

REPATRIATION OF SLOVENIAN NATIONALS DURING MOBILITY LOCKDOWNS DUE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

Repatriation of Slovenian Nationals During Mobility Lockdowns Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Repatriation due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic was the most extensive assisted return in Slovenia's history. The article explores governmental responsiveness to the struggles and social risks experienced by Slovenian nationals stranded abroad during the global outbreak of COVID-19 from February to April 2020. It builds on a review of EU and national-level reports, a qualitative analysis of media sources, and expert interviews. The article highlights the lack of detailed systemic guidelines on transnational social protection in crisis situations and argues that the success in the repatriation of Slovenian nationals can be primarily attributed to the ad hoc measures set in place by highly motivated and inventive consular staff.

KEYWORDS: COVID-19 pandemic, mobility lockdown, repatriation, consular service, Slovenia

IZVLEČEK

Repatriacija slovenskih državljanov v obdobju omejevanja mobilnosti zaradi pandemije bolezni Covid-19

Repatriacija zaradi izbruha pandemije Covid-19 je bila najobsežnejša pomoč pri vračanju v zgodovini Slovenije. Članek raziskuje odzivnost vlade na negotovosti in socialna tveganja, s katerimi so se soočali državljani, ki so med izbruhom pandemije Covid-19 obtičali v tujini. Temelji na pregledu poročil na ravni EU in nacionalni ravni, na kvalitativni analizi medijskih virov ter na intervjujih s strokovnjaki. Avtorici izpostavljata pomanjkanje podrobnih sistemskih smernic o transnacionalni socialni zaščiti v kriznih razmerah in trdita, da lahko uspeh pri repatriaciji slovenskih državljanov v veliki meri pripišemo *ad hoc* ukrepom, ki jih je izvedlo visoko motivirano in iznajdljivo konzularno osebje.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: pandemija Covid-19, omejitev mobilnosti, repatriacija, konzularna pomoč, Slovenija

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INTRODUCTION

The year 2020 was a landmark for human mobility, dramatically reducing cross-border movements of all kinds (Benton et al., 2021). The COVID-19 outbreak prompted a complex worldwide reshaping and redefining of the meaning of mobility and immobility. Immobility became an obligation, while mobilities became either glorified or, in most cases, denounced (Ma, 2020). For instance, mobilities of healthcare workers, first responders, and workers in critical infrastructure were met with gratitude, while most of the other population was expected to remain immobile. Lockdowns defined immobilities as moral and legitimate (Ma, 2020, Novotný, 2021) and mobilities as irresponsible, immoral, and unlawful. In other words, societies shifted from hyper mobilities to forced immobility. There was, however, space for a particular type of mobility—return mobility (Grabowska & Czeranowska, 2021). The closure of borders and the introduction of travel restrictions following the pandemic declaration were accompanied by the emergency repatriations of citizens on short-term travels, students, and mobile workers stranded abroad. Governments activated their consular services and organized charter flights to bring home their citizens from various parts of the world. Outside the government repatriation schemes, large numbers of citizens residing abroad temporarily or permanently also returned home to be with their families during the times of the unprecedented uncertainties spreading throughout the globe.

However, many return mobilities were involuntary because they occurred due to the loss of income caused by the lockdowns and subsequent workplace closures (Acharya & Patel, 2021) that forced workers to return to their countries of origin.¹ Moreover, not all return mobility was facilitated and welcome. In some cases, the returnees who wished to return to their countries of origin or even countries of citizenship were refused entry due to the fears that they carried the virus (Šter, 2021). Some states also introduced unreasonable measures concerning the return of cross-border commuters, who feared not being able to return to their workplace in case they returned home and vice versa (Novotný, 2021).²

The pandemic has constituted a demanding challenge for policymakers worldwide and questioned states' preparedness for crisis management (Konstantinidou &

1 Upon return, many of those returnees were faced with social stigma, discrimination, and harassment (Parvez, 2021). This was also the case with the first Slovenian repatriates returning home from a cruise in Japan, who received hostile treatment from their neighbors (Šter, 2021).

2 One of the most restrictive EU countries in this respect was the Czech Republic, which introduced a strict policy regarding cross-border commuting between the Czech–German border in April 2020. The commuters were allowed to work in Germany, but they had to stay abroad for at least three weeks at a time and then stay in quarantine for two weeks upon their return. They were allowed to return earlier, but in that case, would lose their cross-border commuter status. They had to decide between returning home to take care of their children and the elderly, or staying in Germany to keep their jobs. The choice was most dramatic for single parents (Novotný, 2021).

Vintila, 2020). The most pressing issues raised immediately after the global outbreak in late February 2020 were migration and mobility management, reshaped border management, and the ability to activate the repatriation schemes. Many states had closed their borders to non-citizens and non-residents to stop the spread of the virus but became active in facilitating the return of their stranded citizens (İçduygu, 2020). The initial challenges surrounding repatriation were organizational and logistical, i.e., establishing transnational cooperation, providing consular assistance, and organizing repatriation flights (Prpic, 2020). The entire process of repatriation was a complex endeavor due to frequently changing travel restrictions, limited options of transportation, limited consular coverage, and burdensome bureaucratic procedures, to name a few. It prompted close transnational cooperation that often resulted in successful joint efforts. However, it has also revealed significant gaps in the national, EU, and global commitment to respond to social risks and provide transnational social protection³ to travelers and diaspora members in times of crisis. By mid-July 2020, the pandemic had left millions of people stranded without access to consular assistance, the means to ensure they did not slip into irregular status, or sufficient resources to meet basic needs (Benton et al., 2021).

In Slovenia, the COVID-19-related repatriation was by far the most extensive assisted return in the country's history. The article explores governmental responsiveness to the struggles and social risks experienced by citizens and residents situated outside Slovenia during the global outbreak of COVID-19 and subsequent mobility lockdowns occurring from late February to April 2020.⁴ In particular, it documents and evaluates government initiatives and efforts to ensure the repatriation of individuals stranded abroad. It builds on a review of the publicly released official EU- and national-level reports on the repatriation of citizens and residents, an extensive qualitative analysis of Slovenian media sources⁵ addressing the repatriation in the specified period, and three expert interviews conducted with the senior representatives of two governmental services, the Consular Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia and the Government Office for Slovenians Abroad (Valentinčič, 2021a), and a representative of the Counselling Office for Workers, a non-governmental organization providing counseling to migrant and mobile workers (Lukič, 2021).

The article first addresses the emergence of mobility lockdowns put in place at the outbreak of the pandemic. It then outlines the role and preparedness of consular policies in emergencies, emphasizing the EU and Slovenian repatriation efforts and strategies. In particular, it presents and evaluates the establishment and activities

3 In the context of this article, transnational social protection refers to emigrants' entitlements to sending countries' social protection policies (Lafleur & Vintila, 2020).

4 This period overlaps with the beginning and end of the mobilization of the Consular Crisis Cell to deal with emergency repatriations due to the COVID-19 outbreak.

5 Forty-six articles from several mainstream newspapers and media platforms were used in the analysis: *MMC RTV Slovenija (rtvslo.si)*, *24.ur*, *Dnevnik*, *Delo*, *Siol*, *Svet24*, *Žurnal24* and *Večer*.

of the Consular Crisis Cell. Finally, it evaluates the explored policy measures and groups them into three categories: active intervention, information provision, and additional support. The article concludes with a call for the development of new avenues of research that will grasp the evolving dynamics of (return) migration and mobility in pandemic situations.

MOBILITY LOCKDOWNS IN THE INITIAL PHASE OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) outlined three phases of cross-border mobility in 2020: mobility lockdowns (January to May), phased reopening (June to September), and mixed responses to new outbreaks and virus mutations (October to December) (Benton et al., 2021). The first phase started already two months before the declaration of the pandemic by the World Health Organisation on March 11, 2020. In late January, the neighboring countries with China, where the novel coronavirus was reported to have erupted, were the first to begin closing their borders. By late February, several countries began restricting the entry of travelers from the countries most affected by the virus, including the Islamic Republic of Iran, Italy, and the Republic of Korea. By the time of the declaration of the pandemic, countries around the globe completely closed most points of entry, arrivals (and in some cases departures) were restricted, and flights were grounded. Even in the border-free Schengen area of the European Union, the makeshift borders were re-introduced practically overnight, with limited planning and coordination. Governments and authorities in subnational regions issued or extended 43,300 travel measures; every country, territory, and area worldwide was subject to at least 70 travel bans. The number of passengers on international flights in April and May was down by 92 percent compared to the same months in the previous year (Benton et al., 2021: 1).

In the European Union, the governments of the Member States supported the proposal of the European Commission to reinforce the external borders by applying a coordinated temporary restriction of non-essential travel to the EU for 30 days, starting on March 17, 2020.⁶ Member States also adopted various measures that impacted citizens' right to move freely across the EU. These measures included entry restrictions or other specific requirements, such as quarantining, applicable to cross-border travelers, including those traveling for work reasons (European Commission, 2021). By March 26, fourteen Schengen countries⁷ had notified the

6 Guidance on the implementation of the temporary restriction on non-essential travel to the EU, on the facilitation of transit arrangements for the repatriation of EU citizens, and on the effects on visa policy (2020/C 102 I/02).

7 Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Estonia, Spain, Lithuania, Hungary, Austria, Poland, Portugal, Finland, Switzerland, and Norway.

European Commission of the reintroduction of border controls due to the threats related to the spread of COVID-19; seven other countries⁸ had introduced restrictions on the movement of persons that affect internal borders, such as temporary bans on non-essential travel (Prpic, 2020).

Slovenia introduced the first intra-EU travel restrictions on its western border with Italy on March 11. Entry from Italy was allowed only under specific conditions at six border crossings. This restriction immediately created chaos in international freight transport, causing congestion from Fernetiči to Padova (Šter, 2021). Slovenian rail service was discontinued on March 16, and passenger air traffic was suspended on March 17 (Ministry of Infrastructure, 2021). On March 18, Slovenia closed twenty-seven border crossings with Croatia and an additional two at the border with Italy. On March 24, entry conditions on the border with Austria were introduced, and the border could be crossed only at thirteen checkpoints. These decisions created numerous problems for thousands of cross-border commuters (Toplak & Lukšič Hacin, 2022), who struggled to adapt to the ad hoc measures that greatly restricted their daily mobility, significantly increased their commute time, and strongly affected their work-life balance. The problem was exacerbated further by the fact that the governments tended to act in a protectionist and uncoordinated manner (Novotný, 2021). In Slovenia's border regions, commuters and companies turned to different organizations and institutions for support and advocacy.⁹

Some countries introduced entry bans without the possibility of quarantine, even for their own citizens. In March, several Serbian citizens became stranded in Slovenia without the possibility to enter their country, which had closed its border on March 20 (Zupanič, 2020). The Slovenian Consular Department pleaded with the Serbian embassy to allow these Serbian citizens' entry, especially those returning through Slovenia from work posts in the other EU Member States and did not have accommodation in Slovenia. Many of them were workers posted by Slovenian employers to provide services abroad (Šter, 2021, Lukić, 2021). On March 23, around 60 Serbian citizens waited outside the Serbian Embassy in Ljubljana, some of them for the third day in a row, without food or accommodation. They received some assistance from the Red Cross (Zupanič, 2020) and the Serbian Orthodox Church (Šter, 2021) in the form of hot tea, food packages, and accommodation. Another 100 Serbian nationals were reportedly waiting to receive permission to leave Slovenia and enter Serbia at two border crossings with Croatia (Zupanič, 2020). Altogether, the number of Serbian citizens stranded in Slovenia was around 350. On March 25, the Slovenian Consular Department managed to facilitate their return to Serbia,

8 France, Italy, Latvia, Malta, the Netherlands, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

9 On the northern Slovenian border, commuters mainly sought support from the Trade Union of Migrant Workers (Toplak & Lukšič Hacin, 2022). Later on in the pandemic, the employers on the western and eastern borders also turned to the Government Office for Slovenians Abroad. The minister negotiated, for example, free COVID-19 testing for cross-border commuters at the border checkpoints with Italy (Valentinčič, 2021a, see also Majovski, 2021).

which had agreed to allow entry under the condition that they undergo a mandatory 28-day self-quarantine (STA).

All these travel-related measures and border closures have had far-reaching impacts on migration and mobility within the EU. The most affected persons were travelers stranded abroad awaiting repatriation, migrant and mobile workers getting locked out of destination countries where they might have performed seasonal or temporary work (Benton et al., 2021), workers posted to provide services in other EU Members States (especially third-country nationals), and cross-border commuters whose income relies on the ability to cross borders daily (Toplak & Lukšič Hacin, 2022; Novotný, 2021).¹⁰ The travel bans also heavily affected individuals permanently living abroad who wished to return to their families in their countries of origin or were facing a particularly vulnerable situation in their host countries (Konstantinidou & Vintila, 2020).

CONSULAR POLICIES AND EMERGENCY REPATRIATIONS: A TIMELINE FOR SLOVENIA

Consular policies in emergency situations

Crisis management is an essential part of consular assistance in emergencies. If there is a need to help citizens, the states can, within the framework of international law, perform all activities that prevent the worsening or improve the situation of their citizens abroad (Udovič, 2020). Often, as Udovič notes, the open political questions and disputes only marginally influence consular assistance in times of an emergency, meaning that the high politics do not tend to hinder consular cooperation (often understood as low politics) between states. However, as Šter (2021) notes, in crises, many states also tend to deploy a policy of us-first, them-later. In these situations, the official channels of communication and cooperation become less effective, and personal networks and acquaintances become essential.

Consular engagement generally differs across countries, but the services are broadly similar and limited to strengthening commercial, economic, cultural, and scientific relations between home and host countries; issuing passports and travel documents; serving as a notary and civil registry; and assisting detained nationals abroad. Article 5 of the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations, adopted in 1963 and entered into force in 1967, defines these functions (Aceves, 1998). In the European Union, the key directive that addresses the consular protection of the EU citizens is the Directive (EU) 2015/637 on the coordination and cooperation measures to facilitate consular protection for unrepresented citizens of the Union in third countries

¹⁰ Other persons heavily affected by the travel bans were displaced people facing difficulty in fleeing conflict zones across borders, and asylum seekers struggling to access the procedures to apply for international protection (Benton et al., 2021).

(hereafter the Directive).¹¹ The Directive's aim is to lay down the cooperation and coordination measures necessary to facilitate further consular protection for unrepresented citizens of the European Union. Article 9 of the Directive defines the areas of assistance typical for consular activities, i.e., assistance in case of death, serious illness or accident, arrest or detention, assistance to victims of crime, and the relief and repatriation in case of an emergency. Article 13 of the Directive further elaborates on the role of the consulates in crises. Evacuation and repatriation, in particular, are mentioned in Paragraph 2, which states that the Member States shall inform each other of available evacuation capacities in a timely manner. This provision indicates a duty to take coordinated action if the repatriation of EU citizens is necessary (Udovič, 2020). The Directive also stipulates that the cost of repatriation incurred during an emergency is not borne by the country that carries out the repatriation of another Member State's citizen but by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Member State of which the unrepresented citizen is a national. States then may, in accordance with their national legislation, require citizens to reimburse the incurred costs.

The Slovenian Consular Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs conducts its tasks as stated in the Consular Assistance Act. In emergencies related to outbreaks of disease, the National Plan on Protection and Relief in the Event of an Epidemic or Pandemic of an Infectious Disease among Humans also defines their role (Government of the Republic of Slovenia, 2020).¹² The Plan outlines the basic procedures to be activated in the case of an epidemic or a pandemic, such as establishing contacts with foreign governments, international organizations, embassies, and consulates and offering assistance to Slovenian citizens located in foreign countries. The Plan also presents the legal basis for establishing a Consular Crisis Cell (Slov. *Konzularna krizna celica*), which provides information to citizens stranded abroad and responds to repatriation requests.

11 Directive (EU) 2015/637, adopted on April 20, 2015. The Directive builds on the point (c) of Article 20(2) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union – TFEU) and Article 23 of the TFEU, which state that the Member States should provide consular protection to unrepresented citizens under the same conditions as their own nationals. This Directive does not affect the Member States' competence to determine the scope of the protection to be provided to their own nationals.

12 Other relevant documents include the Plan on the Crisis Management of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Action Plan on the Activities of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs During Natural and Other Disasters.

REPATRIATION STRATEGIES

To facilitate the repatriation of their citizens, the Member States adopted different measures in line with their capacities. In addition, they were able to activate the EU Civil Protection Mechanism.¹³ In the first month of the pandemic, 15 countries requested the help of the Mechanism, and as a result, 4,382 EU citizens were repatriated with evacuation flights by the end of March. The number of Slovenians repatriated on these flights was 19 (Prpic, 2020). The priority, however, was to bring EU citizens back on commercial flights. According to the official estimates, 250,000 were returned in March with no need to activate additional EU resources (Prpic, 2020). Throughout the entire year, the EU and the Member States brought home over 600,000 people. The EU's Civil Protection Mechanism facilitated and co-financed 408 repatriation flights to bring home more than 100,300, including 90,000 stranded EU citizens (European Commission, 2021). Apart from the Mechanism, the EU has been involved in consular protection through the work of the European External Action Service (the European Union's diplomatic service), EU delegations, and cooperation between the EU Member States' embassies and consulates in third countries (Prpic, 2020).¹⁴

However, as Šter (2021) notes, the role and coordination at the EU level could be improved. Often, individual states mobilized their good connections with the third countries, while those Member States with fewer networks and connections were left behind. In his expert opinion, the EU could have played a more assertive coordinating role in this respect. In addition, although the support and solidarity between the Member States in terms of providing consular assistance and sharing repatriation flights departing from the third countries were notable, there was little or no assistance with travel arrangements within the EU. In other words, when the EU citizens from different Member States were repatriated from a third country to a location in the EU, their home states were expected to arrange further transport to bring them back home. In some cases, repatriation was allowed only by air. This task proved to be particularly daunting for Slovenia, which did not own any aircraft at the time of the outbreak. Therefore, the Slovenian Consular Department's action relied on the inventiveness and resourcefulness of the staff based in the consular headquarters in Ljubljana.

13 The Mechanism aims to strengthen cooperation between the EU Member States and six Participating States on civil protection to improve prevention, preparedness, and response to disasters. When an emergency overwhelms the response capabilities of a single country, it can request assistance through the Mechanism. The Mechanism was established in 2001.

14 According to the Article 20(2) c and 23 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU and Article 46 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, and according to the 2015 Directive on consular protection for unrepresented European citizens living or travelling outside the EU, EU citizens have the right to consular protection from another EU Member State in a third country, under the same conditions as its own nationals, if their country is unrepresented (Prpic, 2020).

The establishment and activities of the Consular Crisis Cell

To cope with the unprecedented demand for assistance, the Slovenian Consular Department operating within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs activated a Consular Crisis Cell (CCC) on February 14. The primary role of the CCC was to set up a call service for Slovenian nationals stranded abroad, organize repatriation flights and other transportation options to ensure their safe return to Slovenia, and establish cooperation with Slovenian and other consulates and embassies abroad (Konzularna krizna celica MZZ). The Crisis Management Plan of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had foreseen its activation. However, the scope of the crisis created an unprecedented demand for consular assistance, and the subsequent organizational challenges exceeded the provisions put in place in the existing documents.

The staff at the Consular Department was required to adopt ad hoc measures and creative solutions to provide consular service to thousands of Slovenians in need of their assistance. The initial challenges concerning the functioning of the Consular Crisis Cell involved basic human resource management, including the questions of how to recruit competent staff to work long hours, how to provide financial compensation for their overtime, and how and where to find suitable space for them to carry out their activities as well as how to find additional computers, organize warm meals,¹⁵ and provide beverages (Šter, 2021). The head of the consular department, Andrej Šter, negotiated to turn a conference room at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs into a hub where a total of thirty people would work in shifts of ten to answer telephone calls, reply to e-mails, post information on social media, and provide any advice relating to repatriation. They answered several hundred questions per day (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021). The hub was a lively place where highly motivated enthusiasts with different experiences and skills gathered and established inspiring intergenerational cooperation (Šter, 2021).

The initial event that prompted its establishment was the repatriation of six Slovenian nationals stranded on the cruise ship *Diamond Princess* in Jokahoma, Japan (Ministry of Defense, 2020a), which turned out to be an unprecedented challenge. The first two nationals were to return to the EU on an Italian airplane that was set to make a pit stop in Germany. Slovenia was required to pick up the recruited nationals at the airport and transport them to Slovenia via a direct flight. However, the only aircraft owned by Slovenia had been undergoing repairs in Switzerland. The Slovenian army could pick up the two nationals with the army helicopter, but this was not an option since they would need to land twice before reaching Germany. The CCC reached out to the private aircraft providers in Slovenia, all of whom refused to cooperate, and so did at least 60 foreign providers to whom Slovenia reached out. Eventually, a Serbian provider was outsourced (Šter, 2021). Šter noted that Slovenia's

15 The cost of the meals was initially shared between the employees because the expenditure was not accounted for in the consulate's budget. Later, the head of the consulate made arrangements to receive lunch from the nearby military barracks.

capacities for evacuating its citizens were non-existent. Therefore, cooperation with other countries depended greatly on personal connections and acquaintances, making experienced diplomats and consulate workers indispensable.

By the end of March, over 360 Slovenian nationals and more than 300 foreign nationals had been evacuated by air. With the assistance of the CCC, between 800–1000 nationals returned to Slovenia independently. Around 120 nationals were repatriated by bus (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020). Slovenian foreign minister Anže Logar particularly praised the cooperation with the neighboring countries (Croatia, Austria, and Hungary) and Spain, the UK, France, Russia, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020). Slovenian nationals were repatriated from several EU and third countries, including Japan, Russia, Thailand, Philippines, Vietnam, Morocco, the United States, and the Canary Islands (U.Z. / STA / D.L., 2020). Repatriations took place between the second half of February and April 6, when the Slovenian government decided to abruptly suspend assisted repatriation. The decision was sudden and unexpected, also for the consulate staff, since the need for repatriation persevered and more Slovenians remained stranded abroad (Šter, 2021). The reason for this decision has not been made public. However, at the end of March, the Slovenian foreign minister had alluded that Slovenian nationals abroad were already urged on March 6 to return to the country and that Slovenia would no longer organize additional return flights for Slovenians who refused to board the ones initially available (SDS, 2020).

The CCC remained operational for another twenty days until April 26 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021). The overall cost of repatriations was around 350,000 EUR, but the government decided not to claim the expenses from the repatriates. Instead, a fund for voluntary contributions was created, and repatriates (and others) could contribute an amount they considered suitable. By mid-May, the collected amount was already 750,000 EUR (STA, 2020).¹⁶ The generous contributions reflected the gratitude of Slovenian nationals for the efforts made by the CCC.

After April 26, the tasks conducted by the CCC did not cease but were transformed to meet the new demand for information after the initial mobility lockdowns. The focus was no longer on the emergency repatriation from the third countries but rather on everyday border-regime-related problems experienced by international students, labor migrants, and cross-border commuters.¹⁷

16 The funds will most likely be spent on the purchase of new medical equipment for Slovenian hospitals (Šter, 2021).

17 There were cases when Slovenians abroad contacted the Consulate or the Office for Slovenians Abroad with a request for repatriation due to the loss of employment because of the pandemic. In April and May 2020, two charter flights were organized for Slovenian workers who had lost their jobs in the United Kingdom and requested assistance in returning to Slovenia (Valentinčič, 2021b).

SUMMARY AND EVALUATION OF POLICY MEASURES

The measures initiated by the Consular Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs can be grouped into three categories: active intervention, information provision, and additional support.¹⁸

Active intervention refers to the repatriation efforts involving communication with different ministerial actors, relevant national and international organizations, governments, consulates, and embassies, and organizing repatriation flights and other travel options to bring home nationals stranded abroad. According to the report published by the Administration of the Republic of Slovenia for Civil Protection and Disaster Relief¹⁹ on the activities of protection and assistance during COVID-19 (2020), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs carried out assisted return for around 800 Slovenian citizens and provided assistance in the return of around 1,500 Slovenian citizens who individually returned to the country. The report states that the ministry organized 24 journeys by aircraft and bus (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021). Much of this successful action resulted from the head of the Consular Department's ad hoc setup and organization of the Consular Crisis Cell (CCC). Without a detailed plan of action, he used his and his colleagues' extensive experience to set up the CCC. Likewise, they used their personal networks to connect with colleagues and former colleagues who could provide seats for Slovenian nationals on repatriation flights.²⁰ In its evaluation report, the Administration for Civil Protection and Disaster Relief acknowledged that consulates in the most endangered parts of the world were understaffed. In addition, there was a shortage of public employees who would be willing and appropriately trained to depart to the crisis areas. They also noted that candidates to work in the Consular Crisis Cell should be identified and trained to perform basic consular tasks. Selected employees should also undergo capacity-building training and be involved in the activities of the Slovenian diplomatic and consular networks or the European External Action Service (Ministry of Defense, 2020b). However, according to Šter (2021), the status quo persists, and, during the next emergency, the CCC will have to rebuild itself from scratch.

The second category, information provision, refers to the assistance provided by the CCC to residents abroad and their families in the form of information sharing via telephone, e-mail, websites, and social media. The employees also provided support to consular posts, embassies, and the media (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021). The review of published information by different media sources shows that the media

18 Similar categories have been identified in other countries as well. See, for example, Konstantinidou & Vintila, 2021.

19 The Administration of the Republic of Slovenia for Civil Protection and Disaster Relief is part of the Ministry of Defense.

20 The head of the Consular Department, Andrej Šter, was awarded by the president of the Republic of Slovenia with the Order of Merit for his assistance to Slovenians abroad during the COVID-19 pandemic (STA, 2020).

was well informed on the activities concerning repatriation. All repatriation flights were well documented in daily newspapers and their online platforms. Information about mobility restrictions affecting the return of migrant and posted workers could be obtained from the websites of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Slovenian embassies, Slovenian Police, trade unions—especially the Trade Union of Migrant Workers, and social media posts shared by users (Toplak & Lukšič Hacin, 2022). The workers stranded abroad could also seek assistance from a non-governmental organization, the Counselling Office for Workers, which had provided information, among others, to third-country nationals posted from Slovenia to the EU Member States. In most cases, these were workers from the Western Balkans who needed information about mobility restrictions in several countries: their current country of work (EU Member State), employment (Slovenia), and origin (Lukić, 2021).

The assistance was also provided to foreign citizens with or without residency in Slovenia. Such was the case, for example, of Serbian workers stranded in Slovenia due to the entry ban put out by Serbia, as discussed earlier. The consulate also offered transport to foreign nationals in solidary and quid-pro-quo actions that strengthened bilateral relations (Udovič, 2020). However, the role of the EU in this respect has been evaluated as unambitious. According to Šter, the EU missed its chance to become a more important player in global consular relations. He noted that “he saw no EU flag carrier” and that there were only national means of transportation available to the EU citizens (Udovič, 2020). The consulate’s efforts to assist in other matters, such as mitigating social vulnerabilities, were noted. The highly publicized case in question was the consulate’s role in arranging the arrival of a mother from Bosnia and Herzegovina whose son had lost his wife in Slovenia and was in desperate need of a caregiver (Šter, 2021). Such actions, however, were dependent on the goodwill of the consulate staff since no detailed systemic guidelines on transnational social protection in crises were in place.

Finally, it should be noted that while the pandemic triggered emergency evacuations and repatriations of Slovenians stranded abroad, the ongoing repatriation of Venezuelans of Slovenian origin from Venezuela due to the economic hardship and political unrest came to an abrupt stop (Valentinčič, 2021a). The government’s decision to repatriate from Venezuela prior to the declaration of the pandemic led to an unprecedented political and organizational undertaking coordinated by the Government Office for Slovenians Abroad. It resulted in the arrival of the first group of Venezuelans in Slovenia in January 2020. However, the ongoing action was suspended a couple of months later due to the novel coronavirus outbreak and subsequent border restrictions. Until the beginning of the pandemic, 23 Venezuelans of Slovenian origin and their family members were repatriated, but 15 were left

behind as repatriation was deferred due to the suspension of general and commercial flights in Venezuela (Valentinčič, 2021a).²¹

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The sudden and unprecedented need for swift state intervention triggered different institutional responses across the world. National policymakers adopted varying emergency measures to assist their citizens stranded abroad and diaspora members in need of assistance (Konstantinidou & Vintila, 2021). The ability to respond was largely dependent on the existing transport (especially aviation) infrastructure, civil protection capacities and capabilities, and international consular relations and networks. Slovenia was among the highly disadvantaged states because it did not own any aircraft. Therefore, the repatriation depended on the ability to outsource the flights and the flight crew at a moment's notice. Since there were no detailed plans in place on how to carry out the repatriation of such massive scope and duration, the capacities of the consulate headquarters in terms of the number and capabilities of the staff were initially insufficient. However, the improvisation and inventiveness of the consulate staff, who were able to provide ad hoc solutions during the global-scale emergency, enabled the return of hundreds of nationals and non-nationals. The response from the public regarding the repatriation activities was overwhelmingly positive (Metina lista, 2020; Lamovšek, 2020). It seems, however, that internal policy evaluation did not result in any further activities in terms of developing a detailed plan of action for similar future emergencies. Since the success of any large-scale emergency repatriations is dependent on robust and detailed planning, the lack of interest and motivation to build on the lessons learned during the pandemic is disappointing and signifies a failure to address the issue at the normative level.

The role of consulates and sending states' policies in assisting emigrants to deal with risks abroad have, in general, not received significant scholarly attention (Lafleur & Vintila, 2020; Vah Jevšnik & Cukut Krilić, 2020). However, the body of literature will undoubtedly continue to grow given the transnational turn in migration studies, the increasingly emerging diaspora engagement policies by which the sending states' governments seek to engage with nationals and their descendants abroad (Lafleur & Vintila, 2020; Vah Jevšnik & Cukut Krilić, 2020), and in light of the pandemic that has raised numerous issues relating to the engagement with the diaspora in times of need. Further research is also needed about return migration in the context of pandemics. Return migration has primarily been analyzed in the context of macro-structural changes, such as an economic recession. However, it is questionable if the

21 Repatriation from Venezuela is not subject to the Consular Protection Act (Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia No. 30/18) but the Act Regulating Relations between the Republic of Slovenia and Slovenians Abroad (Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia No. 43/06, 76/10 and 206/21).

pandemic can be conceptualized as a similar kind of crisis as an economic downturn (Grabowska & Czeranowska, 2021). At least two differentiating factors can be identified: the pace of the changes involved and the inevitability of mobility restrictions enforced by governments to hinder the spread of the disease (Grabowska & Czeranowska, 2021). In this respect, new avenues of research will need to emerge to grasp the evolving dynamics of migration and mobility in pandemic situations.

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POVZETEK

REPATRIACIJA SLOVENSКИH DRŽAVLJANOV V OBDOBJU OMEJEVANJA MOBILNOSTI ZARADI PANDEMIJE BOLEZNI COVID-19 Moja VAH JEVŠNIK, Mirjam MILHARČIČ HLADNIK

Članek raziskuje odzivnost vlade na negotovosti in socialna tveganja, s katerimi so se soočali državljani, ki so med izbruhom pandemije Covid-19 obtičali v tujini zaradi zapor mej in omejevanja mobilnosti. Temelji na pregledu poročil na ravni EU in nacionalni ravni, na kvalitativni analizi medijskih virov ter na intervjujih s tremi strokovnjaki: vodjo konzularne službe, predstavnikom nevladne organizacije za pomoč delavcem migrantom ter predstavnikom Urada za Slovence v zamejstvu in po svetu. Članek obravnava obdobje med februarjem in aprilom 2020, s čimer sovpada z obdobjem razglasitve epidemije in delovanja konzularne krizne celice na Ministrstvu za zunanje zadeve. Avtorici izpostavljata pomanjkanje podrobnih sistemskih smernic o transnacionalni socialni zaščiti v kriznih razmerah in trdita, da lahko uspeh pri repatriaciji slovenskih državljanov v veliki meri pripišemo predvsem *ad hoc* ukrepom, ki jih je izvedlo visoko motivirano in iznajdljivo konzularno osebje. Podrobneje so opisani postopki vzpostavitve konzularne krizne celice, ki je delovala z namenom nudenja informacij in pomoči Slovincem in drugim državljanom v tujini ter njihovim svojcem v Sloveniji. Analizirani so številni izzivi, s katerimi se je soočalo konzularno osebje ob odsotnosti jasnih in podrobnih smernic delovanja, ter načini urejanja vračanja – tudi s pomočjo osebnih poznanstev in omreženosti konzularnega osebja. Članek ugotavlja, da so bile aktivnosti konzularnega osebja v Sloveniji s strani ljudi ocenjene zelo dobro, vendar pa na normativni ravni ni bila pripravljena poglobljena analiza, ki bi služila kot osnova za pripravo podrobnega načrta za delovanje v primeru novih kompleksnih globalnih kriz.