

# Social Impact of Migration Studies: The Case of Slovenian Migration Institute

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## **Introduction**

This contribution will in part present the work of the Slovenian Migration Institute of the Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts (ZRC SAZU) through time, and give a brief overview of the Institute's latest activities – particularly those that could illustrate the general discourse on migration to and from Slovenia, and the dialogue between the Institute and Slovenian politics, civil services and the general public. The paper will be based mainly on the Institute's projects documentation and my recent interviews with its researchers. The majority of the goals the Institute researchers try to achieve by these projects concern more efficient integration policies, including better organized dissemination of information for easier integration of migrants living in Slovenia and elsewhere, and the necessity to educate and train experts and broader publics in matters of migration and multicultural values. The focus of this paper will thus be on the Institute's applied projects rather than its academic research programme and basic research projects. Many national and

international applied projects conducted by the Slovenian Migration Institute are aimed at bringing forth a dialogue between researchers, target audiences, stakeholders and the authorities. I intend to outline the main positive as well as negative aspects of the work the Institute's researchers perform on a daily basis when interacting with project users, at public events or lectures, during their seminars or in other similar situations.

## **Slovenian Migration Institute and its Beginnings**

As Marjan Drnovšek (2007: 7) points out, "the tradition of migration research in Slovenia is not as old as in some other European countries." There are of course many experts, institutions and organisations in Slovenia engaged in migration studies nowadays. The Slovenian Migration Institute (hereafter: SMI) remains, however, the only research institution in that country that is entirely specialised in and dedicated to the research of migration. A scientific approach to the investigation into such an important thematic field as migration is therefore its institutional

duty. (Kalc 2017: 7)

The beginnings of the Slovenian Migration Institute date back to the year 1963, with the establishment of the Study Centre for the History of Slovenian Emigration at the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts. With no office rooms or regularly employed staff, the Study Centre engaged in its programme a number of researchers from other institutions to form an interdisciplinary research group covering geography, history, sociology and other disciplines contributing to its main project, *The History of Slovenian Emigration*, funded by the Boris Kidrič Fund. The main objective of the Centre and its project was a “historical outline” that would “encompass all Slovene emigration /.../ in the period from the second half of the Nineteenth Century to World War II.” (Čebulj Sajko 1990: 22) Despite its best efforts, the work of the Centre slowly faded out toward the end of the 1960s.

New initiatives to continue the research into Slovenian emigration, stressing the need for a “separate academic institute”, emerged in 1981 at the international symposium on the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Louis Adamic, the most successful Slovenian emigrant writer. The idea was that this institute should expand and upgrade the efforts of its predecessor – the Study Centre, encompassing a carefully prepared interdisciplinary programme. (Žitnik Serafin 2017: 23) The initiative was fruitful and the Institute for Emigration at the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts was founded in 1982. In 1986, the Institute’s name was changed to the Institute for Slovenian Emigration Research, and it joined the also newly founded Academy’s Research Centre. (Čebulj Sajko 1990: 23–28)

Many factors contributed to the successful development of the newly established Institute. One and perhaps the most important one was the efforts of the Institute researchers to emphasize the importance of international migration and especially Slovenian emigration when discussing Slovenian historical developments. An important effect of these efforts was increased general interest in migration studies as well as an increase of migration related topics in various disciplines: geography, ethnology, literary history and sociology, and later on – in the 1980s – also in history. On the whole, migration studies have become a significant part of the humanities and social sciences in Slovenia, and the bibliography on the topic has shown notable progress in terms of its quality and quantity. International migration is today viewed as a constitutive social phenomenon that has co-created the economic, social and cultural landscapes on a local and global scale. (Kalc 2017: 9–10)

As the turn of decades from the 1980s to the 1990s saw a growing scientific, research and social interest in Slovenian emigration (Kalc 2017: 10), the Institute started issuing an international and interdisciplinary academic journal, *Two Homelands: Migration Studies* in 1990. One of its main objectives was to devote attention “to questions of Slovene emigration treated in the widest interdisciplinary way.” (Vovko 1990: 10) The journal enabled “both domestic and foreign researchers of Slovene emigration to publish the results of their work in a unique professional publication.” (Čebulj Sajko 1990: 29) Even today, the journal, which is now issued twice a year, is still the central academic journal in Slovenia

dedicated to migration studies.

In 2001, the Institute also started publishing a monograph series titled *Migration*. The series now includes 27 scholarly monographs and collections of papers by Slovenian and foreign authors discussing Slovenian emigration, refugees, seasonal and return migration as well as immigration to Slovenia. (Žitnik Serafin 2017: 24–25) The rising number of new researchers from various disciplines that joined the research team in the following years brought new research areas to the Institute's attention. Due to this broadening of the range of the Institute's research topics – these were now becoming more and more connected with immigration to Slovenia – the Institute has finally changed its name to Slovenian Migration Institute (instead of Emigration) in 2009.

Its numerous applied projects now include various educational, expert and even operational activities that allow direct transfer of its research findings to practice. The broadening of the research subject and the ramification of the Institute's other activities have also been encouraged by projects and programs financed from the EU funds. (Žitnik Serafin 2017: 27)

### **Migration Studies and Social Impact of Project Work**

Since migrations tend to have evident impact on more or less all aspects of life in the countries of arrival as well as the countries of origin (Gold and Nawyn 2013: 2), it is not surprising that the purpose of the Institute's elaborate work scope could never have been imagined as only academic. For example, in the past, some of the primary objectives of the research team were to include various government bodies, education institutions,

archives, museums, cultural media and of course the broader public in the Institute's attempts to help find solutions for the challenges of Slovenian emigrants and their descendants. (Žitnik 2002: 231) As it will be explained below, similar practices are today still in use when addressing the challenges of immigrants to Slovenia and their descendants today.

The SMI researchers are included in various additional activities: they are lecturers in the framework of national undergraduate study programmes and national and international graduate university programmes; they participate in various migration-related cultural activities; they help popularise scientific research results for the wider public; they educate teachers and children about migrations, and so on. (Drnovšek 2007: 7) The importance of transferring knowledge into practice remains one of the main SMI principles to this day.

The broader spectrum of the SMI projects follows the same common thread: the inclusion, the integration, and the acceptance of migrants. Certain documents and resolutions issued by the Government of Slovenia identify multiculturalism as the first principle of integration, and at the same time often mention active prevention of marginalization of immigrants and xenophobia. (Žitnik Serafin 2008: 164) The concept of multiculturalism can relate to theory (as a category denoting specific relations between ethnic communities living in the same country), it can denote a political programme or movement for the change of established relations, or a principle of official politics' stance toward indigenous and immigrant ethnic minorities. There are but a few countries in the world today that are not characterised

by multicultural heterogeneity. (Lukšič Hacin 1999: 83–84)

Considering the fact that there has been an increase in discourse on intercultural dialogue since 2008, when members of the EU participated in the European year of intercultural dialogue, one would presume that the multicultural capacities and principles such as “We elsewhere, others with us” (Vižintin 2017: 153) would be more firmly embodied in everyday lives of individuals. However, target audiences of many of the SMI projects perceive such topics only on the abstract level. The collective mindset would, in Žižek’s words, much sooner turn toward tolerance, leaving “the Other” aside, where his or her presence is not intrusive – rather than being open to this kind of “otherness”. (Žižek 2007)

In her Preface to the publication titled *Door ajar (Priprta vrata)*, Tina Cigler wrote: “The majority of us are not even aware of how many worries Slovenia can produce in the first period, when migrants are arranging residence and work permits, let alone later, when Slovenians are somehow incapable of including them. Even though we know that monocultures do not exist anymore, we are yet incapable to live in a multicultural society. Cultural diversity is understood as a necessary evil rather than something that increases development capabilities of our country.” (Cigler 2012: 7)

Nevertheless, many positive practices in this area have been identified in Slovenia, not only those introduced by various organisations but also by certain individuals that help break new ground and bring forth changes in new generations. I will try to highlight some of them in the following presentation of the most

relevant SMI’s applied projects.

### **Implementation of Migration Studies Research Results through SMI Projects**

Some of the most visible projects conducted by the Institute concern areas where migrants are most vulnerable and underprivileged. These areas are education and employment. The knowledge and experience the SMI researchers have gathered in the past years have proved invaluable because they can be used, multiplied and disseminated through present SMI activities, and even upgraded for those to come in the future. In some of the projects, members of the team use this knowledge directly, for example when carrying out trainings for target audiences, while in others they can use them as an excellent reference when addressing public officials or, for example, when applying for new projects. In many cases, good practices of previous projects with similar objectives are still used to this day.

#### *Education and Inclusion*

One such project was a cross-border educational project titled EDUKA, which included five organisations from Slovenia and five from Italy. The objective was to create among pupils in both countries the awareness of various topics of intercultural education, as well as to create knowledge and tools in order to advocate diversity and develop intercultural dialogue in schools and universities. (EDUKA 2014) The project gave an opportunity for Slovenian and Italian minorities to present themselves in a public space, and offered immigrants in both countries an opportunity to enter this space, for example in schools, where they presented their countries of origin,

their lives, reasons for their leaving home, and so on.

One of the researchers working in this project described its unexpectedly positive impact, especially among children. If many schoolbooks that European children use today express a certain degree of (either subliminal or upfront) ethno-centrism or euro-centrism, negative images of migrants and sometimes even racist discourse (Šabec 2015: 128), the aftermath of this project showed mostly messages of welcome, collaboration and bridging the differences. Furthermore, a significant result of this project is its production of educational and didactic materials on intercultural education, which are still available free of charge to any teacher or educator that might need them. Project coordinators note that many schools in Italy and Slovenia still regularly use them.

The visible impact of this project has inspired other national and international projects in which migration studies research results can be applied to education. Some of the ongoing education-oriented projects, such as Out-Side-In and PREDIS, are based on international collaboration with European educational institutions and organisations. Out-Side-In aims at improving social and economic participation of migrant and Roma youth, especially in reducing dropout rates in formal education, while PREDIS encourages the inclusion of refugees in Slovenia, Germany, Greece, Italy, Turkey and Sweden in adult education.

“Only (with) others are we”, on the other hand, is a national project that conducts comprehensive training for expert workers in education, teachers, social workers and other public workers throughout Slovenia as well as Slovenian

educational workers living in neighbouring countries. Immigrant children and first generations of immigrants are, as a rule, included in the Slovenian educational process after they move to Slovenia, yet that their first language is not Slovenian. Teachers therefore often tackle various challenges when educating these children. (Vižintin 2014: 72) In collaboration with the Institute for Education and external experts, SMI researchers conduct trainings on topics such as multiculturalism, intercultural education, reduction of prejudices and stereotypes, integration of migrant and refugee children, to empower teachers at their work. They aim at promoting mutual understanding, the culture of open dialogue and respect for various cultural backgrounds that the children in kindergartens and schools are coming from.

However, this is not an easy process. Many times the SMI lecturers tackle demanding issues, such as increasing xenophobia and hate speech, racist elements in opinions expressed by educational workers, and so on. In my interviews, respondents reported of negative feedbacks from within educational collectives of individual schools. Teachers for example sometimes believe that intercultural education is not their business, or that they “do not have enough time to bother with that” on top of the already overburdened curricula. In some cases they do not agree with certain seminar topics or they feel personally threatened by them. Fortunately, there have not been many such cases.

An important turning point in Slovenian public discourse concerning migration was the year 2015, with the arrival of increased numbers of immigrants and

refugees. A great majority of them only passed through Slovenia but still “caused” a lot of anxiety and agitation. Since the aforementioned project started in 2016, the SMI researchers who participate in it as lecturers often unwillingly find themselves in heated debates or are targets of spiteful comments. These are, to their understanding, often based on poorly understood concepts of migration, asylum system, displacement, refugee issues, integration, and similar. One researcher spoke to me about a general problem. His view of the matter was that in most cases there is a complete lack of knowledge of some basic migration-related terms. Therefore he starts his lectures and workshops by trying to introduce those terms to a highest possible number of workers in education.

When talking about migration topics in Slovenia, it has become necessary to highlight the migration paths that many Slovenians have walked throughout their history. As one of the researchers who also had worked on EDUKA pointed out, “Many times Slovenians notice only immigration to their country, and forget emigration of Slovenians ...” Generally, accentuating these comparisons tends to be well accepted, especially among those who have their own migrant experiences, or in cases where there have been such experiences in their families. Many lecturers at the SMI seminars have reported about the change of feelings, new ways of perceiving refugees, and even emotional responses, for instance when they talked about their own migrant experience or the experiences of their relatives, parents or grandparents. The reaction is most often a feeling of surprise and a reminder that this is something they knew, yet forgot all about it. My colleagues believe that teach-

ers with such experiences generally have more knowledge on the matter and are more emphatic. The positive response is usually then further redoubled when they invite some successful former immigrants to share their stories with the audience.

One of the most important aspects of such approaches is to remind workers in education that – like so many Slovenians abroad – immigrant children in Slovenian schools also have to learn a new language and new, unwritten social rules. This is definitely a long and complex process that needs a lot of cooperation and help not only from teachers but also from schoolmates, parents, and local environment.

#### *Inclusion through Employment*

The question of general understanding of the meaning of migration as well as the public belief that this kind of debate on migration is unnecessary was brought to my attention while interviewing two other researchers. Although both had previously worked on applied and basic research projects concerning different aspects of migration, they have been, for a while now, engaged in promoting national and international discourse on the importance of posted work, health and safety issues of migrant labourers, and general empowerment of the economic integration of migrants. Their latest project with this objective is called POOSH.

When asked about their views on the public opinion about migration, both confirmed that the whole rhetoric on the subject is now essentially different from what it was before 2015. One of them recalled that before the refugee corridor through Slovenia in 2015, migrations were only one of the many topics, floating under the surface. After the refugee corridor, people

have shown more interest in migrations, yet the double-standard perceptions of “our emigrants and refugees” on the one hand, and the incoming immigrants and refugees to the EU nowadays on the other, still remain as persistent as ever. The other researcher, however, feels that migrations are a domain that carries a lot of baggage. She said she could not think of any other research area that would stir such strong emotions on so many different levels. In her opinion, when talking about migrations, people would much sooner think of cultural, every day, social, economic and also political burdens than of the advantages of diversity, opportunities or multicultural values. Another view that I found interesting was her observation on the period during the refugee corridor through Slovenia. She observed that there was much disdain for migrants in general and that during that time even researchers in the field of migrations, with no activist aspirations or affiliations, would be considered as activists. When carrying out fieldwork and collecting data on the subject of refugees, they were labelled as political actors. In her opinion this can be damaging as research in that field can thus lose its neutrality and autonomy. It would be very wrong, according to her, to connect researchers in migration studies with any specific political orientation.

A large ongoing international project of which Slovenian Migration Institute is the leading partner is called DRIM, short for “Danube Region Information Platform for Economic Integration of Migrants”. DRIM’s objective is to enhance the capacity of public institutions for promoting migrants’ economic integration, understood as fair access to employment, work and skills enhancement. Another

interregional project led by the Institute, “Urban Diversity”, intends to connect migrant entrepreneurs and their families in Ljubljana, Slovenia and Graz, Austria to enhance and promote diversity through creativity. The goal of the project is the development of the potential and creativity of migrant entrepreneurs and their families through connection and collaboration of both cities, as research show that “many show enormous success and high awareness of community involvement and contribution to local economic growth.” (Bužinkić 2017: 7–8)

As the experience with all these projects shows, one of the most crucial factors in successful migration-related applied projects is active inclusion of the target audience during the writing of the project proposal, especially when formulating the objectives of the projects. Only in this way can the objectives be set in accordance with the target audience’s needs.

### **Conclusion**

The social impact the Slovenian Migration Institute is shown in its continuing transfer of research results to practice, mainly through various educational processes, be it for a particular group of people, such as educators and civil servants, authorities, stakeholders or fellow researchers, or for the broadest Slovenian audiences. Researchers I work with have shown, on a day-to-day basis, impressive perseverance in some at least seemingly discouraging situations. Either due to their keen sensitivity to the subject of migration or a lifelong commitment to the area, the successes their work brings are numerous and encouraging.

A well-deserved reward for the effort can be a project publication that is still

in use years after the project had been completed, or a positive response at the end of a conference when the target audience becomes engaged in such manner that some of the participants ask for more information, stay in touch with the SMI researchers, or recommend one of the SMI seminars or reading materials to other people.

Whatever project the Institute applies for or carries out, it always includes, in some way or other, the collaboration of people whose challenges its field of expertise addresses. An efficient outcome can be observed when experts in migration studies can help connect multiple, albeit at times disagreeing sides; when in the long run results of educational training are visible among pupils and their teachers; and when project efforts actually mobilise civil servants and officials to directly and actively connect with their users. All of these impacts that can be clearly observed in practical work with the users make the present and future Institute's work meaningful and worthwhile.

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