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Perceptions of Majority–Minority Relations, Integration and Social Inclusion: Croatia and Slovenia in Comparative Perspective

Abstract

Many European countries face challenges in integrating members of various minority groups and ensuring their social inclusion, particularly where these groups differ from the majority population on multiple grounds, including ethnicity. Although some of these countries have highly developed legislation for the protection of minority rights, which defines the modes of political, social, cultural, and economic integration of ethnic/national minorities, the development of a plural society often remains unattained in different contexts. Very often, the success of diversity management policies and institutional arrangements stemming from them is used as an indicator of the quality of democracy and democratic legitimacy in a given society. This paper explores majority–minority relations, integration, and the social inclusion of distinct minority groups in Croatia and Slovenia, based on research results obtained within the international research project *Legitimate Crisis Governance in Multilevel Systems* (LEGITIMULT). To contextualize the results of research examining how members of ethnic/national minorities perceived the legitimacy, proportionality, and democratic nature of crisis governance during the COVID-19 pandemic, which was one of the project's focal points, the introductory questions in the interview protocol addressed assessments of majority–minority relations, integration, and the social inclusion of minority members in four European states. This paper focuses on comparing the research findings from Croatia and Slovenia, which share similar historical backgrounds and contexts in which their minority rights protection models

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were shaped, while also reflecting different approaches, local specificities, and historical circumstances that influenced the formation of minority communities recognized within the legislative framework.

Keywords: national minorities, minority integration, social inclusion, Croatia, Slovenia, LEGITIMULT project

1 Contextual Understanding of Minority Integration in Croatia and Slovenia

In order to assess majority–minority relations in Croatia and Slovenia, it is essential to draw attention to the legislative framework that defines the status and rights of national minorities. Both Croatia and Slovenia are ethnically diverse countries with a well-developed normative framework and system for the protection of national minorities, or national communities and the Roma community in the case of Slovenia (Vukojičić Tomić et al. 2024). Ethnic diversity is recognized in the constitutions of both countries; however, there are differences regarding which communities are granted minority status as the basis for exercising minority rights. In its Constitution (Article 3), Slovenia is defined as “a state of all its citizens”, while the term ‘autochthonous national communities’ refers to the Hungarian and Italian communities, as defined by Article 5 of the Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia (Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia). The historical foundations of the Croatian Constitution define Croatia “as the nation state of the Croatian nation and the state of the members of its national minorities: Serbs, Czechs, Slovaks, Italians, Hungarians, Jews, Germans, Austrians, Ukrainians, Rusyns, Bosniaks, Slovenians, Montenegrins, Macedonians, Russians, Bulgarians, Poles, Roma, Romanians, Turks, Vlachs, Albanians and others who are its citizens and who are guaranteed equality with citizens of Croatian nationality” (Constitution of the Republic of Croatia). While the Croatian Constitution lists twenty-two national minorities, including Roma (Tatalović 2022), the Constitution of Slovenia distinguishes between autochthonous Italian and Hungarian national communities and the Roma community. Article 65 recognizes its existence by stating that the status and special rights of the Roma community shall be regulated by law. However, the Constitution does not confer the same full “autochthonous national minority” status on the Roma community as it does on Italians and Hungarians (Nagy 2025). At the same time, the Government of Slovenia states that “two national minorities – the Italian and Hungarian national communities – and the Roma community traditionally live in the Republic of Slovenia. All three communities enjoy special rights guaranteed by the Constitution” (Gov.si, n. d.). Hence, it is generally accepted that there are three constitutionally recognized national or ethnic minorities in Slovenia (Bešter et al. 2015; Žagar 2001). The separate law prescribed by the Constitution – the *Roma Community in the Republic of Slovenia Act* – was adopted in 2007. It establishes the legal status of the Roma community and defines its special rights in areas such as education, culture, participation in public life, and community development. Its purpose is to ensure the social inclusion, protection, and effective representation of the Roma community through

mechanisms such as Roma community councils and guaranteed cooperation with state and local authorities.²

The principle of non-discrimination is embedded in both constitutions, guaranteeing “human rights and fundamental freedoms” (Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia, Article 14) or “rights and freedoms” (Constitution of the Republic of Croatia, Article 14) to all people irrespective of their differences, including national origin. The protection of national minorities/communities is a constitutional category. The Slovene Constitution prescribes that the state “shall protect and guarantee the rights of the autochthonous Italian and Hungarian national communities” (Article 5), while Article 15 of the Croatian Constitution guarantees “equal rights for the members of all national minorities”. The same article stipulates that a constitutional act shall regulate the equality and rights of national minorities, including the possibility of granting them special voting rights for parliamentary representation. It also guarantees all national minorities the freedom to express their identity, use their language and script, and exercise cultural autonomy.

Both constitutions also refer to the right of national minorities/communities to the official use of minority languages. In the case of Croatia, Article 12 stipulates that, under conditions specified by law, minority languages and scripts may be introduced into official use at the local level alongside the Croatian language and Latin script. In the case of Slovenia, Article 11 directly prescribes that “in those municipalities where Italian or Hungarian national communities reside, Italian or Hungarian shall also be official languages”. Article 64 grants the autochthonous Italian and Hungarian national communities the right to education and schooling in their own languages, as well as the right to establish self-governing communities that can exercise certain collective rights. Different approaches to defining the exercise of this right can be observed. While the Slovene Constitution does not impose additional requirements for either minority to exercise this right, the Croatian *Constitutional Act on the Rights of National Minorities* stipulates in Article 12 that minority languages and scripts may be used officially in a self-government unit when members of a national minority make up at least one third of the local population. It also provides that official use is permitted when required by international treaties to which Croatia is a party, or when included in the statute of a local or regional self-government unit, in line with the special law governing minority language use.

While the two autochthonous national communities in Slovenia are granted a set of collective rights defined in Article 64 of the Constitution, the same article does not apply to the Roma community. These collective rights

2 For more on Italian, Hungarian and Roma communities in Slovenia, see: Kovács 2021; Sörgo & Lukanović 2020; Bešter et al. 2017; Klopčič 2010; Komac 1990.

provide the framework for the integration of Italian and Hungarian minorities into Slovene society while preserving their ethnic identity. In terms of political, social, and cultural integration, the autochthonous Italian and Hungarian national communities exercise their rights as defined in the Constitution and the *Self-Governing National Communities Act* adopted as early as 1994, whereas the rights of the Roma community were defined separately in 2007 by the *Roma Community in the Republic of Slovenia Act*, as noted above. Based on the provision of Article 15 of the Constitution, the Croatian Parliament adopted the *Constitutional Law on the Rights of National Minorities* as an organic law in 2002. The difference between the two legislative frameworks lies in the fact that the Croatian constitutional law applies to all national minorities, whereas in Slovenia there are two laws governing three minority communities with different legal statuses.

There are also differences in the definition of the term ‘national/ethnic minority’ in the two legal systems. Article 5 of the Croatian Constitutional Law on the Rights of National Minorities defines a national minority as “a group of Croatian citizens whose members have been traditionally inhabiting the territory of the Republic of Croatia and whose ethnic, linguistic, cultural and/or religious characteristics differ from the rest of the population, and who are motivated to preserve these characteristics”. In Slovene legislation, by contrast, there is no general definition. Instead, the relevant laws distinguish between ‘national communities’, referring exclusively to Italians and Hungarians, and ‘communities’, referring to Roma. In this sense, the law assumes that minority communities are already categorized based on their historical presence and autochthony, and therefore regulates their rights and self-governance, rather than laying out a general definitional test for a group to qualify as a minority.

Both countries have dedicated government offices dealing with minority rights: the Office for Human Rights and Rights of National Minorities of the Government of the Republic of Croatia³ and the Government Office for National Minorities,⁴ operating as an independent office of the Slovene Government. Additionally, at the state level, Croatia has a Council for National Minorities as a central body tasked with ensuring the cultural autonomy of national minorities through the distribution of funds for cultural programs of minority associations and institutions.⁵

Article 64 of the Slovene Constitution guarantees special rights for the autochthonous Italian and Hungarian national communities, including the right to freely use their national symbols and preserve their national identity

3 Ured za ljudska prava i prava nacionalnih manjina Vlade Republike Hrvatske.

4 Urad Vlade Republike Slovenije za narodnosti.

5 Savjet za nacionalne manjine Republike Hrvatske.

by forming their own organisations and developing cultural, educational and media activities, as well as the right to education and schooling in their own languages and the right to establish self-governing communities for exercising these rights. This is further reinforced by Article 1 of the Self-governing National Communities Act, which states that these two minorities may “establish, in the areas of their autochthonous settlement, self-governing ethnic communities”. Article 64 of the Slovene Constitution explicitly provides that these two national communities “shall be directly represented in representative bodies of local self-government and in the National Assembly”.⁶ Furthermore, Article 80 specifies that one deputy of the Italian community and one deputy of the Hungarian community shall always be elected to the National Assembly.⁷ As a result, Italian and Hungarian minorities enjoy dual voting rights in elections, voting both for regular deputies (general electoral lists) and for their special minority representatives (Komac 2004). While these representatives hold a general mandate, Article 64 of the Constitution grants them “veto rights over general legal acts pertinent to national minorities” (Djordjević 2023, 141).

In Croatia, despite Article 15 of the Constitution stipulating that “over and above general suffrage, the right of the members of national minorities to elect their representatives to the Croatian Parliament may be stipulated by law”, no dual voting rights are defined for minorities. Political participation of national minorities is regulated by the Constitution and the Constitutional Law on the Rights of National Minorities (2002), which provides multiple avenues for representation at national, regional, and local levels. At the national level, minorities have eight reserved seats in the Croatian Parliament, elected through a separate electoral unit. This arrangement ensures legislative advocacy and visibility but does not confer veto power. At the local and regional levels, minorities are entitled to representation in municipal and city councils, county assemblies, and executive bodies such as deputy mayors or deputy prefects. Electoral thresholds depend on minority population size, with communities exceeding 5% entitled to one councillor and those exceeding 15% entitled to proportional representation. Councillors are generally elected via party lists, with by-elections restricted to minority members used when necessary to secure representation. In addition, councils and representatives of national minorities operate at local and regional levels as advisory bodies, representing minority interests in areas such as culture, education, and language. This strengthens minority influence on local governance without granting executive authority. This multi-level system distinguishes between

6 In Slovenia, there is no regional level of governance, as regulated in section V of the Slovene Constitution. Thus, there are only provisions about political representation of minorities at local or state level.

7 For more elaborate analysis, see Djordjević 2023.

national legislative representation, executive and decision-making influence, and advisory and advocacy roles, collectively enhancing the political voice and integration of minority communities in Croatia (Vukojić Tomić et al. 2024).

2 Conceptual and Methodological Framework

The analysis presented in this paper is based on part of the research conducted within the project Legitimate Crisis Governance in Multilevel Systems (LEGITIMULT). The project focused on examining the perceptions of minority groups – including national minorities – in four countries (Austria, Croatia, Italy, and Slovenia) regarding the legitimacy, legality, democratic quality, and inclusiveness of crisis governance during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as its impact on human and minority rights.

Although the broader research encompassed various marginalized and minority groups (national/ethnic/linguistic minorities, women, migrants, and LGBTIQ+ individuals), the analysis in this paper focuses specifically on national minorities and their perceptions of social inclusion and majority–minority relations. Furthermore, the analysis is narrowed to two countries – Croatia and Slovenia – given the comparability of their contexts, which enables the identification of similarities and differences in the perceptions of minority groups across the two states. More precisely, the paper compares the perceptions of members of the Italian, Hungarian, and Roma national minorities residing in both countries and subject to comparable normative frameworks for the protection of national minority rights. In addition, in the case of Croatia, the analysis also includes the perceptions of members of the Serb national minority, which constitutes the largest minority group in the country.

The research was based on a qualitative methodological framework and employed in-depth, open-ended expert interviews as the primary data collection instrument. This approach was selected to generate nuanced insights into how minority and marginalized groups perceived crisis governance measures during the COVID-19 pandemic and how these measures affected human and minority rights (Žagar 2023; 2025).

Using a standardized interview protocol, the objective was to assess how members and representatives of various socially marginalized groups understood their relative position vis-à-vis the majority population under conditions of crisis. This design was informed by the expectation – grounded in existing scholarship on crisis governance and vulnerability – that marginalized groups are at heightened risk of further exclusion and may disproportionately bear the burdens of restrictive policy interventions. Consequently, such

groups may encounter greater barriers in the realization of their human and minority rights compared to the general population.

The interview protocol comprised fourteen core questions structured around multiple governance levels – national, regional, and local. The first set of questions, which forms the empirical basis for the analysis in this paper, focused on respondents' perceptions of majority–minority relations, as well as the degree of social integration and inclusion experienced by minority communities. The second section examined respondents' broader evaluations of crisis management strategies, policies, and measures adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic, with particular emphasis on their implications for human rights and fundamental freedoms. This section also explored respondents' assessments of the differentiated impact of crisis measures on various social groups relative to the wider population.

The third section invited respondents to consider potential reforms aimed at enhancing the democratic quality, inclusiveness, and participatory character of future crisis governance, while also reducing unnecessary constraints on rights and freedoms. In the final section, respondents assessed the legitimacy of public authorities during the pandemic, including the perceived acceptance, relevance, and proportionality of crisis measures, as well as levels of institutional trust.

Beyond the fourteen core questions, the interview protocol included additional items on mobility restrictions and border closures across different governance tiers, as well as questions regarding access to education for members of national minorities during the pandemic.

The first section of the interview protocol, in which respondents expressed their perceptions of majority–minority relations, integration, and social inclusion, was particularly important as it provided essential contextualization and a deeper understanding of responses to subsequent questions concerning crisis governance and the perceived impact of crisis strategies, policies, and measures on minority group members. In the first question, respondents were asked to assess majority–minority relations and, in the second question, to assess the inclusion and integration of the minority and persons belonging to it in the society and social environment.

Respondents were representatives of minority associations, organizations, and institutions, as well as civil society organizations and their political representatives at the local, regional, and national levels. Such a non-probabilistic sample may also be considered an expert sample, as respondents, by virtue of their positions, are more aware of the general status of a minority within society. It may be argued that they are more likely to be aware of the overall situation of the groups they represent, in one way or another, than individual members of those groups.

Interviews were conducted between October 2023 and March 2025. All collected data were anonymized, transcribed, coded, and subsequently analysed using qualitative content analysis. In total, 70 in-depth, open-ended interviews were conducted in four countries: 8 in Austria, 31 in Croatia, 13 in Italy, and 18 in Slovenia. Nearly 39% of all respondents were women. Of the overall sample, 46 interviews were conducted with members of various ethnic, national, or linguistic minorities. Of these interviews, the following are relevant to this article: in Slovenia, interviews were conducted with 6 Hungarians, 2 Italians, and 4 Roma, while in Croatia the minority sample consisted of 2 Hungarians, 3 Italians, 3 Roma, and 14 Serbs. The analysis presented in this paper draws on data collected through interviews with this latter group in the sample.

Majority–minority relations are analysed using a framework consisting of three categories: overall assessment of relations (positive/negative), issues identified as important to minority groups, and challenges they face. All indicators derived from the coding of respondents' answers and the qualitative content analysis were grouped into one of these categories. This analytical structure enables the formulation of conclusions regarding the state of majority–minority relations in Slovenia and Croatia, based on the perceptions of minority group members. Perceptions of minority integration and social inclusion were assessed at multiple levels – local, regional, and national – and responses were grouped and analysed accordingly. It is important to note, however, that not all respondents referred to every level; consequently, it was not possible to identify responses at all levels for all minority groups.⁸

3 Analysis of Majority–Minority Relations in Croatia

Members of the Hungarian national minority offered a moderately positive and cautiously optimistic assessment of majority–minority relations. This evaluation refers not only to their own minority, but also to interethnic relations in Croatia more broadly. While challenges persist, respondents emphasized the need for sustained efforts to enhance engagement at the local level, suggesting that local institutional cooperation and targeted initiatives are viewed as important mechanisms for improving integration. Interethnic coexistence is generally perceived as stable, though not without occasional tensions, and the community adopts a proactive approach to maintaining and strengthening relations through specific activities.

Respondents emphasized the importance of the consistent implementation of a well-defined legislative framework for the protection of national

8 The data base containing anonymized data is available in Bešter et al. 2025.

minority rights. They did not highlight any significant challenges specific to their own minority, noting that Hungarians are generally well accepted and able to exercise their legally guaranteed rights, particularly with respect to bilingualism. However, they stressed that experiences differ markedly across minority groups, pointing specifically to Serbs and Roma as communities facing more substantial difficulties, including barriers to representation in public services and less effective implementation of legal protection.

Respondents from the Italian national minority emphasized the importance of decentralization. Relations were reported to be very good at both local and regional levels, with the Italian community recognized and represented in local and regional authorities. Respondents also reported feeling accepted, experiencing no sense of inequality or discomfort, and encountering no tension when speaking Italian, even in areas where it is not an official language.

The Italian community, like other minorities, emphasized the importance of decentralization. Respondents noted that excessive power is concentrated at the national level, limiting regional autonomy, and stressed that greater decentralization would allow minority communities to exert more political influence in areas where they are historically settled and well integrated into local institutions.

In line with this, respondents identified the need to increase the level of regional autonomy to provide greater decision-making freedom on local matters.

Members of the Roma national minority generally assessed majority–minority relations as predominantly negative, although some positive developments were noted. Respondents highlighted widespread hostility and a lack of acceptance toward the Roma community, with negative prejudices and adverse public opinion prevailing. Efforts are being made to address these issues, indicating some progress, although change remains slow.

Members of the Roma community emphasized the importance of addressing the challenges they face. The process of Croatia's accession to the European Union was associated with improvements in minority rights and majority–minority relations; however, instances of intolerance continue to occur.

The identified challenges include discrimination in education, housing, and employment, the persistence of negative public perceptions and stereotypes, and widespread prejudice and social exclusion. Despite these challenges, respondents indicated that there are many positive examples of coexistence.

Members of the Serb national minority generally assessed majority–minority relations as mixed and regionally variable. While rights are well defined in law and affirmative measures exist, their implementation is often seen as inconsistent, with the legacy of interethnic tensions from the 1990s and the consequences of Croatia's war of independence perceived as major

obstacles. Relations differ by region and are generally better at the local level. In Rijeka, interactions were reported as largely open and positive, and the minority feels accepted; in Vukovar, however, relations are complex, and Serbs frequently experience political and social marginalization. Historical burdens, particularly those stemming from the 1990s, continue to shape attitudes and influence majority–minority relations. Relations fluctuate in response to political changes and leadership, and media pressure and political manipulation exacerbate tensions, rendering interethnic relations highly politicized.

Respondents emphasized the importance of preserving their identity – including cultural, linguistic, and religious aspects – alongside genuine inclusion that goes beyond mere legal or symbolic recognition. They highlighted the need for political representation at all levels, the exercise of freedom and dignity in everyday life, equal treatment compared to other minority groups, and access to education, funding, and cultural institutions.

Members of the Serb community identified several persistent challenges. Assimilation remains a concern, often linked to recent historical experiences, alongside the ongoing need for integration that preserves cultural identity. Historical trauma from the conflicts of the 1990s continues to be a central challenge, affecting interpersonal communication and relationships as well as institutional interactions. Support from state institutions is perceived as uneven, varying between local and national levels. Right-wing politics and hate speech, particularly where such parties hold power, further exacerbate tensions. Slow progress following EU accession in 2013, in contrast to earlier, more active efforts, was also highlighted.

4 Analysis of Majority–Minority Relations in Slovenia

The overall assessment of intergroup relations by members of the Hungarian national community is positive. Respondents described relations between minority and majority communities as “good”, “proper”, or even “ideal”, noting a clear improvement over time. As one participant stated, “... prejudices are not as deep as they were 15 or 20 or 30 years ago” (Interviewee JP/RB/13/03/24/1). Another highlighted that “interethnic coexistence in Prekmurje is quite ideal” (Interviewee RB/JP/23/04/24/2).

Bilingualism and dual identity are identified as central values of particular importance to the Hungarian minority. Bilingualism – both in education and in public administration – is perceived as a key factor in fostering improved relations and mutual understanding. The preservation of a dual identity is viewed as a means of promoting reciprocal respect, while bilingual education is regarded as contributing to the positive development of interethnic relations. More specifically, one respondent emphasized that “all procedures,

communication, and administrative operations are carried out bilingually” (Interviewee BJ/12/07/24/1), while another stated that “the population in the area, including members of the majority nation, sees the coexistence between the majority and the minority as a positive added value” (Interviewee JP/RB/20/05/24/1).

Members of the Hungarian national community identified several challenges affecting interethnic relations. Political tensions and negative online discourse – particularly on social media – were mentioned, with negative public perception of Orbán’s policies as an external political influence contributing to unfavourable attitudes toward members of the minority. At the same time, respondents highlighted the positive role of individual actors – such as neighbours and teachers – alongside local institutions, interethnic marriages, and interpersonal networks in promoting good practices, constructive interaction, and mutual understanding.

Members of the Italian national community generally assessed majority–minority relations as positive. They emphasized a substantial improvement in interethnic relations over the past several decades, noting a marked increase in integration after 1991 and particularly after 2000, as part of broader social and political stabilization. Cultural events and minority activities are increasingly attended by members of the majority population, signalling greater acceptance. Respondents also highlighted significant positive developments in the use and public visibility of the minority language, partly facilitated by the spread of the internet and digital technologies. Bilingual communication was described as smooth and unproblematic, and not a source of conflict.

Respondents emphasized the importance of strong and positive institutional support, particularly in the coastal region traditionally inhabited by the Italian minority. They highlighted effective cooperation with state ministries – especially those responsible for education, culture, and the economy – as well as with local authorities, noting these relationships as consistently positive. Respondents also underscored the value of public funding and support for cultural institutions, such as the Italian Cultural Centre “Combi”. In addition, financing provided to municipal self-governing national communities was assessed favourably, as it enables the minority to organize high-quality cultural events and maintain vibrant cultural activities.

Despite notable improvements, members of the Italian national community pointed to several persistent challenges, particularly in state-level bureaucratic practices and the interpretation of language legislation. They highlighted the financial instability of Italian-language public broadcasting program, which remains vulnerable to centralized decision-making in Ljubljana and thereby risks undermining editorial autonomy. A recent dispute concerning historical plaques written in the Venetian dialect – deemed by the Slovene Language Inspectorate to violate language-use regulations despite

being trilingual and officially approved – illustrates the tensions between legal formalism and cultural recognition in multilingual, historically complex regions. In response, the minority community advocates for greater contextual sensitivity, emphasizing the historical and symbolic significance of such cultural markers.

Members of the Roma community consistently assessed majority–minority relations through the lens of what can be described as persistent structural discrimination. Respondents emphasized enduring prejudices “on both sides” and noted that discriminatory practices, particularly in employment, remain a central barrier to full inclusion. Some Roma reported concealing their ethnic identity, including by changing their surnames, in order to improve their employment prospects. Such systemic exclusion reinforces cycles of poverty and marginalization. Importantly, participants also acknowledged that prejudices can be reciprocal, with some Roma holding negative perceptions of non-Roma, further contributing to social distance.

Members of the Roma community emphasized the importance of everyday interactions in schools, kindergartens, health institutions, and local services, noting gradual improvements in social inclusion, such as better integration of Roma pupils and more frequent social contact between Roma and non-Roma. In the Prekmurje region, the growing number of marriages between Roma and non-Roma was highlighted as an indicator of increasing social acceptance.

Several challenges were identified, including enduring prejudice and social exclusion. Respondents stressed that recent positive developments remain fragile and are often followed by setbacks in majority–minority relations. They also expressed concern about internal cohesion and the difficulties of preserving traditional cultural patterns. Moreover, relations between Roma and non-Roma vary considerably across the country: while Prekmurje is seen as an example of relatively successful integration, the south-eastern regions are perceived as areas of greater tension, partly attributed to cultural and behavioural differences among Roma communities themselves.

5 Analysis of Integration and Social Inclusion in Croatia

At the national level, respondents generally perceive the integration of the Hungarian minority as legally functional yet socially uneven, reflecting a broader distinction between formal guarantees and lived experiences of inclusion. The degree of actual integration continues to depend heavily on local conditions, majority–minority relations, and the effectiveness of institutional implementation. Participants emphasize the need for stronger intercultural engagement, particularly in the fields of education and culture, as well as

greater solidarity with more marginalized groups such as Roma. Their frequent references to the difficulties faced by other minorities suggest that members of the Hungarian minority do not perceive themselves as socially excluded or structurally disadvantaged. In this context, respondents highlight an intersectional understanding of integration: access to public goods and services often depends more on geographical location and regional disparities than on ethnic belonging, recalling comparable differences within Croatia itself (e.g., being a Serb in Zagreb versus in Lika). Ultimately, the extent of minority inclusion appears to be shaped less by constitutional or legislative guarantees than by prevailing attitudes within the majority population, underscoring the crucial role of societal perceptions in mediating the effectiveness of minority rights frameworks.

At the local level, the Italian minority is generally well integrated, with strong participation across political, social, cultural, and educational spheres. Members are widely recognized as equal citizens whose contributions to community life are valued, and their active involvement in local institutions reinforces both their visibility and their social embeddedness. The Italian minority also maintains a significant institutional presence within educational settings, participating actively in schools as well as in national-level educational bodies, which further strengthens their cultural and organizational influence at the community level. Despite these positive indicators of inclusion, the primary challenge identified by community members concerns the long-term preservation of the Italian language among younger generations, as intergenerational linguistic transmission appears increasingly fragile.

At the local level, the Roma perceive themselves as largely excluded from decision-making processes, with local authorities rarely consulting Roma representatives or their councils, where such bodies exist. This systematic lack of dialogue reinforces political marginalization and contributes to the persistence of structural barriers in everyday life, including limited access to services, inadequate living conditions, and weak institutional responsiveness.

At the regional level, perceptions are somewhat more positive, though still characterized by significant limitations. Respondents emphasize that the quality of engagement often depends on individual officials, whose personal attitudes can shape institutional narratives and practices toward Roma communities. In regions such as Međimurje, noticeable improvements have emerged over the past five years, particularly in employment opportunities, resulting in enhanced socioeconomic status for some Roma households and increased mobility, including the purchase of homes outside segregated settlements. Nevertheless, despite these promising developments, the level of inclusion remains insufficient. Perceived discrimination in housing, access to essential services – including financial services such as banking – and unequal educational outcomes continue to undermine sustainable progress.

At the national level, respondents highlight the issue of limited political representation, noting that several minority groups share a single parliamentary seat, which substantially restricts the ability of Roma to influence national policy. The absence of a “kin-state” capable of offering diplomatic or cultural support further differentiates the Roma from national minorities with external backing. Although minority rights in Croatia are robustly protected in legal terms, effective inclusion is hindered by miscommunication between national institutions and local actors, as well as by perceptions that minority representatives serve narrow, group-specific interests rather than advocating for broader societal concerns.

At the local level, respondents generally perceive the Serb minority as well integrated, with active participation in political, social, and cultural life, particularly in municipalities where legal provisions guarantee minority representation. However, the degree of inclusion varies across regions: it tends to be stronger where Serbs meet statutory thresholds for proportional representation and weaker where such thresholds are not met, often depending on the political will of local authorities. Despite a solid legal framework and the absence of systemic obstacles, practical challenges remain in areas such as education, where minority-language schooling is sometimes misinterpreted as a sign of inadequate integration. Local experiences thus diverge significantly: while cities such as Rijeka provide full access to minority rights, places such as Vukovar continue to experience strained communication between minority representatives and local government, hindering effective inclusion. Overall, the Serb minority enjoys broad civic and institutional participation, although the extent of practical influence and social acceptance remains heavily shaped by local political dynamics.

At the regional level, the Serb minority benefits from strong formal legal protections, including provisions for positive discrimination and well-defined rights embedded in regional statutes. Minority councils and representatives perform an advisory role, yet respondents emphasize the need for their deeper involvement in regional decision-making processes. As at the local level, integration outcomes vary considerably across regions and are strongly influenced by the extent to which regions were affected by the war in the 1990s. Regions such as Istria and Primorje–Gorski Kotar, which were not directly affected by the war, demonstrate higher levels of political and institutional inclusion, whereas eastern Croatia, heavily affected by conflict, continues to face substantial challenges related to societal attitudes, political polarization, and institutional cooperation.

At the national level, members of the Serb minority are formally well integrated, with recognized political representation and a general perception of civic equality. However, the extent of their influence is closely tied to broader political dynamics, particularly whether minority representatives

form part of the governing parliamentary majority. Their inclusion remains context-dependent, shaped by regional disparities, societal attitudes, and the overall political climate. Although minority representatives are institutionally present, those who engage in policy areas beyond strictly ethnic issues often face criticism or marginalization, revealing the limitations of full social inclusion within the national political sphere.

6 Analysis of Integration and Social Inclusion in Slovenia

The integration of the Hungarian minority at the local level in the Prekmurje region, where they traditionally reside, can generally be characterized as successful, although not without inherent complexities and challenges. Interviewees expressed a high degree of social integration, noting that they are fully embedded in the broader Slovene society and actively participate in the economic sphere as well as in local public administration. Recruitment practices in bilingual areas often emphasize the employment of individuals proficient in both languages, which reinforces the functional presence of Hungarian in public life. Among younger generations, multilingualism is widespread, reflecting both the cultural environment of the region and the institutional support available to the minority in the fields of information, culture, and education. At the same time, representatives of the community express concerns about what they perceive as “over-integration”, a process in which strong social and economic inclusion may contribute to the dilution of distinct minority identity markers. Additionally, certain shortcomings are noted in the practical implementation of minority protection laws, which indicates that formal guarantees do not always translate seamlessly into consistent protections or lived experiences at the local level. Overall, perceptions of integration among the Hungarian minority reflect a dynamic balance between successful societal inclusion and ongoing efforts to preserve a distinct ethno-cultural identity within a multilingual and multicultural regional context.

At the national level, integration has improved markedly since Slovenia's independence in 1991, although certain structural and institutional challenges persist. From the 1980s onwards, the minority has achieved significant educational advancements, with an increasing number of its members attaining higher levels of formal education. Despite these positive trends, integration within state institutions remains incomplete, partly due to limited institutional knowledge and awareness of the Hungarian minority's specific needs, rights, and cultural particularities. This gap underscores the ongoing need for more effective communication and cooperation between national institutions and minority organizations, a process understood as a shared responsibility.

The Italian minority – concentrated primarily in the coastal region

– exhibits a high degree of institutional and political integration at the local level, supported by a robust legal framework and consistent participation in local governance. A well-developed institutional structure underpins this integration: four self-governing Italian national communities operate as key mechanisms for the articulation and protection of minority rights while maintaining a substantial degree of local autonomy. These communities are coordinated by the Coastal Self-Governing Community of Italian Nationality, headquartered in Koper, which functions as an umbrella body ensuring the coherence of political, cultural, and administrative activities across the coastal municipalities. Guaranteed representation in municipal councils – ensuring at least one minority representative in each – further reinforces the multilevel political integration of the Italian minority, complementing their constitutionally secured representation at the national level. Through both formal political channels and active engagement in community life, members of the Italian minority exert a tangible influence on local decision-making processes, illustrating a model of minority integration characterized by strong institutional support, clear legal protections, and sustained civic participation.

At the national level, integration is perceived as generally stable but suboptimal, as formal political inclusion through a single parliamentary representative does not translate into substantial practical influence or broader public visibility.

The inclusion of the Roma minority at the national level is marked by pronounced regional disparities, persistent social prejudices, and a complex tension between integration and cultural preservation. While some Roma communities – particularly in northern Slovenia – demonstrate higher levels of social and cultural participation, many in the south-east remain largely unintegrated. In these areas, relations are characterized by mutual prejudices and socially segregated structures, such as separate adult-education programs that reinforce institutional and social exclusion rather than genuine inclusion. Concerns about cultural assimilation further complicate integration dynamics, as lower-educated Roma are more likely to speak and transmit the Romani language, whereas more educated individuals often lack proficiency in it, contributing to fears of gradual loss of Romani language proficiency. Although these patterns largely reflect conditions at various local levels, they collectively highlight a broader national challenge: despite certain legal protections, political integration of the Roma at the national level remains minimal, with limited participation and influence in national public life.

7 Comparative Analysis

The overall assessment of majority–minority relations in Slovenia and Croatia reveals both common patterns and notable divergences, reflecting the interplay of historical legacies, institutional frameworks, regional contexts, and societal attitudes.

In both countries, the Hungarian minority generally reports positive interethnic relations. In Slovenia, relations are described as “good” or even “ideal”, with bilingualism and dual identity regarded as central values that foster mutual respect and understanding. Daily coexistence, interethnic marriages, and local institutional support are highlighted as key mechanisms promoting integration, with minority members perceiving themselves as well accepted by the majority population. Challenges are mainly related to political tensions and negative perceptions of Hungary’s external influence; however, these are largely mitigated by positive interpersonal networks and local institutions. In Croatia, Hungarians also report moderately positive relations and a cautiously optimistic view of interethnic coexistence. While generally accepted and able to exercise legal rights – particularly with regard to bilingualism – their assessments emphasize that experiences differ across minority groups. The Hungarian minority perceives other groups, such as Roma and Serbs, as facing more substantial integration challenges. In both countries, local-level engagement and institutional cooperation are regarded as crucial for maintaining positive relations.

The Italian minority enjoys consistently positive majority–minority relations in both Slovenia and Croatia. In Slovenia, relations have improved markedly since 1991, with bilingual communication functioning smoothly and cultural activities increasingly attended by majority members. Strong institutional support, particularly in education, culture, and local governance, reinforces integration and fosters trust between communities. In Croatia, relations are similarly positive at local and regional levels. The Italian community reports high visibility, recognition, and acceptance, with few tensions even in areas where Italian is not an official language. Challenges in both countries relate primarily to centralized bureaucratic practices, financial vulnerabilities of cultural programs, and occasional tensions between legal formalism and cultural recognition. Overall, the Italian minority experiences a high level of societal acceptance and constructive interaction with the majority.

Roma communities are the most marginalized minority in both countries, although the degree and nature of exclusion vary regionally. In Slovenia, structural discrimination persists, particularly in employment, education, and social inclusion. Positive developments exist – such as increased social contact, intermarriage, and better integration of pupils in Prekmurje – but these gains remain fragile, with persistent prejudices and social exclusion

continuing to affect everyday interactions. Relations also vary regionally, with south-eastern Slovenia exhibiting greater tension and weaker integration. In Croatia, Roma report predominantly negative relations, characterized by widespread hostility, public prejudice, and limited political representation. While some regional progress has occurred – especially in employment and socioeconomic mobility – the community continues to face systemic barriers in housing, education, and access to services. EU accession has prompted some improvements in minority rights, but intolerance and marginalization persist. In both countries, the Roma minority highlights the importance of targeted policies, local engagement, and broader societal education to address entrenched stereotypes.

Data for the Serb minority are available only for Croatia, where relations are mixed and highly regionally variable. Legal protections exist, but their implementation is uneven, reflecting the legacy of the conflicts of the 1990s. Challenges include historical trauma, politicization, right-wing rhetoric, and media portrayals, all of which affect social inclusion and interpersonal trust. The Serb community emphasizes the importance of preserving cultural identity, securing political representation, and achieving genuine inclusion beyond symbolic recognition.

8 Conclusion

Overall, majority–minority relations are generally perceived more positive in Slovenia, particularly for members of the Hungarian and Italian minorities, where bilingualism, dual identity, and strong local institutions facilitate integration. Croatia exhibits greater regional variation, with integration outcomes heavily influenced by historical legacies, local political dynamics, and the uneven implementation of minority rights.

The Roma minority is the most socially excluded minority in both countries, although specific regional differences exist and gradual improvements have been observed in some areas. The Italian and Hungarian minorities enjoy relatively high levels of societal acceptance and institutional support in both contexts, while the Serb minority in Croatia illustrates how historical trauma and regional disparities can strongly shape interethnic relations.

In conclusion, majority–minority relations in Slovenia tend to be more stable, institutionally supported, and positively perceived, whereas Croatia presents a more heterogeneous picture, in which historical, political, and regional factors play a decisive role in shaping experiences of coexistence and integration.

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Dojemanje odnosov med večino in manjšino, integracije in socialne vključenosti: Hrvaška in Slovenija v primerjalni perspektivi

Izvleček

Številne evropske države se soočajo z izzivi pri integraciji in zagotavljanju socialne vključenosti pripadnikov različnih manjšinskih skupin, ki se od večinskega prebivalstva med drugim razlikujejo tudi po etnični pripadnosti. Čeprav imajo nekatere od njih ustrezno oblikovano zakonodajo za varstvo pravic manjšin, ki opredeljuje politične, socialne, kulturne in ekonomske vidike integracije etničnih oz. narodnih manjšin, je uresničevanje pluralne družbe v nekaterih primerih pogosto še vedno omejeno. Uspešnost politik upravljanja raznolikosti in z njimi povezanih institucionalnih ureditev se pogosto uporablja kot kazalnik kakovosti demokracije in demokratične legitimnosti posamezne družbe. Članek analizira odnose med večino in manjšino ter integracijo in socialno vključenost različnih manjšinskih skupin na Hrvaškem in v Sloveniji. Analiza temelji na rezultatih raziskave, izvedene v okviru mednarodnega raziskovalnega projekta LEGITIMULT, ki je proučeval legitimnost kriznega upravljanja na več ravneh odločanja. Da bi rezultate raziskave o tem, kako so pripadniki etničnih oz. narodnih manjšin dojemali legitimnost, sorazmernost in demokratičnost upravljanja med pandemijo covid-19, ume-stili v širši družbeni kontekst, se uvodna vprašanja v intervjujih nanašajo na dojemanje odnosov med večino in manjšino ter na integracijo in socialno vključenost pripadnikov manjšin v štirih evropskih državah. Članek se osredotoča na primerjavo raziskovalnih ugotovitev iz Hrvaške in Slovenije, držav s podobnim zgodovinskim ozadjem in načinom oblikovanja modelov varstva pravic manjšin, ki pa obenem odražata različne pristope, lokalne posebnosti in zgodovinske okoliščine, ki so vplivale na oblikovanje zakonsko priznanih manjšinskih skupnosti.

Ključne besede: narodne manjšine, integracija manjšin, socialna vključenost, Hrvaška, Slovenija, projekt LEGITIMULT