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New migration policies and innovative practices. Slovenia between bordering and inclusion

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One of the main aims of this article is to analyse the integration policies and practices in Slovenia with particular focus on the period after the refugee crisis 2015/16. It starts with a description of the main features of the official integration system, its different levels of implementation (international, national, local), main actors, benefits and failures. It concludes with a description of various socially innovative practices of self-organization, inclusion and empowerment of migrants, which often complement and/or challenge the shortcomings of the official system and constitute an 'alternative' inclusion structure to Slovenian society.

Keywords: Slovenia; migration; integration; border struggles; social innovation

The 2015/16 refugee crisis (Hameršak and Pleše 2017; Lunaček Brumen and Meh 2016) exacerbated the dire situation that already existed for refugees, migrants and asylum seekers in Europe. In March 2016, immediately after the official closure of the so-called humanitarian corridor along the Balkan Route, which enabled the transfer of almost one million people from Greece towards Central and North Europe, EU reinforced its policy of closed borders and externalization of migration control (Beznec, Speer, and Mitrović 2016; Hess and Kasperek 2017). The cumulative effect of the brief disruption of the European border regime and its determined restoration has been a fragmentation of the EU with an intensification of the division between South and North, East and West. Given the utter failure of the EU to envision and implement a common response to this crisis, and due to the lack of basic solidarity among member states, nationalism is on the rise again. We are witnessing the unprecedented rise of far-right and anti-EU parties in national parliaments, but also in the European Parliament, with Brexit and other referendums being proposed on leaving the EU. With regular reintroductions of internal border controls, the Schengen agreement is now often suspended, and since 2016 the EU's external borders have been increasingly militarized, with new restrictive laws introduced and securitarian measures applied.

The covid-19 crisis, ongoing as of early 2020, has only seemed to generalize the already existing state of emergency, and measures that previously mainly affected migrants and refugees now also cover the majority population, with border closures, restrictions on freedom of movement, curfews, population tracking and severe limitations to the right to social, political and economic participation. Moreover, the chaos and drama

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of the pandemic and related measures, as well as the various government failures, are commonly presented as the fault of supposedly disobedient people, migrants, other countries and/or open borders. And while most EU citizens at least have a roof over their heads, basic sanitation, access to emergency health care and social services, many migrants and especially refugees are denied even these.

One of the main aims of this article is to analyse the integration policies and practices in Slovenia, with a particular focus on the period after the refugee crisis. It starts with a description of the main features of the official integration system, its different levels of implementation (international, national, local), main actors, benefits and failures. It concludes with a description of various socially innovative practices of self-organization, inclusion and empowerment of migrants, which often complement and/or challenge the shortcomings of the official system and constitute an 'alternative' inclusion structure to Slovenian society. This structure grows out of the rich history of anti-racist or 'border struggles' in Slovenia, such as the movements of Bosnian refugees, the so-called Erased (*izbrisani*), migrant workers and asylum seekers (Beznec 2012). These 'border struggles' illuminate and challenge the violence of border control and selection, while at the same time they also have 'consequences and resonances that extend into and even manifest themselves at the very centre of formally unified political spaces' (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 265). They involve ongoing work with and by migrants, such as monitoring, advocacy, the development of social spaces, research, media and cultural interventions, volunteering and political campaigns. Since 2015/16, this solidarity network has started to cover the entire Balkan Route. Although the refugee crisis in the Balkans is increasingly disappearing from the media and public eye, it is far from over. On the contrary, the situation is worsening, with violent and brutal push-backs now normalized (The Black Book of Push-backs 2020). The humanitarian approach is reduced to a minimum or cancelled altogether, integration funds are almost completely cut, NGOs and solidarity activities are criminalized (Župarić-Iljić and Valenta 2019). Thousands of people are thus stranded without basic infrastructure, services and legal procedures (Amnesty International 2019). With the sharp and general political shift to the right at the European level, the situation of migrants and refugees continues to deteriorate (Stojić Mitrović et al. 2020; Beznec et al. 2021).

Five years after the official closure of the so-called Balkan corridor, the migrant population in Slovenia continues to rise,¹ but the situation of irregular migrants, asylum seekers and persons with international protection status (refugees) in Slovenia remains far from ideal. Nevertheless, there is a network of actors working on a daily basis for solidarity with migrants, whose work is increasingly difficult but also increasingly important. This broad network includes local communities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), activist movements, humanitarian organizations, research and cultural institutions and groups of individuals among others. In this way, practices of solidarity continue to be exchanged, experiences shared, knowledge produced, and actions planned, carried out and evaluated. This new development does not cover the field of integration in a textbook sense, but helps to fill the small everyday gaps while people are stuck in limbo, and has emerged from the lack of a formal long-term strategy in the field of reception and integration of migrants and refugees. This alternative 'system' that is developing from below learns from the border struggles of the past and present and includes a variety of old and new actors, most notably the migrants themselves. Their daily practices of individual survival and community engagement could be understood as 'acts of citizenship' (Nyers 2018), referring to the features of citizenship that can also be exercised by people who do not have any formal legal status. For more than two thousand years

citizenship has been constituted in accordance with the wishes and needs of states' rulers, who presented their privileges as natural, universal and eternal. At the same time, the history of citizenship, and thus of politics itself, is also a history of rebellion and politicization of the dominated against the existing order, which has repeatedly redefined the terms of political engagement. From ancient women, slaves and plebeians to mediaeval cities, guilds and corporations, from modern bourgeois revolutions to labour and migrant struggles, the excluded have always become political through autonomous social practices, spatial interventions and artistic expressions. The transformations of citizenship and sovereignty are thus always accompanied by what Mezzadra and Neilson call 'border struggles' (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 265).

The processes of expropriation and exploitation, accelerated by the global financial crisis of 2008 and the consequent austerity measures, have led to numerous cuts in social rights and services, which were created 'as a result of past social movements and later formalized by institutional practices' (De Angelis 2007, 148). Contemporary border struggles therefore take place on both tangible and intangible borders, created by processes of restricting access to common goods, such as knowledge, health, mobility and communication on the one hand, and processes of privatization of public space or 'urban boundaries' on the other. Migrants are one of the most important targets in the demarcation process, which aims to keep unwanted subjects out of specific areas, and 'in their experiences, the action of these processes of bordering replicates and articulates itself with the action of other borders' (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 296).

At the same time, modern transformations of state sovereignty produce 'operational and rhetorical openings for the emergence of new types of political subjects and new spatialities for politics' (Sassen 2005, 80), which is also reflected in the radical transformation of the institution of citizenship. On the one hand, it maintains continuity and connection to the nation-state, while at the same time more and more of its levels and characteristics move to the post-national or 'denationalised' dimension. In doing so, modern large cities, global cities or metropolises are being established as the most important loci of action, where civic practices are developing that demand 'rights to the city'. In doing so, Sassen emphasizes that these are not necessarily urban practices, but that we can nevertheless – and especially in large cities – simultaneously observe 'some of the most extreme inequalities as well as conditions enabling these citizenship practices. In global cities, these practices also contain the possibility of directly engaging strategic forms of power' (Sassen 2005, 81).

Although cities cannot be reduced solely to this dynamic, their most important feature is the fact that they concentrate and produce most of the contradictions of globalization of capital, being at the same time the locus of power and wealth and the locus of aggregation of the most deprived populations. On the other hand, in the city, as a spatial embodiment of the contradictory effects of globalization and the various subjects who face them in different ways, different forms of struggle are generated, specific to such urban environments. The city is thus a 'machine' of the production of differences (Isin 2002, 283), where demands for the 'right to the city' are formulated in many practices and initiatives: in the fight against gentrification, privatization of public spaces, increasing stratification and growing precarization, against the increasing control and direction of movement, and police violence. And at the same time they are formulated in the demands for the rights of the homeless, migrants, the poor and for the visibility and empowerment of various minorities and alternative social, social and economic models, such as the self-organized management of occupied buildings, the creation of social enterprises or environmental cooperatives.

New actors are thus confronted with new forms of government, constantly shaping and reshaping the image and content of the place of their intervention. It is important to emphasize that the various deprived subjects are not simply marginal, weak and vulnerable. Sassen uses the term ‘presence’ for a specific phenomenon where people with little economic and traditional political power become political actors through struggles. In the modern city as a place of ‘multiplication of presences’, civic practices are linked to the ‘production of the “presence” of those without power and a politics that claims rights to the city’, and through these practices ‘new forms of citizenship are being constituted’ and partly the city itself (Sassen 2005, 90). This ‘presence’ is thus formed ‘in a broader political process that escapes the boundaries of the formal polity’ and at the same time ‘suggests the possibility of a politics’ (Sassen 2005, 92). New practices and forms of citizenship, new presences and policy opportunities emerging in the city, in communication with other civil rights struggles around the world, are grouped into ‘loosely defined, fluid, inventive and cosmopolitan networks’ (Isin 2002, 264). These, together with the transnational networks constituted by global migrations, are being reterritorialized in the city. That is why the term cosmopolis has become established for the city, which is ‘always an unfinished and contested construction site, one characterized above all by its space for difference’ (Sandercock 1998, 199).

In discussions of political subjectivity, studies of citizenship have made great strides by extending the concept of the political beyond the binary between inclusion and exclusion, citizens and non-citizens, citizenship status and citizenship practices. Citizenship can no longer be understood today as a ‘unitary or monolithic whole’, but as a ‘divided concept’ (Bosniak 2006, 3) which is formed in relation to the borders that define it and in relation to the border struggles that expand and deepen it. Non-citizens, foreigners and the undocumented are subject to exclusion on the one hand and at the same time become ‘a key actor in reshaping, contesting and redefining the borders of citizenship’ (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 257). Their practices constitute a form of ‘insurgent citizenship’, so

a full understanding of the tensions and conflicts that mark contemporary citizenship can emerge only from an analysis that works from the edges of the space of citizenship, not from one that operates from the legal plenitude of his centre. (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 256)

Methodology

The research methods and social practices described in the following chapters were carried out by ZRC SAZU in collaboration with various local actors and international partners in the framework of different projects funded by EU funds (AMIF, INTERREG) from 2017 to date. Those projects include PandPass,² BEST,³ Urban Diversity,⁴ Engage⁵ and SiforREF.⁶

In order to address the variety of challenges that asylum seekers, beneficiaries of international protection and irregular migrants face on a daily basis in different local contexts, different methodologies have been used to try to understand these complex situations and offer workable solutions. Research methods such as content analysis, semi-structured interviews and focus groups were complemented by participant observation and an ‘ethnographic border regime analysis’ or a ‘critical regime analysis’ (Hess 2012, 2016; Hess and Kasperek 2017) by the two authors when they were in the field in different border regions in the Balkans since 2015. The methods of collaborative research (Fluehr-

Lobban 2008) became more appropriate in the analysis of the situation of people who later applied for asylum in Slovenia, and became active in self-organized movements and places such as Autonomous Factory Rog, in the Slovenian capital Ljubljana and Pekarna in the second largest city of Maribor.

Of the various structured research settings, the following were most relevant to the findings of this article:

- (a) Organizing focus groups in Ljubljana and Maribor, where local actors discussed challenges at the local level and proposed possible solutions. Activists, NGOs, migrants and officials at local and national level, such as those working for the Slovenian Government Office for Migrant Support and Integration (GOMSI) and Slovenian Employment Service, actively participated in four focus groups, where several sites with challenges were listed as priorities.
- (b) To find out how the local level responds to the challenges and what actions and opportunities it offers, what it knows and organizes, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 10 stakeholders from Ljubljana. Again, activists, NGOs, the director of a primary school, academics, researchers, the head of a vocational school, the official in charge of culture in the city and a local politician tried to reveal the local challenges and provide us with information about the existing system.
- (c) Additional focus groups were organized to address specific challenges faced by women asylum seekers and women with international protection. Two focus groups, one with migrant women and the other with NGOs supporting women and their families, were held. They discussed the issue of inclusion at two different levels. The first of these covered international problems, such as inadequate laws regulating the employment of foreigners, inadequate international agreements, and laws 'preventing' the permanent settlement of foreigners. But some specific informal solutions in the local context were also addressed, such as informal language courses, informal training/workshops, creating inclusive micro-environments where third country nationals (TCN) and especially women start to acquire skills for work, working with employers to see the benefits of employing foreigners, and the skills of TCN women.
- (d) Another brief research project was conducted to understand how workers' rights are respected by Slovenian employers in the case of asylum seekers, undocumented migrants and beneficiaries of international protection. Interviews were conducted with several employers and employees in cooperation with trade unions and the Employment Service of Slovenia, and a workshop was also held. The interviews covered issues such as the constant precariousness of migrants, cases of exploitation, discrimination, dangerous/exhausting working conditions, alternative remuneration schemes, unofficial employment and the like.
- (e) Research on the situation of refugee children and their families in the Slovenian school system is relatively new. Interviews were conducted with children and parents, supplemented by information from volunteers and activists who have accompanied the families over months and years, providing them with day-to-day support. The interviews addressed challenges such as language barriers, peer bullying, lack of knowledge, lack of cultural mediators to communicate with parents and similar.

As the pandemic continued, most of the research became difficult or impossible, but the activist and action-based research continues to provide a bleak picture, as expected, as the already weak state of the integration system struggles under additional pressure.

The official and complementary integration in Slovenia

The official Slovenian political and legal system for the integration of migrants is a combination of laws and measures at the national and EU levels, as most national laws are in line with relevant EU directives. In this respect, the national level largely implements the EU level, with a little more autonomy in the area of social policy, although EU minimum standards exist here as well. Currently, the normative framework is comparable to that of Western European countries, despite the relatively recent history of asylum and migration policy and legislation in Slovenia. The ‘summer of migration’ 2015/16 brought an increase in legal cases at the national level with the increased number of asylum seekers. Their individual cases contributed to the further development of national legislation (despite the fact that many of the asylum seekers continued on their journeys and left Slovenia) with the aid of the court practice of counsellors for refugees.⁷

The national legislative framework consists of acts on asylum procedures, reception conditions, detention and content of international protection. The basis for this framework lies in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (e. g. The Geneva Convention) and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. The mentioned acts are: International Protection Act (IPA), Aliens Act, General Administrative Procedure Act (GAPA) and Administrative Dispute Act. There are also several decrees, guidelines and regulations that implement procedures regarding international protection, reception and detention conditions, as well as the content of international protection. These legal bodies, combined with the two Resolutions on the migration policy of the Republic of Slovenia (adopted in 1999 and 2002, respectively), set out rules of conduct during these procedures, while also ensure the methods and conditions for ensuring rights of asylum applicants, detainees and other persons regarded under the Aliens Act (Klopčič 2020; AIDA report 2018 – UPDATE, 9–11).

When a person obtains refugee status then he or she is on the same level of social rights as a citizen (except for social housing). For the first three years upon status recognition they are under the jurisdiction of the Government Office for the Support and Integration of Migrants, where they are ‘assigned a so-called Consultant/Adviser for integration, who – in cooperation with them – prepares an individualized integration plan. They are also included in orientation programmes in the form of short-term projects implemented by NGOs, as well as in Slovenian language classes’ (Ladić, Bajt, and Jalusič 2020, 4).

Slovenia’s official asylum and migration policy, supported by various measures and laws, can only be discussed at the national level. In July 2019 the government adopted the first Strategy of the Republic of Slovenia in the Field of Migration, drafted by the Ministry of Interior, ‘which is reflected in the content of the document. It heavily emphasizes irregular migration, security issues, border protection and asylum procedures, while the majority of migration in Slovenia is in fact represented by documented economic migration’ (Ladić, Bajt, and Vlasta 2020, 5). Policy implementation is divided among different actors, with the main actors being the Ministry of Interior (MNZ) and Government Office for the Support and Integration of Migrants (GOSIM). GOSIM is expected to fully cover the area of integration, while other government departments are less active. Despite its ambitious title, GOSIM does not cover all migrants, as with its ‘(a) Reception

and Support Division and (b) Integration Division it is only responsible for asylum seekers and people with recognized status of international (refugee or subsidiary) protection' (Ladić, Bajt, and Vlasta 2020, 6). Asylum policy in Slovenia has always been relatively restrictive. In recent years, the percentage of persons granted international protection status has been very low, at one point it was even one of the lowest in the EU.⁸ At the state level, migration is mainly an expert issue, which is not addressed with social and political measures, but with the police and border control methods. Since the Ministry of Interior (MNZ) controls and manages almost every aspect of migration and asylum policy in Slovenia, this means that migration is seen mainly as a security issue, managed by repressive means, without much consideration of other factors, such as education, labour market, health, housing or psychosocial support.

At the local level, we can only observe the implementation of national policy, since local communities

do not have formal power to implement asylum and migration measures, though integration is actually conducted at the local community level and sustained by various non-governmental sector programmes or rather short term projects (mostly funded nationally or by the European Union). (Ladić, Bajt, and Jalušič 2020, 6)

The two largest local authorities in Slovenia, the Municipality of Ljubljana (MOL) and the Municipality of Maribor (MOM), are the most engaged local public actors where most migrants, refugees and asylum seekers reside. MOL and MOM are not directly responsible for organizing integration programmes, but indirectly support other actors such as their own public institutions (primary schools, kindergartens, adult education institutions) and other NGOs. They thus (co)finance various projects to assist the integration of refugees,⁹ as well as many individual events¹⁰ that come in direct contact with refugees or migrants and address their specific needs (Pehar and Gombač 2021). The political discourse at the MOL level is relatively more positive and cosmopolitan compared to MOM or that of the national level. However, there are no specific departments in the city administration dealing with integration issues that would provide a systematic and long-term support structure. More than local authorities, various local public institutions have shown and continue to show themselves to be open in the cultural, artistic or scientific fields. However, while they open their doors this is usually more a matter of goodwill (from individuals) than of (public) policy.

As far as NGOs are concerned, they cover the missing areas that are not yet covered – or only partially covered – by national institutions, by helping refugees, children and young migrants, helping the homeless and others without health insurance to access health services, advocating for the rights of migrant workers, building intergenerational cooperation. They work in the field of social and psychosocial support, providing practical forms of assistance and advice.

Activism in Slovenia, as in other places, changes according to the most pressing matters. During the refugee crisis activist networks organized humanitarian actions at different borders along the Balkan Route, media campaigns, autonomous social spaces, political campaigns, legal aid and similar. Today they continue to work with asylum seekers and refugees in the city on a day-to-day basis, forming an alternative integration process from below. Nevertheless, activist networks mainly do not perceive themselves as the main actors of integration, but as the main political actors who try to expand the boundaries of the existing narrow legal and political framework and constantly work to awaken more political and social imagination.

While it is still nearly impossible to obtain a regular status through asylum application in Slovenia (Kogovšek 2018), the problems and challenges of new arrivals do not stop with the completion of administrative procedures. Challenges to full inclusion persist on all social levels, ‘which are not directly connected to legal regulations but rather reside in the wider social settings and interconnected barriers to integration’ (Ladić, Bajt, and Jalusic 2020, 36). For the purpose of this article, we will focus on the three most pertinent areas: education and language proficiency, labour market integration and housing.

While beneficiaries of international protection have the same access to primary, secondary and higher education as citizens in law and theory, they still face obstacles while trying to exercise their rights in practice. There are no major difficulties at the level of elementary schools, since enrolment is mandatory. Challenges occur at the higher levels, because refugees and asylum seekers ‘cannot choose the school they would like to attend (vocational or high school) or schools are not willing to accept them because of the language barrier or because they do not have documents to prove their previous education’. The same barriers are present in the process of enrolment to university, where ‘the burden of proving the level of education obtained in the country of origin is entirely on asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection’ (Ladić, Bajt, and Jalusic 2020, 17).

There is no official refugee education policy in Slovenia at the local level, and therefore public institutions in the field of education (elementary schools and kindergartens)¹¹ have been searching for some other solutions: connecting with public universities, providing Slovenian language courses, looking for active forms of cooperation with parents, organizing special events and involvement in national and international projects. Generally, local public authorities finance various national programmes and projects, and also make sure the participants are informed about and directed towards educational programmes.

Education for children in Ljubljana is organized and managed by the Department of Pre-School Education of MOL. It invests in spatial solutions and equipment for kindergartens and schools, enables pupils to spend quality free time in school facilities, promotes cooperation between schools and relevant institutions, and prepares and implements a comprehensive educational design, which hopes to achieve equal opportunities for a high standard of education for refugee pupils and students as well as for pupils and students who are foreigners or whose parents are foreigners and Slovenian is not their mother tongue. All school-age children from reception centres go to one school (Primary School Livada) where they receive professional help and additional support. However, from a social point of view, it would be better if the children were spread over several schools to avoid marginalization.

Adult education, with a special focus on Slovenian courses, is mainly run by the Public Education Centre Cene Štupar in Ljubljana, one of the largest adult education organisations in Slovenia. The institution presents itself as public one that is open to working with persons under international protection and asylum seekers. It was founded by MOL and has worked to alert ministries and local authorities that the educational needs of migrants have increased and differ from those of immigrants from the former Yugoslav republics in the 1990s. In the last 10 years, the number of migrants, asylum seekers and persons with international protection status in the city has steadily increased, and with it the need for more subsidised hours of Slovenian language courses and more diverse teaching programmes that would accommodate students at different levels of proficiency.

With the end of the economic crisis and better economic prospects, more attention has been paid to the integration of refugees into the labour market. In 2017 the Employment Service of Slovenia launched a special counselling programme and hired two counsellors to take care of beneficiaries of international protection and actively help them find employment. Refugees have been actively involved in various other activities of the Employment Service, such as an on-the-job training programme where they can acquire some skills. Refugees also participate in orientation programmes conducted by NGOs and volunteers, where they are equipped with the basic skills they need: from how institutions work to talking about local customs, culture and society. NGO's are thus crucial in the expansion of social skills and networks of migrants, yet the financing of their projects and programmes 'is not implemented systematically and is not nationwide' (Ladić, Bajt, and Vlasta 2020, 26). Since their introduction, more asylum seekers and refugees have been hired, which means that these programmes have had some positive impact on labour market integration. However, a proficiency in Slovenian language is required for mid- to high-skill employment, so asylum seekers and refugees are hired by employers in relatively low-paid jobs, trapped in a vicious circle of poverty, marginalization and insecurity.

The system of labour market integration is still sporadic and restrictive in Slovenia. Asylum seekers are not allowed to work for their first nine months in the country, and if they get one negative decision then they cannot work for the entire asylum process, which can take years. The small minority who succeeds in getting refugee status receive subsidies for rent and welfare for two years. But if they get employed during this period and receive a salary, these benefits and subsidies end. Asylum seekers, refugees and foreigners in general are constantly confronted with various 'small' obstacles to integration: for example, many banks refuse to provide foreigners with a personal bank account. Other barriers to employment are a lack of language skills and education; and even if people have completed training in their home countries they mostly cannot provide the required certificates. Since they cannot access jobs that 'are related to their skills, educational level and profession, they may settle for any kind of job, which mainly means low-skilled physical labour' (Ladić, Bajt, and Jalusic 2020, 34), adding to the already existing social and cultural marginalization. As people cannot find work or adequate work in Slovenia they are more likely to feel desperate, which makes them want to leave the country, and when they change countries this process starts all over again.

When it comes to housing, the situation is even more problematic. Upon arrival at the Reception Centre (Ljubljana), applicants are held in the reception area of the building without free access to its other parts. The Reception Centre in Ljubljana (Asylum Home) has 3 branch facilities: 1 also in Ljubljana (branch facility Kotnikova), 1 in Logatec (branch facility) and 1 in Postojna (student dormitory). The total capacity of all facilities is 429. The Ljubljana Reception Centre accommodates mostly single men and some families, the branch facility Kotnikova in Ljubljana exclusively single men, the branch facility Logatec mostly families and couples, and the student dormitory in Postojna unaccompanied children. Applicants can also request to reside in private accommodation (AIDA report 2018 – UPDATE, 47–49).

After receiving their refugee status, people are allowed to move outside the official facilities. Even if they are formally allowed to freely choose their place of residence, most beneficiaries reside in Ljubljana and Maribor, which are also the most expensive in terms of housing rents. Even if the state provides unemployed beneficiaries with a monthly financial allowance for rent for a period of 18 months (which can be prolonged

to three years), it is hard for such individuals to survive, as it is still difficult to find work after the subsidies expire. To date, refugees still do not have access to non-profit or other forms of social housing. Recognized refugees in Slovenia have the opportunity to live for a maximum of one year in a so-called integration house, which is a state institution managed by GOSIM, and otherwise they are left to the real estate market, where they are often discriminated against on the basis of prejudices and/or poorer housing conditions for above-market prices.

Socially innovative practices

Our variety of methods provided us with several sets of information about the challenges asylum seekers and persons with international protection face during their promised inclusion to Slovenian society. As some of the needs were already addressed by the official system, such as schooling, housing, social transfers, language courses, medical assistance, insurance, etc., some of them were addressed by NGOs, like daily centres, orientation courses, basic information in foreign languages, day-to-day support and help with learning, we decided to organize specific short- to medium-term social actions with as many local actors as possible in order to both provide support and increase their visibility in local communities, and also support the engagement of civil society and other actors. We found this idea innovative enough to start to organize possible local partners. As our focus groups and interviews pinpointed three major topics (education, employment, social integration) we started to prepare the necessary steps to find the solutions and implement them. We also set a very simple definition of an innovative social practice,¹² which was every practice that its users recognized as a useful one and demanded its repetition or upgrade.

So after establishing informal local steering committees¹³ in Maribor and Ljubljana with various of the already mentioned local actors, our first major action was the organization of swimming lessons for children with international protection in the city of Maribor during the school holidays. We were contacted by a local NGO which was in charge of the daily centre, and we contacted a local swimming association and a local pool. Through the daily centre we contacted the children and their parents. A group of children was formed, and they visited the pool several times. They learned how to swim or improved their swimming abilities. Some of them also lost their fear of water, and one traumatized boy started talking again. They also socialized and spent some quality time together doing an activity they would otherwise not have been able to afford. It is also a good activity for us to gain the trust of the children and their families.

Later that year a group of Eritreans and Ethiopians contacted us and explained that they had heard about the swimming lessons and wanted to attend them too. There were some issues which could be described as racist at the local pool this time, some comments about skin colour, hygiene, etc. were made by regular visitors, but after an intervention from the swimming association responsible for the lessons the situation calmed down. So the results of this practice were manifold: the people involved learned how to swim or improved their swimming, spent some quality time together, became empowered by new skills and connected with parts of local population.

The second social practice was aimed at increasing the visibility and empowerment of persons with international protection in the local community in Maribor. Cooking classes (Eritrean, Syrian cuisine) were organized for the local population, and food was later served at several events like the 'Migrant Film Festival', 'Living Human Libraries' and Migrants Day. Several organizations came together, like GT22 (Transnational Guerrilla

Art School), Slovenian Philanthropy, Youth Cultural Centre, Municipality of Maribor, Slovenian Employment Service, Slovenian Red Cross and a local falafel bar, among others. Refugee families that organized cooking lessons and catering were also present at these events at different locations as equal partners. These social actions started in an underground cultural creative space called GT22 (Transnational Guerrilla Art School) and eventually made it to Maribor main square with more than 1000 people attending, and thus the aim of visibility and empowerment was achieved.

The third social practice we considered as innovative was complex Slovenian language lessons for adults. Our informants made clear during the interviews and informal conversations that the official language classes, financed by the Ministry of Interior and performed by various subcontractors, were problematic for many reasons. They have created in a 'one-size fit all' manner, so people with different levels of knowledge of Slovenian, people who could speak English and those who could not, people from Slavic speaking countries and all the others, people literate in Tigrinya, Amharic, Cyrillic, and Arabic but not in Latin letters, and so on, were put together in the same group. Moreover, most of the time according to our informants a very basic and rigid programme was followed which did little to help them in their daily lives. As this created minimal or no results three members of informal the local steering committee decided to organize complex Slovenian language classes, which took place at Youth Cultural Centre in Maribor. Two levels were organized, basic and advanced. Moreover, the teacher also learned a lot since she had to deal with a very motivated, demanding, and fast-learning group which was able to co-create the content with her.

During all these activities, and also because of them, two primary schools from Maribor contacted us and reported that they had unexpectedly received three children from Syria in the middle of the school year without any assistance from the official system. We found a possibility to hire and supervise a special pedagogy student who was already engaged at the border camps during the long summer of migration of 2015–2016, and later volunteered at different NGOs, and was familiar with our previous activities, so she had experiences in this line of work. She also had time to follow these three girls as a sort of 'personal assistant' during classes for a few months, so the children could adapt to school life, follow the classes, work on their assignments, communicate with their peers and so on. Connections were also made with the main city library and local puppet theatre in order for these children to attend workshops, find friends and expand their social networks.

Because of our constant research on families, especially women with international protection, we already detected in earlier stages of the Slovenian integration effort after the 2015–2016 migration crisis that women also needed support in such efforts, as they were faced with many challenges such as the language barrier, marginalization, dependence on social help/male 'bearer', domestic violence, unemployment and the like. As the official system offered nothing of the kind at the time we started a women's group with a cultural mediator and trained psychologist, who did her counselling pro bono. Women got together every second Friday in the Youth Cultural Centre of Maribor (a familiar and safe place) and discussed their histories, then moved to current issues and if necessary talked individually to the psychologist. The goals of these meetings were to detect possible past traumas because of war and the journey to Europe itself, and move forward from there. The group was a success and the women continued to meet long after we were not able to maintain it for financial reasons, and thus the formal part of the project ended. This was also the reason why we applied for another AMIF project focused on 'job-shadowing' by women with refugee status in order to further improve

the possibility of their entering the labour market. We were successful in this application and are getting ready to upgrade the already existing group's work.

Inclusion in the labour market was also considered and discussed with all our informants. As the Employment Service of Slovenia has taken over employment opportunities of persons with international protection we focused on two factors that made the life of asylum seekers and persons with international protection difficult, namely language barriers (already discussed) and driving licences. With regard to the latter issue, those with international protection had problems with extending their driving licences, and most had even lost their licences because of the long asylum procedures and other factors. When they tried to obtain another licence they had to face substantial costs, including the cost of a translator for the exam. For most of them this cost was too high, so together with the Slovenian Red Cross we organized payment for an official translator from Arabic to Slovenian, and some of the Syrians who expressed an interest were thus able to obtain a driving licence. We then upgraded this project and later provided financial support for younger people with international protection so that they were able to have driving lessons and take first aid and driving exams, and finally, some of them obtained a driving licence and thus increased their chances of employment.

All this time we engaged with asylum seekers, undocumented migrants and persons with international protection in various acts of citizenship in order to 'contest, rupture and transform' the concept of citizenship (Isin 2002). This was one of the most difficult issues we dealt with since countries usually protect both citizenship and political participation with a variety of formal and informal mechanisms, such as racism, discrimination, protective legislation on many levels, etc. What we managed to organize or take part in were various anti-deportation protests, protests in support of Afghani and Ethiopian asylum seekers and undocumented migrants, round tables about the Balkan Route and the violence, push-backs and violations of human rights experiences on it, round tables about other issues, scientific conferences and so on. Such events made irregular migrants, asylum seekers and people with international protection politically more visible and important, which made a lot of difference to them.

On the local level, we supported a team of people with international protection at a 'Kick the Racism' football tournament, which sent a clear message to the public that racism can be prevented by simple means such as football matches or the use of Living Human Libraries.

One of the recent social practices also capitalized on our previous work on Trubarjeva Street in Ljubljana, which is a part of the city with high numbers of migrant entrepreneurs (Beznec, Kastelic and Gombac 2020). We tried to promote this street and its community in order to attract domestic consumers and tourists. We created a homepage with life stories, historical facts and specific offers of food that could not be found anywhere else in Slovenia.¹⁴ As this street was for years a meeting point between migrant entrepreneurs, asylum seekers from nearby asylum home and activists from the Rog Factory Social Centre, we decided that we would implement courses for social entrepreneurs in the vicinity using experiences from migrant and social entrepreneurs from Trubarjeva Street. Social entrepreneurship with migrants was and still is an idea that we would like to develop further, as it is quite hard for people with international protection to open and run an enterprise, and impossible for asylum seekers, so we would like to develop a common framework in order to employ, school, educate and train such people with the goal that they will eventually be able to open their own businesses in the future.

There were also lots of other small social actions and interventions which do not really seem like 'border struggles' or very innovative in themselves, like taking asylum seekers

to the Slovenian seaside, lectures on workers' rights, enabling their constant presence in the mainstream media with positive stories and relevant facts, giving support to young, talented directors who have international protection and their movies, job-shadowing for women, learning assistance for children, help with looking for accommodation, organizing cultural events, scientific conferences and so on, which we hope will provide results in the future as our networks, capacities and innovative potential grow. Organizing on the local level and influencing higher levels from the bottom up in a state which has the opposite approach is demanding, and it takes a lot of accumulated knowledge, common effort and luck to implement successful innovative social practices in order to move things forward.

Conclusions

Although Slovenia is a net immigration country, it has not made significant progress in terms of integration policies and participation practices of migrants. Slovenia still considers itself a 'transit' country in regard to asylum procedures and a 'temporary country' in regard to labour migration, and consequently, there are minimal or no efforts to find new and durable solutions to migrant inclusion. A very small percentage of people receive refugee status and migrant workers tend to be exposed to long working hours under extremely precarious conditions. The first official government strategy on integration was adopted only two years ago. As with most areas relating to migration, it was written by the Ministry of Interior, which remains the main actor in policy and decision-making in this context. Consequently, this strategy also focuses mainly on issues of asylum, irregular migration and border control, once again moving the issue into the realm of security rather than social affairs. Despite some tentative attempts to give more influence to non-repressive government agencies, such as the recent creation of the supposedly independent Governmental Office for Support and Integration of Migrants, the Ministry of Interior remains responsible for creating most relevant legislation. Moreover, it remains the main distributor of the very limited national integration funds to civil society, which ensures constant competition among relatively small but important actors, as well as self-restraint and self-censorship by civil society, which is reluctant to criticize its source of funding.

Nevertheless, Slovenia, even as a small country, has a relatively strong civil sector implementing individual integration programmes, which is its relative advantage, as the civil sector has better access to real users as well as to the majority population. On the other hand, non-state actors do not have a free hand. In the absence of institutionalized integration policies at the local level, local actors also have limited options, as they are not allowed to act in contradiction with national refugee policies. Other obstacles to successful integration as a two-way process include administrative barriers, lengthy procedures, insufficient involvement of educational institutions, lack of language programmes, employment opportunities, adequate housing and equal access to health and other social services. As in other parts of Europe, refugee policy in Slovenia has been influenced by some populist tendencies in recent years, so a major problem is also the lack of strategic thinking and imagination at the level of national policymakers. They tend to remain very rigid, security-oriented and inclined to present and treat the newcomers as a burden rather than a potential.

The refugee crisis of 2015/16 certainly sparked new discussions, but the system has not adapted to the reality of increased numbers of asylum seekers, refugees, migrants and undocumented people. Some cities and organizations at the local level are trying to

fill the gaps by applying for projects and implementing social programmes for their new residents. But there is a need to develop local policies in this area and transfer certain competences from the state to the local community. It is not certain that this will work immediately, as local authorities tend to be inflexible. But the fact is that integration needs to take place in smaller local settings, with integration policies being developed and implemented in localities, where people actually work and live and in collaboration with them. Local communities do not just need to speak out for or against something, they need real leverage to organize and implement programmes. A local level alliance between migrants, the civil sector and city authorities is the only way to steer migration and integration policies towards more inclusion and equality.

Notes

1. On 1 January 2021, Slovenia's population was 2,108,977 or 0.6% more than one year earlier. The number of Slovene citizens increased by 800, and the number of foreign citizens by 12,300 in 2020. On 1 January 2021, 8% of the 2,108,977 usually resident population of Slovenia were foreigners. Republic of Slovenia Statistical Office. <https://www.stat.si/StatWeb/en/news/Index/9212>
2. Project PandPas, <http://www.pandpasproject.eu/>
3. Project Best, <https://www.facebook.com/project.BEST.amif/>
4. Project Urban Diversity, www.urbandiversity.eu
5. Project ENGAGE, <https://emphasyscentre.com/research/amif/engage/>
6. Project SiforREF (Integrating Refugees in Society and the Labour Market Through Social Innovation), <https://www.interreg-central.eu/Content.Node/SiforREF.html>
7. Legal representatives of asylum seekers and or refugees in legal procedures in front of courts and other official institutions.
8. In the beginning of 2021 there were less than 1000 people with recognized international protection status in Slovenia. Governmental Office for Support and Integration of Migrants <https://www.gov.si/assets/vladne-sluzbe/UOIM/STATISTIKA/Januar-2021/Stevidlo-oseb-z-mednarodno-zascito-po-letih.pdf-correctedByPAVE.pdf>
9. In the fields of labour market integration, initial integration (orientation), intercultural centre, literacy and learning assistance, functional literacy and Slovene language courses, among others.
10. Culinary achievements of immigrants, exhibitions, readings, events for book promotions, concerts and similar.
11. In integrating immigrants into education the following public actors are included: Employment Service of Slovenia, Centres for Social Work, Pension and Disability Insurance Institute, Ministry of the Interior, Government Office for the Support and Integration of Migrants, Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, Slovenian Institute for Adult Education, National Education Institute, People's Universities Association, primary schools, museums, galleries, theatres and the National Assembly. Also several private actors are involved: companies, private educational institutions, Šentprima (Institute for Rehabilitation and Education), the Odnos society, the Institute for African Studies, the MISSS institution, Voluntariat, Terra-Vera, Slovene Philanthropy, IOM, the Social Chamber and Chamber of Commerce, among others.
12. In the framework of Siforef project we have contributed to the development of *Social Innovation Guidelines for Policy Makers and Practitioners for Integration and Inclusion of Refugees*. <https://www.interreg-central.eu/Content.Node/SiforREF/SiforREF-Social-Innovation-Guidelines-Checklist.pdf>
13. In the framework of PandPass project.
14. <https://trubarjevanadlani.eu/en/blog>

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