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CEREMONIAL GIFTS – NICE GESTURE OR POTENTIAL RISK? GIFT REPORTING DISCREPANCIES IN SLOVENIA**

Abstract. *Integrity and transparency are crucial elements of modern democratic countries, and trust in politico-administrative institutions must be pursued and maintained at every turn, including when it comes to reporting ceremonial gifts. Despite their (often) problematic connotations, ceremonial gifts are a major element of building strong relationships, from the highest positions in politics and diplomacy to the closest public servants. This article examines data concerning reported gifts in the Republic of Slovenia. Through in-depth statistical analysis, the authors established anomalies in the reporting of ceremonial gifts, in particular flawed descriptions of gifts and problematic assessment of their monetary values, which in most cases is left to the layperson. The authors conclude that a problem clearly exists with implementation of the normative framework because only the technical aspect and less the qualitative side is taken into account while reporting ceremonial gifts.*
Keywords: *ceremonial gifts; reporting; anomalies; transparency; trust; Slovenia*

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Introduction

When discussing ceremonial gifts,[1] we cannot go past the most commonly cited example from Greek mythology, the large wooden horse the Greeks gave to the Trojans. Believing that this gift was the sign of a truce,

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[1]   *In the literature, one can also find synonyms such as diplomatic or protocol gifts.*

the Trojans dragged the horse into the city, without knowing that it was hiding Greek soldiers, who then opened the wall gates at night for their army to enter. Troy was deceived and defeated in this way, and ceremonial gifts are still considered to be given and received with caution. The story of the Trojan Horse is explained by Nagy (1981) as a paradigm according to which the giver of the gift has an advantage, and the receiver is in danger. The latter is especially true in the political world as the recipient country runs the risk of becoming beholden to the donor country by accepting the gift (Kustermans, 2021: 105). From this point of view, it is unsurprising that many countries around the world have established and adopted rules for accepting and giving ceremonial gifts.

Despite the risk, the presentation of gifts is a constant in diplomatic practice as gifts symbolise welcome, honour and the cultivation of beneficial diplomatic relations, and often emphasise the workmanship of local businesses, historical craftsmanship, or local luxury goods and materials (Aubert, 2022). The extent of the gifts often depends on the country where the visit takes place and the customs of the country involved. In the Middle East, for example, countries give lavish gifts on each other during state visits as a sign of their generosity and respect for each other. This is much less common in the West, where the meaning of a gift is more important than its price (Monod de Froideville and Verheul, 2021).

In this article, we examine the reporting of ceremonial gifts in the case of the Republic of Slovenia, including all public and state entities. Through in-depth statistical analysis, we investigate the dataset of reported gifts to see if we can detect some discrepancies or anomalies in the reporting by public officials and their family members. We hypothesise that while the reporting of gifts received is an essential element for ensuring integrity and trust in administrative and political institutions and public officials, mere reporting is not enough given that the quality of reporting is also important in terms of accuracy and a fair assessment of gifts. In the first part of the article, we focus on the normative framework applying in the Republic of Slovenia regarding the receiving and reporting of ceremonial gifts. Part two of the article contains a comprehensive analysis of data collected in the gift reporting database managed by the Commission for the Prevention of Corruption (hereafter: the CPC).

Theoretical and normative framework

In a modern democracy, the quality of governance or indicators that measure the quality of regulation, the rule of law, the effectiveness of governance, and the control of corruption are very important (Wiatr, 2018: 7–8). According to administrative theory (Bogason and Toonen, 1998) and

corresponding administrative argumentation, the consistency of administrative values is vital for the quality of governance. Administrative values are decisive for ensuring answering the legitimacy of the administration, i.e., for the transformation of its power into authority and its recognition in society. Within the framework of open public administration, two key principles stand out: the principle of openness and the principle of transparency. The principle of the openness of public administration is broader than the principle of transparency as it aims at direct active communication between the administration and the user (Brezovšek et al., 2014).

The openness of public administration is also a condition for citizens' trust in administrative and political institutions (Haček and Brezovšek, 2014: 6–7). Gamson (1968: 42) argues that trust in political and administrative institutions is important because it serves as a "creator of collective power", enabling the government to make decisions and commit resources without resorting to coercion or seeking the explicit consent of citizens for every decision. In modern democracies where citizens are in control, it is trust that gives representatives the leeway to set aside the electorate's short-term concerns while pursuing long-term national interests (Mishler and Rose, 1997: 419; 2001). In the Republic of Slovenia, trust in the central institutions of the democratic political system is quite low; however, Haček (2019: 436–437) notes that trust has dropped further in the last decade due to the permanent state of political crisis.[2]

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One area where the trust of citizens should not be further eroded is the reporting and recording of ceremonial gifts received by representatives or officials[3] of political and administrative institutions.[4] The tradition of gift-giving between political leaders and other state officials is a long-standing practice and a strong element of peaceful diplomatic relations. The earliest evidence of a diplomatic exchange of this kind is engraved stone vessels from Egypt given to the Hittite neighbours. Later, gifts between European ambassadors and the Ottoman Empire, albeit mainly textiles, also included clocks and watches. Gift-giving between European monarchies was also unique in that it involved realpolitik: receiving objects became a way of securing or maintaining an advantageous position with a diplomatic counterpart or

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[2] *A similar trend appears in other Central and Eastern European countries as well (see Agh, 2020: 30–32).*

[3] *Officials include public officials, officials in positions and other public servants, employees working at the Bank of Slovenia, executive officers and members of management, leadership, and supervisory bodies in public sector entities. Family members include spouses, children, adopted children, parents, adoptive parents, siblings and persons living in the same household or in a non-marital partnership with the person concerned. The prohibitions and restrictions on accepting gifts also apply to companies in which the state or municipality holds a majority stake or exercises a controlling influence, and which were established on a statutory basis.*

[4] *For more on diplomacy in the Republic of Slovenia, see Udovič (2023).*

opponent, based on the value of the gift. Another famous gesture was introduced by the Chinese government in the 1950s when it began sending pandas to its communist allies and later to other foreign governments, becoming known as *panda diplomacy*. In Western democracies where the goal of diplomacy is to promote security, prosperity, democracy and economic development, the exchange of gifts may seem an unusual tactic, although this tradition still has a firm place in international relations today (Aubert, 2022). The exchange of gifts, even if made by individuals, is not considered a personal exchange as these individuals represent the state or an institution and the gifts are thus considered to be state or public property.[5] The exchange of gifts is not limited to the supranational, national or state levels, but is also seen on other levels of government (e.g., regional and local) and, in the broadest sense, concern all officials in public and government institutions. Institutions, ministries, public entities and state companies are therefore subject to special rules and instructions for accepting gifts (e.g., only gifts up to a certain amount may be given). These rules are about integrity and, in many cases, giving and accepting gifts is prohibited to avoid any kind of preferential treatment or even corruption. In other cases, every gift must be reported and evidenced in a database monitored by the respective state institution or commission.

The main element of the Slovenian normative framework that (also) regulates ceremonial gifts is the umbrella Integrity and Prevention of Corruption Act (2010/2020),[6] Article 30 of which talks about the prohibition and restrictions on accepting gifts in the public sector. In paragraph 2 of Article 30, the law is limited to ceremonial gifts and states that "… a public official or his/her family member may accept a ceremonial gift on behalf of the entity for which (s)he works, which becomes the property of his/her employer regardless of its value. Gifts given by foreign or domestic legal or natural persons at work events are considered ceremonial gifts". In the third paragraph of Article 30, the law states that an official may accept a gift traditionally or customarily given on specific occasions (cultural, ceremonial, completion of education, training, holidays etc.) or when performing diplomatic activities, but its value may not exceed the value of EUR 100, regardless of the form of the gift and the number of givers of the same gift.[7]

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[5] *In some countries, ceremonial gifts are located in state museums or other suitable places and exhibited to the public.*

[6] *The Decree on restrictions and duties of public employees as regards the acceptance of gifts (2003) was in force until 2021.*

[7] *As long as the gift is not a ceremonial gift or a gift presented on certain occasions, the official person is obliged to warn the donor of the prohibition against accepting gifts and to refuse the gift offered. A family member of the official person is also obliged to refuse the gift. If the donor insists on the gift, the official or his/her family member is obliged to deliver the gift to the official's employer. An official or a family member may not accept a gift if the delivery or acceptance of such a gift would constitute a criminal act; it is prohib-*

In terms of openness and transparency, paragraphs six and seven of Article 30 (Integrity and Prevention of Corruption Act, 2010/2020) are particularly important, requiring that a public entity keeps a record of gifts received,[8] containing information on the type and estimated value of the gift, the donor and other circumstances of the gift's delivery. The latter instructs all recipients of gifts to enter information[9] on gifts whose value exceeds EUR 50 on the list of gifts. The public sector entity is obliged to submit a list of gifts to public officials, their family members and ceremonial gifts to the CPC by 31 March for the previous year. The way gifts are disposed of, how the value of gifts is determined and how a list of gifts is maintained, together with other issues related to implementation of this Article, are determined by the Minister responsible for systemic control of the limitation of corruption through regulations.

In addition to the Integrity and Prevention of Corruption Act, the Rules on restrictions and duties of officials as regards the acceptance of gifts (2021) are in force. These rules regulate the manner in which gifts maybe be disposed, the determination of the value of gifts, the maintenance and content of the list of gifts given in connection with the performance of one's function, work or public service or received by public officials or their family members in connection with their position, as well as other implementation issues related to the prohibitions, restrictions and duties of public officials in accepting gifts. The following sections of the Rules are especially relevant for our analysis.

The third section determines the conduct in the case a gift is accepted. Article 5 prescribes that in the case of the acceptance of a gift, the recipient[10] must, as soon as possible and at the latest within 8 days, fill in a form to record the gift received and hand it over to the person who maintains the list of gifts in the public entity where they work.[11] On this form, the recipient of the gift must provide the following information: his/her first and last name and the activity he/she carries out; the first and last name and address

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ited by another law or regulations issued under it; money, securities, gift certificates and precious metals are given as gifts; the acceptance of the gift would impair or appear to impair the impartial and objective performance of the official's public duties (Integrity and Prevention of Corruption Act, 2010/2020: Article 30).

   [8] *The CPC publishes the list of reported gifts on ERAR.si application. A link to this dataset can be found here: https://erar.si/darila/.*

   [9] *The gifts that public officials receive are reported via the online form accessible at https://registri. kpk-rs.si/registri/prejeta_darila/prijava/.*

   [10] *If the gift is accepted by a family member of an official, the official is obliged to fill in the form and hand it over to the person responsible for keeping the list in the public entity where they work.*

   [11] *The recipient does not complete the form if they receive a gift of negligible/symbolic value. Gifts of symbolic value traditionally given in connection with work are not considered work-related gifts (plaques, badges, flags, promotional materials and similar items). Prohibitions and restrictions on the acceptance of gifts do not apply to these types of gifts and officials may accept them.*

of the donor or the title and registered office of a legal entity if the gift was given on behalf of a legal entity; the date of acceptance of the gift; information about whether the gift was received by a family member; an indication of whether the gift is diplomatic or occasional; the nature and value of the gift and an indication of how the value of the gift was determined; the reasons for, or circumstances in which, the gift was given; the manner in which the gift was given (e.g., in person, by post); an indication of whether the gift has become the property of the recipient or the public entity that employs the recipient; the date of completion of the form and the signature of the recipient.

Further, the regulations provide that the recipient of ceremonial and occasional gifts that become the property of the public entity where the recipient works, as well as gifts that the recipient is not allowed to keep, must be handed over to the person responsible for maintaining the list of gifts at the public entity that employs the recipient immediately upon receipt or as soon as possible, but no later than within 8 days. The person maintaining the list of gifts at the public entity where the recipient works shall also enter on the form the way the gift was recorded and used or kept if the gift has become the property of the public entity where the recipient works.

Article 8 states that while assessing the value of gifts the market price of the gift must be considered. Where the gift is one whose value cannot be determined based on market prices, its value shall be determined according to the lay estimate of the person keeping the register of gifts, noting the prices of similar or comparable things, rights, services or other benefits. If the gift is a work of art or an object of historical value or other value that cannot be assessed based on market criteria, the gift's value is to be determined based on the assessment of a professional valuer.

Each gift shall be recorded in the electronic list under a consecutive number for the period of the calendar year and kept for 5 years from the end of the year in which it was given. In each public entity, one or more persons must be designated as responsible for the proper management of the record of gifts in accordance with the Rules (the person maintaining the list of gifts). If the mentioned person has doubts over the accuracy of the data entered in the record of gifts, they shall determine, as far as possible, whether the data provided are true. If they find that the information on the form is untrue or that it is not an occasional gift of symbolic value, they must inform the recipient and the head of the public entity. They are obliged to do the same if they discover violations in the transmission of data to the record or if the Rules have been violated in any other way.

External control is carried out by the CPC to which public entities must submit a list of gifts received in the previous year by 31 March at the latest, including all the information that must be provided while registering gifts.

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In addition to the CPC, internal control is carried out by the heads of the public entities (Rules on restrictions and duties of officials as regards the acceptance of gifts, 2021: Article 15).

Detailed instructions on how to report, record and deal with ceremonial gifts may be found on the official website of the CPC, as well as the website of the Court of Audit of the Republic of Slovenia, where Guidance on the restrictions and obligations when accepting gifts (2021) and the Form for recording a gift received are available.

Analysis of the normative framework shows that the recording of ceremonial gifts received is obligatory for all recipients and regulated quite precisely, also in the light of an open, transparent, credible and trustworthy public and state administration. In the following section of the article, we examine how the provisions of the umbrella law and the Rules are considered in practice.

Data and methods

For the statistical analysis, we use the publicly available dataset provided by the CPC at the ERAR.si portal. The table contains 3,954 gifts reported between January 2014 and February 2023. For each gift, the following data points are reported: date of receipt, recipient, donor, gift type (ceremonial or occasional), description of the gift, value, method of value determination, reason for giving the gift and the final owner of the gift.

The initial hurdle in dissecting this dataset becomes apparent on a cursory inspection (as shown in Figure 1) – the lack of uniformity in the reporting of gifts is evident.[12] The CPC mandated this reporting with the aim of enabling the public to closely monitor public officials. However, it is clear that the process can be challenging for those without considerable computer skills.

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[12] *Evidently, due to unrestricted inputs such as case sensitivity and organisation type, discrepancies arise within the raw fields of the database. For instance, "MUNICIPALITY OF ŠENČUR" and "Šenčur municipality" are recognised as distinct entities. This observation extends to "Municipality of St. Jurij", highlighting the need for extensive data pre-processing. See Figure 1.*

Figure 1: TOP 15 REPORTED GIFT DONORS BY NUMBER OF GIFTS THEY SENT
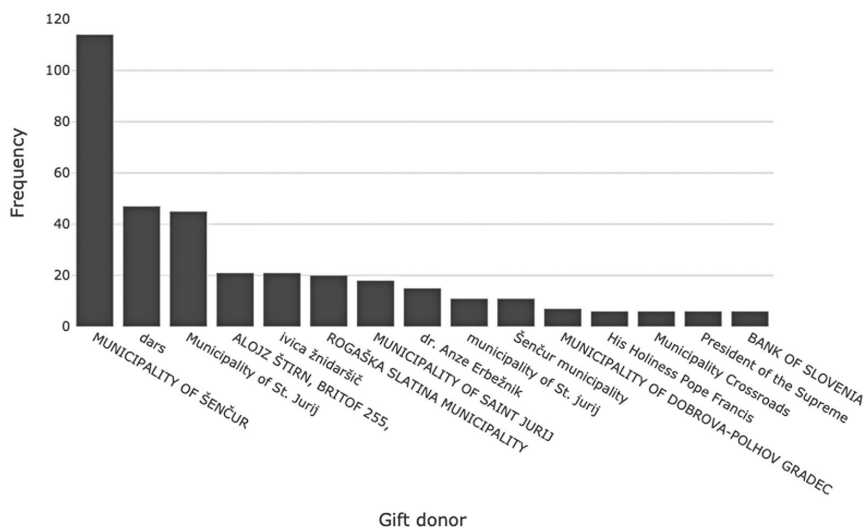
Source: Data from ERAR.si portal (2023).

Data pre-processing

The first method we performed was to translate all the data points from Slovenian to English. We did this automatically using the deep translator library in Python. To minimise the amount of noise in the dataset, we cleaned the data for the following attributes:

- *Case sensitivity:* As may be seen in the accompanying dataset, all data points in the collected data are missing case sensitivity. To address this issue, we first converted all text to lowercase to reduce the possibility of category duplication, such as "books" vs. "BOOKS" and similar cases.
- *Stop words:* Stop words (such as the, a, an, in, of) are often used in descriptions of gifts, but provide little context about the gift. The nltk. corpus Python package was used to filter out stop words in gift characteristics, such as the description of the gift, the occasion on which the gift was received etc.
- *Dates:* Textual date fields were converted to timestamps to allow various forms of aggregation and time series analysis.

Unsupervised machine learning

One of the techniques for extracting the most frequent gifts in our dataset entails clustering them based on their description. For this purpose, the

K-means algorithm was applied to the *Term Frequency-Inverse Document Frequency* (TF-IDF) matrix of features (Karabiber, 2023) obtained from the vectorisation step. K-Means divided the gift descriptions into *k* clusters based on their feature similarity.

- *TF-IDF vectorisation:* To represent our text fields numerically, we vectorise our text data using the TF-IDF technique. It measures how important a term is within a document (i.e., the gift description) compared to a collection of documents (i.e., all gift descriptions). The words in a text document are converted into numbers indicating their importance through a text vectorisation process. TF-IDF vectorises (scores) a word by multiplying the word's Term Frequency (TF) with the Inverse Document Frequency (IDF).

$$TF = \frac{number\ of\ times\ the\ term\ appears\ in\ a\ document}{total\ number\ of\ words\ in\ the\ document}$$

$$IDF = log(\frac{total\ number\ of\ documents}{number\ of\ documents\ where\ term\ t\ appears})$$

$$TF - IDF = TF * IDF$$

- *Silhouette Score & Calinski-Harabasz Index:* the evaluation methods we use for our clustering algorithm are the Silhouette Score (SS) and the Calinski-Harabasz Index (CH) (Wang, 2019). We calculate the average SS for the whole dataset and for each cluster using the function from the sklearn.metrics module. The Silhouette Score measures the compactness of each data point within its assigned cluster and the separation between different clusters. A higher Silhouette Score (ranging from -1 to 1) indicates better defined and well-separated clusters. The Silhouette Score for a data point *i* is given as follows:

$$S_i = \frac{b_i - a_i}{max\{b_i, a_i\}},$$

$$b_i = min_{\{k \neq i\}} \frac{1}{C_k} \sum_{j \in C_k} d(i,j),$$

$$a_i = \frac{1}{|C_i| - 1} \sum_{j \in C_i, i \neq j} d(i,j),$$

thus, *bi* is the inter-cluster distance, defined as the average distance to the nearest cluster of data point *i*, other than the one to which it belongs; and *ai* is the intra-cluster distance, defined as the average distance to all other points in the cluster to which it belongs (Tushar, 2021).

The Calinski-Harabasz Index (also known as the Variance Ratio Criterion) is an evaluation index based on the degree of dispersion between clusters and clusters and is defined as follows. A higher value indicates more compact and better separated clusters. The index is calculated in this way:

$$CH(k) = \frac{B(k)(n-k)}{W(k)(k-1)}$$

$$B(k) = \sum_{i=1}^{k} a_i \left\| \overline{x_i} - \overline{x} \right\|^2 ,$$

$$C(k) = \sum_{i=1}^{k} \sum_{C(j)=i} \left\| x_j - \overline{x_i} \right\|^2$$

where *k* is the number of clusters, *n* is the number of samples, W(k) is the intra-cluster divergence and B(k) is the inter-cluster divergence.

Keywords utilisation and words filtering

After running the clustering algorithm, we performed a manual review of the clusters step. This is necessary because there are no labelled records of this type. First, we inspected the SS of each cluster and extracted the most frequent word (gift object) from each cluster. For the clusters with large SS (*strong clusters*), we took the most frequent word as the keyword for further use in the analysis. For clusters with small SS (*weak clusters*), there were only a few possible solutions. First, we used the keywords from the strong clusters and then performed word filtering to extract all the expressions that fit better with the other clusters. We assigned these expressions to the clusters they belong to. For the remaining expressions, there were two steps to ensure the most optimal results:

- The first step was to repeat the task of clustering and using keywords (i.e., consequently several times) until we arrived at a satisfactory result (we managed to group all the gifts in a meaningful way). However, due to the multiple descriptions of the gifts leading to a single large, weak cluster, this method yielded suboptimal results, explaining why we only performed it twice.
- After the second manual inspection, instead of performing a new iteration of clustering, we conducted a subsequent reorganisation of the remaining weak clusters and made a concerted effort to group similar items (e.g., teacups, pots, sets and samovars). Through this process, we also identified different types of keywords that can be used effectively by focusing on gift materials rather than the objects themselves.

Named entity recognition (NER)

In data categories such as Donors of the gifts, our focus was on uncovering the countries or municipalities that mostly provide gifts to Slovenian public officials. To achieve this, we use Named Entity Recognition (NER) techniques, concentrating on the identification of geopolitical entities,

referred to as "GPE" in this feature. To this end, we used the capabilities of the spaCy library. We employed the pre-trained English language model "en_core_web_sm", which includes various text processing and analysis components, including tokenisation, part-of-speech tagging, dependency parsing, and NER (Majumder, 2021).

Record of ceremonial gifts received in practice: results and discussion

Following our initial phase of data cleansing and transformation, we present a series of insightful graphs to spotlight various attributes of ceremonial gifts in our dataset. We begin by presenting the distributions of the most prominent gift recipients (Figure 2) before moving on to the distributions of the leading gift givers (Figure 3). This is to provide clearer insight into the characteristics of the dataset, especially as concerns the most important participants. We then look in more detail at the descriptions and values of the gifts, revealing the most striking differences within the dataset.

Figure 2: DISTRIBUTION OF ORGANISATIONS (PANEL A) OFFICIALS (PANEL B) THAT RECEIVE GIFTS

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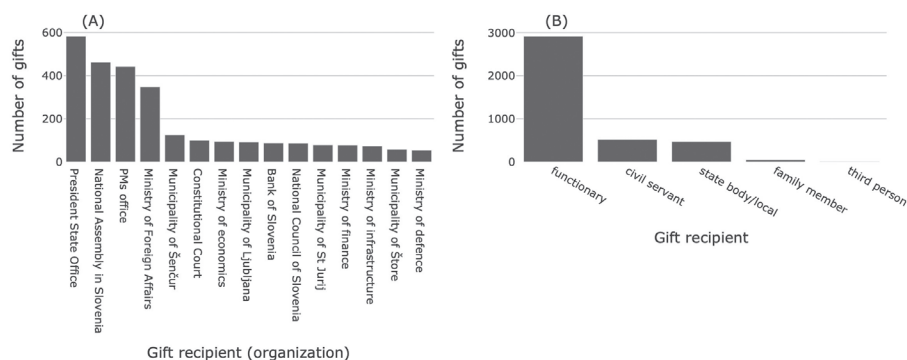
Source: Data from ERAR.si portal (2023).

Panel A in Figure 2 shows that the recipients of gifts – as was also to be expected – include the three highest state bodies in ceremonial terms, i.e., the President of the Republic, the National Assembly and the Prime Minister's Cabinet, followed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Constitutional Court, various municipalities and the Ministry of Economics, the Bank of Slovenia, the National Council, and others. It is particularly interesting that, among the municipalities, the highest number of gifts received was reported by the Municipality of Šenčur and not – as one might anticipate – by the Municipality of Ljubljana as the capital city of the country. In Panel B, we observe that most gifts went to functionaries (and interestingly

not also their family members), followed by a much smaller number of civil servants and local authorities.

*Figure 3: DISTRIBUTIONS OF GIFT DONORS*
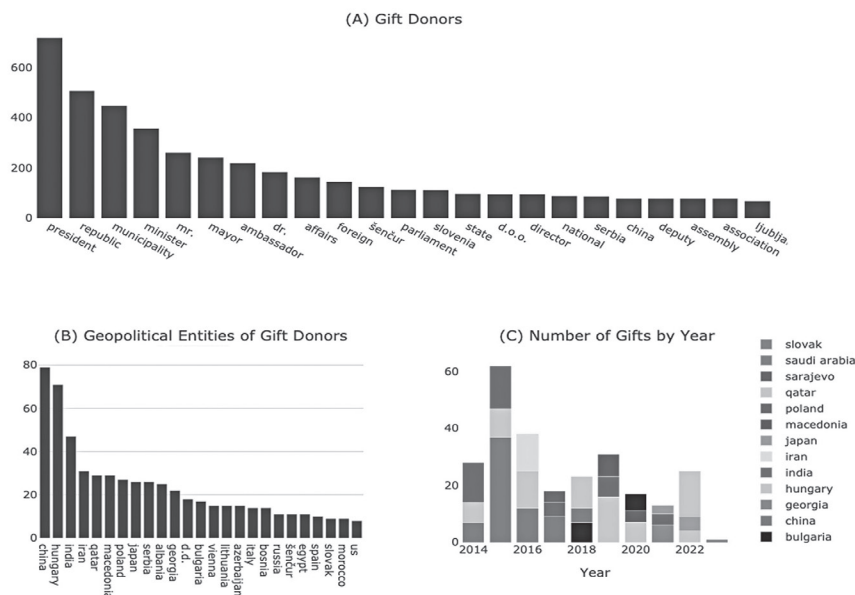
* Panel A: top 25 words used to describe gift donors. We chose this preview since there are more than 3000 unique records for donors, so this graph presents a more meaningful starting point for further grouping of donors. Panel B: Top 25 geopolitical entities the gifts come from. Panel C: Number of gifts per top 3 geopolitical locations donated in the particular year.

Source: Data from ERAR.si portal (2023).

Panel (A) in Figure 3 shows that the majority of gifts were sent by presidents, ministries, mayors and ambassadors, while we end up with few country names. It is indeed interesting to see which geopolitical entities most often gave gifts to officials in Slovenia (Panel B) and how this evolved over time (Panel C). Panel B shows the 25 geopolitical entities from which the gifts originate. It is worth noting that among the most common Asian countries are China, India, Iran, Qatar and Japan, followed by countries from the region such as Hungary, Macedonia, Poland, Serbia, Albania etc. In Panels B and C, we see that China was the largest gift donor in the period 2014–2018, which coincides with the fact that the Republic of China and Slovenia have strengthened their economic cooperation through the Platform 16+1 and the Belt and Road Initiative. This led to a rise in trade of goods, service activities, the number of tourists and investments in both countries (Raščan, 2019). As a result, the number of protocol visits between the two countries' summits increased during this period. Further, in 2015 Slovenia adopted the

Foreign Policy Strategy of the Republic of Slovenia that states with respect to cooperation with countries in Asia that in this part of the world the most important partners of the Republic of Slovenia are India, Japan, and China as one of the biggest economies in the world. The government at the time began to implement the new Strategy (2015), which led to more frequent political contacts between the countries and hence also to the exchange of ceremonial gifts, as may be clearly seen in Panel C where China and India are prominent. There is another interesting observation in Panel C; namely, that countries were donors for 2 years in a row and then either stopped or reduced their gifts (e.g., India in 2014 and 2015, Macedonia in 2019 and 2020, Bulgaria from 2018 to 2020, Japan in 2021 and 2022 etc.). On the other hand, Hungary was a constant donor.

Figure 4: NUMBER OF GIFTS PER YEAR

Source: Data from ERAR.si portal (2023).

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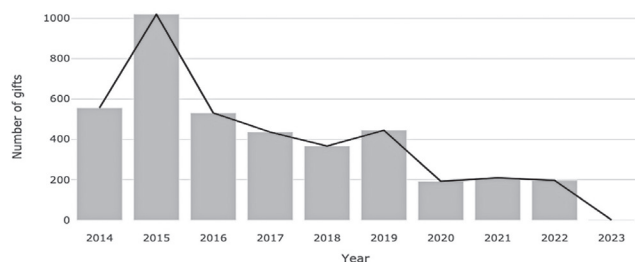
Since the analysed timeframe incorporates the COVID-19 pandemic, which had a strong impact on diplomatic activities, we additionally analysed the possible effects of the lockdowns on the presenting of ceremonial gifts. The number of reported gifts (Panel A) during the COVID-19 period was about half the usual number, on average about 100 reported gifts per year between 2020 and 2022. In this period, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs proved to be the most important organisation receiving gifts. As for Slovenian municipalities, Ljubljana, Šenčur and St. Jurij were the most frequent recipients of gifts in the pre-COVID-19 period, but were replaced by the municipalities of Piran and Štore during the pandemic. There was a shift in the recipients (Panel B) themselves during the COVID-19 period. While in the pre-COVID-19 period, functionaries were the main recipients, during the pandemic they almost disappeared in favour of civil servants. In the pre-COVID-19 period, China, Hungary, India, Iran and Serbia were the most common donors of gifts, while in the COVID-19 period, Qatar, Hungary, Japan, Georgia and India were the main donors.

Figure 4 shows the number of gifts received by individual years. We observe that the year 2015 stands out with the highest number of ceremonial gifts

received over the entire study period.[13] We attribute the latter mainly to the government's then foreign policy, mainly focused on Asian countries. On the other hand, another political promises of the coalition at the time was transparency and the fight against corruption, which may have led to the more consistent registration of ceremonial gifts. Still, it is somewhat surprising that the number of gifts received did not increase during the period when the Republic of Slovenia was presiding over the Council of the European Union (in 2021) and was hosting many events on the level of the highest national and European representatives. It should indeed be stressed that while the amendments to the normative framework on the reporting of ceremonial gifts (i.e., Amendments to the Integrity and Prevention of Corruption Act; Rules on restrictions and duties of officials as regards the acceptance of gifts) were adopted in 2020 and 2021, no changes in the following years are evident from the data shown in Figure 4.

Gift values

We now consider the reported values assigned to the gifts and look at the main statistics: Median = EUR 40, Minimum = 0, Mode = EUR 50, Q3 = EUR 70, Maximum = EUR 62,000, Mean = EUR 135.8, with all gifts worth more than EUR 131 being outliers. Table 1 presents the frequency distribution of the reported values. It is interesting to note that the most frequently reported value coincides with the threshold of EUR 50 set by the CPC.

Table 1: NUMBER OF GIFTS PER THEIR VALUES

Reported gift value (EUR)	Number of gifts
0–50	2632
50–100	828
100–200	276
200–1000	187
1000–62000	31

* We can notice that it drastically drops in two pints, after 50 and after 1000 EUR.
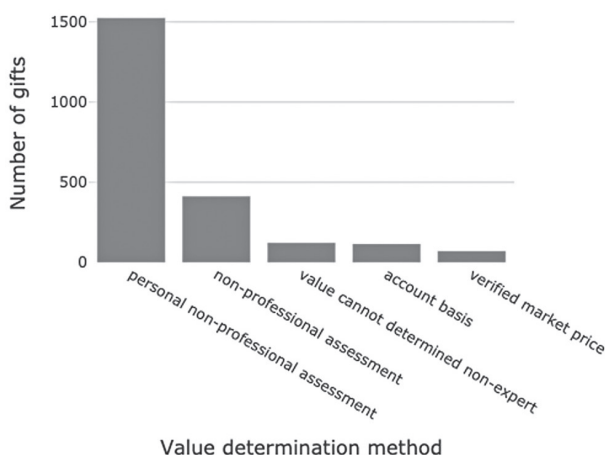
Source: Data from ERAR.si portal (2023).

It is clear from Figure 5 that a significant proportion of gift values does not have a professional valuation. While it is unrealistic to expect entities to hire professionals to value all gifts, there does seem to be an expectation of more conscientious evaluation. Currently, the prevailing view appears to be that, in the absence of further regulation, evaluations of gifts are undertaken

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[13] *The six main recipients of ceremonial gifts in 2015 were the President of the Republic of Slovenia, the National Assembly, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Municipality of Šenčur, the Prime Minister's Office, and the Municipality of Ljubljana.*

casually, often with the underlying motivation of them being personally acquired.

Figure 5: BAR-PLOT OF VALUE DETERMINATION METHOD

* We can notice that most of the gifts are evaluated non-professionally (first three groups). Only a minor fraction is appraised based on account or verified market value.

Source: Data from ERAR.si portal (2023).

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Gift descriptions

We found that distinguishing between objects (e.g., "plate", "vase", "bowl") and adjectives (e.g., "silver", "crystal", "glass") is a challenge for any clustering or topic grouping algorithm. For example, consider an object like a glass bowl – deciding whether it belongs more to the cluster "glass" or "bowl" presents a conundrum. An illustrative case, representative of many in our dataset, is the description "decorative, traditionally decorated stone plate with carved wooden frame" – wording for which the machine struggles to determine the most meaningful cluster assignment. To enable the most comprehensive understanding and analysis of gift descriptions, we take a dual approach: clustering of objects and clustering of materials.

Object clustering

The application of the K-means algorithm for clustering objects required testing with different values of k (k = 10, 15, 20, 50, 100). Observations showed that as k increased the Sum of Squares (SS) rose, but the Calinski-Harabasz (CH) score decreased. For all k values tested, a clear trend

emerged: a prominent larger cluster (comprising almost half of the items) coexisted with a weaker cluster (which turned out to be negative SS) comprising a wide variety of items. The optimal balance between the SS and CH scores materialised at k = 20. The clusters and their corresponding SS scores are listed in Table 2. This clustering primarily facilitated the identification of the most frequent expressions within the gift descriptions and enabled the gifts to be grouped around these expressions.

Table 2: TWENTY CLUSTERS OF DESCRIPTIONS OF GIFTS

ID	Keyword	Examples	n	SS
0	'book'	'golden book issued on the 60th bank's anniversary', 'Huawei P8 mobile phone', 'Cartier wristwatch'	1790	-0.35
1	'–'	'a gilded model of the palace in a box', 'mosaic of the symbol of the autonomous region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia"	521	-0.01
2	'glass'	'Hand-crafted glass and amber water obelisk with Saudi motifs', 'swarovski glass horse'	127	0.04
3	'bowl'	'marble bowl', 'silver bowl with wooden bottom'	43	0.16
4	'books'	'6 books', 'a collection of books'	44	0.66
5	'–'	'archaeological find from the ruins of Göbekli Tepe', 'shot of central Slovenia from space'	51	0.005
6	'carpets'	'Baku carpet', 'silk carpet', 'carpet – hand woven'	31	0.30
7	'plates'	'marble plate with print', 'engraved silver plate', 'hand painted decorative plate'	127	0.15
8	'set'	'set of porcelain tea cups', 'set of crystal glasses with stars'	112	0.06
9	'tickets'	'tickets for a cultural event', 'tickets for a theatre performance'	48	0.3
10	'picture'	'framed copper picture', 'a picture of a woman in Africa', 'art picture'	162	0.15
11	'painting'	'painting – oil on glass', 'painting, oil on canvas, 50 cm × 37 cm, pine house'	80	0.07
12	'bottle'	'crystal aperitif glasses and a bottle', 'whiskey set', '6 bottles of wine'	116	0.15
13	'book'	'book', '2x book'	81	0.98
14	'pen'	'fountain pen, book "EU.RO" and a set of commemorative coins', 'fountain pen in silver filigree and ink'	52	0.17
15	'gift'	'a gift bag containing wine, a calendar, dried fruit, prosciutto, salami, cheese and honey'	126	0.24
16	'wooden'	'handmade wool carpet (2.97 × 2.02 m) and a gold coin in a wooden box'	206	0.02
17	'coin'	'gold collector's coin', 'tashkent uzbekistan coin collection', 'the gold coin falls'	105	0.07
18	'new'	'new year's gift', 'gift basket'	51	0.66
19	'vase'	'porcelain vase', 'ceramic persian vase', 'traditional chinese vase'	81	0.27

* Average Silhouette Score (SS) obtained is 0.06, while Calinski-Harabasz Index (CH) is 33.9.

Source: Data from ERAR.si portal (2023).

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While clusters such as 4, 6, 9, 13, 14, 15, 18 and 19 had strong SS scores, there was considerable room for improvement in the other clusters. Conversely, clusters 0, 1 and 5 had strikingly low Silhouette scores. Moreover, the most frequent words did not adequately characterise the items in these clusters. In cluster 0, for example, the word "book" was mentioned the most frequently, even though only about 600 of 1,790 items were books. The composition of the cluster extended to various items such as wristwatches, sculptures and plaques. These cases are due to extensive and complex descriptions that confound the understanding of the clustering algorithm. Despite these challenges, our main goal of describing the gifts remained achievable. By using cluster keywords, the items could be grouped effectively. The main entities identified included ["book", "bowl", "rug", "plate", "set", "ticket", "painting", "bottle", "pen", "gift", "coin", "vase"]. Items containing these keywords were categorised accordingly. Subsequently, 1,679 gifts that did not contain these common expressions were subjected to repeated k = 20 clustering. The results yielded a SS of 0.06 and CH of 19.5. This procedure produced extensive keywords for strong clusters such as ["cuff", "medallion", "plaque", "monograph", "saint's mark"]. Similarly, more abstract clusters emerged, including ["silver", "wood", "New Year's gift"]. A larger, weak cluster comprising 1,188 items was also found. Manual examination of this cluster revealed common words such as ["frame", "statue", "model", "replica", "plaque", "sculpture", "wristwatch", "photo", "coat arms", "award", "Huawei"]. To further refine the grouping, we conducted manual restructuring by grouping similar items. The final list of 782 gifts that defy meaningful grouping was identified. Notably, adjectives like "glass", "porcelain" and "silver" played a major role in this sub-grouping. This finding paved the way for a second iteration to group the gift items by their materials. The final compilation of the most important object groups, paired with their materials, is shown in Table 3.

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Materials Clustering

Turning to materials, we draw insights from our objects clustering approach to optimise our methodology. Here, we focus directly on extracting the most frequently occurring adjectives, which are also significant in the context of our topic of investigation. In particular, the most frequently occurring adjectives include "gold", "silver", "pearl", "glass", "wood" and "porcelain". A comprehensive list of these adjectives and their corresponding frequencies is given in Table 3.

Table 3: FINAL LIST OF 28 GROUPS REGARDING ITEMS (OBJECTS AND MATERIALS)

| Gifts as objects	Count	Gift materials (adjectives)	Count
books	865	glass	217
paintings	472	wooden	198
gift bags	347	silver	162
bottles	297	porcelain	87
statues	199	ceramic	83
plates	191	golden	79
sets	176	crystal	65
coins	172	handmade	58
luxury gifts	144	stone	46
frames	120	bronze	34
vases	110	leather	28
photos	96	jewellery	12
pens	88	marble	10
boxes	86	pearl	7
plaques	82		
cuffs	80		
monographs	64		
tickets	54		
bowls	47		
medallions	42		
coat of arms	39		
watches	32		
carpets	32		
awards	28		
mobile phones	27		
saint's sign	25		

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Source: Data from ERAR.si portal (2023).

Gift Value vs. the Description

To obtain insight into the variations of values in the above clusters, we may consider Figure 6 for objects and Figure 7 for the clustering of materials. It is worth noting that for most clusters the median values are either around or below EUR 50 (solid red line), even for clusters such as paintings, carpets, vases, pearls, crystals, marbles and the like.

Since the greatest differences are evident in this segment of reporting, we explain these results in more detail in the section below.
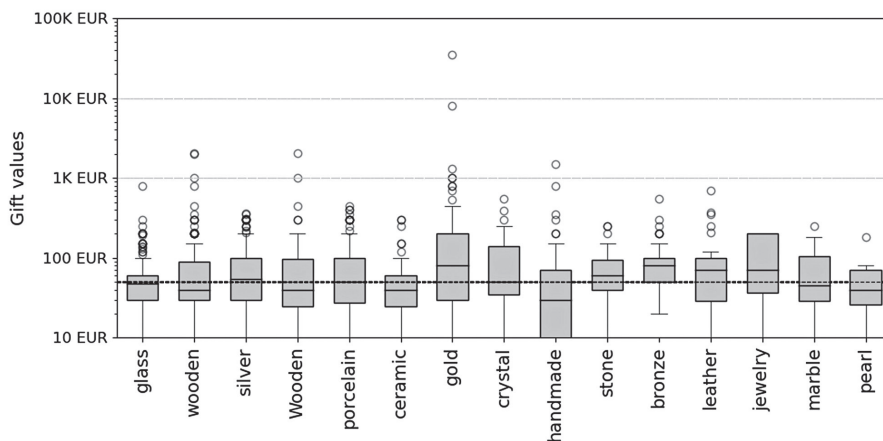
Figure 6: BOX-PLOT OF VALUES OF REPORTED GIFTS (OBJECTS CLUSTERING)
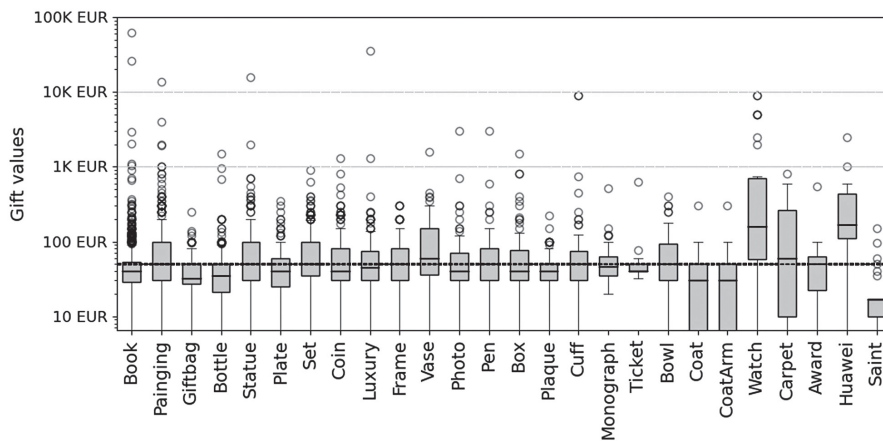
* Horizontal line depicts a value of 50 EUR that the government set as a boundary. On y-axes we have values in a log-scale, for the better preview.

Source: Data from ERAR.si portal (2023).

Figure 7: BOX-PLOT OF VALUES OF REPORTED GIFTS (MATERIALS CLUSTERING)

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* Horizontal line depicts a value of 50 EUR that the government set as a boundary. On y-axes we have values in a log-scale, for the better preview.

Source: Data from ERAR.si portal (2023).

Problematising records and determining the value of an individual gift

Our exhaustive investigation of the reporting in Slovenia revealed some problematic aspects of the system. First, the frequency of reporting of the value of EUR 50, established as the minimum by the CPC, seems somewhat convenient given the negligible threshold. Second, we found several problems with the reporting of gifts, ranging from underestimates with high variability to inconsistent expressions and case usage. These challenges could prevent non-technical people from using the ERAR.si application for hypothesis testing. In addition, our analysis revealed intriguing discrepancies while comparing reported gift values with gift types and materials. For example, the median value of "golden" items was barely above EUR 100; 75% of them were valued below EUR 200, which arouses suspicion. There were also similar discrepancies when it comes to "bronze", "pearls" and "silver". Moreover, the 3rd quartile of "paintings" hovered around EUR 100 (meaning that 75% of the paintings received were valued at less than EUR 100), while there were carpets valued at less than EUR 30.

These findings underline the need to strengthen the gift reporting system and modify it so that fewer anomalies occur in the future. Addressing these discrepancies in reported gift values calls for proactive measures to correct the gift reporting system and assure its effectiveness. As part of these efforts, the CPC could consider implementing additional requirements to enhance transparency and accuracy. Based on our findings, we recommend the following improvements. First, to avoid naming the same entity differently, the electronic form should contain a pre-prepared, drop-down list of public entities from which the person declaring the ceremonial gift can choose. Second, the persons entering the descriptions and values of ceremonial gifts into the database should have access to more precise rules, especially as regards the description of items and assessment of their value. Third, in terms of transparency, it is necessary to provide for a simple yet effective step, such as attaching a photograph of the items, measurements, or information about the material (if applicable) to the description of the gift in the database, so as to provide valuable evidence and verification. This would allow the CPC to match the reported values with the actual nature and value of the gifts received, providing an additional layer of accountability, and reducing the potential for misrepresentation or undervaluation. Fourth, the CPC should not only provide the dataset, but also develop a simple tool to observe the different distributions of characteristics in the database – as shown in our Results section. Fifth, the CPC should tighten control over the reporting of ceremonial gifts and make any established irregularities public. Gift reporting should be an essential part of the code of ethics of all politicians, civil servants, and other employees working in political institutions, the public sector and the state sector.

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Conclusion

Ceremonial gifts symbolise welcome, honour and the cultivation of advantageous diplomatic relations. They form a crucial part of building strong relationships, from the highest positions in politics and diplomacy to the closest people in the public service. Nevertheless, ceremonial gifts are seen as problematic in several ways, not simply since the recipient risks being beholden to the giver by accepting the gift, but also because the receipt of ceremonial gifts is often associated with potential favours, preferential treatment or even corruption. To minimise such commercialisation and to ensure the integrity, transparency and openness of politics and public officials, and to maintain trust in political and administrative institutions, many countries around the world have established and adopted rules for the acceptance and giving of ceremonial gifts.

Through detailed statistical analysis, we examined the reporting of ceremonial gifts in the Republic of Slovenia where trust in the most visible political institutions (the political parties, the President of the Republic, the government, the National Parliament) is at a relatively low levels, also due to the many scandals in the political arena over the last two decades. Our analysis reveals anomalies in the reporting of ceremonial gifts as well as weaknesses in the normative framework. In our article, we uncover the most obvious discrepancies in reporting, from the name of the reporting body, to flawed descriptions of gifts, through to the particularly problematic assessment of gift values, which is typically left to the layperson. Further, the question of the control by the CPC (its sufficiency) arises.

In relation to our initial hypothesis, we note that in the case of Slovenia there is clearly a problem with implementation of the normative framework since register entries only show that the technical aspect and less the qualitative side of the reporting of ceremonial gifts is complied with. We believe that the gift reporting system could become more transparent if our recommendations and actions are implemented. This can only help to further strengthen the integrity of politics, public administration and the entire public sector, increase public trust and act as a robust safeguard against fraud, favouritism and corruption in Slovenia.

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