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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.

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