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# Attitudes of the Majority Population towards the Civic and Political Participation of Immigrants in Slovenia

The civic and political participation of immigrants in the receiving country are important dimensions of the integration process. However, immigrants often encounter various barriers in accessing individual forms of participation, either due to legal barriers or due to informal opposition from the majority population. This article aims to examine the attitudes of the majority population towards the civic and political participation of immigrants in Slovenia and the factors influencing such attitudes. The survey on a representative sample of Slovene residents revealed predominantly negative attitudes of the majority population towards both civic and political participation of immigrants. Particularly notable is the opposition to granting immigrants active and passive voting rights. Relevant factors influencing such attitudes include gender, age, education, the type of settlement in which the respondents reside, and their ideological orientation.

**Keywords:** civic participation, political participation, immigrants, attitude of the majority population, Slovenia.

## Odnos večinskega prebivalstva do civilnodružbene in politične participacije priseljencev v Sloveniji

*Civilnodružbena in politična participacija priseljencev v državi sprejema sta pomembni dimenziji integracijskega procesa. Kljub temu pogosto prihaja do omejevanja dostopa priseljencev do različnih oblik participacije, bodisi zaradi pravnih ovir bodisi zaradi neformalnega nasprotovanja večinskega prebivalstva. Namen članka je preveriti, kakšen je odnos večinskega prebivalstva do civilnodružbene in politične participacije priseljencev v Sloveniji in kateri dejavniki vplivajo na ta odnos. Anketa, izvedena na reprezentativnem vzorcu prebivalcev Slovenije, je pokazala pretežno odklonilen odnos do civilnodružbene in politične participacije priseljencev. Predvsem izstopa nasprotovanje aktivni in pasivni volilni pravici priseljencev. Kot relevantni dejavniki, ki vplivajo na ta odnos, so se pokazali spol, starost, izobrazba, tip naselja, v katerem anketiranci prebivajo, in njihova ideološka usmeritev.*

**Ključne besede:** civilnodružbena participacija, politična participacija, priseljenci, odnos večinskega prebivalstva, Slovenija.

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# 1. Introduction

In many countries of the European Union, the inclusion of immigrants in political processes and decision-making was, for a long time, not a major concern for politicians, political decision-makers, or the academia. Immigrants were viewed primarily as a temporary workforce expected to return to their country of origin rather than as potential citizens staying in the host country. Consequently, the majority population did not expect them to be politically active, nor did they want them to be (Martiniello 2006, 83). This perspective first shifted in those European countries that had experienced significant immigration several decades ago. Here, political mobilisation, participation, and representation of immigrants became topical issues, especially at the local level. Debate on immigrant integration could no longer exclude its political dimension (Martiniello 2006, 83). Several studies show that immigrants have always been active in less conventional forms of participation such as trade unions, associations, etc. Likewise, recent research indicates that immigrants, regardless of their status (documented or undocumented), are increasingly engaging in political activities in various ways (Strijbis 2015; Vintila & Martiniello 2021) and that this activism can lead to effective changes in policies (Kende et al. 2024). Nevertheless, the level of civic and political engagement among immigrant populations remains generally lower than among the majority population (Aleksynska 2008; Doomernik et al. 2010; Pettinicchio & de Vries 2017; Li & Jones 2020; Bešter et al. 2023).

The civic<sup>1</sup> and political participation<sup>2</sup> of immigrants are important dimensions of the integration process. Immigrant involvement in civic and political activities is both a prerequisite for their full integration into the receiving society and an indicator of the success and comprehensiveness of that integration. Without participating in civic and political governance, immigrants cannot achieve equal and full integration into society. In such case, their opinions, needs, and wishes are often unheard and unrepresented. Therefore, civic and political participation are certainly in the interest of immigrants, but it is also important to consider how the majority population perceives such. The survey titled *Challenges of Immigrant Integration and Development of Integration Policy in Slovenia* (hereinafter: the *Challenges of Integration survey*) conducted in 2020 (Medvešek et al. 2022a) revealed that among the various measures<sup>3</sup> to enhance immigrant integration in Slovenia, the majority population is least in favour of promoting the inclusion of immigrants in political decision-making. It appears that the majority population expects immigrants to adapt to Slovene society rather than participate in the co-creation of societal norms and values (Medvešek et al. 2022a, 147–155). This raises several questions: which forms of political participation by immigrants are most objectionable to the majority population? Is it more challenging for the majority population to accept immi-

grants exercising passive voting rights, such as running for political office, or their active voting rights in choosing candidates for political office? Additionally, how does the majority population perceive immigrant involvement in political parties or other forms of political participation? Does the majority population oppose only the political participation of immigrants, or do they also object to their broader civic participation? What factors influence the majority population's attitudes towards the civic and political participation of immigrants?

The aim of this paper is to answer these questions and thereby contribute to a broader and deeper understanding of the attitudes of the majority population towards the civic and political participation of immigrants, which is a crucial factor in the process of integration of immigrants into the social and political life of the receiving country. The answers to the research questions will be obtained by analysing data from a survey conducted among the Slovene population as part of the project Immigrant Integration through Civic and Political Participation (hereinafter: the Research on Participation).<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Theoretical Background

Klarenbeek and Weide (2020, 214) note that European integration discourses reflect an ambivalence towards the political participation of immigrants. This ambivalence manifests in what they call a participation paradox, constituted by two conflicting characteristics of discourse. The first one emphasises the need for immigrants to be active to attain a well-integrated society and well-functioning democratic political community. The second one is a call for the protection of liberal democratic institutions against the alleged illiberal threats that immigrants pose to society. On the one hand, immigrant participation is demanded, while on the other hand there are fears that this participation would undermine liberal democratic values and lead to undesirable, illiberal changes in society. This ambivalence towards the political participation of immigrants is also reflected in empirical research, which yields varying conclusions. Some studies (e.g., Verkuyten 2018) suggest that members of the majority population might feel threatened by immigrant political participation if they see it as questioning their dominant position in society. In this case, they exhibit negative attitudes towards the political participation of immigrants. Conversely, the majority population may view immigrant engagement in civil society and politics positively if they see it as a sign of successful integration, as a sign of immigrants' willingness to co-shape and contribute to the common good. For instance, Kende et al. (2024) find that higher levels of immigrant political participation are associated with more positive attitudes towards immigrants among the majority population. Their research also found that in countries where immigrants were more active politically, national majority members perceived lower levels of threat (Kende et al. 2024, 11).

Other authors explored the relationship between immigrant political participation and the attitudes of the majority population from the opposite perspective: examining the level of immigrant political participation in environments where the majority population is either accepting and supportive or opposed. Just and Anderson (2014) found that in environments where the majority population is more open to immigrants and supportive of their engagement in political decision-making, immigrants tend to participate more. Conversely, where the majority population is more reluctant to immigrant participation, immigrants are less involved in various political activities. Structural opportunities for immigrant participation (rights, openness of institutions) also play a significant role. The more these opportunities exist and the more open they are, the more the majority population supports ethnic diversity among political representatives (OSCE/ODIHR 2017, 31). In other words, in environments where there are more legal/formal opportunities for immigrant political participation – where immigrants have more rights and more channels available to them to participate in the political process – the majority population tends to be more favourable to immigrant political participation.

The Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) (Solano & Huddleston 2020) defines the Slovene approach to integration as “equality on paper”. Immigrants in Slovenia enjoy basic rights and long-term security,<sup>5</sup> but do not enjoy equal opportunities. Slovenia’s integration policy encourages the public to see immigrants as equals and as potential citizens, but not as their neighbours.<sup>6</sup> Instead, they are viewed as strangers. Conversely, the top ten MIPEX countries treat immigrants as equals, neighbours, and potential citizens, and invest in integration as a two-way process. Policies that treat immigrants as strangers (as Slovenia’s do according to MIPEX) lead more people to see immigrants as a general threat and to treat them in ways that harm integration (Solano & Huddleston 2020, 220). Similarly, the Challenges of Integration survey (Medvešek et al. 2022a) finds that a significant proportion of the Slovene population views immigrants as a threat and that perceptions of (cultural, economic, security) threat exacerbate negative public attitudes towards immigration and immigrants. Moreover, individuals who perceive immigrants as a threat tend to have a more negative view of immigrant integration in Slovenia.

Based on these data and in line with the theoretical assumptions mentioned above that people who feel threatened tend to have a more negative attitude towards immigrant participation, it can be assumed that the majority population in Slovenia is not very supportive of the civic and political participation of immigrants. A similar assumption can also be drawn from the finding that in countries where structural opportunities for political participation are greater, the public tends to be more favourable to immigrant political participation, whereas in countries with limited structural opportunities for immigrants, the public tends to be more opposed to their participation. In Slovenia, as indicated

by MIPEX, structural opportunities for the political participation of immigrants are not well developed. Although all permanent residents have the right to vote in local elections, leading MIPEX to rank Slovenia as a leader in Central Europe on this issue, the overall opportunities for political participation of immigrants are deemed slightly unfavourable. Notably, non-EU citizens residing in Slovenia are not allowed to be members of political parties (aside from being honorary members) or stand as candidates in elections. MIPEX also criticises the limited ability of immigrants or their organisations to influence policymaking (Solano & Huddleston 2020, 221). Furthermore, in terms of access to nationality, which grants immigrants rights equal to other citizens in all areas, including political rights, Slovenia ranks in the bottom five countries according to MIPEX. Two key factors particularly restrict access to Slovene citizenship: the lengthy residence requirement (10 years), one of the longest in Europe, and the requirement to give up the current citizenship (Mirovni inštitut 2020).<sup>7</sup>

In addition to political participation, civic participation of immigrants is another vital component of a democratic society. Immigrant involvement in the civil society organisations of the majority population presents opportunities for intercultural learning, fostering mutual respect, and cultivating a sense of belonging among immigrants. However, it can also evoke discomfort among the majority population, instilling fears of losing traditional values and potentially sparking opposition to immigrant integration. One example of civil society organisation is immigrant organisations,<sup>8</sup> serving as crucial vehicles for preserving immigrants' cultural heritage, presenting their interests to the majority society, and promoting intercultural dialogue (Medvešek et al. 2023). There is disagreement among scholars regarding the effects of immigrant participation in immigrant organisations. Some scholars (e.g., Portes & Rumbaut 1990) argue that their engagement in immigrant organisations and the advocacy of "ethnic" interests represent a transitional phase in which immigrants gain experience and prepare for broader participation in society. On the other hand, Fennema and Tillie (2001) contend that immigrant organisations, akin to any majority organisations, contribute to the development of civic skills and teach members to address problems collectively. In contrast, other authors (e.g., Uslander & Conley 2003) argue that a stronger attachment to an ethnic community may divert individuals from active civic participation in the receiving country, instead increasing their interest in politics within their country of origin.

The concept of civic participation of immigrants, whether through integration into existing majority civil society organisations or through the activities of immigrant organisations, can elicit a negative response from the majority population, often stemming from feelings of threat, as explained by the cultural threat theory (Hopkins 2010). In contrast, the intergroup contact theory posits that interactions between the majority population and immigrants can, under suitable conditions, diminish prejudice and cultivate positive sentiments

towards diversity. However, the contact theory, which emerged in the 1940s, is complicated by the paradox that intergroup contact may simultaneously reinforce prejudice and intolerance at both individual and collective levels while also contributing to reducing prejudice and dismantling stereotypes between groups (Durrheim & Dixon 2005, 20). Although recent studies have approached the (intergroup) contact theory cautiously, there remains a substantial body of research in psychological and sociological literature affirming that intergroup contact contributes to reducing prejudice and negative attitudes towards out-group members (Durrheim & Dixon 2005, 21; Pettigrew & Tropp 2006).

Limited research has been conducted on the attitudes of the majority population towards political and, in particular, civic participation of immigrants. Consequently, there is a scant understanding of this aspect of the integration process. Our research attempts to bridge this gap at least to some extent.

### 3. Methodology

Data on the perceptions of the majority population regarding the civic and political participation of immigrants were obtained through a survey among the Slovene population. The survey, part of our Research on Participation, covered a wide range of topics, including the population's perceptions regarding the civic and political participation of immigrants. The sample was drawn from the Central Population Register of Slovenia using random systematic sampling and included residents of Slovenia aged 18+, with a sample size at 2,500 persons. As the survey also collected data on the civic and political participation of immigrants and given that the immigrant population is often under-represented even in surveys of a representative sample of the Slovene population, additional purposive sampling was conducted to gather more responses from immigrants. From a supplementary sample of 7,000 individuals, also based on the Central Population Register of Slovenia and including residents aged 18+, we used an onomastic approach to identify a smaller sample ( $n = 1,682$ ) of residents likely to be immigrants given their first or family names. Subsequent analysis revealed that this group also included a small proportion of individuals who, by our definition, belonged to the majority population. The final sample of respondents analysed in this paper includes all individuals born in Slovenia, defined as the majority population, regardless of whether they were included in the initial or supplementary sampling.

The two samples were interviewed using a combination of postal and online surveys. The survey period ran from October 2022 to January 2023, during which we received 1,303 valid responses. Of these, 976 were provided by residents born in Slovenia, who we define in this paper as majority population. Foreign-born residents of Slovenia are defined as immigrants.

**Table 1: Comparison of data on the gender, age, and education structure of respondents included in the Research on Participation with Eurostat and SORS statistics on the gender, age, and education structure of the Slovene population aged 18+**

	Research on Participation – respondents born in Slovenia, 2022/2023		Eurostat, SORS – residents born in Slovenia, 2023	
	No.	%	No.	%
<b>Gender</b>				
Male	399	40.9	702,475	48.4
Female	577	59.1	750,256	51.6
Total	976	100	1,452,731	100
<b>Age</b>				
18–30 years	165	16.9	227,607	16.1
31–45 years	255	26.1	361,815	25.7
46–60 years	293	30.1	378,730	25.7
61+	263	27.0	484,579	32.4
Total	976	100	1,452,731	100
<b>Education</b>				
Primary education (incomplete or completed primary school)	65	6.7	243,355	16.8
Secondary education (vocational school, technical upper secondary school, general upper secondary school)	490	50.2	781,109	53.8
Tertiary education (college, university, master's degree and PhD)	398	40.8	428,267	29.5
No answer	23	2.4	/	/
Total	976	100	1,452,731	100

Source: Eurostat (2024); SORS;<sup>9</sup> data from the Research on Participation.

The comparison of the surveyed population with the demographic structure of the population born in Slovenia in terms of gender, age, and education reveals a higher proportion of women and respondents with higher education in the sample. This difference is in line with the general trend indicating a greater willingness of women and the highly educated to participate in surveys.

## 4. Attitudes of the Majority Population towards the Civic and Political Participation of Immigrants

The attitudes of the majority population towards the civic and political participation of immigrants were measured through questions relating to various forms of participation. We sought to understand how the majority population feels about immigrants who do not yet have Slovene citizenship but permanently reside in Slovenia having the same rights to vote or stand for election as the majority population. Additionally, we asked about their views on immigrants without Slovene citizenship being able to establish their own civil society organisations co-funded by the State, participate in majority organisations co-funded by the State, join existing political parties, and organise protests. Respondents could answer these questions with Yes, No, or I don't know. In the analysis, the replies were assigned the following values: 1 – Yes, 2 – No, 0 – I don't know.

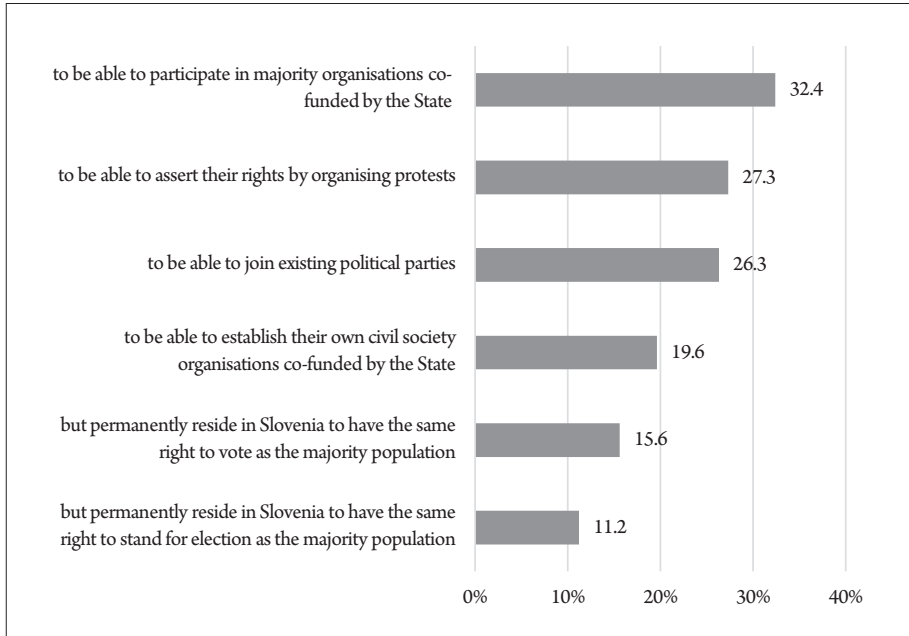
**Table 2: Attitudes of the majority population towards various forms of civic and political participation of immigrants, 2023 (n = 976)**

Do you think it is right for immigrants who do not yet have Slovene citizenship ...										
	Yes		No		I don't know		No answer		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
a) but permanently reside in Slovenia to have the same right to vote as the majority population?	152	15.6	667	68.3	156	16.0	1	0.1	976	100
b) but permanently reside in Slovenia to have the same right to stand for election as the majority population?	109	11.2	712	73.0	153	15.7	2	0.2	976	100
c) to be able to establish their own civil society organisations co-funded by the State?	191	19.6	577	59.1	201	20.6	7	0.7	976	100
d) to be able to participate in majority organisations co-funded by the State?	316	32.4	470	48.2	187	19.2	3	0.3	976	100
e) to be able to join existing political parties?	257	26.3	521	53.4	195	20.0	3	0.3	976	100
f) to be able to assert their rights by organising protests?	266	27.3	524	53.7	183	18.8	3	0.3	976	100

Source: Data from the Research on Participation; Medvešek et al. (2022b).



**Chart 1: Share of the majority population believing that it is right for immigrants who do not yet have Slovene citizenship ... 2023, (n = 976)**



Source: Data from the Research on Participation.

The data indicate that respondents largely hold negative attitudes towards all forms of civic and political participation of immigrants. Specifically, there is strong disagreement with the idea that immigrants (who do not have Slovene citizenship but reside permanently in Slovenia) should have the same voting rights as the majority population. Only 15.6% of respondents supported granting immigrants equal rights to vote as the majority population. Even fewer, 11.2%, supported allowing immigrants equal rights to stand for election. It is also important to note that approximately 15–20% of the respondents are undecided or do not have an opinion on these issues. However, a majority (over 50%, except for question d where the proportion is 48.2%) are explicitly opposed to the forms of political or civic participation of immigrants in question.

Elections are a key pillar of legitimacy and a mechanism through which a general sense of belonging and trust in the political system can be established. The participation of immigrants in elections can indicate their sense of belonging and responsibility for the management of public affairs, which implies their political integration (Doomernik et al. 2010, 15). A prerequisite for this is that immigrants are allowed to participate in the political process and influence political decision-making. Countries usually provide this possibility to immigrants who have been resident in their territory for a long time, either by

extending the right to vote to permanent residents or by liberalising the right to citizenship, allowing more immigrants to acquire citizenship and thus the right to vote. However, the scope of the right to vote varies according to the political and administrative level of the election, i.e., whether it is a local or a national election. Countries are still trying to ensure that access to political rights, such as the right to vote and to stand as candidates in national elections, remains reserved for their citizens. Such exclusion contradicts the modern democratic idea, which emphasises the equal influence of each individual in political decisions directly affecting them. Over time, access to citizenship and political rights gradually expanded to encompass more individuals, allowing a growing number of people to enjoy such rights. Initially, they were reserved for rich men, then extended to adult men, followed by all adults born in the territory of the country (citizens), regardless of gender. In the modern world, where population mobility is increasing and the proportion of foreign nationals in each country is growing, the political exclusion of immigrants is becoming a topical issue (Jacobs et al. 2009, 220–221).

Regarding the voting rights of foreigners at the local level, Slovenia distinguishes between individuals originating from other EU Member States and third-country nationals. Citizens of other EU Member States holding a permanent residence registration permit and having a registered permanent residence in the Republic of Slovenia, or a residence registration permit and a registered temporary residence in the Republic of Slovenia have the right to vote and stand for election to municipal councils, as well as to the councils of local communities, village communities, or parts of municipalities. Third-country nationals only have the right to vote, without the right to stand for election, and even this applies only to those who possess a permanent residence permit and a registered permanent residence in Slovenia. There are also differences in the election of mayors. In addition to citizens of Slovenia, citizens of other EU countries with the above-mentioned status and third-country nationals holding a permanent residence permit and a having a registered permanent residence in Slovenia have the right to vote for mayor. However, only citizens of Slovenia have the right to stand as candidates for mayor. Likewise, only citizens of Slovenia have the right to vote and stand for election in elections for the President of the Republic, the National Assembly, and the National Council, although the latter elections allow for a partial exception, meaning that foreigners can vote in elections to the National Council just like Slovene citizens, provided they are engaged in an activity or are in an employment relationship in Slovenia (Bešter et al. 2023, 23–24).

In the perceptions of the majority population, immigrant access to full voting rights continues to be contingent on acquiring Slovene citizenship. One possible explanation is that immigrants without Slovene citizenship, who would obtain the same voting rights as the majority population, are viewed as competitors for

power and influence. Due to their cultural differences and divergent values, they may be perceived as seeking to steer society in a direction that the majority population does not endorse, thus leading to the perception of immigrants as a threat.

The idea that immigrants without Slovene citizenship should be able to establish their own civil society organisations co-funded by the State finds support only among 19.6% of the majority population. Under existing legislation, foreign nationals living in Slovenia can set up their own associations or other types of organisations, e.g., institutes. In this respect, their rights are equal to the rights of the majority population. In 2023, 134 immigrant organisations were active in Slovenia (Medvešek et al. 2023). Active organisations are those that submit annual reports to the Agency of the Republic of Slovenia for Public Records and Services. In practice, the State provides partial financial support for various cultural programmes and projects aimed at immigrant communities, in accordance with its legislative obligations.<sup>10</sup> The Ministry of Culture and the Public Fund of the Republic of Slovenia for Cultural Activities regularly publish calls for tenders that offer the possibility of funding cultural projects of immigrant communities or organisations targeting immigrants.

A favourable attitude from the receiving society towards immigrant organisations can have a positive impact on the integration of immigrants into the wider society. Conversely, opposition to such immigrant organising can foster ethnic segregation and radicalisation of immigrant communities (Pilati 2012; Herman & Jacobs 2015). Our previous research (Medvešek et al. 2022a, 164–167) has shown that the majority society perceives considerable positive effects from immigrant integration and mobilisation within immigrant organisations, though a much smaller proportion supports state funding of these organisations. The small proportion of respondents supporting the establishment of immigrant organisations in this survey may be due to the inclusion of the question regarding state funding.

The majority population of Slovenia favours the possibility for immigrants to participate in majority organisations funded by the State more than the establishment of immigrant civil society organisations. This option was supported by 32.4% of respondents, while opposition to this form of immigrant participation was the lowest at 48.2%. Notably, this is the only form of immigrant participation where the share of respondents with a negative opinion did not exceed 50%. In practice, as our survey shows, immigrants are indeed more likely to be involved in majority organisations (e.g., trade unions, organisations in the fields of education, arts, culture, environment protection, animal protection, sports and recreation, peace organisations, charitable and humanitarian organisations, organisations associated with religious beliefs) than in specific immigrant organisations (Bešter et al. 2023, 35).

The majority population is also more supportive of immigrant participation in existing political parties than of the establishment of immigrant civil society

organisations. This option was supported by 26.3% of respondents, which is surprisingly high given the low proportion supporting the immigrants' rights to vote and stand for election.

In democratic countries, political parties act as a bridge between civil society and state institutions. Their role is to translate societal interests and ideologies into legislative proposals and to train and nominate individuals for various political offices. On one hand, party politics is an element of government policy; on the other hand, democratic parties are voluntary associations, not state institutions, that exercise legitimate political power. Not all political parties are part of the government; some remain on the margins of the political system, advocating for more radical political change (Martiniello 2006, 96). Political party membership and the willingness to take an active role within a political party is an important form of participation. Immigrants' party membership is an indicator of their involvement in wider society and an expression of their interest in central social issues. Their involvement can influence party positions and electoral politics (Doomernik et al. 2010). MIPEX notes that immigrants are allowed to join political parties without restrictions in 27 out of 56 countries (MIPEX 2020). In Slovenia, however, foreigners cannot become regular members of political parties under the Political Parties Act, though they can become honorary members if the party's statutes allow it. An exception is made for citizens of other EU Member States who have a recognised right to vote in Slovenia (Art. 7 of the Political Parties Act). These are individuals holding a permanent residence registration permit and having a registered permanent residence in the Republic of Slovenia, or a residence registration permit and a registered temporary residence in the Republic of Slovenia (Art. 5. of the Local Elections Act).

In a similar proportion to immigrant membership in political parties, the majority population also supports the possibility for immigrants to exercise their rights by organising protests. Specifically, 27.3% of the majority population supports this option.

The right to protest is part of the rights to freedom of (opinion and) expression and to (peaceful) assembly and association, which are enshrined in fundamental human rights documents<sup>11</sup> and the Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia (1991, Art. 39 and 42). These rights have no limitations based on nationality or any other personal circumstances of the individual. While protests are a form of political participation that allows immigrants to express their needs and interests, they do not lead to the acquisition of institutionalised positions of power or political functions that would guarantee decision-making opportunities for immigrants. Decisions on whether the needs and interests expressed in protests will be taken into account remain in the hands of others. From this perspective, the majority population is likely to perceive the participation of immigrants in protests as less threatening and is therefore not so much opposed to immigrants exercising their rights by organising protests.

The data presented here confirm our assumption that the majority population in Slovenia is generally not in favour of the civic and political participation of immigrants. Notably, there is a reluctance towards those forms of political participation through which immigrants could have a more direct influence on political decision-making, such as running for political office or voting for candidates.

## 5. Factors Influencing the Attitudes of the Majority Population towards the Civic and Political Participation of Immigrants

In the section below, we will examine whether and how the following factors influence the respondents' views on the civic and political participation of immigrants: gender, age, education, type of settlement in which the respondents reside, their ideological orientation, and employment status.

Considering the findings of the Challenges of Integration survey, indicating that men, the older generation, respondents with lower education, and those living in rural environments have more negative attitudes towards immigrants and immigration in general (Medvešek et al. 2022a, 98, 125), we assume that these categories of the population also have more negative attitudes towards the civic and political participation of immigrants (Medvešek et al. 2022a, 98, 125). As regards ideological orientation, research shows that more right-leaning members of the majority population feel more threatened by immigrants compared to their more left-leaning counterparts (Kende et al. 2024). Thus, in terms of threat perception, more right-leaning individuals might perceive politically active immigrants competing for political power as particularly threatening. On this basis, we hypothesise that more right-leaning individuals have more negative attitudes towards the civic and political participation of immigrants than those who are more left-leaning. Another factor influencing the population's attitudes towards immigrants or immigration is employment, mainly because of its association with perceptions of economic threat. For example, Callens and Meuleman (2017) find that unemployment is associated with significantly stronger perceptions of economic threat, which may (in turn) be associated with more negative attitudes towards immigration (Lancee & Pardos-Prado 2013). In line therewith, we assume that the unemployed have negative attitudes towards the civic and political participation of immigrants.

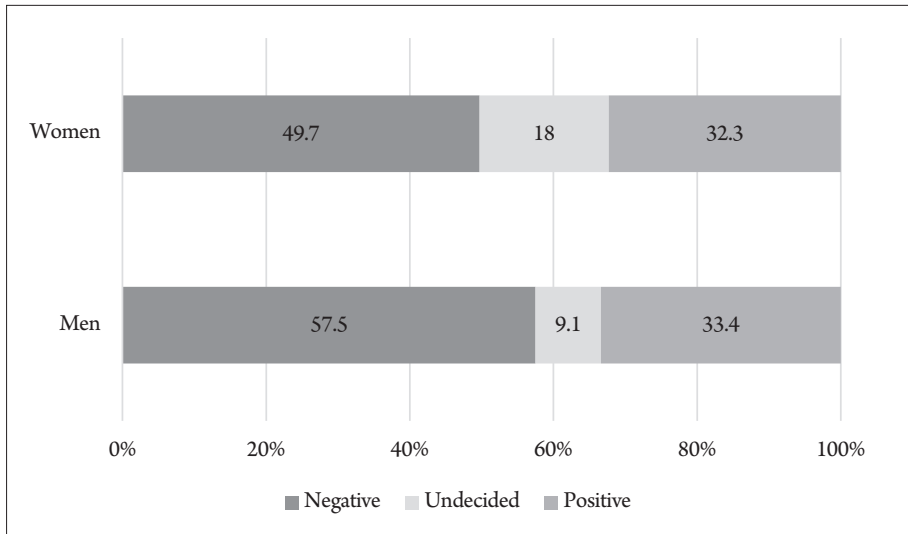
To test these assumptions, we first used the hierarchical clustering method to examine how respondents group themselves according to their agreement or disagreement with the possibility of immigrants having access to different forms of civic and political participation.<sup>12</sup> We used Ward's method, which has the fewest assumptions and provides the easiest way to detect different structures in the data. Differences between units were calculated using Euclidean distance.

From the dendrogram, we extracted the classification of the respondents into three groups. The assumption of grouping the respondents into three groups was verified using the k-means clustering method.

The first group of respondents, which we called negative attitudes (n = 511), clusters respondents who predominantly answered No to the given questions (a–f, see Table 2) (we assigned a value of 2 to the answer No). Consequently, their answers have higher mean values. In the second group, undecided (n = 139), the answers to all questions have low mean values, indicating that this group consists of respondents who largely answered I don't know to the given questions (the answer I don't know was assigned a value of 0). In the third group, positive attitudes (n = 317), respondents often answered No to question b and partially to question a (value 2), while frequently answering Yes to the other four questions (value 1). Based on the classification of the respondents into three groups, we created a new variable, attitudes towards immigrant participation, with the following values: 1 – negative, 2 – undecided, and 3 – positive.

Next, we examined the characteristics of the respondents classified into these three groups according to their attitudes towards the civic and political participation of immigrants (negative, undecided, positive) and the factors influencing such.

**Chart 2: Correlation between the respondents' gender and their attitudes towards civic and political participation of immigrants, 2023**

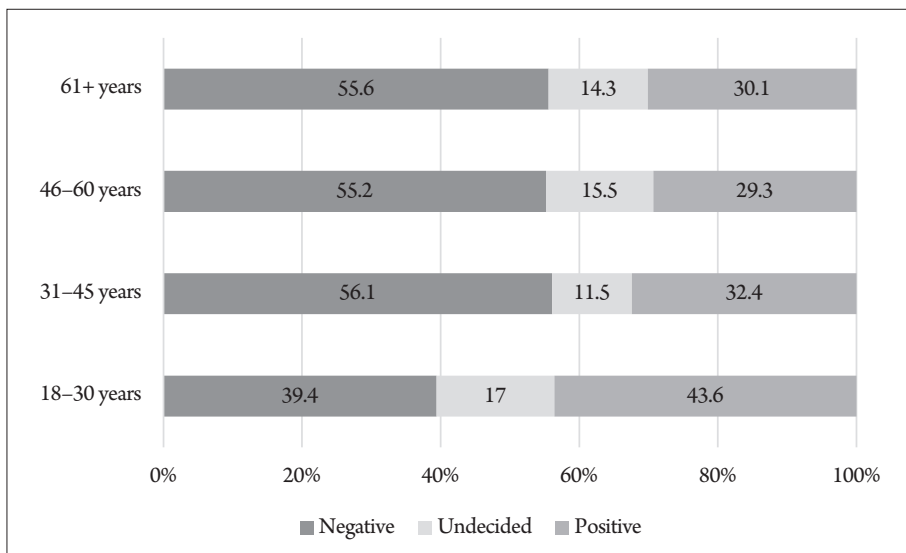


Source: Data from the Research on Participation.

There was a statistically significant correlation between the variable attitudes towards participation and gender,  $\chi^2(2) = 15.64, p < .001$ . Women were more

likely to be undecided (18%) than men (9.1%) about immigrants' participation. Conversely, men showed a higher proportion (57.5%) of negative attitudes towards participation than women (49.7%). However, the proportions of individuals with positive attitudes towards immigrant participation were similar among women (32.3%) and men (33.4%).

**Chart 3: Correlation between the respondents' age and their attitudes towards civic and political participation of immigrants, 2023**

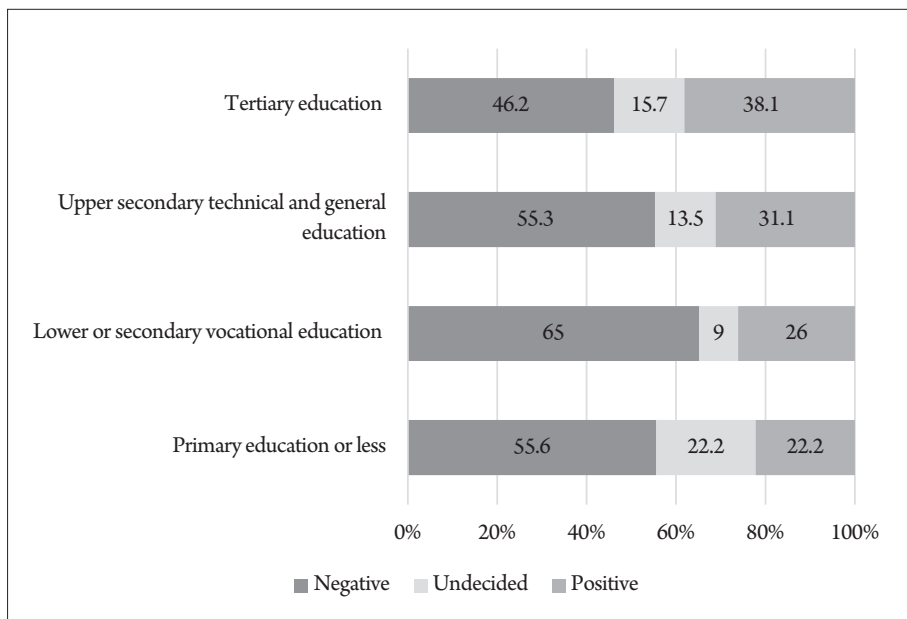


Source: Data from the Research on Participation.

There was also a statistically significant correlation between age and the variable attitudes towards participation,  $\chi^2(6) = 16.93, p = .010$ . Young people under 30 years of age exhibited the highest proportion of individuals across all age categories who displayed positive attitudes towards immigrant participation (43.6%), alongside the highest proportion of individuals undecided towards immigrant participation (17%) and the lowest proportion of individuals with negative attitudes (39.4%). Among respondents aged between 31 and 45 years, the highest proportion of individuals demonstrated a negative attitude towards immigrant participation (56.1%) compared to all other age categories, with 32.4% exhibiting a positive attitude and the lowest proportion (11.5%) showing indecision towards immigrant participation. The age groups 46–60 years and 61+ years displayed relatively similar attitudes towards immigrant participation. Over half of the respondents in both categories (55.2% of those aged 46–60 years and 55.6% of those aged 61+ years) held negative attitudes towards immigrant participation. Additionally, 29.3% of individuals aged 46–60 years and 30.1% of

those aged 61+ years expressed positive attitudes towards immigrant participation, while the shares of those undecided were 15.5% and 14.3%, respectively.

**Chart 4: Correlation between the respondents' education and their attitudes towards civic and political participation of immigrants, 2023**

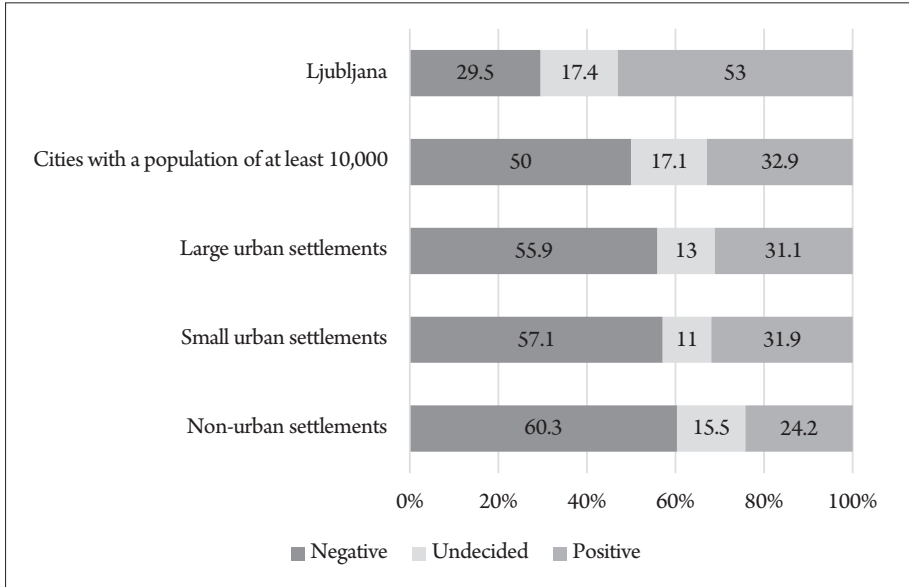


Source: Data from the Research on Participation.

A statistically significant correlation was also identified between education and the variable attitudes towards participation,  $\chi^2(6) = 22.00, p = .001$ . The data suggest that the higher the education level of the respondents, the greater the proportion with positive attitudes towards immigrant participation. Among respondents with a primary school education or less, 22.2% exhibited positive attitudes towards immigrant participation. This figure rose to 26% among those with lower or secondary vocational education, further increasing to 31.1% among respondents with upper secondary technical or general education. Among those with tertiary education, the proportion with positive attitudes reached 38.1%. The highest proportion of respondents with negative attitudes towards immigrant participation was found among those with lower or secondary vocational education (65%), while the lowest proportion was among those with tertiary education (46.2%). The shares of respondents who displayed an undecided attitude towards immigrant participation were highest among those with primary education or less (22.2%) and lowest among those with lower or secondary vocational education (9%).



**Chart 5: Correlation between the type of settlement in which the respondents reside and their attitudes towards civic and political participation of immigrants, 2023**

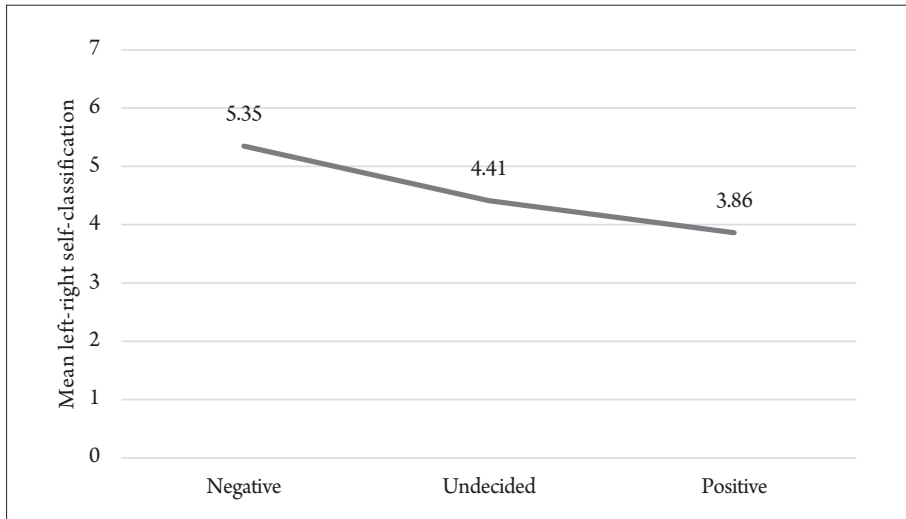


Source: Data from the Research on Participation.

There is a statistically significant correlation also between the type of settlement<sup>13</sup> where the respondents reside and the variable attitudes towards participation,  $\chi^2(8) = 44.09, p < .001$ . It appears that the proportion of individuals with negative attitudes towards immigrant participation decreases with increasing urbanisation and size of the settlement. For instance, respondents living in the capital, Ljubljana, exhibit the highest proportion of positive attitudes towards immigrant political participation (53%) and the lowest proportion of negative attitudes (29.5%). Similarly, residents of Ljubljana also display the highest proportion of undecided individuals. Conversely, respondents residing in non-urban settlements record the lowest proportion (24.2%) of individuals with positive attitudes and the highest proportion of individuals with negative attitudes towards immigrant participation (60.3%).

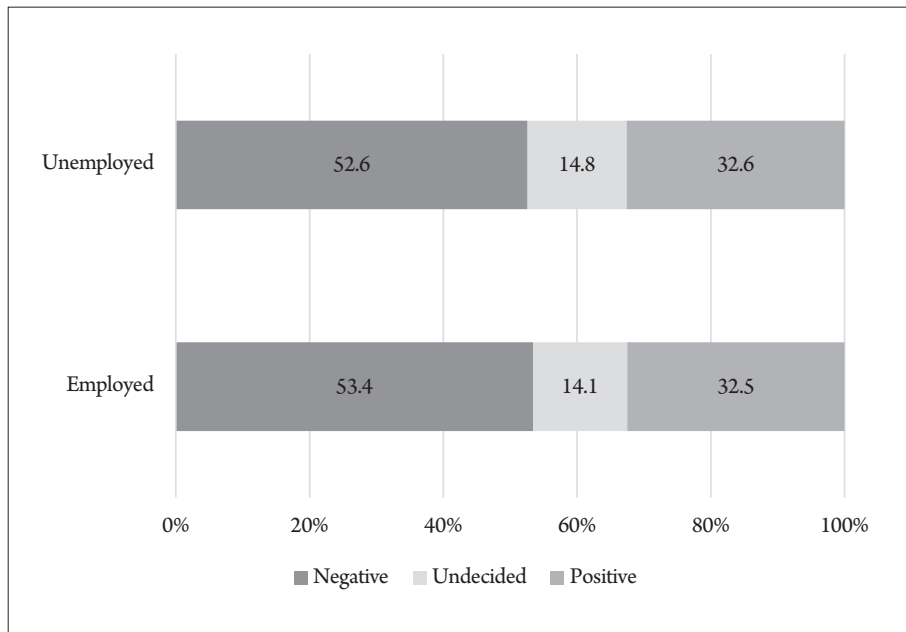
We also tested whether there was a correlation between the respondents' ideological self-classification and their attitudes towards immigrant participation. Ideological self-classification was assessed by asking respondents to position themselves on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 represented left-leaning and 10 represented right-leaning. The analysis revealed that the respondents' ideological self-classification significantly influenced their attitudes towards immigrant participation  $F(2, 738) = 28.87, p < .001$ . Those classified in the group with positive attitudes towards immigrant participation tended to be more

**Chart 6: Correlation between the respondents' ideological self-classification on a scale from 0 to 1, where 0 represents left-leaning and 10 indicates right-leaning, and their attitudes towards civic and political participation of immigrants, 2023**



Source: Data from the Research on Participation.

**Chart 7: Correlation between the respondents' status of employment and their attitudes towards civic and political participation of immigrants, 2023**



Source: Data from the Research on Participation.

left-leaning (mean = 3.86), while respondents in the undecided group leaned slightly towards the middle of the scale (mean = 4.41). Conversely, respondents in the negative attitudes group were more right-leaning (mean = 5.35). Post-hoc testing using Turkey's test further revealed statistically significant differences between undecided and negative attitudes groups ( $p = .003$ ), as well as between the positive and negative attitudes groups ( $p < .001$ ).

The correlation between the variable attitudes towards immigrant participation and employment did not prove to be statistically significant,  $\chi^2(2) = 0.12$ ,  $p = .937$ . Regardless of employment status, approximately half of the respondents held negative attitudes, while less than a third expressed positive attitudes, with just over 14% showing indecision towards immigrant participation.

## 6. Conclusion

The civic and political participation of immigrants are gradually gaining recognition in the European setting as crucial dimensions of the integration process. Consequently, an increasing number of countries are beginning to promote integration into society by extending opportunities for immigrants to engage in socio-political activities in the receiving country. Immigrant participation has also become a prominent topic in research; however, most studies have focused on the forms and levels of political and civic participation, as well as the various individual and structural factors (opportunities and obstacles) that influence immigrant participation, while the attitudes of the majority population towards such participation have received limited attention in scientific research. The research presented in this paper aims to address this gap.

One of the objectives of this paper was to investigate the attitudes of the majority population towards the civic and political participation of immigrants in Slovenia. Drawing on the results of previous surveys on the attitudes of the majority population towards immigration and immigrants in general, which indicated considerable reluctance towards immigrants and immigration, and considering the rather unfavourable structural opportunities for immigrant political participation, we assumed that the majority population was largely hesitant towards the civic and political participation of immigrants. The analysis of data from the survey among the majority population of Slovenia confirmed our assumptions. The findings revealed predominantly negative attitudes towards all the above forms of civic and political participation of immigrants, particularly towards granting to immigrants without Slovene citizenship (even if they are permanent residents of Slovenia) the same voting rights as those pertaining to the majority population and allowing them to stand as candidates in elections. The most negative attitudes of the majority population are in fact observed in relation to traditional modes of political participation, specifically active and passive voting rights.

Responses suggest concerns about the influence of immigrants on the political processes, with a prevailing sentiment that such rights should be tied to citizenship which implies a greater commitment to the State. The inclusion of immigrants without Slovene citizenship in the political decision-making process is obviously not widely perceived as a mechanism to strengthen democratic processes and promote a more inclusive society.

Another aim of the paper was to examine factors influencing the attitudes of the majority population towards the civic and political participation of immigrants in Slovenia, such as gender, age, education, type of settlement in which the respondents reside, ideological orientation, and employment status. Based on previous research on the influence of these factors on the attitudes of the majority population towards immigration and immigrants in general, we assumed that a similar influence would be found in the attitudes towards the civic and political participation of immigrants. Our assumptions were that men, older individuals, those with lower education levels, residents of less urbanised areas, ideologically right-leaning individuals, and the unemployed would hold more negative attitudes towards the civic and political participation of immigrants than women, the younger generation, people with higher education, those living in urban environments, ideologically left-leaning individuals, and those with full-time jobs. Again, the analysis confirmed most of our assumptions, except the last one. Although we expected that employment status would influence the attitude towards immigrant participation, our results revealed that economic stability related to the employment status did not appear to significantly shape attitudes towards immigrant participation. Instead, factors such as cultural differences, demographics, and political beliefs seemed to play a more prominent role.

Moreover, the analysis of the impact of these factors on the attitudes of the majority population towards immigrant participation revealed interrelationships between some of these factors. It is therefore expected that with the rise in the average level of education in Slovenia, there will also be an increase, to some extent, in the proportion of the majority population in higher age categories who will exhibit favourable attitudes towards the civic and political participation of immigrants. Conversely, the relationship between factors such as settlement type, educational structure, and ideological self-classification warrants further exploration. Large urban settlements tend to have a more highly educated population, which is generally more receptive to immigrant participation compared to the population of small or non-urban settlements, which tends to be more conservative on multiple issues (e.g., elections). Focusing on the type or size of the settlement only, the Research on Participation (Medvešek et al. 2023) showed that, due to the above-average share of immigrants in the largest settlements, at least one segment of immigrant civic participation was highly concentrated there, namely the activity of immigrant organisations. In 2023, almost three quarters of all immigrant organisations operated in the seven largest Slovene cities. These

are also the environments where the majority population shows the most positive attitudes towards immigrant participation, which could argue in favour of the intergroup contact theory.

The perceived reluctance of the majority population towards the civic and political participation of immigrants may stem from a sense of threat in the competition for political power. Members of the majority population may view politically active immigrants as a threat to their own position in society and a potential threat to their interests. The fear of losing the dominant influence of the majority population leads to a resistance against granting equal political rights to immigrants. It is also important to understand that attitudes towards immigrant participation are influenced by prevailing societal norms and values; societies favouring traditional identities and societal structures are less likely to support immigrant inclusion in political life as they are not in favour of societal changes. Moreover, the general reluctance of the majority population towards the civic and political participation of immigrants in Slovenia may be largely related to the general reluctance towards immigration perceived in other studies (e.g., Medvešek et al. 2022a). Among the factors contributing to the majority population's opposition to immigrant participation, perceptions of cultural threat are particularly noteworthy. This suggests that the majority population is wary of potential changes in the prevailing culture and values of Slovene society and may therefore oppose the civic and (especially) political participation of immigrants, fearing that such engagement could promote interests and viewpoints diverging from the *status quo*. It may not even be a matter of direct opposition to immigrant participation, but rather a resistance to changes that could disrupt societal norms. This line of reasoning is consistent with the notion of the participation paradox mentioned by Klarenbeek & Weide (2020), but additional research is required to validate these assumptions.

The reluctance of the majority population towards immigrant participation may also stem from a broader distrust of immigrants, possibly related to the majority population's distrust of institutions (institutional trust) and people (interpersonal trust) in general. In fact, in terms of institutional and interpersonal trust, Slovenia ranks below the EU average (OECD Data 2024; Ortiz-Ospina et al. 2016).

Considering its demographic and economic needs, Slovenia will likely continue to rely on immigrants in the future, possibly to an even greater extent. Therefore, it is essential to raise awareness about the importance of integrating immigrants into civic and political life to ensure their successful integration and to preserve the democratic character of Slovenia's society.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Civic participation refers to activities aimed at the general benefit of the community, rather than merely at the pursuit of personal interests. These activities include helping other community members, acting on behalf of the community, addressing community problems, and participating in community life in general (Barrett & Zani 2015, 5).
- <sup>2</sup> Political participation refers to activities aimed at engaging with the political community or political institutions, processes, and political decision-making at various levels – local, regional,



national, or supranational (Barrett & Zani 2015, 4). The purpose or effect of political participation activities is to influence government decisions and governance, either directly by shaping or implementing public policies, or indirectly by selecting individuals who shape those policies (Ekman & Amnå 2012).

- <sup>3</sup> The participants expressed their views on the following integration policy measures: implementing compulsory Slovene language courses; implementing compulsory integration programmes for immigrants, including an orientation course with basic information about everyday life, social values, and norms; educating young people in schools about intercultural coexistence and respect; implementing integration measures already in the immigrants' countries of origin; assisting immigrants in finding employment; promoting objective media reporting on the integration of immigrants and their descendants; providing information on the positive contributions of immigrants to the development of Slovene society; prosecuting individuals who publicly incite hatred or intolerance towards immigrants; and promoting the inclusion of immigrants in political decision-making.
- <sup>4</sup> Research data will be available in the Social Science Data Archives (ADP) (<https://www.adp.fdv.uni-lj.si/eng/>) after the completion of the project.
- <sup>5</sup> Long-term security pertains to immigrants' ability to plan for settling in the country over the long term and to feel assured about their future there. This encompasses factors such as family reunification rights, criteria for obtaining permanent residence, and access to citizenship.
- <sup>6</sup> Once immigrants become part of the community and social ties are established, the majority population starts to see them as neighbours.
- <sup>7</sup> Exemptions from these two requirements are possible under the provisions of the Citizenship of the Republic of Slovenia Act. For example, under Art. 10, citizens of an EU Member States do not have to provide proof of release from their current citizenship if there is reciprocity between the two countries.
- <sup>8</sup> Immigrant organisations are organisations established by or primarily composed of members from immigrant communities or their descendants, whose activities focus on immigrant-related matters (in particular, the preservation of immigrant culture and language in their new environment, advocating for the rights and status of immigrants or immigrant communities), while majority organisations encompass all other organisations typically founded by members of the majority population.
- <sup>9</sup> Data from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia (SORS) were received by e-mail on 7 May 2024.
- <sup>10</sup> Among the cultural programmes and projects financed by the State, Art. 65 of the Exercising of the Public Interest in Culture Act also lists those specifically intended for the "cultural integration of minority communities and immigrants, if their cultural programmes or projects exceed local relevance". Art. 66 of the same Act defines the competences of municipalities and provides that municipalities support "amateur cultural activities including those aimed at the cultural integration of minority communities and immigrants".
- <sup>11</sup> Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Art. 19 and 20), Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (Art. 10–12), European Convention on Human Rights (Art. 10 and 11), International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Art. 19 and 21).
- <sup>12</sup> See Table 2.
- <sup>13</sup> Variable type of settlement (according to the classification of the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia): 1 – non-urban settlements, 2 – small urban settlements, 3 – large urban settlements, 4 – cities with a population of at least 10,000, 5 – Ljubljana.

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