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# NAVIGATING INTEGRATION AND EMOTIONAL DISTRESS DURING VULNERABLE STAGES OF LIFE: THE CASE OF SLOVENIAN REPATRIATES FROM VENEZUELA

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## ABSTRACT

### Navigating Integration and Emotional Distress During Vulnerable Stages of Life: The Case of Slovenian Repatriates From Venezuela

Slovenia has been repatriating persons of Slovenian descent and their immediate family members from poverty-stricken Venezuela since 2019. The article explores the innate, situational, and structural vulnerabilities of the repatriates, focusing in particular on the vulnerabilities affecting their well-being and leading to emotional distress. The vulnerabilities are examined through the lens of time, i.e., before, during, and after the acquisition of the status of a repatriate, and in the context of specific age-related integration challenges. The article shows that their preferred emotional support is provided by the close-knit community of Venezuelan repatriates with whom they share the same language, culture, and experience of repatriation and integration and by the Catholic church through mass, confession, and church gatherings.

**KEYWORDS:** repatriation, vulnerabilities, integration, Slovenia, Venezuela

## IZVLEČEK

### Soočanje z integracijo in čustvenimi stiskami v ranljivih življenjskih obdobjih: Primer repatriiranih Slovencev iz Venezuele

Slovenija od leta 2019 izvaja proces repatriacije Slovencev iz Venezuele, ki se sooča s hudo humanitarno krizo. Avtorica v članku ponudi pregled in analizo prepletenih (prirojenih, situacijskih in strukturnih) ranljivosti repatriirancev, s poudarkom na tistih, ki vplivajo na njihovo počutje in vodijo v čustvene stiske. Ranljivosti proučuje skozi časovno prizmo, tj. pred in po pridobitvi statusa repatriiranca in po izteku slednjega, ter v kontekstu starostno pogojenih integracijskih izzivov. Kot ugotavlja, si repatriiranci čustveno oporo največkrat poiščejo v tesno povezani skupnosti repatriirancev, s katerimi si delijo jezik, kulturo ter izkušnjo repatriacije in integracije, pa tudi pri Katoliški cerkvi z mašami in spovedmi ter s sodelovanjem pri cerkvenih dogodkih.

**KLJUČNE BESEDE:** repatriacija, ranljivosti, integracija, Slovenija, Venezuela

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## INTRODUCTION

In late 2019, the Slovenian government instigated the largest repatriation in the country's history. They offered to repatriate Slovenians with or without Slovenian citizenship and their immediate family members from the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (hereinafter, Venezuela), which had been experiencing severe humanitarian, economic, and political crises. The article explores the vulnerabilities of these repatriates prior to repatriation, during the acquisition of a fifteen-month status that ensures their social security and access to public services, and after the expiration of the status of a repatriated person. The vulnerabilities identified and analyzed in this article are both innate, situational, and structural (Gilodi et al., 2022). In other words, they are analyzed through the lens of intersectionality by taking into account the personal characteristics of the repatriates, the variety of complex situations they are exposed to, and the legal, institutional, economic, and social conditions they encounter. The notion of integration, defined as the process of settlement, interaction with the host society, and social change that follows immigration (Penninx & Garcés-Mascareñas, 2016), is included in the conceptual framework as it is inextricably intertwined with the manifestation of vulnerabilities. Namely, vulnerabilities may develop as a result of migrants' struggles with integration, just as they may conversely have a significant impact on their integration processes and experiences. The article categorizes and groups the identified vulnerabilities through the lens of time, a criterion of classification chosen based on the empirical findings. In particular, the article explores the dimensions of vulnerabilities affecting repatriates' well-being and leading to their emotional (psychological) distress, i.e., "a state of emotional suffering associated with stressors and demands that are difficult to cope with in daily life" (Arvidsdotter et al., 2016). The point of departure is a stark understanding that stressors are always relative to the person they are affecting and, hence, cannot be generalized to the entire population. Nevertheless, the article shows that common situations and conditions, and most notably repatriates' innate characteristics, depending especially on the age-defining stages of life (childhood, adolescence, adult age, old age), may be clustered into groups that share similar vulnerabilities and challenges with the integration.

The article builds on the literature review of relevant academic sources addressing vulnerabilities and integration in the context of migration, policy analysis of legal documents governing repatriation to Slovenia, and statistical information on repatriation and repatriates. Qualitative empirical data includes interviews with six repatriated persons published in the media,<sup>1</sup> in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with two government officials representing competent authorities,<sup>2</sup> two

1 See list of references.

2 Semi-structured interview with the Government official 1 conducted on April 21, 2021. Semi-structured interviews with the Government official 2 conducted on May 6, 2021, and November 10, 2022.

integration counselors providing services to the repatriates,<sup>3</sup> and three repatriated persons.<sup>4</sup> The article's scope is limited to the vulnerabilities defined and described by the interviewees. It does not provide an extensive overview of all vulnerabilities experienced by the entire population of repatriates.

The article first outlines the context leading to the decision of the Slovenian government to repatriate Slovenians from Venezuela, i.e., the humanitarian, economic, and political crises in Venezuela spanning throughout the last decade. It then provides an overview of the Act Regulating Relations between the Republic of Slovenia and Slovenians Abroad, which foresees the possibility of repatriation of Slovenians who live in countries where serious economic or political crises have occurred and where Slovenians are subjected to different pressure. The timeline of repatriation and demographic data of the repatriates is presented next. The following chapter moves on to conceptualize vulnerability and integration in the context of migration and provide theoretical criteria for the categorization and evaluation of the stressors leading to vulnerabilities described by the interviewees. Expatriates' navigation of migration and integration is presented in three subchapters, each focusing on vulnerabilities emerging in either the period before emigration from Venezuela, during the fifteen-month period of status acquisition, or right before and immediately after the status expiration.

## REPATRIATION FROM VENEZUELA: OUTLINE OF THE CONTEXT AND POLICIES

### Humanitarian, economic, and political crisis in Venezuela

In the past decade, more than 7.7 million refugees and migrants have left Venezuela as a result of the political turmoil, socioeconomic instability, and ongoing humanitarian crisis ("Emergency Appeal. Venezuela Situation", 2023). The unfavorable developments, resulting in extensive external displacement, have been described as the most profound crisis of any society in modern Latin America (Bull & Rosales, 2020). In economic terms, the country lost more than 60 percent of its Gross Domestic Product between 2013 and 2019. State infrastructures are collapsing, and the population is facing the precariousness of many services, including electricity and running water (Freier et al., 2022). Public services, especially in the healthcare and education sectors, have been compromised and have significantly deteriorated due to a lack of financing and constant interruption of water, gas, and electricity. In 2019,

3 Semi structured interviews with Integration counsellor 1 and Integration counsellor 2 conducted on October 5, 2022.

4 Semi-structured interviews were conducted on the following dates: Repatriated person 1 (female), July 6, 2023; Repatriated person 2 (male), August 25, 2023; Repatriated person 3 (female), October 10, 2023.

hospitals lacked between 80 and 90 percent of essential medicines and surgical materials (Freier et al., 2022), which resulted in a steep rise in mortality from a range of diseases, as well as in the “skyrocketing” of child and infant mortality. The right to education has been compromised by the lack of teachers, infrastructure deficiencies, and lack of supplies, forcing many schools to remain closed or operate only intermittently (Bull & Rosales, 2020). Furthermore, hyperinflation, declining food production, and food shortages are all contributing to the deterioration that has turned into a persistent humanitarian emergency, as nearly 90 percent of the population was classified as poor by the United Nations (UN) standards in 2019. Corruption, extortion, and human rights violations have also become commonplace (Roekel & De Theije, 2020).

According to Human Rights Watch (2023), authoritarian Venezuelan authorities resort to harassment and persecution of political opponents, human rights defenders, and civil society organizations. They also “stigmatize, harass and repress” the media, closing nonconformist outlets. Security raids and extra-judicial killings, especially in marginalized neighborhoods, have been documented. Horrific abuses have been reported to take place in southern Venezuela by groups controlling illegal gold mines, operating with government acquiescence, where indigenous groups face physical violence, forced labor, and sexual exploitation and are exposed to severe health risks (Human Rights Watch, 2023). According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (“Emergency Appeal. Venezuela Situation”, 2023), the humanitarian crisis in Venezuela has become the second-largest international displacement crisis in the world. The main destinations of Venezuelan migrants and refugees are South American countries and the Caribbean. However, many have been trying to reach Mexico and cross the border into the United States. The European Union has also noted a steady increase in immigration from Venezuela, including an increase in the number of asylum applications being lodged by Venezuelans, mostly in Spain. The increase was most notable in the period 2022–2023 (“Venezuelans, Colombians, and Peruvians”, 2023). However, compared to the other abovementioned regions and countries, the absolute number of asylum applications remains low. Freier et al. (2022) argue that Venezuelan displacement undoubtedly classifies as survival migration, which is defined as the abandonment of a country due to an existential threat for which a solution is not available. Despite the urgency of the situation, however, the political and policy debate on whether Venezuelans should be recognized as refugees continues.<sup>5</sup>

5 Despite the urgency of the situation for the majority, Venezuela is often described as a land of stark social inequalities. Van Roekel and de Theije note that the “complex humanitarian crisis is as much about poverty and scarcity as it is about wealth and abundance” benefiting only a very few (Van Roekel & De Theije, 2020, p. 8). They also bring attention to the Venezuelans who decide not to emigrate but stay and find strategies to cope with scarcity and insecurity. They point out, “Ad hoc solutions [...] depend on alternative economies” in the borderlands that “(un)willingly sustain the crisis” and “do not always fit within the framework of humanitarian aid, human rights, rule of law or democracy, but do provide relief and produce opportunities

## Decision of the Republic of Slovenia to instigate repatriation

In 2019, the Slovenian government decided to act and utilize the provisions in the Act Regulating Relations between the Republic of Slovenia and Slovenians Abroad (Uradni list Republike Slovenije, 2006; hereinafter, the Act), which foresees the possibility of repatriation of Slovenians who live in the countries where serious economic or political crises have occurred and where Slovenians are subjected to different pressures.<sup>6</sup> Repatriation is defined as “immigration of Slovenians to their homeland organized and financed by the Republic of Slovenia” (Article 71 of the Act). The legal determination of the status of Slovenian is not limited to citizenship and includes also individuals of Slovenian descent. Namely, the Act introduces the so-called status of a Slovenian without Slovenian citizenship, which can be acquired based on descent and some other conditions, including an active role in Slovenian organizations abroad.<sup>7</sup> The Act states that *all* Slovenians abroad are an equal part of the unified Slovenian nation and aims at maintaining and developing Slovenian language and culture, preserving cultural heritage and national identity among Slovenians abroad, as well as facilitating the integration of Slovenian abroad into the social, cultural and political life of Slovenia. The Act, therefore, also guarantees special rights and benefits to Slovenians without citizenship. Moreover, in the case of repatriation, the Act guarantees the acquisition of the status also to the immediate family members, which include the spouse or cohabitant, minor unmarried children, and relatives in the direct line of the repatriated person if these persons are without means of subsistence, dependent on the repatriated person and the repatriated person supports them (Article 77 of the Act).

Based on the decision of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that the situation in Venezuela constitutes a crisis, the Slovenian government adopted the Action Plan for Repatriation in November 2019. The eligibility for repatriation of individual persons was to be decided by the Government Office for Slovenians Abroad on the basis of citizenship, Slovenian descent, and the opinions of Slovenian diplomatic or consular representations and non-profit private organizations, such as Slovenian Roman Catholic missions and the missions of other religious communities, Slovenian emigrant organizations in Slovenia and abroad, and others (Article 78 of the Act). The status of a repatriated person may last up to fifteen months. During that time, repatriated persons who did not have a guaranteed personal income were to become eligible for a means-tested financial allowance, as well as free health care and Slovenian

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along with new inequalities” (Van Roekel & De Theije, 2020, p. 9–10). “Amid collapsing state infrastructures, these transborder economies tie into the global trade of basic supplies, narcotics, drugs, natural resources and human trafficking that operate in the interface of the legal and the illegal” (Van Roekel & De Theije, 2020, Abstract).

6 Those eligible for repatriation are also “Slovenians who can contribute to the development and affirmation of the Republic of Slovenia” (Article 72 of the Act).

7 See Article 59 of the Act.

language classes for them and their immediate family members. Upon the granting of the status of a repatriate person, they were to receive a personal work permit issued by the Employment Service of Slovenia.<sup>8</sup> The Action Plan for Repatriation, prepared in cooperation with seven ministries, also included practicalities, such as arranging the transport from Venezuela and addressing any personal issues arising after the expiration of the status of a repatriated person.

Slovenia had little previous experience with repatriation. Prior to 2019, only one family was repatriated based on the provisions of the Act due to the outbreak of civil war in Syria.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the decision was not fully supported by some prominent political and expert figures, such as the Head of the Consular Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who noted that the decision to commence (and openly publicize) repatriation from Venezuela is not a preferred policy of the European Union and many of their Member States, and questioned the ability of the state to provide decent conditions for integration (Government official 1). Integration was indeed the most pressing issue to address. Initially, the Government Office for Slovenians Abroad was mandated to do the task. However, they later decided that the complexity and variety of difficulties and needs of individual persons required assistance from a specialized outsourced organization. The organization chosen to coordinate and assist with the integration was Karitas Slovenia (hereinafter, Karitas). Karitas has already been active in providing financial and other assistance to Slovenians in Venezuela prior to the governmental decision of repatriation and was chosen also due to their extensive network of offices across the country that could assist with the integration of repatriates, who were planned to be dispersedly accommodated (Government Official 2). Very active assistance was also provided by the non-governmental and humanitarian organization Društvo za razvijanje prostovoljnega dela Novo mesto (Association for Developing Voluntary Work Novo mesto), which provided additional language courses and assistance with integration spanning across different policy areas.

The first repatriates arrived in Slovenia at the end of 2019. The process was suspended from March to September 2020 due to the outbreak of COVID-19 and mobility restrictions imposed to limit the global spread of the virus. For those who arrived before the pandemic, the status of a repatriated person was extended for three months. Repatriation resumed in November 2020.

<sup>8</sup> According to Article 66 of the Act, other rights are guaranteed, including the right to more favorable entry requirements determined by the statutes of higher education establishments, access to all public cultural goods under the same conditions as apply to Slovenian citizens, and priority in applying for vacant job positions over third-country nationals.

<sup>9</sup> Prior to the adoption of the Act in 2006, however, Slovenia carried out extensive evacuation (repatriation) of hundreds of Slovenians from occupied Sarajevo during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina following the disintegration of Yugoslavia. The evacuation was carried out in November 1992 (Klavora, 2012).

## Timeline of the arrivals and basic demographic profile of repatriates

The total number of repatriated persons to date is 121.<sup>10</sup> The highest number of repatriates arrived in 2021 and 2022, 37 in each year. Overall, more women (74) than men (47) were repatriated. 65% (78) of the repatriates fall into the category of a working-age population, 17% (21) are children attending primary and secondary schools, and 14% (17) are aged 65 or older (see Table 1).

Year of arrival	Gender		Age			
	Male	Female	0–5	6–19	20–64	65+
2019	2	4	1	/	5	/
2020	12	25	2	5	23	7
2021	15	22	1	7	23	6
2022	11	17	1	6	18	3
2023	7	6	/	3	9	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>17</b>

Table 1: Arrivals by year and demographic data of the repatriates (source: own calculations based on the data supplied by the Government Office for Slovenians Abroad).

## EXPOSURE TO STRESSORS AND THEIR IMPACT ON THE VULNERABILITIES AND INTEGRATION OF REPATRIATES

### Conceptualizing vulnerability and integration in the context of migration

Vulnerability is a multifaceted condition that requires careful conceptualization. The term has been consistently and frequently used for a variety of purposes in academic research and in policy frameworks, to the point of often being treated as a self-explanatory condition or phenomenon (Gilodi et al., 2022). Definitions and conceptualizations of vulnerability across different disciplines, and sometimes also within them, vary enormously, and there is no consensus on what the notion stands for or describes. Most often, also in migration studies, it is defined in relation to the concepts of risks, capacity, autonomy, and dependency (Gilodi et al., 2022).<sup>11</sup> For the discussion provided in this article, it is important, however, to understand vulnerability wholesomely and comprehensibly by taking into consideration multi-level conceptualizations and acknowledging different nuances of meaning given to the concept. The

<sup>10</sup> Data supplied by the Government Office for Slovenians Abroad on November 20, 2023.

<sup>11</sup> For instance, migrants may be at higher *risk* of being subjected to discriminatory practices, violence, social disadvantages, or economic hardships than others; they may be vulnerable due to a limited *capacity* to avoid, resist, cope with, or recover from harm; and they may have a diminished level of *autonomy* and thus higher *dependency* (see Gilodi et al., 2022).

vulnerabilities experienced by the repatriates will, therefore, be examined by using a new theoretical and conceptual framework for the research and evaluation of vulnerabilities developed by Gilodi et al. (2022), which proposes three main conceptualizations that characterize vulnerability as 1) the product of innate or natural characteristics; 2) the product of past, present, or future situations and experiences, and 3) the product of structural characteristics and dynamics. Innate vulnerability stems from innate characteristics that are, by definition, inherent and inevitable, such as age, gender, and disability. Situational vulnerability refers to the specific situations and experiences that migrants have been through, are living through, or may be exposed to. Structural vulnerability denotes the unfavorable social, political, and cultural characteristics of the country of origin, as well as the exclusionary policies and practices in the country of destination. The vulnerabilities in the context of repatriation explored in this article will be considered as both innate, situational, and structural. In other words, the identified vulnerabilities will be analyzed through the lens of intersectionality by considering personal and situational characteristics, as well as the legal, institutional, economic, and social conditions. The discussion will be framed around the dimension of time, as it has a significant impact on the emergence of specific vulnerabilities throughout the processes of repatriation and integration.

Similar to the concept of vulnerability, integration is also a multi-level and multi-dimensional concept. It can be defined as the process of settlement, interaction with the host society, and social change that follows immigration (Penninx & Garcés-Mascareñas, 2016). This definition encompasses three distinct dimensions. Namely, the legal-political, the socioeconomic, and the cultural-religious dimensions. The legal-political dimension refers to residence and political rights and statuses. The socioeconomic dimension refers to the social and economic position of residents and access to core institutions, such as healthcare, housing, education, and employment. The cultural-religious dimension "pertains to the domain of perceptions and practices of immigrants and the receiving society as well as their reciprocal reactions to difference and diversity" (Penninx & Garcés-Mascareñas, 2016, p. 15). Heckmann (2006) also emphasizes the social dimension of integration, which refers to the formation of relationships and the identificational dimension that relates to individuals' multiple senses of identity and belonging.

Some parallels can be drawn with the categorizations of vulnerabilities, especially in terms of the impact of similar multi-level variables on both processes. For instance, the precariousness of the legal status of migrants in the receiving country and the exclusion from or limited access to the services provided by the state hinder socioeconomic integration and may lead to structural and situational vulnerabilities. Negative perceptions and attitudes of the receiving society have a strong impact on the micro-level integration and may lead to events and experiences that create situational vulnerabilities. Conversely, innate characteristics of migrants, such as age, gender, and disabilities, as well as their personality traits, may have a significant (positive or negative) impact on the social dimension of integration.

There is, therefore, a strong two-directional link between the processes of integration and the development of vulnerabilities that may eventually have an impact on migrants' mental health. Vulnerabilities may develop as a result of migrants' struggles with integration, just as they may conversely have a significant impact on their integration processes and experiences. Bhugra also notes that the process of migration consists of a series of events, "which are influenced by a number of factors over a prolonged period of time, and these phases in return are influenced by other factors at social and individual levels" (Bhugra, 2004, p. 244). For instance, bereavement related to loss of relationships, assets, and support after emigration may have a strong impact on migrants' vulnerability and mental health, and the situation may be exacerbated by a prolonged period of language learning upon arrival that hinders labor market integration and the creation of social networks. Conversely, successful integration may lead to the easing of social risks and better emotional well-being. Needless to note, vulnerabilities experienced by migrants, as well as coping mechanisms developed to overcome them, vary significantly, as stressors are always relative to the person they are affecting.

### **Expatriates' navigation of migration, integration, and vulnerabilities**

Emergence, persistence, and severity of vulnerabilities before, during, and after migration can be attributed to a combination of several factors, including the degree of severity of initial trauma exposures and exposure to secondary stressors after settlement in the country of destination (Rousseau & Frounfelker, 2019). The time dimension turned out to be an important variable in the exploration of vulnerabilities of the repatriates, not only in terms of understanding vulnerabilities in relation to individual migration trajectories but also in terms of developing policies and approaches that would enhance their integration.

#### ***Vulnerabilities prior to repatriation***

When describing the conditions in Venezuela prior to repatriation, the interviewees' narratives included depictions of all three dimensions of vulnerabilities conceptualized by Gilodi et al. (2022). The most emphasized was situational vulnerability relating to food scarcity, lack of medicine and healthcare, electricity cuts, violence, corruption, and theft.

Food is scarce. You buy what you can get your hands on; you buy whatever is available. There are also a lot of problems with getting the fuel for the car [...] Also, Venezuela is very dangerous. As a woman, past 6 o'clock in the evening, you have to make sure you are not walking on the streets alone. In the evening, you also have to beware where you park your car. You always wonder if someone will steal the tires or the battery, or even the car itself. (Repatriated person 1)

Life in Venezuela is too difficult. Often, we have no electricity or running water. When the water returns, it's brown at first, and it's a long process to get it clean enough to drink [...]. A lot of people are begging for food. Young people cannot become independent, as they have to live with their families to get by. It is emotionally very difficult. (Repatriated person 2)

A Slovenian missionary nun serving in Venezuela also emphasized the lack of security, inflation, and struggles of the elderly to survive, pointing out the age-related innate vulnerabilities.

Because the police and army are not in the service of the people, there is no safety. Bolivar, their currency, has lost its value entirely. One liter of milk can cost up to 2 million bolivars. Meanwhile, the monthly pension is around 400 thousand bolivars, which is not even 40 [Euro] cents. They survive because of the remittances sent by those who emigrated. But the price is high, because emigration means that families become separated. Andreja Godnič (Oprčkal, 2020)<sup>12</sup>

Living under high stress and permanent uncertainties is likely to have a negative effect on mental health, as the stressors affecting the life of ordinary people, i.e., limited economic opportunities, disrupted social networks, and exposure to violence (Rousseau & Frounfelker, 2019), may lead to profound emotional distress. "Every day, we thought that it was so bad that it couldn't get any worse. But every day after was even worse than the previous day. In the end, we lost everything. Like most Venezuelans, we lived off help from our families and friends living abroad." Maria Voglar (Ahačič, 2020)

Structural vulnerabilities that may lead to emigration can also be a cause of non-migration (Gilodi et al., 2022), as a lack of structurally determined resources may prohibit people from emigrating and settling abroad. For many, state-assisted repatriation can, therefore, be the only option for emigration.

### ***Vulnerabilities during the fifteen-month period of status acquisition and mechanisms of coping***

According to the interviewed integration counselors tasked with providing assistance to the repatriates, the most notable vulnerabilities in the fifteen-month period after the arrival were bereavement due to loss of relationships, difficulties in learning the Slovenian language, and inclusion of children and adolescents into the education system.

The arrival and initial settlement in Slovenia were not overly stressful, as their legal status was confirmed and social security ensured. Because of the state-funded

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12 All quotes obtained from the media were translated into English by the author.

fifteen-month transition period, they were not immediately concerned with existential problems, such as securing housing<sup>13</sup> or finding employment. In the period immediately after the arrival, the counselors noted primarily bereavement issues related to loss of relationships and homesickness and less concern about their inclusion into the new society. Negative emotions, such as a sense of loss and anxiety about those left behind, were pervasive. One repatriate explained: "I missed my friends, I missed my dog. I constantly wondered how they were doing. I was in a lot of pain" (Repatriated person 3).

The frustrations were initially most notable in relation to language learning, as they noted that the Slovenian language is difficult to learn, and most of them did not have any prior knowledge or understanding of Slovenian vocabulary or grammar. Moreover, since most of them had not been learning any second language in Venezuela, starting with Slovenian was a significant challenge. The frustrations were exacerbated when they realized that written Slovenian differs significantly from spoken Slovenian, and especially from regional dialects, which can be tremendously confusing. One repatriate noted:

It is surprising because Slovenia is so small, but it has about fifty dialects. Language apps do not translate words in dialects. It's so confusing [...] I'm not sure if words that I hear in everyday conversations are correct Slovenian words or merely words spoken in dialect [...] Trying to communicate with my peers who are coming from different parts of Slovenia is truly a challenge. (Repatriated person 2)

Outsourced providers offered Slovenian language courses. They were free of charge but were temporarily disrupted by the pandemic for those arriving during the outbreak of the disease. The Employment Service of Slovenia also provided additional classes for all employment seekers with the intention of accelerating their labor market integration. However, the interviewees noted that language learning is a complex process that depends not only on the accessibility of quality of state-provided courses but also on motivation to learn and personal characteristics.

The provided language classes were not sufficient, but they were a good start. After the classes, I kept learning by myself. I did all the homework. I listened to Slovenian radio; I watched Slovenian cartoons. I remember when we arrived, we did not receive any assistance from Karitas because we were among the first to arrive, and Karitas did not yet provide assistance to the repatriates. But that kept many of us more motivated to learn the language quickly because we had to take care of everything ourselves [...] I think that outgoing people also have fewer problems

13 Housing was provided by the state or relatives of the expatriates and hence there was no immediate need to seek accommodation on the market. Later on, however, lifestyle needs and preferences, and availability of suitable employment opportunities, lead to further mobility and the need for new housing.

with speaking than introverts and perfectionists. That plays a major role in language learning. (Repatriated person 1)

The finding that overly attentive state-provided assistance with integration may hinder language learning has been affirmed by the integration counselors themselves. They noted that many repatriates became too dependent on their support with communication with the authorities and service providers such as social workers, healthcare workers, teachers, and staff at administrative units, which hindered the progress of their language learning. Age was an important factor in the learning process as well, as elderly repatriates, in general, demonstrated less ability and motivation to learn than other age groups. Some, however, understood language learning as simply an intrinsic part of the migration process. Carolina Žibert van Gricken states: "The language is complicated, that's true. You need time to learn it. But that is not necessarily bad. It's a basic problem of any migration" (Miklavčič, 2021, 0:47).

In particular, younger repatriates demonstrated a high degree of proactive and resilient agency. They sought (or offered) support with language learning by utilizing social media platforms, where they created their own networks. For instance, the Facebook post from April 2021 posted by the Society for Slovenian-Latin American Friendship (Lipa) invited native speakers to provide Slovenian language classes in exchange for Spanish language classes:

Those who are learning Spanish or would like to practice speaking, we offer Spanish lessons in exchange for Slovenian lessons. Spanish native speakers are situated in Radovljica, Hrastje, Britof, and Črnuče, but the location is not so important as meetings can be held online. These people urgently need to learn Slovenian, they came from Venezuela and will start a new life here. We are appealing to your generosity to help them if you are able to. (Društvo slovensko-latinskoameriškega prijateljstva Lipa, 2021)

Age played an important role in the fifteen-month period of transition and adaptation in general, as vulnerabilities were most noticeable in primary and secondary school children and less in people in old age. Children were enrolled in schools without prior knowledge of the Slovenian language, with different educational backgrounds than their Slovenian peers, and without established social networks. A mother described her daughter's struggles with the language barrier as follows: "She was sad that others didn't understand what she was trying to say. It was hard for her to accept that it's a slow process. I also wish that we could speak well, we learn, and we try, but words just don't come easily" Amal (Rupar, 2023).

The difficulties with integration into the school environment seemed to be increasing with the age of the child, which is in line with the studies that confirm that "the key importance of the demographic indicator of age results from the fact that a relatively large portion of social capital is gained in the early years, meaning

that the younger the migrant, the higher the probability of successful integration in the new society" (Elder, 1990, as quoted in Strzemecka, 2015). According to the integration counselors, integration of a preschool child is easier than integration of an adolescent who is entering a complex web of already established relationships while still developing their (cultural) identity and dealing with the pains of growing up. They may experience a loss of security and develop a sense of "otherness" that can have a significantly negative impact on their self-esteem, as well as on the learning outcomes. That is why family background and support, as well as support from school, are crucial for tackling migratory experiences that affect peer relationships and school performance (Strzemecka, 2015). Cooperation between schools and repatriated parents, however, was hindered also by the inability to communicate in either Slovenian or English, but only in Spanish. A detachment from "certain models of daily life and lifestyle, and a loss of status and of the specific position which they held in their country of origin" can lead to feelings of non-belonging (Strzemecka, 2015, p. 94) and can have a significant impact on the mental health and well-being of adolescents.

My [name of the family member] is very sad. He is an introvert, and relationships in high school are very difficult. He does not want to talk to anybody. I don't know why. And the schoolwork is not going very well. He might have to repeat the class again. The school subjects are in Slovenian, and he doesn't understand it well. He is trying to find motivation, but kids here are less approachable, and he is an introvert himself. When he comes home from school, he goes straight to his room and doesn't come out. (Repatriated person 2)

Despite the vulnerabilities and struggles observed by the integration counselors, none of the adolescents sought professional help, although the counselors strongly recommended it in at least two cases. This finding is in line with the extensive literature on the mental health of migrants that has repeatedly shown that migrants underutilize mental health services, which can be attributed to a variety of reasons, including stigma around mental illness and linguistic obstacles (Rousseau & Frounfelker, 2019). The latter, in particular, has been outlined by the interviewed counselors as the major obstacle. They noted that sharing vulnerabilities with strangers, albeit trained experts, is a difficult decision to make, even for adults who are proficient in the language spoken during the counseling session. It is unimaginably difficult, they noted, to share your struggles with an adult in a language you are not comfortable with and when you are not familiar with the words that describe your feelings.

Despite the availability of the services, adolescents and other repatriates dealing with mental health issues prefer to resort to some other ways of coping, like sharing their struggles among themselves. The entire community of repatriates is connected via the WhatsApp messaging service, which they frequently use to

exchange information and advice, share concerns and struggles, invite each other to events, and similar. Many also resort to the Catholic church service for emotional relief. Integration counselors noted that confession to a priest often provides relief and comfort, as does socializing with other churchgoers in the church environment and at the community events organized by the church. Karitas organized one such well-attended event in July 2022 at the parish of Podutik. The event started with a mass that was translated into Spanish and was carried out in active cooperation with the repatriated Venezuelan families. Songs were sung in Spanish and Slovenian languages, and later, there was a picnic with Slovenian and Venezuelan food, such as *cachapas*, *arepa*, and *tequeños* (Petek, 2022). According to the interviewees, such church-related events have contributed to the well-being of many religious repatriates and have also been an opportunity to socialize with the local population and thus enhance social integration (Repatriated person 2). They note that emotional comfort is greatest when they come together with members of other ethnicities who have a similar experience of emigration and settling down in a foreign country:

Now we understand the purpose of such gatherings. Venezuela is the land of immigrants who arrived from Europe during the war. They all established their own [ethnic] societies. My childhood friends always attended Saturday gatherings, for example, as part of their Italian community. I never understood why we can't all simply be Venezuelans. But now that I have this experience myself, I understand. I know that we have to integrate, but when we meet people with the same experience, we feel connected, like a family. It means a lot to us to attend mass in Spanish [together], which is held every third Sunday of the month at St. Jacob's Church in Ljubljana. Amal (Rupar, 2023).

### ***Vulnerabilities after the status expiration***

Nearing the end of the fifteen-month period during which the basic social security for all repatriates was guaranteed was particularly stressful for the working-age population that was yet to find suitable employment. One interviewee noted:

Finding a job was extremely stressful for me. It was the most stressful time, full of anxiety. The status was about to expire, and I was expected to find a job, any kind of job. The thought that I would have to go out there and talk to prospective employers in the Slovenian language was terrifying. But, honestly, I was also dreading that I would end up with a job that I don't like or that I'm overqualified for. I was seriously stressed out. Much more than when I first arrived in this country. (Repatriated person 3)

Integration into the labor market, generically defined as finding formal and legally protected employment with decent working conditions (Triandafyllidou et al., 2023), is one of the most basic prerequisites for integration in general, as it enables financial independence and provides ample opportunities for socializing with the

local population. A successfully integrated migrant, however, is not one that secures just any kind of job but a well-paid job, is adjusted to their area of specialization, and enables career progress (Baglioni & Isaakyan, 2019). Labor market integration is also a process of establishing yourself as a professional and as a person in a host society. Isaakyan et al. (2023, p. 209) note:

It is a long journey of responding to critical events, undergoing various obstacles, and possibly finding a desired outcome. It is a difficult journey during which the migrant may be lost, depending on how ready they are for it. It is therefore an outcome of migrant agency that follows a scenario, albeit with individualised configurations. It is a process of self-discovery through which the migrant not only finds a better place to live and work but also re-evaluates the symbolic meanings and social relations that they encounter. It is a complex socio-cultural scenario, in which each migrant is both the actor and the director.

Successful entry into the labor market is, therefore, a tremendously important milestone that not only contributes to structural integration in terms of participation in the labor and housing markets, education, and health systems but also to the dimension of social integration in terms of social interaction, creation of relationships and networks, as well as to the dimension of identity. The latter refers in this particular context to the processes "through which individuals may develop a shared identity and sense of belonging with the place, nation, communities and people among whom they live" (Spencer, 2022). It is important to recognize that processes in one dimension may have an impact on another; they do not necessarily take place at the same time, and they may reverse. Penninx & Garcés Mascareñas (2016) give the following examples to illustrate the complex intertwining of these dimensions: 1) racist attitudes may be impacting the opportunities to obtain employment, 2) social engagement may come before participation in the labor market, and 3) reversal may be observed that is a result of redundancy or a diminished sense of belonging due to repeated experiences of discrimination.

In the case of the repatriates, the intertwining of the dimensions was observed as well. Experiences of discrimination based on xenophobia were not reported.<sup>14</sup> The main obstacle reported when looking for jobs was poor knowledge of the Slovenian language. Integration counselors advised the repatriates who were not able to find suitable jobs to initially take on employment below their level of education and skills in order to start socializing and using the language in professional settings. In many cases, however, the repatriates decided to wait to find employment until the expiration of the status, which, in the end, caused much stress and anxiety (Integration Counselor 1). Many repatriates were engaging socially before finding employment,

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14 For those repatriates arriving early and finding possibilities for employment relatively quickly, the employment was delayed due to incompatibility of regulations stipulated in different laws. However, the issue was later resolved in cooperation with the competent authorities.

especially those who were accommodated in parishes in rural environments and were actively participating in church activities.

Repatriates who gained basic knowledge of the Slovenian language and were educated and trained in the professions deficit in Slovenia were able to validate their university diplomas and find employment relatively quickly. The process was also facilitated for some of those with particular skills and assisted by non-governmental organizations.<sup>15</sup>

I was contacted by [name of NGO] if I wanted to have extra Slovenian lessons free of charge. I accepted, of course. Then they asked me if I would organize dance workshops because I'm a professional dancer, I graduated in dance. I said I can't because I don't speak Slovenian very well. They told me all I had to know is how to say left, right, forward, turn, and so on. So, I did it. It was through these workshops that I was able to finally start speaking Slovenian and become confident. They offered me a paying job later, and I'm still working there. (Repatriated person 1)

Support with employment was provided by the counselors at the Slovenian Employment Service and Social Work Centres were providing assistance with social and family benefits and any other emerging issues. Integration counselors noted, however, that the benefits of the services provided by the state varied greatly depending on the users' level of motivation and determination to enter the labor market. This was confirmed by one of the interviewees, who agreed that lack of motivation indeed led to "hibernation" but noted that lack of motivation was due to "introverted personality and anxiety, not aloofness or arrogance" (Repatriated person 3).

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The empirical findings presented in this article are in line with the theoretical assumptions developed by Gilodi et al. (2022), which state that each individual experience of vulnerability is always situated in a specific context, time, and developmental phase and is the product of interrelating structural, situational, social, biographical, and psychological characteristics. The findings are also aligned with the writings of Rousseau & Frounfelker (2019), who argue that vulnerabilities that may lead to emotional distress may be more prevalent when immigration takes place during specific periods of the life cycle and are, therefore, age-related.

According to the interviewees, the overall process of integration was most difficult for children and adolescents attending primary and secondary schools as they

15 For instance, José Voglar and his spouse Maribel Briceño, photographers and visual artists, found opportunities to publicly display their art around Slovenia with the assistance of DRPD and other stakeholders (Prva razstava), and are striving to develop and provide photography and visual art courses in Ljubljana (Jež, 2022).

reported a lack of emotional safety, self-confidence, and group belonging, on top of the poor learning outcomes due to the language barrier. The period before and immediately after the expiration of the status, however, was most stressful for the working-age repatriates who were expected to integrate into the Slovenian labor market but were not yet proficient in the Slovenian language and/or were not trained in deficit professions. Interestingly, some interviewees questioned whether the extensiveness of the governmental (social) support provided to the working-age repatriates for the duration of fifteen months could be considered a help or hindrance. Namely, they pointed out that long periods of assisted integration might, in fact, be counterproductive and may delay language learning, everyday communication, and inclusion into the labor market—which can lead to “severe anxiety and existential crisis after the expiration of the status” (Integration counselor 1). This opinion undoubtedly renders further scrutiny and should be taken into consideration when evaluating the existing integration strategies and developing better strategies for multi-level inclusion and, consequently, better emotional well-being of repatriates and other immigrants. Finally, the least vulnerable repatriates, according to the integration counselors, were kindergarten children and the elderly receiving old-age pensions.

Vulnerabilities and emotional distress experienced by the repatriates are mostly discussed among the repatriated families themselves. Practical assistance with the legal procedures and everyday tasks was sought continuously from the integration counselors, but they did not look for any type of psychological counseling. Many of them found solace in the conversations with the other repatriates, with whom they share the same language, culture, and experience of repatriation and integration into Slovenian society. The Catholic church also played a major role in relieving social distress for some repatriates, who managed to find support and consolation at mass, confession, and church gatherings and through involvement in church-organized community activities.

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## POVZETEK

### SOOČANJE Z INTEGRACIJO IN ČUSTVENIMI STISKAMI V RANLJIVIH ŽIVLJENJSKIH OBDOBJIH: PRIMER REPATRIIRANIH SLOVENCEV IZ VENEZUELE

Mojca Vah Jevšnik

Slovenija od leta 2019 izvaja proces repatriacije Slovencev iz Venezuela, ki se sooča s hudo humanitarno krizo. Avtorica v članku najprej kontekstualizira odločitev države za repatriacijo in oriše zakonsko podlago, ki omogoča repatriacijo, torej Zakon o odnosih Republike Slovenije s Slovenci zunaj njenih meja. Nato ponudi pregled in analizo prepletenih (prirojenih, situacijskih in strukturnih) ranljivosti repatriirancev, s poudarkom na tistih, ki vplivajo na njihovo emocionalno dobrobit in vodijo v čustvene stiske. Ranljivosti obravnava skozi časovno prizmo, tj. pred in po pridobitvi statusa repatriiranca in po izteku slednjega, ter v kontekstu starostno pogojenih integracijskih izzivov. Članek temelji na analizi sekundarnih virov ter na polstrukturiranih intervjujih, opravljenih z repatriiranci in strokovnimi delavci, ki slednjim pomagajo pri integraciji. Izsledki prispevka kažejo, da je proces integracije največji izziv za otroke, ki obiskujejo osnovno in srednjo šolo, po izteku statusa repatriiranca pa se čustvene stiske pojavljajo predvsem pri delovno aktivnih posameznikih ob iskanju zaposlitve. Pri tem se pojavlja vprašanje, ali dolžina statusa vpliva na hitrost vključevanja na trg delovne sile in na druga področja družbe. Repatriirani Slovenci čustveno oporo največkrat iščejo v tesno povezani skupnosti repatriirancev, s katerimi si delijo jezik, kulturo ter izkušnjo repatriacije in integracije, pa tudi pri Katoliški cerkvi z mašami in spovedmi ter s sodelovanjem pri drugih cerkvenih dogodkih. Manj je iskanja strokovne pomoči izven skupnosti, pri čemer je eden najpomembnejših razlogov nepoznavanje oziroma slabo poznavanje slovenskega in angleškega jezika.

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