strongly unbalanced bilingualism of the mentioned students is the result of a monolingual family and (usually also) local environment, they are hereinafter referred to as Slovene or German monolingual students.

The negative effects of school closure are felt in various areas. The most obvious are the consequences for the health of children, predicting health problems in children in the long run (cf. Rundle et al. 2020). Research in Slovenia even shows the largest decline in children's motor performance ever, the largest decline in the number of previously active children, the largest increase in subcutaneous fat, and the largest increase in obesity, all as a result of three months of lockdown and closure of schools, gyms, and playgrounds (SLOfit 2020). The Chamber of Clinical Psychologists of Slovenia has developed guidelines for educators in the field of children's mental health in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic (Dobnik Renko et al. 2020). Often, the professional public and teachers at various roundtables (e.g. LMSŠ – List of Marjan Šarec 2020) themselves pointed out the negative consequences of closure, even by means of various petitions for the abolition of remote learning or its non-introduction in the next school year (e.g. teachers of the Prva gimnazija Maribor (STA 2020)).

## 2.1 Impact on Language

Research on literacy and language learning deficits due to school closure is sporadic and dealing mainly with English-speaking learners. The studies conducted suggest that the rapid introduction of remote learning also had an impact on literacy and language skills, especially for children who do not speak the language of instruction at home and/or come from a socially weaker environment, where parents are, for various reasons, unable to provide a language input comparable to that obtained in school. They also point to the consequences of the lack of meaningful social interactions needed to support (foreign) language learning. The school setting, which was unavailable to children during the pandemic, is a place of rich social and academic interaction with both peers and teachers. At the same time, remote learning reduced listening and speaking practice (and consequently the decline of these two specific linguistic competencies), as learning mostly focused on reading and writing (both in terms of teachers passing out assignments and of students completing them). The decline in verbal and listening communication is particularly harmful in foreign language learning (cf. Sayer & Braun 2020). This hasty transition was probably also the reason why (language) teachers failed to make extensive use of various videoconferencing systems that already offer additional communication options (e.g. through Zoom cf. Kohnke & Moorhouse 2020), as well as of alternatives offered by various applications for language teaching/learning (cf. Gulli n et al. 2020). Research showed a particular problem in language acquisition in young (monolingual) children during the lockdown. Some studies linked the negative effects on language (language deve-

lopment delays, memory loss, problems concentrating and describing events/stories) to stress and isolation, while an undeniable effect was also attributed to a low family income (Kamal et al. 2020). Other research focused on measuring the loss of literacy due to absenteeism, where five to six-year-olds showed a 66 % reduction in literacy (Bao et al. 2020) during the closure of preschool educational institutions and the abolition of in-person learning. Daily reading to children improved the result (only) by 43 %. This means that reading books to children cannot substitute for the failure of formal language learning, but it is still a good way to mitigate the consequences during the complete closure of schools that manifest themselves as loss of reading ability. Reading is also an effective method during school holidays as they, too, lead to lower grades on tests, although the losses in mathematics are greater than in reading (a book is more accessible than a math instructor). Moreover, the economic aspect is highly relevant, as the disparities in learning are smaller in children from advantaged families and larger in children from socially weaker backgrounds (where the language is often a cause-and-effect category) (cf. Burkam et al. 2004) and growing with age, i.e. with increases in students' grade levels (Cooper et al. 1996).

Also in Canada, researchers warned about the consequences that the closure of educational institutions would have on children: "children in Quebec from non-francophone families and children from non-anglophone families in English-speaking regions may have deterioration in their ability to speak and write comfortably in the local language, setting them further behind once class resume" (Silverman 2020, 463). In our case, too, in both groups of monolingual students, i.e. from Slovenia and Austria, a lower language input of the second language during remote learning and subsequent holidays is to be expected. The effect on monolingual students is likely to be much stronger than on bilingual students from Carinthia where language input is more even (while one could still argue that the input of standard Slovene at that time was lower than it would have been if students were in class). Another reason why the consequences could not be any milder is the students' poor reading habits (cf. Zorčič 2019).

The shift to remote learning was stressful for teachers as well. This fact deserves special attention due to the possible negative effect of teacher stress on students, known as stress-contagion (Oberle & Schonert-Reichel 2016, cited in MacIntyre et al. 2020). Herman et al. (2020, cited in MacIntyre et al. 2020) proposed the 3C Theory of Teachers Stress that describes three interconnected pathways leading to teacher stress, integrating individual differences in teachers' (1) coping, (2) competence in executing effective practices of teaching-learning process, and the systemic (3) context in which teaching occurs (policies, practices, and administrative support). Accordingly, the results of research on teacher stress during online learning confirm that the most stressful for teachers was workload followed by family health and loss of control over work (MacIntyre et al. 2020). Nevertheless, the predominant tendency was to apply an active response

to a stressful situation to first accept the situation and attempt to deal with it through activity, reframing, and seeking emotional support. The study also confirmed that individual teachers whose response was more avoidant experienced significantly higher stress levels and various negative emotions (anxiety, anger, sadness, and loneliness). This is reason enough that learning to deal effectively with stress should be integrated into teacher education programmes as one of their basic professional competencies.

Teachers experienced stress not only due to previous insufficient preparations for remote teaching in terms of digital skills (see above), but also because in the new situation they also had to reconcile their personal and professional life, which was – as for many of us – indeed particularly challenging. In this context, it would be advisable to assess the stress of female teachers, as according to the research of the Institute for the Study of Gender Equality (Pavlič 2020), in addition to work from home and childcare, they also carried most household responsibilities, which further increased their stress.

Most countries attempted to identify and analyse the changes caused by remote learning at different levels through various studies. The research was conducted both in Slovenia and in Austria (e.g. under the School Barometer survey for German-speaking countries (2020)). The methodological issues related to such research were well substantiated by Huber and Helm (2020) based on theoretical findings in the practical part of the School Barometer survey questionnaire. The most disputable issue in such regard is that general research does not cover various (largely) vulnerable groups. This is also the point at which the Slovene survey failed in terms of methodology (Mladina 2020).

Nevertheless, some teachers also report some silver linings of the forced remote learning (cf. Sayer & Braun 2020). First and foremost, they emphasise the connections with the families of (linguistically and socially deprived) students, as parents gained more insight into the actual content and processes of their children's learning, while teachers could grasp what sort of real-world challenges the students faced in trying to complete academic tasks, from not having a quiet place to study or even internet access to parents working long hours to put food on the table. The connections forged are likely to pay dividends for students down the road. The second positive outcome was the increase in students' (and teachers') skills to use the new technologies in remote learning.

### 3. Methodology

The article will answer the following research question:

#### **What are the dimensions of remote learning in minority language schools?**

The research thus focuses on the perception of a possible decrease in knowledge of the languages of instruction (Slovene and German) in three minority secondary schools in Carinthia, Austria, where the language of instruction is

(also) Slovene. These are the Slovene *Gimnazija* (secondary school) in Klagenfurt (hereinafter: *Gimnazija*) where the language of instruction is Slovene only, and two vocational schools – the Commercial College in Klagenfurt (hereinafter: TAK) and the College for Commercial Vocations in St. Peter (hereinafter: VŠGP) – where the languages of instruction are Slovene and German in alternating monthly intervals. Based on a survey among teachers of the above schools, we wished to verify the following: how did they cope with remote learning (explanation of learning content, passing out assignments, communication), what was the communication with students (languages used, language accommodation), teachers' opinion about the impact of online classes on the quality of knowledge of learning content and language(s) of instruction, and changes necessary for better functioning and performance of remote learning. Auxiliary data to help with the analysis included information on the school where teachers work, the type of subject taught, length of service, and self-assessed bilingualism balance (equally fluent in both languages or bilingual with better competence in one or the other language).

Given the requirements imposed due to the pandemic, data were only acquired remotely. In addition to studying the official media channels on both sides of the border, written correspondence with the management of all three schools and the Consulate of the Republic of Slovenia in Klagenfurt took place during the period of remote learning in April and May. After the initial familiarisation with the situation, a short survey was drawn up for teachers engaged in remote learning at the schools in question, who were encouraged to complete it by the management of their school. To obtain a sufficient number of participating teachers, the latter had to be called upon by the school management to participate and the survey had to be kept short (the respondents completed it on average in about 6 minutes), as teachers were already heavily burdened with requests for evaluation of remote learning from different levels: state, institutional and (hopefully also) personal. In the period between 15 June 2020 and 11 September 2020 when the survey was open and accessible on the 1ka portal, the survey was completed by 43 teachers.<sup>1</sup>

The survey was compiled with due consideration of the different ways in which schools use Slovene as the language of instruction and the differing structure of students. It should be mentioned at this point that the two vocational schools have many monolingual students (both Slovene-speaking students from Slovenia and German-speaking students from Austria), while at the *Gimnazija* the majority of students are bilingual. Differences in teachers' answers regarding the linguistic competences of students were expected due to differences in the way Slovene is used as the language of instruction, as well as due to different structure of students. The data were analysed with the Orange Data Mining 3.26 open-source software tool (Demšar et al. 2013). The analysis of data also covered students' posts to the VŠGP blog during lockdown and data of the internal

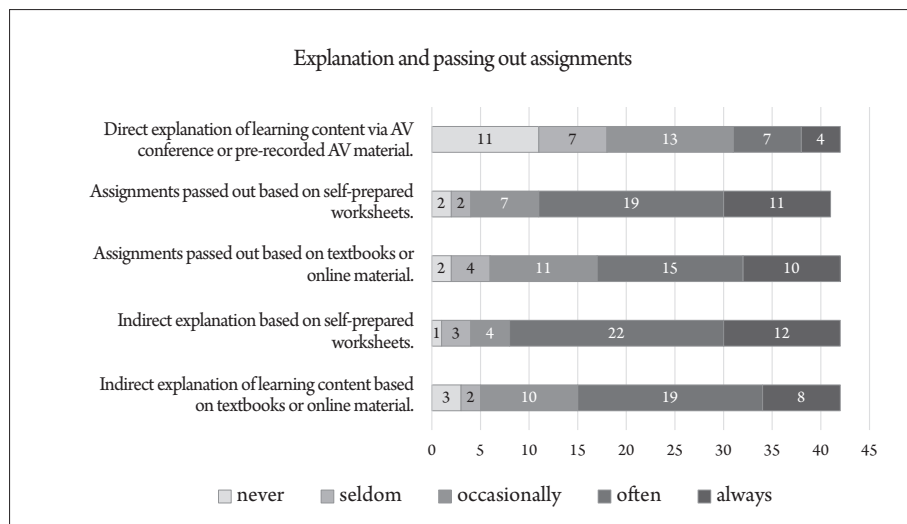
survey conducted among the students of the TAK kindly provided by the school principal, Mag. Pogelschek.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Conduct of Classes: Providing Explanation and Passing out Assignments

Teachers' answers confirmed (Chart 1) that the explanation of learning content and the passing out of assignments were largely based on reading and writing communication. For nearly two-thirds of the teachers (64.29 %), the explanation was (often or always) indirect, carried out by means of textbooks and even more so by means of worksheets (often or always, 80.95 % of the teachers), while audio-video explanation was provided by a mere quarter (often or always, 26.19 %). Assignments were passed out in a similar way: textbooks (often or always, 59.52 %) and worksheets (often or always, 71.43 %).

Chart 1: *Explanation and passing out assignments*



Source: survey.

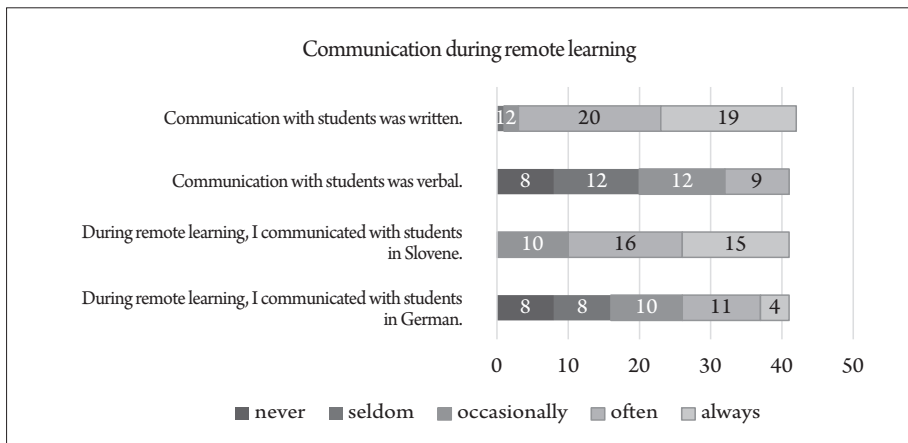
A subsequent analysis<sup>2</sup> of the data showed that, during remote learning, teachers who made greater use of audio-video (AV) and hence verbal communication communicated with students largely in German. They define themselves as bilingual with a better knowledge of German and have, on average, a shorter length of service in the school (these data are statistically insignificant). It is thus advisable to further investigate the bilingualism of the teachers and check whether

the dominance of German among younger teachers is already a consequence of the general decline in the knowledge of Slovene and the resulting poorer vitalisation of Slovene in Austrian Carinthia in the long run. Of particular concern is the non-use of AV communication by language subject teachers (more on that below).

## 4.2 Teachers' Communication and Language Accommodation

Teachers' answers (Chart 2) confirmed that communication with students during remote learning was much more written (always 45.24 %, often 47.62 %) than verbal (never 19.05 %, seldom 28.57 %). The use of language in teacher-student communication shows that Slovene was used more (always 36.5 %, often 39 %, occasionally 24.5 %) than German (always 10 %, often 26.5 %, occasionally 23.5 %, seldom 19.5 %, never 19.5 %), which is in line with the fact that Slovene is the language of instruction and the predominant language of communication in the *Gimnazija*. The presence of Slovene in communication with students greatly influences teachers' opinions about students' language deterioration (below).

Chart 2: Communication during remote learning



Source: survey.

Although based on teachers' self-assessment, the answers about language accommodation in schools with (also) Slovene language of instruction in Austrian Carinthia provide completely new and important data. They are the first of their kind, as data on teachers' language accommodation in the academic process have so far not been available to researchers. Data on the extent of language accommodation in the period preceding the pandemic (i.e. under the normal school regime) were obtained by measuring the teachers' agreement with



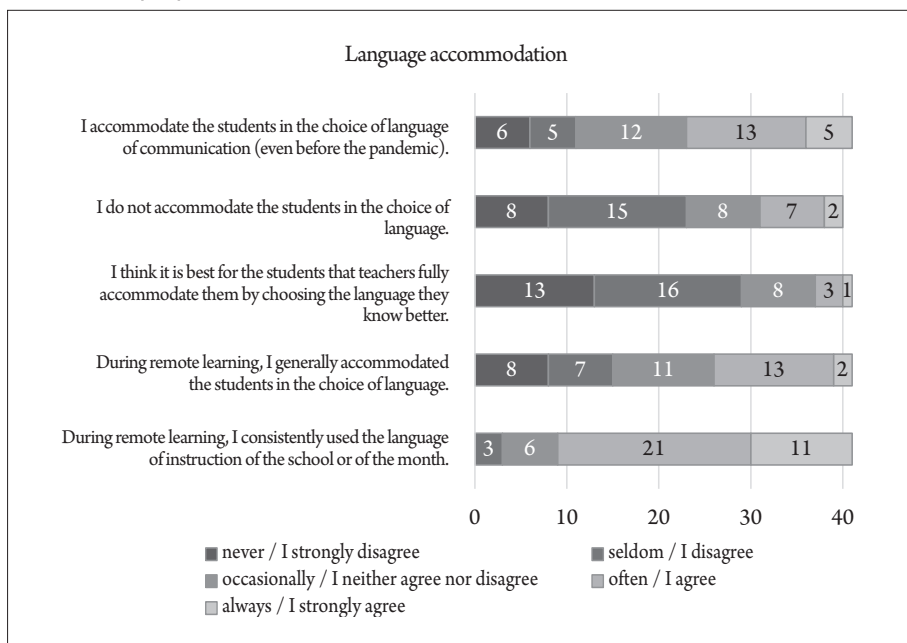
the following, non-sequentially listed statements: “I accommodate students in the choice of language of communication (even before the pandemic)”, “I do not accommodate students in the choice of language”, and “I think it is best for students that teachers fully accommodate them by choosing the language they know better”. Data show (Chart 3) that teachers generally accommodate the students. Under normal circumstances, a good tenth (11.90 %) of the teachers always accommodate the students in communication, often almost a third (30.95 %), and occasionally a little less (28.57 %). Overall, 71.42 % of teachers accommodate the students to a certain extent, while just over a quarter (26.19 %) do so seldom (11.90 %) or never (14.29 %). Data are (statistically significantly) confirmed by the teachers’ agreement with the opposite statement, i.e. that they do not accommodate students in the choice of language. Here, almost a fifth of the teachers (19.05 %) strongly disagree and almost a third disagree (35.17 %), meaning that more than half of the teachers (54.76 %) disagree with the statement and accommodate the students in the choice of language. One-fifth of the teachers claim that they do not accommodate the students and agree (16.67 %) or strongly agree (4.76 %) with the statement. A comparison of these data with the data on teachers’ agreement with the statement that it is good for the students to choose the language that they know best reveals that language accommodation in the schools in question is imperative for (fast and effective) communication. Although over two-thirds of the teachers (69.05 %) disagree (30.95 % strongly disagree, 38.10 % disagree) that language accommodation is good for students, they still accommodate them in the choice of language.

A subsequent analysis of teachers’ language accommodation by subject, school, length of service, and self-assessed bilingualism balance shows the following (statistically insignificant) data: language teachers accommodate less, while teachers with shorter length of service and bilingual teachers with better knowledge of German accommodate more. Additional insight is provided by the statistically significant difference ( $p = 0.048$ ) between teachers’ language accommodation and their use of language during remote learning. Teachers who use more Slovene accommodate less, while teachers who use more German are more inclined to language accommodation ( $p = 0.017$ ) and indeed accommodated more during the pandemic ( $p = 0.003$ ). The fact that bilingual teachers who speak Slovene better (and also speak more Slovene) accommodate less is further confirmed by the fact that these teachers largely agree with the statement that knowledge of Slovene among German-speaking students deteriorated ( $p = 0.044$ ).

On average, teachers who accommodate the students in the choice of language and believe that this is in the students’ best interest also use AV communication more often and provide learning content directly; at the same time, during remote learning, teachers who believe that accommodation is in the students’ best interest always and often communicated with students in German ( $p = 0.005$ ).

These teachers are also the most convinced that, despite remote learning, students achieved suitable knowledge of the learning content in their subjects ( $p = 0.020$ ), probably because they put content before language. Likewise, they agree less with the statement that the knowledge of Slovene among German-speaking students deteriorated, which may also indicate a different subjective evaluation of the students' knowledge of Slovene among the teachers. They also express their self-confidence in the implementation of remote learning through a higher level of agreement with the statement that remote learning would be an interesting added value for cross-border schools. By cross-border schools, the author means schools attended by students from both sides of the border.

**Chart 3: Language accommodation**



Source: survey.

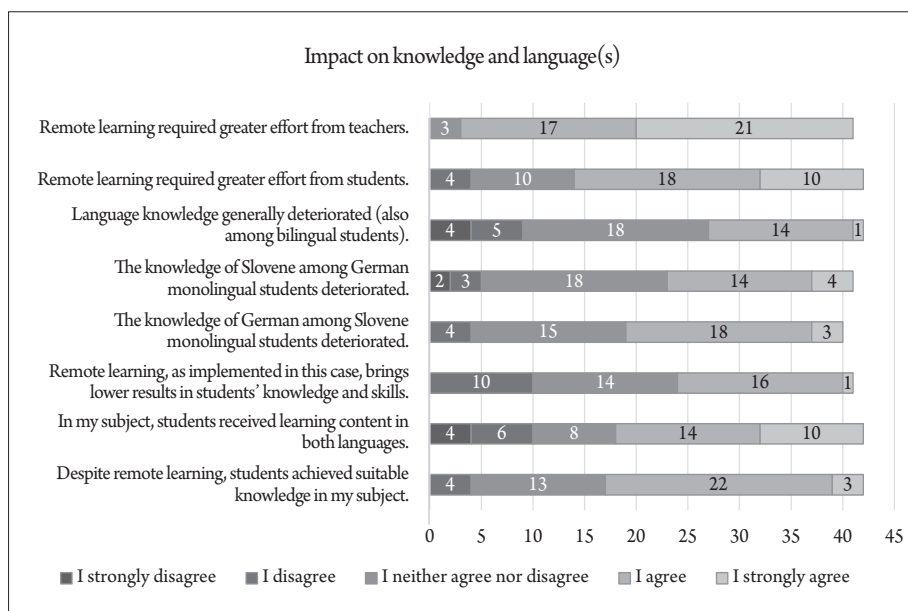
### 4.3 Impact of Remote Learning on the Quality of Knowledge of the Learning Content and the Language(s) of Instruction

Chart 4 presents the results of the answers to the question about the impact of remote learning on the quality of knowledge of the learning content and language(s).

The majority of the teachers agree (52.5 %) or even strongly agree (7 %) that students achieved suitable knowledge in their subject despite remote lear-

ning, just under a third are undecided (31 %), while 9.5 % disagree. The teachers' answers do not depend on the subject taught, length of service, or self-assessed bilingualism balance, but there is statistical significance indicated in the answers to the question of consistent use of language during remote learning. Teachers who did not consistently adhere to the language rules (i.e. the use of exclusively Slovene in *Gimnazija* or the language of the month in both vocational schools) to a lesser extent agree with the statement that students acquired suitable knowledge in their subject. The interpretation of the result is probably multifaceted and would require further in-depth interviews.

**Chart 4: Impact on knowledge of the learning content and language(s)**



Source: survey.

The majority of teachers (57.5 %) agree (35 % agree, 22.5 % strongly agree) that in their subject students received material in both languages. Methodologically speaking, this is a rather controversial question, because in the *Gimnazija* Slovene is the exclusive language of instruction. However, taking into account only the answers from TAK and VŠGP teachers, 65 % are convinced that the learning content was equally explained in both languages. Another problem is language teachers, who find this question more difficult to answer. The interpretation of the result is probably multifaceted and would require further in-depth interviews.

As already mentioned, the teachers' answers about students receiving a sufficient amount of learning content in both languages present a statistically si-

gnificant difference compared to the answers about language (non)accommodation. Teachers who accommodated more in the choice of language during the pandemic were, on average, more in agreement with the above statement ( $p = 0.046$ ). Conversely, teachers who never accommodate were, on average, less in agreement with the statement that students received sufficient learning content in both languages in their subject. The answers are statistically insignificant by subject and self-assessed bilingualism balance.

Regarding the statement that remote learning – in the form as it took place in the spring, i.e. in the first wave – brings poorer results in students' knowledge and skills, the teachers' opinions vary. A share of 42.5 % agree (2.5 % strongly agree), 35 % are undecided, and only 20 % disagree.

Teachers who agree to a greater extent are also more convinced that certain changes (e.g. language assistants, more AV material, better technical equipment, see 4.3) would be in vain and disagree with such a form of schooling. This is a personality trait of individual teachers since data are independent of the length of service, school, and self-assessed bilingualism balance. At the same time, teachers who do not advocate remote learning are less convinced that students received suitable knowledge in their subject ( $p = 0.002$ ). On the contrary, teachers who do not believe that remote learning brings poorer results believe to a greater extent that students received suitable knowledge in their subject.

Half of the teachers agree (7.5 % strongly agree, 42.5 % agree) that the knowledge of German among monolingual Slovene students deteriorated, 35 % are undecided in such regard, and 10 % disagree. The statement that the knowledge of Slovene among German monolingual students deteriorated is supported by a total of 42 % of teachers (10 % strongly agree, 32.5 % agree), 42.5 % are undecided, while 7.5 % disagree.

It is statistically significant that teachers who agree with the statement that the knowledge of German among Slovene monolingual students deteriorated also largely agree with the statement that the knowledge of Slovene among German monolingual students deteriorated ( $p = 0.000$ ). Given that the result is independent of the subject and self-assessed bilingualism balance of teachers, it can be assumed that this is a subjective characteristic of individual teachers who highly value language skills.

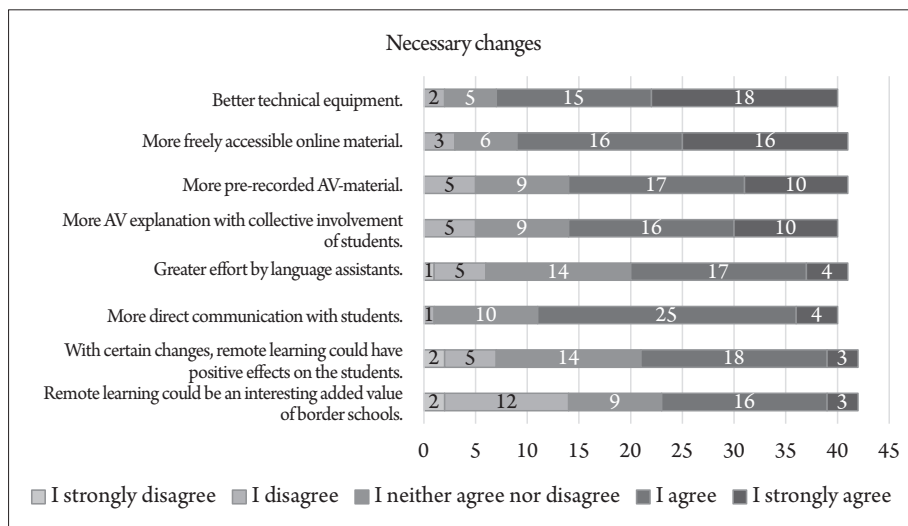
Regarding deterioration of language knowledge among bilingual students, only 32.5 % of the teachers agree with the statement (2.5 % strongly agree, 30 % agree), 45 % are undecided, and a total of 22.5 % disagree (12.5 % disagree, 10 % strongly disagree). Probably, the undecided also include teachers who find that the differences between individual students are such that for some the statement is true, while for others it is not, which was also included in the comment by one of the respondents: "I am often undecided in my answers because I can agree with the statement for some students, and at the same time disagree for other students. Thus, I could not decide." (Survey 3/43).

More than two-thirds of teachers agree (25 % strongly agree, 42.5 % agree), a quarter is undecided and only 7.5 % disagree with the statement that remote learning required much more student effort. However, almost all teachers are convinced that remote learning required much more effort from the teachers (50 % strongly agree, 40 % agree, and only 7.5 % neither agree nor disagree).

#### 4.4 Changes to be Implemented to Ensure Better Functioning and Effect of Remote Learning

Chart 5 presents the teachers' opinions on the necessary changes for better functioning and effect of remote learning.

Chart 5: Necessary changes



Source: survey.

Just under a half of the teachers are convinced that with certain changes, remote learning could have positive effects on students (7.5 % strongly agree, 40 % agree), a third (35 %) are undecided, and just under a fifth disagree (12.5 % disagree, 5 % strongly disagree).

Just under half of the teachers agree (7.5 % strongly agree, 37.5 % agree) that remote learning could be an interesting added value for schools in the cross-border area, whereby students could complete part of their school obligations from home; about a fifth (22.5 %) are undecided, and a good third disagree (27.5 % disagree, 5 % strongly disagree).

The vast majority of teachers agree (10 % strongly agree, 62.5 % agree) that more direct communication with students is necessary, a good fifth is undecided and only 2.5 % disagree.

This statement is largely agreed with by the teachers who also agree with the statement that greater effort was needed from both teachers and students. At the same time, teachers who largely agree with the statement that more direct communication is needed to a lesser extent agree with the statement that the knowledge of Slovene among German-speaking students deteriorated ( $p = 0.015$ ), while for Slovene monolingual students they largely agree that their knowledge of German deteriorated (but these results are not statistically significant). The latter can also be explained by the fact that these teachers, on average, more often accommodate the students in the choice of language ( $p = 0.006$ ) and during the pandemic they accommodated them even more ( $p = 0.034$ ) and communicated to a greater extent in German.

Just over half of teachers (52.5 %) agree that more effort from language assistants is needed, a third is undecided (32.5 %), a tenth disagrees, and 2.5 % strongly disagree. A statistically significant difference in responses is observed in the agreement that much more effort from students was needed. This is much more strongly agreed with by teachers who are more convinced that greater effort from language assistants is necessary ( $p = 0.073$ ). They think this fell solely on students' shoulders. As a rule, language assistants are staff whose role differs significantly from that of a subject teacher. Language assistants help with language subjects. The purpose of the question was to perceive the potential effectiveness of assistants in other subjects, which is something that should be considered in the future (along with greater knowledge transfer and occasional integration of subjects).

The majority (60 %) agree that more AV explanation is needed with group participation of students (25 % strongly agree, 35 % agree), a good fifth is undecided (22.5 %) and only 12.5 % disagree. Even more (64.5 %) teachers believe that more pre-recorded AV material is needed (22.5 % strongly agree, 42.5 % agree), a fifth are undecided, and only 12.5 % disagree. Even more (75 %) are in favour of the possibility of freely available online material (37.5 % strongly agree, 37.5 % agree), 15 % are undecided, and only 7.5 % disagree.

Teachers who largely agree that more AV explanation is needed with group participation of students also agree that more pre-recorded AV material is needed ( $p = 0.000$ ). Teachers who largely agree that more pre-recorded AV material is needed also, on average, largely agree that more free online material is needed ( $p = 0.000$ ). All the answers are related to the smaller involvement of teachers in their own production of AV material.

The vast majority (77.5 %) of teachers believe that better implementation of remote learning would require better technical equipment (40 % strongly agree, 37.5 % agree), 12.5 % are undecided, and only 5 % disagree. Teachers who believe that better equipment is needed for better remote learning on average provided fewer AV explanations. The data are not statistically relevant, but they are still significant although they do not answer the question of whether the reason

for not holding AV conferences was actually the (lack of) technical equipment of teachers or just an excuse for not doing so. The non-provision of AV explanation can also be related to the fact that teachers who believe that better technical equipment is needed also largely agree with the statement that there should be more pre-recorded material ( $p = 0.043$ ) and more material freely available online ( $p = 0.000$ ).

#### 4.5 Additional Analysis by Bilingualism Balance, School, and Subject

The analysis of differences in teachers' answers in terms of bilingualism balance, subject taught, and especially school is intended primarily for the public interested in the specific topic and familiar with the situation in minority education in Austrian Carinthia.

The analysis of differences in teachers' answers **by self-assessed bilingualism balance** (bilingual with better knowledge of Slovene ( $N = 9$ ), better knowledge of German ( $N = 13$ ), balanced bilingual ( $N = 20$ )) shows the following:

- Language accommodation is, on average, more common in balanced bilingual teachers and even more common in bilinguals with better knowledge of German (see above).
- Teachers who are stronger in Slovene believe that, on average, there was greater deterioration in the knowledge of Slovene among German monolingual students (22 % agree, 33 % strongly agree). Conversely, teachers who are stronger in German on average believe that there was greater deterioration in the knowledge of German among Slovene monolingual students (69 % agree, 8 % strongly agree). As regards balanced bilingual teachers, this difference is not perceived to such an extent (they neither agree nor disagree in 56 % and 53 %, respectively), but they are slightly more critical of the general language skills of bilingual students (25 % agree, 5 % strongly agree).
- The differences partly stem from the subject they teach, as it is statistically more typical for bilinguals with a better command of Slovene to teach language (67 %), to teach at the *Gimnazija* (56 %), and to have a shorter length of service (78 % between 2 and 5 years). On the other hand, bilinguals who are stronger in German are more likely to teach a vocational subject (64 %), work in one of the vocational schools (45 %), and have on average a longer length of service (54 % over 10 years). Balanced bilinguals also have a longer length of service (70 % over 10 years), more often teach a vocational subject (55 %), and work at the TAK (63 %).

The analysis of teachers' answers **by school** (*Gimnazija*  $N=16$ , TAK  $N=20$ , VŠGP  $N=13$ ) reveals the following:

- Lack of learning material in Slovene. The largest share of teachers who passed out assignments on self-prepared worksheets worked at the *Gimnazija*

(always 40 %, often 33 %) and VŠGP (always 31 %, often 62 %). This is due to a larger number of students from Slovenia (the highest share of students from Slovenia is at the VŠGP) and specific learning contents, as teachers at this school also taught the learning content with the help of worksheets prepared by themselves (always 38 %, often 54 %), while the other two schools did not lag far behind (*Gimnazija*: 38 % always, 44 % often; TAK: 15 % always, 60 % often).

- Use of worksheets. Higher use of worksheets at the VŠGP is reflected in the much lower use of AV material, which is the lowest at this school (never 38 %, seldom 8 %, occasionally 38 %) and was also rather low at the *Gimnazija* (never 25 %, seldom 31 %, occasionally 13 %, often 19 %, always 13 %), while the result is slightly better at the TAK (25 % never, 10 % seldom, 25 % occasionally, 25 % often, 15 % always).
- Manner of communication. The above results also reflect whether the communication was written or verbal: at the *Gimnazija*, 56 % of communication was always written, 27 % never verbal; similarly, at the VŠGP, 46 % of communication was always written, 15 % never verbal, while at the TAK, the share of teachers who communicated only in writing decreases significantly (always written 25 %), while the share of teachers who never communicated verbally remains approximately the same as in both other schools (never 15 %).
- Use of Slovene and German. In accordance with the method of implementation (the language of instruction at the *Gimnazija* is only Slovene, while in both vocational schools the two languages alternate monthly), the teachers who mainly communicated in Slovene are those from the *Gimnazija* (always 75 %, often 19 %), followed by the VŠGP which has the largest share of students from Slovenia (always 25 %, often 50 %), and the TAK (which still communicated in Slovene quite often due to many students from Slovenia: always 21 %, often 42 %). A positive fact is that there was no teacher at any of the three schools who used Slovene rarely or never. German was used more by teachers at both vocational schools, where it is also used as a monthly language of instruction. On average, it was used more by teachers at the VŠGP (8 % always, 42 % often) than at the TAK (always 5 %, often 21 %), while at the *Gimnazija* it was used always by 13 % of the teachers (2 teachers), often by no one, and never by 50 %. Further analysis showed that the above two teachers are *Gimnazija* teachers (one also teaches at the TAK) who declare themselves to be balanced bilinguals, but in their communication, they fully accommodate the students and are also convinced that this is in their best interest.
- Language accommodation. Teachers mostly accommodate the students in the choice of language (even when there is no pandemic) at the VŠGP (always 8 %, often 42 %, occasionally 33 %, seldom 17 %, never 0 %) where the need seems greatest considering that the answers are quite homogeneous



(standard deviation (SD) 0.9), slightly less at the TAK (always 16 %, often 26 %, occasionally 26 %, seldom 16 %, never 16 %, SD 1.33), and the least at Gimnazija (always 19 %, often 19 %, occasionally 13 %, rarely 13 %, never 38 %, SD 1.62). The dispersion of answers in the last two schools is considerable, pointing to personality differences among teachers rather than to the need for better communication. Also, the level of agreement with the statement that teachers accommodated the students more during remote learning expresses the needs arising from the specifics of individual schools. On average, agreement was higher among VŠGP teachers (50 % agree) than at the other two schools (Gimnazija: 13 % strongly agree, 13 % agree; TAK: 5 % strongly agree, 21 % agree), although the results regarding the consistent use of the language of the month indicate greater language accommodation at the TAK (During remote learning, I consistently used the language of instruction of the month: at the VŠGP: 17 % strongly agree, 83 % agree, SD 0.39; at the TAK: 4 % strongly agree, 21 % agree, 32 % neither agree nor disagree, 16 % disagree, 0 % strongly disagree, SD 1.02). At the *Gimnazija*, the share of teachers who strongly agreed on the consistent use of Slovene was the highest (50 %), but all other answers were rather dispersed (SD 1.09). The analysis of differences among schools concerning teachers' agreement with the statement that it is best for students if teachers fully accommodate them and communicate in the language in which students are strongest showed that the largest share of teachers who strongly disagree with this statement is at the *Gimnazija* (63 %), but dispersion in other categories of answers is extremely high (13 % disagree, 6 % neither agree nor disagree, 13 % agree, 6 % strongly agree, SD 1.36). At the TAK, the data also vary, although a little less (26 % strongly disagree, 47 % disagree, 16 % neither agree nor disagree, 5 % agree, 5 % strongly agree, SD 1.07), while the teachers at the VŠGP are more unanimously convinced that accommodation is not good (33 % strongly disagree, 33 % disagree, 33 % neither agree nor disagree, 0 % agree, 0 % strongly agree, SD 0.85). The data reveal differing opinions of teachers regarding language accommodation and language choice even in an environment where such possibility does not exist (Slovene is the only language of instruction at the *Gimnazija*). A comparison of data even shows that *Gimnazija* teachers agree with this statement even more than teachers who use both languages in the learning process (and should consistently adhere to the use of the one or the other language according to the month of use). The reason for such a difference in teachers' opinions should be a matter of further research.

- Impact on the quality of knowledge and language. The statement that despite remote learning students achieved suitable knowledge in a particular subject is mostly true for the teachers at the VŠGP (15 % strongly agree, 54 % agree, SD 1.04;) and *Gimnazija* (6 % strongly agree, 56 % agree, SD

0.72) and much less for the teachers at the TAK (10 % strongly agree, 35 % agree, 50 % neither agree nor disagree, SD 0.76). Also the agreement with the statement that students received the material in both languages is higher at the VŠGP (38 % strongly agree, 38 % agree, SD 1.08) than at the TAK (20 % strongly agree, 35 % agree, SD 1.15). Regarding the deterioration of language knowledge, the differences are as follows: VŠGP teachers are the least convinced while TAK teachers are the most convinced that language knowledge among monolingual students did not deteriorate. The share of teachers convinced that the knowledge of German among Slovene monolingual students deteriorated is 45 % at the VŠGP (9 % strongly agree, 36 % agree, SD 0.82) and 53 % at the TAK (11 % strongly agree, 42 % agree, SD 0.77). It is the same with the deterioration of the knowledge of Slovene among German monolingual students: this belief is shared by 33 % of teachers at the VŠGP (0 % strongly agree, 33 % agree, SD 0.9) and 37 % at the TAK (11 % strongly agree, 26 % agree, SD 0.95), while the largest share of teachers who are convinced of the deterioration of knowledge of monolingual German-speaking students works at the *Gimnazija*, where agreement was expressed by 63 % of the teachers (25 % strongly agree, 38 % agree, SD 1.06). The results prove that monolingual students were severely disadvantaged due to absence from school and consequently lower input of Slovene and German. More attention should be paid thereto, especially if remote learning becomes a recurrent practice in the future, as it would mean less possibility of progress for students from Slovenia who, after all, account for a significant share of students in both vocational schools.

- The effort by teachers and students. Teachers are on average quite convinced that remote learning required additional effort both on their part and on the part of students. Most teachers who believe that greater effort was required from the students come from the VŠGP (54 % strongly agree, 46 % agree, SD 0.52), followed by *Gimnazija* teachers (44 % strongly agree, 31 % agree, SD 0.77), while such statement is less true for teachers at the TAK (25 % strongly agree, 35 % agree, SD 0.97). However, teachers are more unanimous about their own additional effort, especially at the VŠGP (54 % strongly agree, 46 % agree, SD 0.52), as well as at the *Gimnazija* (40 % strongly agree, 60 % agree, SD 0.51) and the TAK (55 % strongly agree, 30 % agree, SD 0.75).
- Teachers have very different opinions on the fact that remote learning could be an interesting added value for schools in the border area, with the highest shares recorded among TAK teachers (10 % strongly agree, 50 % agree, SD 1.05; VŠGP: 0 % strongly agree, 54 % agree, SD 0.93; *Gimnazija*: 13 % strongly agree, 38 % agree, SD 1.18).
- Changes to be implemented for better functioning and effect of remote learning. In general, it has been found that teachers are convinced that more direct communication would be needed. Differences among schools are

reflected in the need for greater commitment (or greater number?) of language assistants: they are most convinced thereof at the *Gimnazija* (19 % strongly agree, 44 % agree, SD. 0.86) and the TAK (15 % strongly agree, 45 % agree, SD. 0.99), while teachers at the VŠGP do not see this as a particular problem (0 % strongly agree, 38 % agree, SD 0.95). The ratio among schools is similar concerning the statement that more AV explanation with group participation of students, more pre-recorded material, and more freely available online material are needed. Such need was mainly expressed by VŠGP and *Gimnazija* teachers, and a little less by TAK teachers. In particular, it is necessary to mention the desire/need for better technical equipment for teachers in all schools, especially in the *Gimnazija* (56 % strongly agree, 38 % agree, SD 0.63; VŠGP: 42 % strongly agree, 42 % agree, SD 0.75; TAK: 40 % strongly agree, 40 % agree, SD 0.97).

- Teachers' profile by school. Among the teachers who completed the survey, some work in two, one even in all three schools. Given the fact that the *Gimnazija* and the TAK operate in the same building, there is a greater synergy between them – thus, half of the *Gimnazija* teachers also work at the TAK (8/16), while TAK teachers also work at the *Gimnazija* (40 % or 8/20) and VŠGP (10 % or 2/20). Among the teachers from VŠGP, only one (/13 or 8%) also works at the *Gimnazija* and two (15 %) at the TAK. VŠGP is about 30 kilometres away from the other two schools.
- Regarding the length of service, most teachers have a long length of service (over 10 years: TAK 55 %, VŠGP 46 %, *Gimnazija* 38 %) and the least teachers have the shortest length of service (less than 2 years: TAK 5 %, *Gimnazija* 6 %, VŠGP 15 %), followed by a short length of service (2–5 years) due to an obvious rejuvenation of staff at the *Gimnazija* and the TAK (TAK 40 %, *Gimnazija* 44 %, VŠGP 15 %), and medium length of service (TAK 0 %, *Gimnazija* 13 %, VŠGP 23 %).
- Regarding self-assessed bilingualism balance among teachers, there are differences among schools confirming the results by learning content and language of instruction. In all schools, most teachers define themselves as balanced bilinguals (*Gimnazija* 63 %, TAK 60 %, VŠGP 46 %). Most bilinguals with better knowledge of Slovene teach at the *Gimnazija* (*Gimnazija* 31 %, TAK 15 %, VŠGP 15 %) and most bilinguals with better knowledge of German teach at the two vocational schools, especially VŠGP (28 %, TAK 25 %, *Gimnazija* 6 %).

The analysis of the responses of teachers who **teach a language subject** (N = 17, they are also teachers of other foreign languages, and about a fifth teach another general or vocational subject in addition to language) showed the following:

- Concern that explanation in a language subject was never (35 %), seldom (24 %) or occasionally (24 %) supported by AV conference or pre-recor-

- ded material. The explanation was supported by learning content available in textbooks (47 % often, 12 % always) or worksheets prepared by the teachers themselves (59 % often, 35 % always, SD 0.59). The outcome is similar in relation to passing out assignments: most teachers used the material available in textbooks and online (47 % often, 18 % always) as well as worksheets prepared by the teachers themselves (65 % often, 29 % always, SD 0.56)
- Communication largely took place in writing (47 % often, 47 % always, SD 0.62) and less verbally (24 % never, 24 % seldom, SD 1.18). However, Slovene was more present in communication (38 % occasionally, 31 % often, 31 % always) than German (19 % never, 38 % seldom, 25 % occasionally, 19 % often), which is probably the reason why teachers see a greater deterioration in German among Slovene monolingual students (they are slightly less convinced of deterioration of Slovene among German monolingual students, see below).
  - Language accommodation to students (even outside the epidemic) shows an extraordinary dispersion of answers (SD 1.33), which partly indicates psychological differences between teachers, and partly the need for accommodation reflected in communication with students. Namely, language teachers are on average less convinced that language accommodation and the use of a language in which students are stronger is good for students (44 % strongly disagree, 38 % disagree, SD 0.91), which is in line with their concern for greater linguistic involvement and mental effort of students. The latter is also reflected in the fact that, compared to other teachers, they on average agree less with the statement that they accommodated the students more during the pandemic (19 % strongly disagree, 13 % disagree, 44 % neither agree nor disagree, SD 1.06).
  - The impact of remote learning on the quality of knowledge of learning content and languages of instruction. Most language teachers believe that students achieved suitable knowledge in their subject despite remote learning (53 % agree, 6 % strongly agree), yet almost half of them (47 %) believe that remote learning brings lower results in student knowledge and skills. Regarding language knowledge, they are mostly convinced of the deterioration of German among Slovene monolingual students (40 % neither agree nor disagree, 47 % agree, 7 % strongly agree, SD 0.74), slightly less of the deterioration of Slovene among German monolingual students, where they are also less unanimous (6 % strongly disagree, 13 % disagree, 38 % neither agree nor disagree, 31 % agree, 13 % strongly agree, SD 1.08), and even fewer agree with the statement that language knowledge also deteriorated among bilingual students (12 % strongly disagree, 18 % disagree, 35 % neither agree nor disagree, 35 % agree, 0 % strongly agree, SD 1.03).
  - Additional effort because of remote learning. The necessity of additional effort from students and teachers is emphasised mainly by teachers of gene-

ral subjects (greater effort by students: 25 % agree, 50 % strongly agree, SD 0.87; greater effort by teachers: 42 % agree, 58 % strongly agree, SD 0.51), followed by language teachers (greater effort by students: 59 % agree, 18 % strongly agree, SD 0.88; greater effort by teachers: 35 % agree, 53 % strongly agree, SD 0.71) and less by teachers of vocational subjects (greater effort by students: 35 % agree, 15 % strongly agree, SD 0.89; greater effort by teachers: 53 % agree, 42 % strongly agree, SD 0.60).

- Share of language teachers by school: 38 % *Gimnazija*, 56 % TAK, 31 % VŠGP.
- Share of language teachers by length of service: 59 % short length of service (2–5 years), 12 % 5–10 years, and 29 % over 10 years. Interestingly, however, their youth did not encourage them to use the modern methods of AV teaching.

## 5. Data Interpretation and Discussion

The results of the survey confirmed the prevalence of reading and writing communication between professors and students. The absence of verbal communication in remote learning during the first wave of the epidemic and the subsequent summer holidays must have had an impact on the language skills of students attending the schools in question in Austrian Carinthia. The use of languages in the communication between teachers and students shows that Slovene was more present than German, which is in line with the fact that Slovene is the only language of instruction and the predominant language of communication between students and professors at the *Gimnazija*. The presence of Slovene in communication with students greatly influences the teachers' opinion about the deterioration of language knowledge among students. Teachers confirmed that language knowledge deteriorated the most among students with an unbalanced competence in the languages of instruction, especially in Slovene monolingual students, i.e. students from Slovenia, who were mostly affected by lower language input of German as they remained in a completely Slovene environment and Slovene was predominant also in school communication. We assume that the latter is also the reason why teachers see less deterioration in the knowledge of Slovene among German monolingual students. In general, the least deterioration in language knowledge was observed among bilingual students. Half of the teachers agree that Slovene monolingual students deteriorated in the knowledge of German and a few less believe that German monolingual students deteriorated in the knowledge of Slovene. As those teachers who largely agree with the first statement also largely agree with the second statement, it can be concluded that this is a subjective characteristic of individual teachers who highly value language skills. Regarding the deterioration of language knowledge among bilingual students, only a third of the teachers agree. The answers of the undeci-

ded probably also comprise the answers of those who see such great differences between individual students that for some they can claim that the statement is true, while for others, the statement is not true. One needs to keep in mind that teachers also perceive great differences in language skills and attitudes towards this issue among students.

During the first wave, only a good quarter of the teachers used AV technology to explain the learning content, mainly teachers with shorter length of service (we assume that they were also younger) and better knowledge of German. We believe this is also related to the fact that teachers indicate better technical equipment as a necessary change for better teaching. It is up to the schools to assess to what extent such need refers to technical issues (equipment and good internet connection) and to what extent it also refers to the technical or digital literacy of the teachers. The data may indicate a problem of weak Internet accessibility of students (and teachers) from the border areas in Slovenia, which during remote learning proved to be a major problem also in Slovenia (cf. Polanc 2020).

The data show that teachers accommodate the students in the choice of language. Under normal circumstances, 71.42 % of teachers accommodate their communication to a certain extent (always, often, occasionally). If these data are compared with teachers' answers on the extent to which full accommodation in the use of the language in which students are strongest is good, it is obvious that language accommodation in the schools in question is necessary for (fast and effective) communication. The analysis of language accommodation by subject, school, length of service, and self-assessed bilingualism balance shows that bilingual professors who are stronger in Slovene (and also speak more Slovene) accommodate less. This is also indicated and confirmed by the fact that these teachers highly agree with the statement that the knowledge of Slovene among German-speaking students deteriorated. Teachers of non-language subjects, teachers with shorter length of service and those with a better knowledge of German are more accommodating, but the data are not statistically significant. However, it is statistically significant that teachers who normally accommodate and those who believe that students need to be accommodated with the choice of their strongest language accommodated even more during remote learning. These teachers are also most convinced that despite remote learning, students achieved a suitable knowledge of their subject. We assume that is because they put content knowledge before language knowledge. At the same time, on average, they agree less with the statement that the knowledge of Slovene among German-speaking students deteriorated, which may indicate a different subjective evaluation of the students' knowledge of Slovene among teachers. They also express self-confidence about remote learning by agreeing with the statement that remote learning would be an interesting market niche for cross-border schools. The latter reflects the active responses of teachers to the new situation as well as the different attitudes of the teachers towards language accommodation

(which is tied to personal opinions about the importance of language as well as to individual personality traits). Identifying the differences between teachers is certainly an important research question for future studies.

Most teachers agree that students achieved suitable knowledge in their subject. Regarding the statement that remote learning, in the form as it took place in the spring, i.e. in the first wave of the pandemic, brings poorer results in students' knowledge and skills, the teachers' answers are diverse. Teachers who agree to a greater extent are also more convinced that changes (e.g. language assistants, more AV material, better technical equipment) would be in vain and are generally opposed to such a form of schooling. At the same time, teachers who do not support remote learning are less convinced that students received suitable knowledge in their subject, while teachers who do not believe in poorer results in remote learning are more likely to believe that students received suitable knowledge of the learning content in their subject. More than two-thirds of teachers agree that remote learning required greater effort from students, and almost all believe that remote learning required greater effort from teachers. Just under a half are convinced that with some changes, remote learning might even have positive effects on students. Approximately as many also agree that remote learning could be an interesting added value of schools in the cross-border area, whereby students could complete part of their school obligations from home. However, certain changes would be needed in such regard: the vast majority of teachers agree that more direct communication with students would be needed. A good half of them agree that greater involvement of language assistants would be necessary. Most also agree that more AV explanation with group participation of students is needed, two-thirds of the teachers think that more pre-recorded AV material is needed, and they are very much in favour of the possibility of freely available online material. All these answers are related to teachers' involvement in the production of AV material, which was insufficient. Although the vast majority of teachers believe that better remote learning would require better technical equipment and, on average, resorted less to direct AV explanation, this data does not yet answer the question of whether the reason for not conducting AV conferences was actually (lack of) technical equipping of the teachers or was it just an excuse for not doing so.

To illustrate the situation, below are some thoughts posted by the students on the VŠGP blog (HLW / VŠ St. Peter 2020), clearly showing that students experienced the lockdown and remote learning in very different ways. Some considered it (extremely) stressful (one student even mentions depression), while others managed the situation perfectly. First of all, they highlight the establishment of a work routine: production of a daily schedule to complete the assignments in various subjects within the deadlines set and regular everyday school work. For most students, remote learning took place in the mornings and occasionally, in case of numerous assignments (at the beginning of lockdown), also on

a few afternoons. However, they all say to prefer in-person classes, being easier for them especially when learning new topics. The posts reveal that most assignments were passed out by e-mail, e.g.: “My daily routine includes 2–3 hours of writing texts or filling out worksheets for various subjects” (HLW / VŠ St. Peter 2020). Conference applications were intended for socialising within the class, e.g. class meetings. Some students also mention overload with chores assigned to them by their parents and the lack of tranquillity due to the presence of other family members (especially siblings). While most emphasised that an advantage of lockdown was the possibility of spending more time with the family and at home in Slovenia, some students stated that Austria had become their second home (e.g.: “To be fair, I would rather be quarantined there, just so I can spend time with my friends” (HLW / VŠ St. Peter 2020)).

Data that shed light on the situation at the TAK were obtained also based on an internal school survey involving about two-thirds of their students, more precisely 145. Starting from students’ statements indicating overload with assignments, inconsistency of timetable, and lack of coordination among teachers, the following can also be highlighted: (1) wish for more (video) communication, which leads to the conclusion that some students miss verbal practice. Especially monolingual students miss practice in the language in which they are weaker (apparently also out of a desire to practice for the matura exam), while many also mention specific subjects that they find impossible to process without a verbal explanation. (2) Technical problems are mentioned by a few, all in Slovene language, presumably students from Slovenia.<sup>3</sup> The technical capacities (computer capacity and data transfer) should be checked. Probably the number of students who would need additional equipment is greater than the two students who applied for a laptop at the TAK and the two at the VŠGP (for work and remote learning, a family of four would ideally need four computer sets, high-speed internet, and (in case of remote learning mostly taking place based on worksheets) huge amounts of cartridge). (3) Most students, of course, miss their friends, but it is also obvious that some students find this way of schooling suitable.

## 6. Conclusion

Well-prepared and well-established remote learning can give satisfactory results, but the rapid introduction of remote learning during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic did not allow such. The results of the survey confirm the prevalence of reading and writing communication between teachers and students. The absence of verbal communication during remote learning and the subsequent summer holidays must have had an impact on the language skills of students attending the schools in question in Carinthia, Austria. During the first wave of the pandemic, just above a quarter of teachers used audio-video technology in their lessons, mainly teachers with a shorter length of service (we assume that



they were also younger) and better knowledge of German. We believe that this is also related to the fact that teachers indicate better technical equipment as a necessary change for better teaching. It is up to the schools to evaluate to what extent such need refers only to technical aspects (equipment and good internet connection) and to what extent it relates to the technical or digital literacy of teachers. Teachers confirmed that the language knowledge deteriorated the most among students with a strongly unbalanced competence in both languages of instruction, where the lack of language input of the weaker language that would otherwise be obtained in the school and extracurricular environment is the greatest. Although, according to teachers, deterioration was highest among students from Slovenia, slightly less among monolingual students from Austria and the least among bilingual students, it can be concluded that the loss was inevitable in all three groups of students. Research carried out under normal circumstances demonstrates that language skills deteriorate for various reasons of lower language input.

The data also reveal that teachers accommodate students in the choice of language. Under normal circumstances, 71.42 % of teachers adapt communication to a certain extent (always, often, occasionally). If we compare this data with teachers' agreement on how beneficial is full accommodation in the use of the language in which students are strongest, it is obvious that language accommodation in the schools in question is necessary for (fast and effective) communication. Teachers who normally accommodate and those who believe that students need to be accommodated with the choice of their strongest language accommodated even more during remote learning.

Just under half of the teachers are convinced that with some changes, remote learning might have positive effects on students. Changes would indeed be necessary in such regard: the vast majority of teachers agree that more direct communication with students is necessary, as well as greater involvement of language assistants, more AV explanation with group participation of students, and more pre-recorded AV material. They are also all very much in favour of the possibility of freely available online material.

Pending another school closure as a result of the next Covid-19 waves and inevitable epidemics in the future, schools must provide technical equipment and digital literacy for their teachers to enable them to teach without difficulty using audio-video conferencing systems, and give students the possibility of active verbal communication. In particular, it would be necessary to provide accessible audio-video material in Slovene, which is not automatically available online, which means that its production requires a lot of additional effort from the teachers. Providing learning material in Slovene has been a challenge for the teachers even before the epidemic.

For the time being, it is impossible to assess the outcome of the changed behaviour and functioning of society due to Covid-19, but upon introduction

of the above improvements, remote learning could turn into an interesting alternative for schools in the future, at least for a part of the learning content. For schools from cross-border areas, this would probably be a very interesting and effective alternative, especially for daily migrant students.

In any case, the current year poses new challenges and encourages us to find new and, above all, satisfactory and inclusive solutions for the whole society. Education is an important factor in reducing inequalities in society. As long as remote learning increases inequality, however, this form of education should be pursued with some reservations.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> 16 teachers from *Gimnazija* (out of just over 50), 20 from TAK (out of 30), and 13 from VŠGP (out of 25). In our opinion, the share of committed teachers also shows differences in support and commitment to the issue provided by the school management.
- <sup>2</sup> The charts for subsequent analyses are available from the author.
- <sup>3</sup> The students themselves chose the language in which they would respond. The survey also confirmed the language accommodation of students (based on their knowledge and anticipation of the interlocutor's knowledge (cf. Zorčič 2020)). It is interesting that in the same school, students participating in the survey, when addressed by a person from Slovenia, mostly chose a Slovene survey (and responded in Slovene) (Zorčič 2020), while in the school survey students used German more (42 students, 29 %), although most of them still chose Slovene (94 students, 65 %). Both data confirm the method of language selection in bilingual communication in Austrian Carinthia: Slovene is chosen when communicating with someone from Slovenia, while when communicating with someone from Austria, students accommodate according to their language skills and (known) language skills of the interlocutor (Zorčič 2020).

## Acknowledgement

The article was written under the research programme Minority and Ethnic Studies and the Slovene National Question (P5-0081), funded by Slovenian Research Agency.

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