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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).

FUEN¹ 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.² 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,³ 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 Carinthia⁴ 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 open⁵ (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*⁶ 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

- ¹ 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.
- ² 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.
- ³ 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.)

- ⁴ According to estimates, there are 20,000 to 25,000 daily migrants. Most daily cross-border migrants come from the Štajerska region in Slovenia.
- ⁵ The online workshop was held in the summer of 2020 when restrictions were no longer in place.
- ⁶ 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.

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