

# Sustainable leadership within Slovene and Croatian diaspora

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**Society's Challenges for  
Organizational Opportunities**

**41. mednarodna konferenca  
O RAZVOJU ORGANIZACIJSKIH ZNANOSTI  
Izzivi družbe za  
priložnosti organizacij**

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# SUSTAINABLE LEADERSHIP WITHIN SLOVENE AND CROATIAN DIASPORA

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**Abstract** Emigrant organizations usually play an important role for mutual assistance of compatriots helping each other in integrating into new society. With time the role of diaspora organizations typically transforms into preserving the culture, language and identity of country of origin. With this also the management of such organization changes. Upon the aging of emigrants, inclusion of their descendants, changes in identity, also the focus and activities in such organizations most often modifies. Our paper compares the state of management within Slovene and Croatian diaspora based on the sample of case studies that responded to our survey distributed in 2020 and 2021. On one hand we compare situation in different countries, but at the same time we also compare situations in organizations of both nations. Questions such as how many members do they have, what is their average age, do they have their own facilities, what kind of events and how often do they organize, what is their relation towards digitalization and what are the prospects for the future, are raised. We present key general findings, exhibit individual specifics of societies and provide recommendations for improvement.

**Keywords:**

Slovenian diaspora  
Croatian diaspora  
emigrant organizations  
digitalization.

## 1 Introduction

Slovenia and Croatia are two nations and countries that are similar in many ways: neighbouring, both Slavic, both predominantly Catholic, most of the history, until both countries gained independence in 1991, Slovenes and Croats lived in the same countries (Habsburg Empire, Austro-Hungary, Kingdom of Yugoslavia, Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia), etc.

Following all this it's no surprise that emigration from both territories was similar in many ways. Diaspora is an important factor for both countries, nowadays. On one hand diaspora played an important role as remittances provider in the past and helped both countries in their democratization and independence efforts. On the other hand, today both countries develop policies towards diaspora with the goal to help them in maintaining their ethnic identity abroad. At the same time both countries act in the sense that diaspora can still be an important factor for the future development of both countries (in the sense of investment, internationalization, demography, etc).

When considering emigrant's communities vitality and future, diaspora organizations are of key importance. Their role changes in time. The purpose of this article is to investigate what is the state of management withing different representative organizations of Slovene and Croatian diaspora. In the theoretical part we first shortly present emigration from both countries, then some theory on ethnic organizations in diaspora and in the third part the role of digitalization for modern diaspora organizations are shown. In the empirical part we introduce the results of a survey that was conducted in 2020 and 2021. At the end, in the discussion, we give some recommendations. We research question that we try to answer is: What is the focus of managers of diaspora organizations in Slovenia and Croatia?

## **2 Theoretical framework**

### **2.1 Short history of emigration from Slovenian and Croatian ethnic territory**

The first important wave of emigration from today's Croatia took place in the 15th century, with the expansion of the Ottoman Empire. The result of that are Croat communities in Austria, Hungary, Slovakia and Italy. The second large wave occurred in the second half of the 19th and early 20th century, with a substantial number of Croats moving to North and South America, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. The next big wave happened after the Second World War. Some left (mostly to Argentina and other South American countries) immediately after the war in order to avoid reprisals by the communists who took the power. In the coming years, many Croats moved to other parts of Yugoslavia, mostly as part working force. The next wave happened in the late 1960s and early 1970s when several hundred thousand Croats emigrated abroad due to economic and political reasons. Croatian emigration during the 1990s was mostly refugees from the war-torn areas (Čizmić, 1996; Total Croatia, 2021).

There were three major waves of emigration from Slovenian ethnic territory. The first one was from the 1880's till the world war 1 (WW1). At that time the reasons for emigration were mostly economic and in some cases also young men escaped from the military draft. The country of immigration was mostly USA, to some extent also South America, Western Europe and Egipt. The second wave took place between both world wars. At that time most of the migrants were still the economic ones, but there were also a lot of political refugees (especially from the part of Slovenian territory that became part of Italy and in fewer numbers also from the territory that became part of Austria). Migrants moved mostly to South America (especially Argentina), to some extent also to Western Europe and Egipt. The third wave started right after the end of WW2 with the political refugees from communist regime and continued in the next three decades, when political and economic reasons for migration were interlaced. At the beginning the migration mostly occurred to USA, Canada, Australia and Argentina (in smaller number also to other South American countries), later on many people moved to Western European countries, especially Germany. In the time of both Yugoslavias Slovenians were

constantly moving also to other republics of the common country (Drnovšek, 1991; Kalc et al., 2020).

In recent years, another wave occurred from both countries, after they entered the European Union (Slovenia in 2004; Croatia in 2013), which lifted restrictions on employment in Western European countries.

## **2.2 The role of ethnic organizations in diaspora**

After emigrating, emigrants usually organize themselves in the new homeland to preserve their identity and connection with the original homeland by socializing with each other, as well as to alleviate their difficulties in the new world. The way of organizing by individual countries, as well as places within countries, is by no means the same. In our case, considering the time of settlement, the number of Slovenes/Croats, the reasons for moving and the related national consciousness, the support of the new state, etc. very different structures have developed. Some have survived unchanged to this day, others have changed over time, and still others have disappeared.

As past emigration was more uniform and condensed than it is today, the common features were self-organization and often relative isolation from the dominant society. The organizations were originally intended to help overcome isolation and facilitate integration (Genorio, 1989, p. 141), but today they represent unification in order to preserve identity. They also bring together people with other common interests and leisure activities (eg singing, dancing, hunting, bowling), but the activities in this context have a strong ethnic focus. Undoubtedly, ethnicity motivates many to be interested in such activities.

The pioneer in Yugoslave migration studies, Peter Klinar (1976, p. 108) distinguishes between two types of ethnic organizations in diaspora:

- old institutions copied by immigrants from their home countries (eg. church, family)
- new institutions set up for the needs of immigrants (eg. support units, banks).

Rado Genorio (1989, p. 142) says that for both types of organizations, immigrants are considered to be included in order to meet their cultural, social, economic and political needs. Klinar (1976, p. 111) claims that these institutions "transmit to the ethnic community the values and norms of immigrant society, which they interpret in their own way and thus connect immigrants with the new social environment." Genorio (1989, p. 142) notes that the possibility of rapid assimilation is smaller the more complete the network of immigrant institutions is.

### **2.3 The role of digitalization for diaspora organizations**

In the last years internet has become the central media, since it is the global communication infrastructure and at the same time the most spread forum, where discussions and negotiations on most different topics take place (Medvešek, 2012, p. 9). Internet gives different possibilities of communication: one-to-one, one-to-many and many-to-many (Medvešek, 2012, p. 9). Modern information and communication technologies made connecting people a lot more easier than before. In the last years social networks attract more and more people, especially the young ones. They allow users to present themselves and communicate in the cyberspace with practically no additional technical or software skills (Boykova, 2015, p. 1). Cyber space theoretics speak about »virtual communities«. Elkinns (1997, p. 141) claims that virtual ethnic communities are not any less real than usual ethnic communities, since they have the potential to become as significant for the identity of some people as existing ethnic communities are. Medvešek (2009, p. 12) thinks that internet can help creating ethnic identity, since it is easier for an individual or a community to keep connections with the population with common interests. Warschauer and De Florio-Hansen (2003, p. 22) on the other hand think that it seems like internet, in comparison with other mass media, does not give the opportunity to create new modus of ethnic identities, it can only help with the increasing dynamics in the field of developing ethnic identifications. Elkinns (1997, p. 148) believes that virtual ethnic communities give the existing ethnic communities the opportunity to strengthen and refresh the community and make it to maintain the identity and activities, which would be otherwise difficult to keep through generations in small enclaves in the middle of other societies. Virtual ethnic communities give the individuals an opportunity for new ways of connecting between themselves (Čikić, 2002, p. 85).

Moreover, in developing ethnic identifications, but also in preserving the culture and connecting across generations, digitalization of (diaspora) cultural heritage seems as valuable support. The related digital potential should refer on catalogue-type entries; video stories and images relating to objects; user-generated content; fully searchable Web-based resources; and communication via social media (Singh & Blake, 2012, p. 95 ). In the same study, the authors argue the digitization-related issues that still concerns like follows: (i) the digital media enable information to become universally available, without central control, (ii) the costs of digitization, and (iii) the level of accuracy of user-generated content).

Relation between virtual (on-line) and »real« (off-line) life is certainly complex and twisted. The important questions for us are if diaspora organizations understand and use the potential of digitalization, and if the internet just shows the situation in these communities as it is, or does also affect the situation itself?

### **3 Research method**

We used on line survey as our tool of gathering data. The survey was distributed by email to Slovenian and Croatian diaspora organizations from all over the world. We analyzed the data gathered by categorizing it into several key themes of our research interest for this conference paper.

#### **3.1 Research sample**

##### **3.1.1 Sample of organizations representing Slovenians living abroad**

In our sample 3 organizations represent Slovenians living in Serbia and one organization representing Slovenians living in Sweden, one in Australia and one in Finland. Membership of the organizations - representing the interest of Slovenians living abroad - is spanning from 2 – 350 members. Slovenian societies abroad mostly rent places for their events. Main activities of Slovenian societies abroad are social gatherings for holiday or weekends, information sharing, networking, exchanging knowledge, workshops on culture and education for children and family language and Slovenian culture development. 4 organizations which represent Slovenians abroad have the legal status of an non-profit organization - society, one is for-profit and one is only informally acting. Slovenians mostly gather a few times a year in their

organizations. Usually 25-50 people join their events and three quarters of them are of Slovenian origin and older than 40 years. Yearly budget of the organizations varies, from 300 - 7000 euros. All the organizations raise their money mostly by applying for the funds from the Republic of Slovenia and from their members, donations. Three organizations which responded receive on average from the Republic of Slovenia 501-2000 euros, while the others receive: one up to 500 euros, one 5001-10 000, and one 2001-5000. At the events they mostly speak the language of the country where they live, especially the youth but they also try to practice Slovenian language. Only one organization measures satisfaction of their members. 4 organizations are satisfied with the human capital development within their organizations and two are worried that there is no younger generation to keep working.

### **3.1.2 Sample of organizations representing Croats living abroad**

Regarding Croatian sample, the 8 societies (organizations) represent Croats are registered in Canada, Australia, Lithuania, Luxemburg, Italy, Hungary, Sweden and North Macedonia. Membership of the organizations - representing the interest of Croats living abroad varies from 5 to 1.200 members. Croatian societies abroad mostly rent places for their events (only two of them have proprietary premises, one operates only virtually). Each one has the legal status of a non-profit organization – society. Main activities of Croatian societies abroad are social gatherings for holiday or weekends, with intention to strengthen relations with Croatia in the area like: arts and culture, sports and recreation, tourism and economic activity, scientific and educational sector. The range of participants in events organized by those societies goes from 20 to 500. They are mostly older than 40 and meets from several times a week to several times a year. Yearly budget of the organizations is spanning from 4000 – 30.000 euros.

The majority of the societies raise their money by applying for the public funds either from in the country where they are located either from the Republic of Croatia. The membership fees and donations are also the relevant source for the society finance. Two organizations which responded receive on average from the Republic of Croatia 501-2000 euros, two 2000-5000 euros, while the others receive: one up to 500 euros and one more than 10.000 euros. One organization misses to respond. Half of the respondents speak the language of the country where they live, the other

half use the Croatian language in internal communication. Finally, two-thirds of societies from the Croatian sample measure satisfaction of their members. Three organizations are satisfied with the human capital development within their organizations; three express particular difficulties to engage young people in the society's life, while two are quite worried about the lack of young people to keep these societies active in future.

## 4 Research findings

### 4.1 Key general findings from the sample of Slovenians living abroad

Inner team of the organizations is motivated in all the organizations to keep the work done. Plans for the future depend on the availability of human and financial resources which are scarce:

*"Work plans depend on financial resources, in the field of culture".*

*"We are pleased to have our own social spaces that we like to come to. We definitely have great wishes and great plans to meet and meet in the future, because in this way we preserve the Slovenian word of habit and culture. We try and work to ensure that the work and leadership of the association "Simon Gregorčič" following the paths that are set. Our biggest operation next year will be to carry out the 50th anniversary of the association, because it was not possible to carry it out this year due to the Corona virus. However, I must say that this pandemic stopped a large part of our meeting and the activities of social activities. We want and strive for the existence of the association and of courses all of us Slovenian compatriots in Köping".*

*"We make over 30 projects in the association every year, we have the most guests from Slovenia, these are singing associations; literary, athletes."*

*"We intend to continue with information, networking, and the exchange and promotion of Slovenian knowledge between academia, industry, governmental and non-governmental organizations and active individuals through events such as local meetings and traditional annual conferences and social networks; We intend to continue awarding scholarships for learning Slovene to promising members who are planning professional cooperation with Slovenia. We plan to increase the activity of members in individual regional sections and to continue cooperation with similar organizations inside and outside Slovenia and Australia".*



*“Further development of activities through the web, cultural-scientific and educational activities”*

*“In order to attract more Slovenes to work in the organization. Now there are only three of us who organize everything. The problem is because there are many families with young children who do not have time to organize and like to attend meetings and workshops. If we know that there are around 200 Slovenes in Finland, and the distances are very large, the 50 present at our most visited Christmas meeting are quite large. People come to our meetings more than 100 km away, the record is more than 600 km! Supplementary classes are also attended by more than 20 children. In addition to our Association of Parents of Slovenian Children, we also have Slovenia-seura in Finland, the Finnish-Slovenian Friendship Association. Here, the members are mainly enthusiastic about Slovenia Finns, there are only a few of us Slovenes. The association is very active and takes care of the recognition of Slovenia in Finland and integration, especially in the cultural field. The official language here is Finnish, unlike the Association of Parents of Slovenian Children, where the official language is Slovene. Slovenia-seura receives most of its funding from the Finnish state”.*

We also wanted to find out how well prepared are Slovenian associations abroad in terms of digitalization of their activities and efforts. All the organizations support digitalization of their cultural heritage. Four out of six organizations perceive digitalization as a choice and not as obligatory. When they wish to digitalize their cultural heritage, they take into consideration the cost of digitalization, loss of curator voice and consultation as well as lower level of protection of the material as well as loss of authorship. Two organizations take into consideration also access as digitalization enables universal access to the content without central control. Six organizations use Facebook, webpage, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter. Digitalization in their community refers to usage of online tools (social media) to educate younger members of their community and to digitalize their materials.

Organizations also invest effort into connecting first generation of migrants with next generations in the form of networking, socializing, and help to elderly, visits. Unfortunately, they do not see the future of their organizations in a positive light. Young Slovenes have moved to Slovenia in some organizations. Some are afraid that in 20 years their organization will not exist anymore due to lack of interest to work voluntarily in the organization. In Australia, they are noticing higher interest of younger generation for Slovenia as part of European community and even though they do not speak Slovene language, they are interested for professional and cultural

collaboration with Slovenia at academic, business, political and cultural level. In terms of what they need the most, they expressed financial support; will to gather together, support in teaching Slovenian language to children. Most of them are not trained to teach their children Slovenian language even though they are mostly successful members of the society. They wish they could have more members so they could do more activities.

Slovenians abroad take care for the collaboration among the first generation of settlers and the next generations with home visits, organizing gatherings, helping elderly, organizing classes and events. They expressed their main needs in terms of bigger financing support from Slovenian government, raising the wish of Slovenians to gather abroad, bigger support in preserving Slovenian language and Slovenian culture abroad and acknowledging accomplishments of Slovenians abroad. The organizations see their role in helping to their members in preserving Slovenian identity by talking in Slovenian language, listening to Slovenian music, organizing trips to Slovenia, organizing conferences, providing information about successful Slovenians in their community, giving scholarships for learning Slovenian language, educational scientific and cultural activities, workshops for children and language course for children, etc.

## **4.2 Key general findings from the sample of Croatians living abroad**

Every society shows motivation to keep working and acting in forthcoming period although the plan mainly depends on the availability of human and financial resources, which, in the moment are, mainly deficient. Croats abroad take special care for the collaboration among the first generation of settlers and the next generations with home visits, organizing gatherings, helping elderly, organizing classes and events. They expressed their main needs in terms of more networking *in situ* and with the homeland, more regular and higher levels of funding. Moreover, they are ready to emphasize over and over the importance of preserving Croatian language, culture and history, but also to maintain passion for cultural heritage among generations, but also to cooperate with cultural societies and sports associations in the homeland. Croats abroad are looking forward creating space for intercultural dialogue and expanding cooperation for the exchange of interreligious dialogue in mutual respect and creativity. Following that, the societies are focused on building Croatian identity within multiculturalism and by engagement on projects

that will express cultural diversity as a resource and wealth of coexistence. Looking to the future however is, according the many painted in lighter colors:

*“The community will continue to grow as many come for employment and some for working in EU institutions.”*

*“The association takes special care of young people who are its main goal.”*

*“We believe that we will still exist with Croatian signs, but in a different form”*

*“Very well from year to year the community will be stronger and stronger*

Regarding digitalization within Croatian abroad, almost all organizations support digitalization of their cultural heritage. However, five out of eight perceive digitalization as a choice, not as obligatory. When digitalize the cultural heritage tree out of eight take into consideration (i) loss of curator voice and consultation, (ii) access to the content without central control, (iii) the lower level of protection of the material and, (iv) doing digitalization in non-ethical manner. Two organizations worry about (i) the cost of digitalization and (ii) imposition of other rights over local ownership of cultural content. The majority use Facebook and webpages (6), than Youtube (4) and Instagram (2). Twitter and blogs is used only by one. Digitalization in Croatian community refers to virtual community (3), than usage of online tools (social media) to educate younger members of their community and to digitalize their materials (2), and usage of software designed for cultural heritage digitalization (1).

## **5 Concluding remarks**

Our data shows that managers of diaspora in both countries, Slovenia and Croatia, are responsibly developing their activities and practice planning, organizing, leading and controlling of their activities, depending on the time, skills and resources available. It can be noted that Slovenian managers are somehow more worried about the future of their communities abroad; this is also in line with the study performed by IMD World Competitiveness Center from Lausanne, Switzerland which found Slovenian managers as second most pessimistic in the world (Bris, 2015). However, all the organizations from both samples, Slovenia and Croatia, demonstrate motivation to remain active and help their communities abroad remain their cultural

identity. Their main strategical effort is invested into gaining more human and financial resources to do all the activities they see as necessary to keep their communities abroad vital and prospering. One common challenge ahead of all the diaspora organizations is adjusting their way of management to the younger generation's needs and lifestyle patterns and there digitalization plays a key role which means that part of the financing mechanism needs to promote and encourage the most suitable digital tools for online management of their activities, but also take into account the digitization-related concerns in accordance with Singh and Blake (2012).

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