

Mirjana Ule, Slavko Kurdija

Intercultural Relations and Attitudes towards Immigrants – The Case of Slovenia

The paper analyses public opinion towards immigrants in Slovenia, especially in terms of openness and acceptance. It begins by providing some key theoretical background on the topic and then draws on selected empirical data from the European Social Survey from a cross-temporal perspective. According to survey data, respondents in Slovenia have become more open towards immigrants in recent years. However, there are significant tensions between those who are more open to and those who oppose immigration. This divide between immigration supporters and opponents is a persistent social tension that characterises political orientations in Slovenia in general. Despite the shifting public opinion towards greater tolerance, right-wing populist politicians may still target and mobilise those who remain sceptical or hostile towards immigrants.

Keywords: migration, intercultural tension, social categorisation, acceptance, public opinion, populism.

Medkulturni odnosi in odnos do priseljencev – primer Slovenije

Prispevek analizira javno mnenje o priseljenicah v Sloveniji, zlasti z vidika odprtosti in sprejemanja. Avtorji na začetku predstavijo nekaj ključnih teoretičnih izhodišč, nato pa raziskovalno tematiko proučijo še s časovnega vidika na podlagi izbranih empiričnih podatkov iz Evropske družboslovne raziskave. Slednja kaže, da anketiranci v Sloveniji v zadnjih letih postajajo bolj odprti do priseljencev, hkrati pa se pojavljajo napetosti med tistimi, ki so bolj odprti do priseljevanja, in tistimi, ki priseljevanju nasprotujejo. Ločnica med podporniki in nasprotniki priseljevanja je ena od oblik stalnih družbenih napetosti, ki so na splošno značilne za politične usmeritve v Sloveniji. Kljub nagibanju javnega mnenja k večji strpnosti lahko namreč populistični politiki z desnega pola še vedno najdejo somišljenike in podpornike med tistimi deli prebivalstva, ki do priseljencev ostajajo skeptični ali sovražni.

Ključne besede: migracije, medkulturne napetosti, družbena kategorizacija, sprejemanje, javno mnenje, populizem.

Correspondence address: Mirjana Ule, Faculty of Social Science, Kardeljeva ploščad 5, SI-1000 Ljubljana, e-mail: mirjana.ule@fdv.uni-lj.si; Slavko Kurdija, Faculty of Social Science, The Public Opinion and Mass Communication Research Centre, Kardeljeva ploščad 5, SI-1000 Ljubljana, e-mail: slavko.kurdija@fdv.uni-lj.si.

1. Introduction

In the European Union, migration has become a fact of life. As the Special Eurobarometer survey report entitled *Integration of Immigrants in the European Union* (European Commission 2022) notes, approximately 37 million persons born outside the EU reside in the Union, making up around 8% of its total population. Both within the EU and between the EU and the rest of the world, populations have become more mobile, moving for work, family, leisure, and, unfortunately, fleeing persecution and war. Migration and the integration of immigrants have become, and are likely to remain, politically sensitive issues.

A recent study by the Vienna-based International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) on migration trends in the EU warns that a substantial increase in non-European migrants to EU countries can be expected in 2024 (ICMPD 2024). In addition to established causes and reasons for the continued influx of migration into the EU – such as the increasing number of economically and politically threatened countries, worsening ecological crises, and new military conflicts around the world – the report cites the upcoming European and US elections. These elections will feature migration as a primary theme, with governments and opposition forces trying to convince their voters of their plans for reducing irregular arrivals and asylum applications (ICMPD 2024, 34). Consequently, we can expect a tightening of entry conditions to the EU for migrants from crisis areas. “I call it the closed-shop effect. People will hear all these measures on migration announced in election campaigns and will think they have to be here [in the EU] before they come into force,” said ICMPD Director General Michael Spindelegger (O’Carroll 2024).

For most migrants, Slovenia is just a transit country, through which they try to reach the EU’s central countries. However, with a larger influx, more immigrants are likely to want to stay in Slovenia. The key question here is whether, and to what extent, public opinion in the EU and Slovenia supports the social integration of immigrants who wish to stay in Slovenia and whether domestic society is willing to help them do so. Slovenia’s policy towards immigrants has a significant impact on contact and communication with immigrants. On one hand, this policy tries to follow the prevailing attitudes, opinions, and expectations of public opinion in Slovenia towards immigrants, but it also strongly influences public opinion through the media and political messages.

In this paper, we analyse public attitudes towards immigrants in Slovenia, especially regarding openness and acceptance. We begin with some key social-psychological theoretical concepts, assuming that a more open public attitude consequently also allows for better integration. The relevance of a social-psychological approach to the study of attitudes towards immigrants is also highlighted in other contemporary studies on migration, such as the study by the Dresden Forum for Migration and Democracy on migration and populism in Germany

and the EU (MIDEM 2018) and the study by the Roman social psychologist Valerio Pellegrini et al. on the psychological underpinnings of anti-migrant attitudes among voters of populist parties in Italy (Pellegrini et al. 2022). In the second part of the paper, our central focus will be on selected empirical data on attitudes towards immigrants from the European Social Survey from a temporal comparative perspective.

2. Theoretical Framework: The Social-Psychological Characteristics of Intercultural Relations

Intercultural tensions are not the result of random events. They develop out of cultural differences influenced by socio-economic, historical, and social-psychological factors between different social groups. Relationships among members of the same micro-culture or culture are governed by the rules of interpersonal communication, where we enter relationships as individuals with personal characteristics. However, when interacting with persons from other cultures, micro-cultures, or groups, we typically act as representatives of those groups or cultures, not as individuals. This means that we perceive and judge ourselves and others as representatives of these cultures, not as individuals with specific characteristics. Personality traits take a back seat, while cultural and group characteristics come to the fore, governed by different rules (Arasaratnam 2013). In intercultural communication, we do not then act as “I” or “you”. Instead, “we”, “you” or “they” relations come to the forefront.

The most common strategy for intercultural communication and relations is to increase attention to group identity markers such as gender, age, race, physical characteristics, social belonging, and lifestyle. Gender, age, and race are typical categories or prototypes for social categorisation and therefore also the first characteristics noticed when perceiving people from other cultures (Postmes & Branscombe 2010). When comparing our own group with other groups, we tend to succumb to various errors of judgement, such as overestimating our own group and underestimating other groups. Renowned social psychologist Henri Tajfel (1978) calls this phenomenon the process of establishing a positive difference. By establishing a positive difference, we artificially raise the value of our own group and indirectly enhance our self-esteem. Experiments have shown that this phenomenon occurs even in purely ad hoc groups in laboratory experiments by artificially dividing the experimental subjects into two or more groups (Baron & Kerr 2003).

The spread of negative perceptions of other groups is also based on what are known as illusory correlations – the tendency to perceive less normal and socially disapproved behaviour in people from other groups rather than in members of one's own group (Kauff et al. 2016). The effect of illusory correlations is greater when people are anxious, scared, angry, or resentful. It is most common

in times of crisis. Insecurity, anger, and fear are phenomena that are strongly present in the social fabric of the modern world. Ashley Whitaker (2020) talks about how a state of permanent insecurity causes existential rage, an intolerable and acute flooding of people with unreflected frustrations and anxiety about existential threats. The feelings of humiliation and anger that accompany this existential anger are common fodder for populist policies that exploit these feelings to spread hateful sentiments towards the perceived perpetrators of this situation, such as members of marginalised groups, people with different lifestyles, refugees, migrants. It is then easy to make unjustified generalisations of negative characteristics based on certain observed negative traits, often expressing the defensive behaviour of a minority group, which quickly escalates into a general devaluation of that group. They perceive possible violent behaviour by the minority as aggression, while they perceive violent behaviour by their own group as justified self-defence.

According to a study by the MIDEM Forum on Migration and Populism, the segments of the population that feel most threatened by immigrants are those that are apolitical, have less education, and, above all, have had no contact with immigrants (MIDEM 2018, 20). These segments are also the most supportive of demands for radical restrictions on migration and the expulsion of immigrants from the country. These feelings are deliberately stirred up and reinforced by right-wing populist politicians and their extensive media propaganda, which spread fears of the devaluation of established ways of life, their own culture, and common identity (MIDEM 2018, 37). Although microaggressions are subtle, appearing as innocent verbal or behavioural slips in interpersonal relations between representatives of the host society and immigrants, they can have severe and long-lasting negative consequences for immigrants if they are continuously repeated, because they further reinforce and deepen their sense of social exclusion and unwantedness (Quassoli & Colombo 2023).

However, not all foreigners are equally accepted, although they are generally all subject to processes of stigmatisation or “chains of othering”, as the cultural sociologist Edward Said (2005) calls this mechanism of negative social categorisation. The first act in this chain of othering is the homogenisation of foreigners as other and different, without any internal differentiation among individuals. Homogenisation is usually followed by the hierarchical classification of groups of strangers according to a biological, cultural, or historical hierarchical scale, as defined by Erwin Goffman in his stigma theory. In Goffman’s typology of stigmas, strangers are victims of three types of stigmas, albeit to different degrees. The first type of stigma is represented by physical characteristics and deficiencies, such as gender and age. The second type is represented by real or imagined life and value orientations and habits. The third type of stigma is what Goffman calls “tribal stigma”. This includes racial, ethnic, and religious characteristics (Goffman 1986).

In relation to migrants, the third, “tribal stigma”, which combines racial, ethnic, and religious “otherness”, seems to overlap with the first two (physical and character). At the top of the hierarchical scale of otherness are therefore the “good foreigners”, for example, white, wealthy members of Western culture who, although they are not natives, are interesting, useful, and acceptable. At the other end of the chain of othering are those foreigners who have accumulated all the deprivations of foreignness, for example poor, black, illegal immigrants (Van Rijswijk et al. 2009). Such stereotypes are common in situations where there are no clear guidelines for behaviour and speech and no objective criteria for judging other people.

Interestingly, the feeling of social deprivation is also common among members of dominant groups. For example, surveys of white people with conservative political leanings in the US have shown feelings of group disadvantage against black people, believing that black people are privileged in the US. Research on nationalist movements also shows that they are regularly associated with references to group disadvantage (Lopes et al. 2013). Members of German nationalist groups in Carinthia (Koroška) say that they feel disadvantaged because of the special rights enjoyed by members of the Slovene minority in Carinthia.

Unlike the simplistic adaptation constructs of the newcomer and the native, which serve primarily to navigate unfamiliar situations, the ideological (nationalistic, prejudiced) construct (of the foreigner) is different. Nationalist constructs further simplify the relationship to others and otherness by deliberately adapting to the particular interests that drive them, and therefore usually no longer have empirically observable links to the original reality. Nationalistic, prejudiced discourse is one of the most difficult obstacles to rational intercultural communication and relations. It manifests primarily in disrespectful, intolerant, or dismissive attitudes towards members of other nations, ethnic communities, races, cultures, people with different lifestyles, religions, or sexual orientations.

Otherness in nationalist discourse becomes a totalising signifier that serves as an argument for rejecting the coexistence or mixing of different racial or ethnic groups or individuals. Bauman (2003), for example, speaks of “myxophobia”, the fear of mixing with foreigners. Goffman (1986) calls this type of fear the fear of contamination, the fear of being contaminated by a stigmatised person’s trait and thus being devalued. It is precisely this otherness, underpinned by the thesis of the diversity of cultures and their mutual incompatibility, that is one of the main arguments against immigration and the integration of migrants into new environments.

Pellegrini et al.’s study on the psychological basis of anti-migrant attitudes, for example, finds that discrimination against migrants is closely linked to competition as a fundamental social strategy and to the tendency to maintain dominance and hierarchy in society (Pellegrini et al. 2022, 455). If we describe a minority as lazy or stupid, these descriptions help us to rationalise the social system that has

created discrimination and marginalisation of that minority. Such rationalisations also justify the privileges of the dominant group. This means that prejudice has the ideological function of justifying the local or global social order.

But the world today is too heterogeneous and dynamic to narrow our relationships and actions to only those people we know, who are close to us, and who fit in with us. People from cultures different from the one in which we have been socialised are around us all the time. We need to be prepared to meet them. Anyone can find themselves in the role of stranger, in strange physical or social environments. The first experience of intercultural communication is precisely that of strangeness.

3. Introduction to Empirical Evidence

According to the Special Eurobarometer survey, Europeans tend to largely overestimate the number of non-EU immigrants as a proportion of the population of their countries (European Commission 2022)¹. For example, around a third of respondents believe that their share is between 12% and 25%, while the average is only about 5%. Additionally, over a third of Europeans (36%) think that there are more immigrants staying legally than illegally (European Commission 2022, 18–19). 31% of Europeans view immigration as more of a problem than an opportunity, although this perception varies significantly by country. Compared to 2017, in 2021 Europeans were slightly more inclined to see immigration from outside the EU as an opportunity. The tendency to view immigration as an opportunity decreases with age, with 32% of those aged 15 to 24 seeing it as an opportunity, compared to only 18% of those aged 55 or older (European Commission 2022, 40–41).

Most Europeans (64%) feel comfortable with immigrants, and four in ten respondents interact with them on a weekly basis. Between 2017 and 2021, on average across the EU, respondents seem to have become noticeably more comfortable interacting with immigrants across various social categories (European Commission 2022). More than half of Europeans (51%) have either friends or family members who are immigrants, a sharp increase of 20 percentage points since 2017. Younger respondents (53%) and those with higher levels of education (45%) are consistently more likely to report higher levels of contact with immigrants on at least a weekly basis. This is also confirmed by the empirical data presented in the section below.

According to the survey, residents of Sweden, other Scandinavian countries, Denmark, and the Netherlands are the most open to immigrants. Slovenia falls in the middle range among EU countries on most questions in this report, close to Germany and France. On some questions, such as willingness to engage with immigrants, Slovenia is even more open. However, fewer respondents in Slovenia than in the EU average consider the integration of migrants to be successful,

and significantly more respondents in Slovenia (40%) see migrants as more of a problem than an opportunity, with only 17% seeing them as more of an opportunity than a problem.

To examine attitudes towards immigrants in Slovenia in more detail, the following analysis will focus on selected questions measuring openness and acceptance towards immigrants based on data from the European Social Survey. We will also conduct a detailed comparison based on age and education.

4. Method and Data Sources

The baseline measurement was taken from the European Social Survey (ESS) from 2002 to 2023 (ESS ERIC 2024). Since the beginning, ESS has included a comprehensive set of questions related to migrants. In 2002 and 2014, in addition to the standard block of questions, extensive modules on migration and migrants were also developed. The ESS offers an exceptional opportunity to monitor longitudinal and cross-national comparisons in attitudes towards migrants.²

The European Social Survey (ESS ERIC, n. d.) is a renowned cross-national social science survey emphasising empirical observations of social phenomena through systematic data collection and analysis. The ESS's research design relies on cross-sectional survey data collected from a representative sample of individuals across more than 30 European countries. The survey employs face-to-face interviews with standardised questionnaires, with a focus on high-quality translations into the languages of all participating countries. The ESS is one of the most valid and reliable instruments for systematically monitoring attitudes and subjective perceptions in European countries. Its methodology has reached the highest level of standardisation in comparative social science research (Malnar & Kurdija 2010), and the survey has been awarded the Descartes Prize, the highest European award in scientific research, for its achievements in ensuring consistency and equivalence of methods cross-nationally.

Within the regular ESS questions on public attitudes towards migration, we find various perspectives on the issue, from the permeability of national borders to different types of migrants and the perceived advantages and disadvantages of migration. We will use longitudinal comparisons of Slovene data over the entire survey duration from 2002 to 2023 (Kurdija et al. 2023). However, some highlights will focus specifically on structural differences between 2014 and 2023. We will mainly observe two aspects of attitudes towards immigrants. The first examines the level of support for immigration in Slovenia from an inter-temporal perspective with the question: "Has Slovenia become a worse or a better place to live due to people coming to live here from other countries?". Respondents answered using a scale from 0 to 10, with 0 indicating a worse place to live and 10 a better place to live.

Secondly, we will observe public attitudes towards immigrants from poorer countries outside Europe. Namely, the survey records attitudes towards different categories of migrants regarding geographical proximity and similarity to Slovene national origin. The focus on immigrants from poorer non-European countries will most clearly show the contradictions within the Slovene public, considering the different social positions according to the respondent's age and education. Previous studies have shown pronounced distinctions in these two variables (Kunovich 2004). For age, we took three basic categories: 15–34 (young), 35–64 (middle) and 65+ (old). As for education, we grouped the categories from the cross-nationally comparable ISCED classification into three basic categories: lower, middle, and high education. The lower category includes all individuals with no or incomplete primary education to secondary vocational education, the medium category includes those with general secondary or higher vocational (post-secondary) education, and the high category includes those with a university diploma or higher. However, our focus will primarily be on observing the gap between the low and highly educated. The second aspect will be based on the question: "To what extent do you think Slovenia should allow people from poorer countries outside Europe to come and live here?" The four possible answers were grouped into two predominantly opposing categories: 1 – Allow many/some migrants and 2 – Allow few/no migrants.

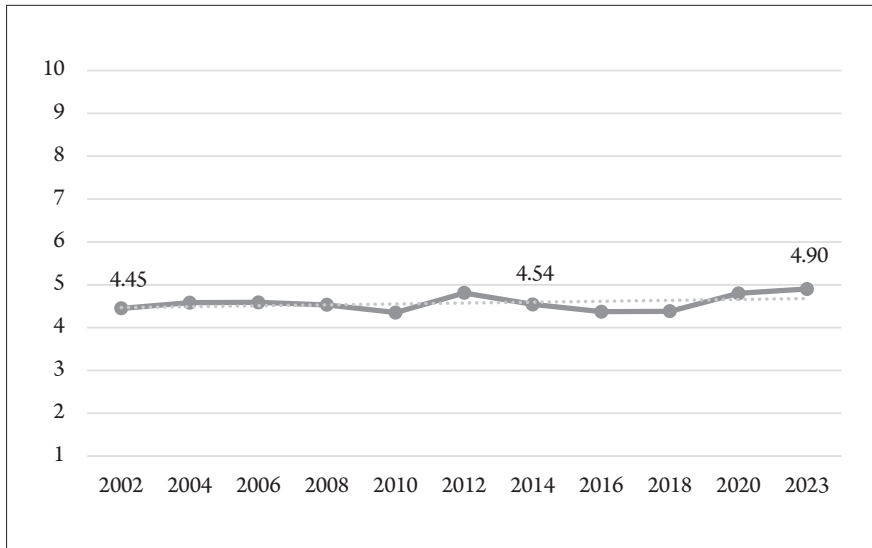
5. Results – Openness and Acceptance towards Immigrants in Slovenia

In the introduction to the empirical presentation, we first examine general attitudes towards immigration in Slovenia over time. Specifically, we address the question: "Has Slovenia become a worse or a better place to live due to people coming to live here from other countries?" Looking at the average values on a scale from 0 to 10 (with 0 indicating a worse place to live and 10 a better place to live), Slovenia ranks 18th with an average score of 4.45 in 2002, and 17th out of 21 countries in 2014 with an average of 4.54 (Austria, Portugal, the Czech Republic and Hungary are also behind Slovenia). In 2023,³ the average is a bit higher (4.90), showing a slightly more optimistic general attitude towards immigration over time.

We can see a fairly stable picture in general attitudes towards immigration over the whole period, with no significant deviations. Even during and after the pronounced refugee crisis in 2015, there were no marked changes in public opinion. There was a slight downward swing in Slovenia from 2012 to 2016, but it was not particularly pronounced. On the contrary, the trend line shows a mild increase in the general climate towards this issue. A similar pattern can be observed in most other European countries. This is somewhat surprising, given

that in the broader European context, there has been a sharpening of the political discourse towards immigrants in the aftermath of the refugee crisis mainly caused by the war in Syria.

Chart 1: Has Slovenia become a worse or a better place to live due to people coming to live here from other countries?



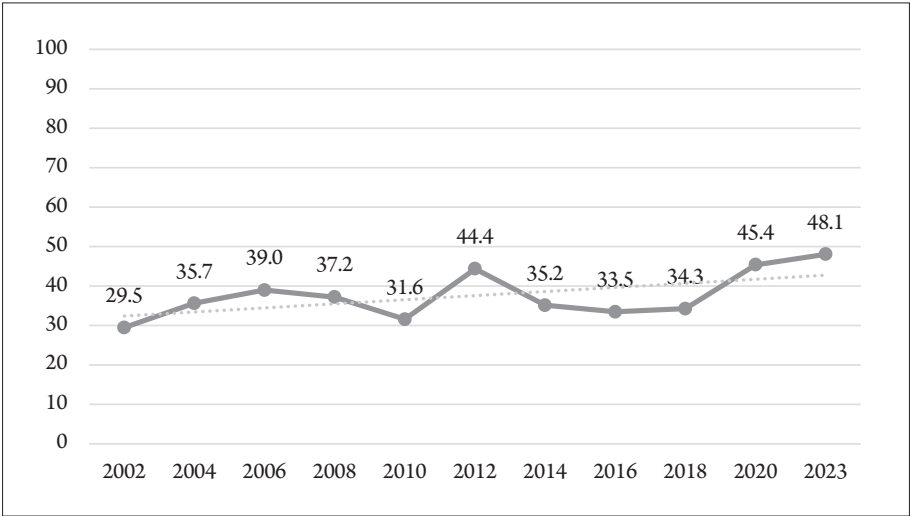
Source: ESS data on Slovenia 2002–2023.

Note: The average on a scale from 0 to 10 (with 0 = worse place to live / 10 = better place to live).

If we analyse the data differently and focus only on the share of respondents who answered “better place to live” among the value-defined group, we observe more dynamics in the cross-temporal comparison. For the category “better place to live”, we summed responses 7, 8, 9 and 10 on a scale from 1 to 10; for the category “worse place to live”, we summed values 0, 1, 2, and 3. The midpoint values of 4, 5 and 6 were excluded as less defined in terms of their position. This approach provides clearer proportions, highlighting the positions expressed (in the sense of pro and contra) more distinctly. The percentages shown are calculated based on the number of respondents who selected answer choices 0, 1, 2, 3, and 7, 8, 9, 10.⁴

Chart 2 shows a slightly more evident, positive shift in attitudes towards immigration. Two notable peaks highlight this shift: the first in 2012, before the large-scale refugee crisis of 2015, and the second in 2023. These two points in the timeline shift the trend notably upward. The linear trend line shows an increase of around 10% in acceptance of immigration over 20 years.

Chart 2: Has Slovenia become a worse or a better place to live due to people coming to live here from other countries? Proportion of responses “better place to live” among more clearly opinionated respondents (%)



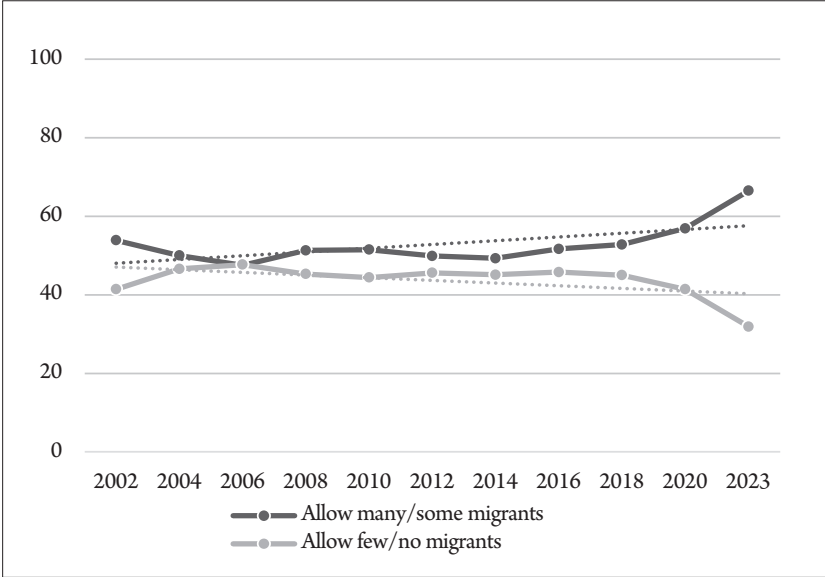
Source: ESS data on Slovenia 2002–2023 (author’s own calculations).

We also examined structural differences in attitudes towards immigration, focusing on questions that reveal greater divisiveness. The ESS categorises several types of immigrants based on their origin, but a detailed breakdown is beyond the scope of this paper. Our primary interest is identifying points where values and political attitudes towards immigrants diverge significantly. To this end, we analysed responses to the question: “To what extent do you think Slovenia should allow people from poorer countries outside Europe to come and live here?” For this analysis, we will use (in sum) two opposing categories: 1 – Allow many/some migrants, indicating openness and acceptance, and 2 – Allow few/no migrants, indicating restriction or closure towards such immigrants.

A glance at Chart 3 confirms the impression given in the previous illustration. The dark line, which represents acceptance of migrants (from poor countries outside Europe), tends to rise, especially after 2018. The curves intersected in 2006, meaning the public was split down the middle. Since then, however, the share of “allow many/some migrants” has been slightly higher than the share of “allow few/no migrants”. The increase is particularly pronounced after 2018, confirming the gradual increase in openness towards migrants from poorer countries outside Europe.

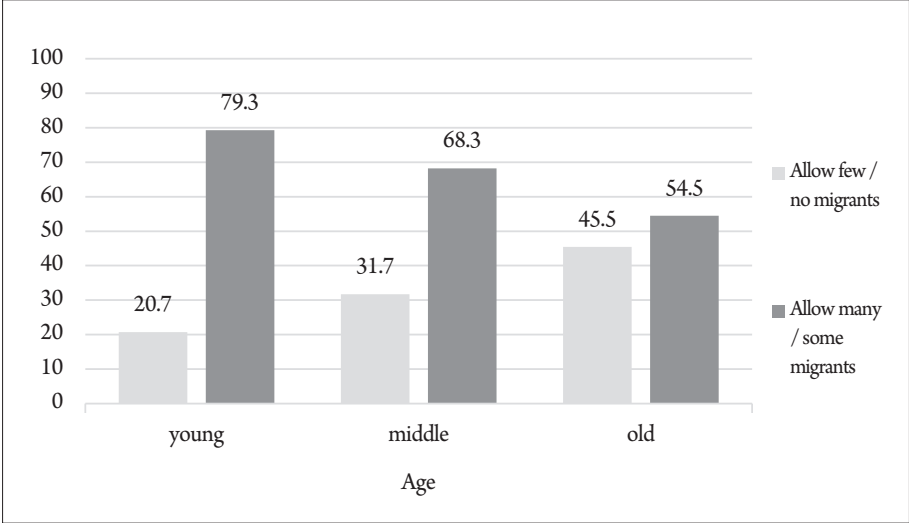
In the next step, we aim to investigate structural differences regarding this attitude dilemma for 2023. We will use the age and education of the respondents as the two basic demographic control criteria, as they reflect, to a large extent, the diversity of views at the subpopulation level.

Chart 3: *To what extent do you think Slovenia should allow people from poorer countries outside Europe to come and live here? (%)*



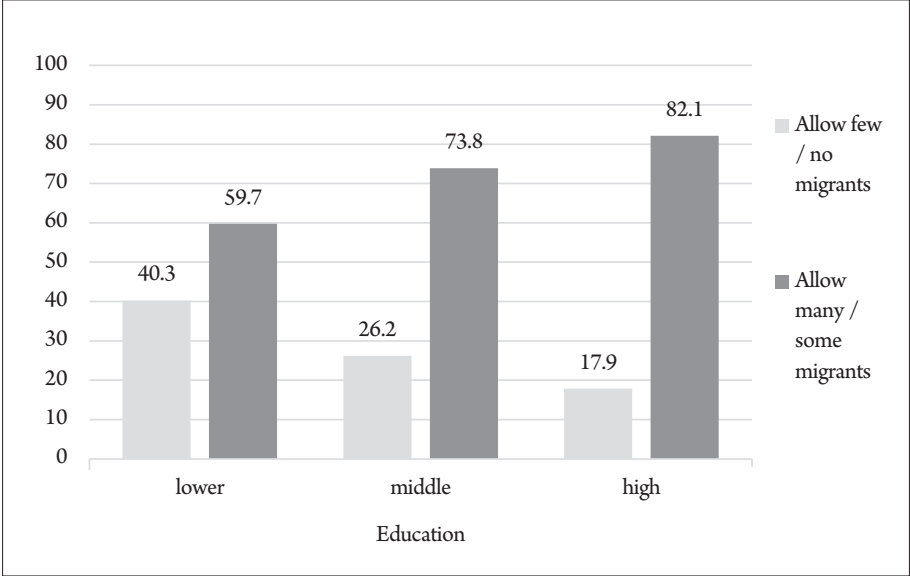
Source: ESS data on Slovenia 2002–2023.

Chart 4: *To what extent do you think Slovenia should allow people from poorer countries outside Europe to come and live here? – By age (%)*



Source: ESS data on Slovenia 2023.

Chart 5: To what extent do you think Slovenia should allow people from poorer countries outside Europe to come and live here? – By education (%)



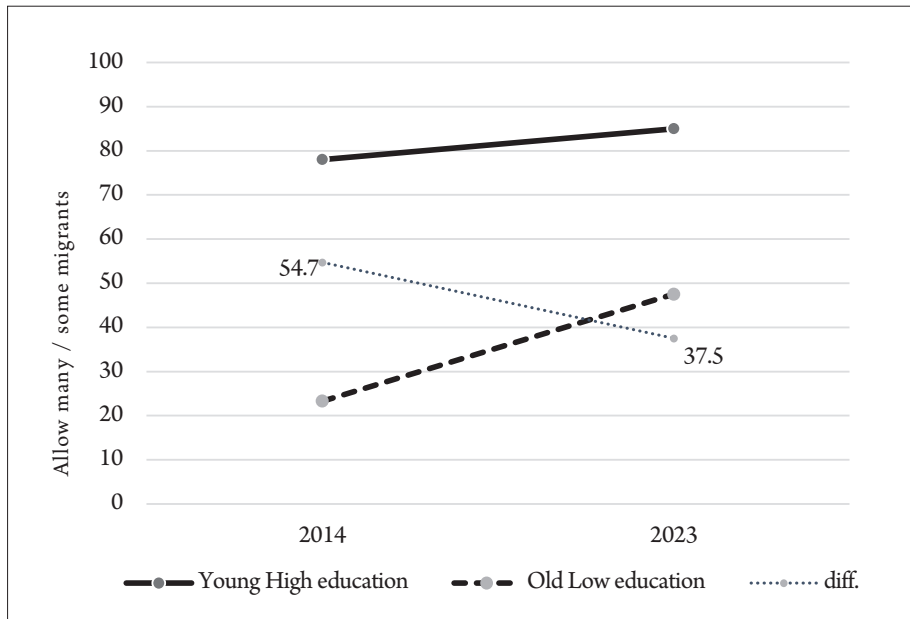
Source: ESS data on Slovenia 2023.

The two bivariate analyses for 2023 (Chart 4 and 5) show a clear linear relationship between the control variables and the dependent variable (allowing entry of migrants from poor countries outside Europe). The differences by age category are significant (Cramer’s V: 0.19; sig 0.0000), with younger individuals being significantly more open to the arrival of this type of migrants than older individuals. Interestingly, even within the older age category (which tends to be much more reserved), the answer “allow many/some migrants” still prevails, albeit with a significantly smaller margin. A similar picture, with even more pronounced differences, is observed in the case of education. The differences are statistically significant (Cramer’s V: 0.21; sig 0.0000) and particularly pronounced between the low-educated group and the other two categories – middle and high, within which the mass-dominant view favours an affirmative attitude towards migrants.

A marked differentiation by age and education is also highlighted in the migration module of the ESS Topline series report analysis (Heath & Richards 2016). This analysis indicates that the cleavage by age and education in attitudes towards migrants is visible in most European countries. The gap is further exacerbated when considering separate sub-categories that account for both criteria simultaneously, with low-educated older people on one hand and high-educated young people on the other.⁵ The disparity in views between these two population segments shows the true range of public divisions within a society regarding the acceptance of migrants (especially those from poor non-European countries).

We have followed up this 2014 example with a comparable analysis using the most recent ESS data on Slovenia (referring to 2023).

Chart 6: The difference in support proportions (for allowing migrants from poorer countries outside Europe to come to Slovenia) between young, highly educated individuals and old, less educated ones. Cross-temporal comparison 2014–2023 (%)



Source: ESS data on Slovenia 2014–2023.

The 2014 analysis in the above-mentioned report (Heath & Richards 2016) already points to a gap between the two observed social categories across European countries. These differences are not equally distributed across Europe; they are significantly smaller in Hungary, the Czech Republic, Ireland, and Israel. Interestingly, at the opposite end of the spectrum, the largest differences are observed in Slovenia, followed by France and the UK. The difference between the two groups is as high as 50% or more in the countries where the groups hold the most divergent views. This is particularly evident in Slovenia, where the difference measured in 2014 was almost 55%. To provide a comparison, we conducted a similar analysis using data from 2023. Chart 6 shows that this difference has narrowed markedly in the most recent measurement. However, it remains at over 37%. The marked increase in support is evident among the older, less educated category, which has apparently adjusted its views towards migrants over the past decade.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

44

Immigration remains a focal point in European politics, retaining its status as one of the foremost concerns among voters across many nations. The influx of labour immigrants into several European countries, coupled with persistent demands to provide refuge for those fleeing war-torn regions globally, ensures that this issue will maintain its relevance for the foreseeable future.

According to public opinion data, respondents in Slovenia generally hold relatively positive attitudes towards immigrants. They have become somewhat more open towards immigrants in recent years, which is a positive trend. Overall, the integration of immigrants is decreasingly perceived as a problem and increasingly acknowledged as a two-way process where both immigrants and society share responsibility, as well as a high governmental priority. Viewing migration as a problem may not necessarily imply hostility towards immigrants but rather reflects a perception that governments are not adequately managing the issue of immigrant integration. It reflects a growing recognition of the value that immigrants could bring to societies, both economically and culturally.

However, the presence of a significant division within the population between supporters and opponents of immigrants underscores ongoing societal tensions and polarisation on this issue – something that characterises a broader field of values and political orientations in Slovenia and is becoming a kind of historical aftermath of the Slovenia's transition. Right-wing populist politicians adeptly exploit such divisions for their own political gain, often by stoking fears and anxieties among segments of the population who perceive immigrants as a threat to their economic well-being (job competition, strain on social services), cultural identity (cultural dilution), or national security (naming migrants as possible terrorists). Even in the face of shifting public opinion towards greater tolerance, these politicians may target and mobilise those who remain sceptical or hostile towards immigrants, using inflammatory rhetoric and fear-mongering tactics to galvanise their base and appeal to those who feel left behind or marginalised in an increasingly diverse society.

Right-wing populist rhetoric may exploit the division within the population by framing themselves as the voice of the people against a perceived out-of-touch establishment – liberal elites pushing an agenda of open borders and multiculturalism. They may seek to capitalise on any conflict involving immigrants to stoke anti-immigrant sentiments further and rally their supporters. Blaming immigrants for societal problems also deflects attention away from other pressing issues or failures of governance. Specifically, the impression that populist politicians are perceived as addressing problems with concrete solutions, despite neither approach yielding positive outcomes, creates an illusion that could impact public attitudes. These characteristics make nationalist and populist ideologies dangerous simplifications, not so much because they are misleading, but because they serve as the catch-nets for many undisclosed vested interests.

It is crucial for political actors and civil society organisations to counter the narrative of fear and division by promoting inclusive and evidence-based policies that address the legitimate concerns of all segments of society, fostering dialogue and understanding across different communities, and challenging xenophobic rhetoric wherever it arises. By advocating for values of tolerance, diversity, and solidarity, we can mitigate the influence of divisive and exclusionary politics and work towards building a more inclusive and equitable society.

In terms of living and social standards, Europeans and Slovenes are in the top 20% of the world's population, yet we cannot ignore the misfortunes of the remaining 80% of the population. Accepting migrant refugees brought to us by hardship, misfortune, war, and unbearable tyranny means not only agreeing to integrate immigrants into our local social community but also integrating ourselves into the world as our human common home. It is not a question of integrating foreigners into our world but of integrating ourselves into a globalised common world. With Ulrich Beck (2016), we could say that this is a "cosmopolitanism from below", starting from the local ground and ascending into the globalised world to finally return to the local, enriched by the experience of solidarity.

Therefore, attitudes towards immigrants are an essential test of a society's maturity, namely its maturity to deal democratically and equally with differences, in this case, immigrants from different cultural backgrounds. It is not only a question of acceptance but also of democratic participation and non-coercive integration of migrants into the host society. "The equal participation of all members of society in the political process lies at the core of democracy," as the Finnish sociologist Laura Ahocas points out (Ahocas 2010, 18). She also stresses that "migrants' participation is a matter of belonging and trust. It is a matter of ownership and realising potentials and possibilities through social engagement, which makes participation important" (Ahocas 2010, 47). Supporting this kind of conception of democratic integration is the only way to secure respect for intercultural differences and equality as basic principles in modern democratic societies. Such a vision of the democratic integration of immigrants is, of course, in sharp contrast to the populist and authoritarian defensive reflex against migrants that has proliferated in many EU (and global) countries in recent years. This attitude threatens immigrants with various barriers (physical, social, linguistic, etc.), social exclusion, and assimilationist integration.

References

- Ahocas, L., 2010. *Promoting Immigrants' Democratic Participation and Integration* [The EPAC Project], https://migrant-integration.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2011-04/doc1_19984_14684396.pdf (accessed 24 May 2024).
- Arasratnam, L. A., 2013. Intercultural Communication Competence. In A. Kurylo (ed.) *Inter/Cultural Communication: Representation and Construction of Culture*. Sage, Los Angeles, 47–68.

- Baron, R. S. & Kerr, N., 2003. *Group Process, Group Decision, Group Action*. Open University Press, Buckingham.
- Bauman, Z., 2003. *City of Fears, City of Hopes*. University of London, London.
- Beck, U., 2016. *The Metamorphosis of the World*. Polity Press, Cambridge.
- ESS ERIC - European Social Survey European Research Infrastructure, 2024. ESS11 - integrated file, edition 1.0 [Data set]. Sikt - Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research, https://doi.org/10.21338/ess11e01_0.
- ESS ERIC – European Social Survey, European Research Infrastructure Consortium, (n. d.), <https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/about-ess> (accessed 28 May 2024).
- European Commission, Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, 2022. *Integration of Immigrants in the European Union: Special Eurobarometer 519* (Report). Publications Office of the European Union, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2837/672792> (accessed 24 May 2024).
- Goffman, E., 1986. *Stigma*. Simon & Schuster, New York.
- Heath, A. & Richards, L., 2016. *Attitudes towards Immigration and Their Antecedents: Topline Results from Round 7 of the European Social Survey*. City, University of London, London, <https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/sites/default/files/2023-06/TL7-Immigration-English.pdf> (accessed 27 March 2024).
- ICMPD – International Centre for Migration Policy Development, 2024. *Migration Outlook 2024*. ICMPD, [Vienna], <https://www.icmpd.org/file/download/60599/file/ICMPD%2520Migration%2520Outlook%25202024.pdf> (accessed 14 March 2024).
- Kauff, M., Green, E., Schmid, K., Hewstone, M. & Christ, O., 2016. Effects of Majority Members' Positive Intergroup Contact on Minority Members' Support for Ingroup Rights: Mobilizing or Demobilising Effects? *European Journal of Social Psychology* 46 (7), 793–913, doi: <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1002/ejsp.2194>
- Kunovich, R. M., 2004. Social Structural Position and Prejudice: An Exploration of Cross-national Differences in Regression Slopes. *Social Science Research* 33 (1), 20–44, doi: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0049-089X\(03\)00037-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0049-089X(03)00037-1)
- Kurdija, S., Malnar, B., Hafner-Fink, M., Uhan, S., Vovk, T., Falle Zorman, R., Broder, Ž., ... Jagodic, A., 2023. *Slovensko javno mnenje 2020/2: evropska družboslovna raziskava* [Database]. CJMMK – Center za raziskovanje javnega mnenja in množičnih komunikacij, Fakulteta za družbene vede, Univerza v Ljubljani, Arhiv družboslovnih podatkov, doi: 10.17898/ADP_SJM202_V1
- Lopes, R., Dovidio, J., Pereira, C. & Jost, T., 2013. Social Psychological Perspectives on the Legitimation of Social Inequality: Past, Present and Future. *European Journal of Social Psychology* 43 (4), 229–237, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.1966>
- Malnar, B. & Kurdija, S., 2010. Evropska družboslovna raziskava: poskus kvalitativnega preskoka v primerjalnem raziskovanju. In N. Toš & K. H. Müller (eds.) *Primerjalno družboslovje: metodološki in vsebinski vidiki*. Fakulteta za družbene vede, IDV – CJMMK, Ljubljana.
- MIDEM, 2018. *Migration und Populismus: MIDEM Jahresbericht 2018*, <https://www.stiftung-mercator.de/de/publikationen/midem-jahresbericht-2018/> (accessed 10 March 2024).
- O'Carroll, L., 2024. Migration to Europe Will Increase in 2024, Thinktank Says. *Guardian*, 17. jan. 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/jan/17/migration-to-europe-will-increase-in-2024-thinktank-says> (accessed 24 May 2024).
- Quassoli, F. & Colombo, M., 2023. Post-Migration Stress: Racial Microaggressions and Everyday Discrimination. *Social Inclusion* 11 (2), 1–4, doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17645/si.v11i2.6980>

- Pellegrini, V., Salvati, M., De Cristofaro, V., Giacomantonio, M. & Leone, L., 2022. Psychological Bases of Anti-immigration Attitudes among Populist Voters. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 52 (6), 449–458, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/jasp.12871>
- Postmes, T. & Branscombe, N. R. (eds.), 2010. *Rediscovering Social Identity: Core Sources*. Psychology Press, New York.
- Said, E., 2005. *Oblasti povedati resnico*. *Cf, Ljubljana.
- Tajfel, H., 1978. The Achievement of Inter-group Differentiation. In H. Tajfel (ed.) *Differentiation between Social Groups*. Academic Press, London, 77–100.
- Van Rijswijk, W., Hopkins, N. & Johnston, H., 2009. The Role of Social Categorisation and Identity Threat in the Perception of Migrants. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 19 (6), 515–520, doi: <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1002/casp.1011>
- Whitaker, A., 2020. Existential Rage. In V. Zeigler-Hill & T. Shackelford (eds.) *Encyclopedia of Personality and Individual Differences*. Springer, Cham, 1476–1479.
- Zavratnik, S., Falle Zorman, R. & Broder, Ž., 2017. Javno mnenje in migracije: mehanizmi klasifikacij in »begunska kriza«. *Teorija in praksa* 54 (5), 857–884.

Notes

- ¹ This survey, commissioned by the European Commission, Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs (DG HOME), was carried out by the Kantar network in the 27 EU Member States between 2 November and 3 December 2021.
- ² Several analyses based on longitudinal measurements have already been produced in national and cross-national comparative contexts (see, for example, Zavratnik et al. 2017).
- ³ At the time of writing the article, the ESS 2023 cross-national data set was still being prepared.
- ⁴ The opposite line “worse place to live” would be a mirror image of the presented line, aligned with the 50% mark.
- ⁵ It is worth noting the seemingly stereotyped definition of age and education. Age, in itself, is not necessarily a predictor of attitudes but rather reflects indirect effects related to practical experience and contacts, which younger people may have more of due to their connections with individuals of immigrant origin and their engagement with globalised forms of communication. Here, age serves more as a proxy for what constitutes empirical practice. Similarly, education can be considered an indirect indicator, associated with both income and feelings of job insecurity, as well as certain economic pressures that immigrants represent in the minds of the majority population.