

Katalin Munda Hirnök

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.

Correspondence address: Katalin Munda Hirnök, Inštitut za narodnostna vprašanja / Institute for Ethnic Studies, Erjavčeva 26, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia, e-mail: katalin.hirnok@inv.si.

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 abroad¹ – 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*),² 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 20th 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*³ 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.⁴ 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 Farm⁵ 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)⁶ and the Kühar Memorial House (Slovene Collection)⁷ was closed.

Due to the epidemic, the implementation of the Development Programme of the Slovene Raba Region,⁸ 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)⁹ 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*¹⁰ 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,¹¹ 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 utrinki¹² 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/Felsőszölnök¹³ and Čepinci-Verica/Kétvölgy¹⁴ (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-Hodoš¹⁵ 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

- ¹ 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).
- ² The answers to the online survey were not sent to us by the editorial board of Radio Monošter until September.
- ³ 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.
- ⁴ 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.
- ⁵ The Slovene Model Farm was set up in 2015 and was financed by the Republic of Slovenia.
- ⁶ The event entitled Porabski dan (Raba Region Day) is organised by the ASH and the NSS on a rotating basis.
- ⁷ Kühar Memorial House was opened in 2010 and is managed by the NSS.
- ⁸ The development programme was approved by the Hungarian government in October 2019 (A Kormány 1618/2019. (X. 28.) Korm. határozata).
- ⁹ 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.
- ¹⁰ 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>.
- ¹¹ 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>.
- ¹² 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>.
- ¹³ The interstate border crossing Martinje – Gornji Senik/Felsőszölnök was opened in 1992; in 2005, it was upgraded to an international border crossing.
- ¹⁴ The border crossing Čepinci – Verica/Kétvölgy was opened in 2002.
- ¹⁵ The international border crossing Bajánsenye –Hodoš was opened in July 1977.

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