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# CHARACTERISTICS OF THE RETURN MIGRATION OF THE SLOVENIAN DIASPORA FROM ARGENTINA

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## Abstract

This article deals with the return migration of Slovenian emigrants and their descendants from Argentina. The first part of the article provides a general overview of return migration, which takes place in the context of globalisation and increasing migration flows as a reaction to changing life circumstances, economic opportunities or as a result of the search for personal and cultural identity, as well as the background and historical context of Slovenian emigration to Argentina and outlines the characteristics of the Slovenian diaspora in Argentina. In the second part, we present the analysis and interpretation of the results of the data collected through semi-structured interviews using the biographical-interpretative narrative method with Slovenian immigrants from Argentina who represent a specific community in Slovenia and maintain transnational links with Argentina.

**Keywords:** Slovenian emigration, diaspora, return migration, Argentina, Slovenia, national identity

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Although migrations have occurred throughout human history, it was not until the beginning of the 20th century that they became the focus of scientific research. Since then, they have taken an increasingly important place in various scientific disciplines such as sociology, geography, anthropology, economics and others (King, 1978; Lukšič-Hacin, 2010) and have developed into a »distinctly interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary field of research« (Ilc Klun, 2014, p. 166). Despite the growing popularity of migration research, the topic of return migration remained on the margins of research for a long time, as it was mostly discussed or mentioned in the context of broader migration processes, but almost never as a main topic of academic research (Lukšič-Hacin, 2006b; Mlekuž, 2003). The migration of the descendants of emigrants has been dealt with even less frequently. Traditionally, migration studies have focused on the first generation of migrants, while the descendants have mostly been mentioned in the context of the challenges of integration or assimilation (King, Christou, 2011).

Recently, interest in research on return migration has increased and consolidated its place within migration studies (Bilecen, 2022; Gemi, Triandafyllidou, 2021; King, Kuschminder, 2022). King and Christou (2011, p. 452) argue that this trend is not due to an actual increase in migration flows, but rather represents a »reconceptualization of migration phenomena« within the framework of new paradigms such as transnationality. However, King and Kuschminder (2022) conclude that return migration is still not a central topic in the migration studies literature and that more attention should be paid to return migration in research studies at both global and national levels.

In Slovenia, there was less interest in researching the return migration of the Slovenian diaspora. Research on this process took place mainly in three periods: in the second half of the 1970s, when some works dealt mainly with the return of Slovenian »zdomci«<sup>1</sup> from Germany to Slovenia (Toplak, 2004), in the 1990s (Žigon, 1998), when there was a slightly increased rate of remigration as a result of Slovenia's independence, and around the turn of the millennium (Lukšič-Hacin 2006a; 2006b; Repič, 2006; Žigon, 2001). Nevertheless, return migration of the Slovenian diaspora is mainly considered in the academic and professional literature as part of the broader research on the Slovenian diaspora. It is also a fact that the concept of return migration is hardly known to the general public (Ilc Klun, 2014).

To fill this research gap, our 2022 study investigated the return migration of Slovenian emigrants in Argentina and the migration of the descendants of Slovenian emigrants in Argentina to Slovenia, focusing on a holistic understanding of the processes before, during and after return migration. Research on return migration has taken into account the multidimensionality and complexity of the process. This required an interdisciplinary approach combining geographical, sociological, economic and historical

1 At this point, it should be noted that contemporary migration research does not classify »zdomci« as returning migrants, as they have only gone abroad temporarily.

research perspectives. In addition, the inclusion of (return) migrants in the research process was crucial, as their personal experiences and perspectives contributed significantly to a comprehensive understanding of the (return) migration process.

The study of return migration of Slovenian emigrants and their descendants is important because understanding these processes gives us insights into contemporary migration trends, including those of the Slovenian diaspora, and provides an understanding of the characteristics and dynamics of migration processes in which Slovenia has been and is involved over different periods of time.

## 2 TERMINOLOGY

In the domestic and foreign literature on return migration, various terms are used to describe this process. In Slovenian literature, which also summarises foreign literature, we can find terms such as reverse migration, return migration (Mlekuž, 2006; 2021), remigration (Ilc Klun, 2014), reemigration, repatriation, return migration (IOM, 2006), while in English literature we can mainly find terms such as counterstream migration, reverse migration, u-turn migration, homeward migration and so on. It should be noted that these terms are not completely synonymous. For example, the Slovenian term »povratništvo« is used in Slovenian literature as a synonym for return migration, but the word »povratnik«, which is derived from the term »povratništvo«, can also have a negative connotation and refers, among other things, to someone who »has already been convicted but commits a new offence« (SSKJ, 2022), so it is not directly associated with the process of migration as such. The term repatriation also allows for different interpretations. The term is derived from the Latin word *repatriare*, which means »to return home« (Gombač, 2006), while the Geographical Terminology Dictionary (2022) describes repatriation as »the return of emigrants, the population living on the territory of another country or in another area within one's own country, to their home country, the place of their original residence«. Today, the term repatriation has mainly a political connotation and is used in literature and the media to describe the return of refugees and prisoners of war to the country of which they are citizens (IOM, 2006). The Glossary on Migration (IOM, 2006, p. 62) also describes repatriation as a personal right of the refugee or prisoner of war, and that »the option of repatriation is a personal decision of the individual, not of the state. Repatriation also includes the obligation of the state to allow authorised persons (soldiers and civilians) to leave and the obligation of the state of origin to accept its own nationals. Repatriation also applies to diplomatic representatives and international personnel in times of international crisis«. Gombač (2006) notes that repatriation was part of the social reality in Slovenia, especially after the Second World War, when Yugoslav and foreign citizens returned (via Slovenia) to their home countries. In order to avoid terminological inconsistencies, we therefore suggest using the term »return migration« or its

Slovenian equivalent »povratna migracija«, to refer to those migrants who return after a certain period of residence outside their country of origin, return migrants.

Definitions of return migration as we understand it today date back about half a century (Bilgili, 2022). The 1960s saw the first specific studies focusing exclusively on this migration process, with researchers using the example of return migration from the USA to Italy and from the UK to the Caribbean (King, Kuschminder, 2022).

In the 1970s, the oil crisis that shook the global economy also affected the dynamics of migration processes and triggered a large-scale return migration of workers. Studies that have looked at this process have focused on the reasons for this – deindustrialization, the decline of the Fordist economic model, family choices and the improvement of economic conditions in the migrants' countries of origin (King, Kuschminder 2022). In this context, Frank Bovenkerk (1974) was the first to systematically analyse and theorise return migration in his work »The Sociology of Return Migration«, thus laying the foundation for further research (King, Christou, 2011). Bovenkerk (1974) defines return migration as the process that takes place when people return to their country (or region) of origin after emigrating. In his definition, Bovenkerk therefore only refers to a return migrant as someone who has emigrated from their place of origin and returned to their place of origin after a certain period of time, but not to their descendants who move to their ancestors' place of origin.

In the 1980s, George Gmelch developed one of the first and widely accepted definitions of remigration in his book »Return Migration«, defining it as the movement of migrants back to their home countries with the aim of resettlement (Gmelch, 1980). In the 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century, migration research became closely linked to the processes of globalisation, as discussed by Castles and Miller (1993) in their work »The Age of Migration«.

Migration has long been understood as a clearly one-way and one-time phenomenon, with return migration seen as a possible final phase in the life of a person who has first emigrated and then re-immigrated (Toplak, 2006). However, a number of authors, including for example Toplak (2006), Lukšič-Hacin (2006a) and King (2015), point out that such a one-sided and static understanding of return migration is too simplistic and does not take into account the complexity of the processes that follow the initial emigration. This is countered by new conceptualizations of return migration, which have sparked a renewed interest in the study of this process in the first decades of the 21st century and which, unlike the earlier understanding of migration as the end of a so-called migration flow, understand return migration as part of a circulation in a transnational space (Gemi, Trinadfyllidou, 2021). This is because migrants maintain strong links between the country of origin and the host country, which shapes transnational identity as they are not anchored (physically, socially, culturally) in either country (Al-Ali, Koser, 2002, as cited in Cassarino, 2004). King

(2015) therefore expands the phases of the migration flow to include *return migration*<sup>2</sup>, *transit migration*<sup>3</sup>, *re-emigration*<sup>4</sup>, *second migration*<sup>5</sup> and *circular migration*<sup>6</sup>, thereby emphasising the diversity and complexity of remigration processes that go beyond simple emigration and immigration.

In the 21st century, the definitions of international organisations are also frequently used. The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) defines return migration as the process of a person's return to their country of origin or habitual residence after a stay abroad of at least one year, which may be voluntary or forced (IOM, 2006). This definition emphasises two dimensions - the temporal dimension (return after a stay of at least one year abroad) and the forced/voluntary dimension.

Since this work deals with the processes of return migration of both emigrants and their descendants, it is worth mentioning that there is also a wide range of terminology and conceptualizations of return migration in this context. In particular, the question of the integration of the descendants of emigrants into the country of origin of their ancestors is controversial and has led to numerous debates between different authors. Some authors associate return migration only with migrants who have returned to their place of origin after a certain period of time, while others include their descendants in the concept of return migration.

In his 1974 work, Bovenkerk highlights ancestral return migration as a specific type of return migration. He defines it as the migration of the descendants of emigrants to the place of origin of their ancestors, citing the Rastafarian »Back to Africa« movement as an example. Although Bovenkerk considers these migrations as a marginal example of return migration, he refers to them as »a return that is not really a return« (Bovenkerk, 1974, p. 19). Conway and Potter (2009) favour the inclusion of the next generation (i.e. descendants) in the notion of return migration, defining this process as multi-generational and referring to it as »next-generation return migration« (Bovenkerk, 1974, p. 19). Conway and Potter (2009) favour the inclusion of the next generation (i.e. descendants) in the notion of return migration, defining this process as ‚multigenerational‘. On the other hand, some other authors (Batič, 2003; Lukšič-Hacin, 2006b; Mlekuž, 2006; Toplak, 2006) argue against this, as they consider that the so-called return migration flow should only cover individual mobility and not multigenerational movements (Lukšič-Hacin, 2006b).

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- 2 This phase refers to migrants who return to their country or region of origin after a longer stay abroad.
  - 3 This phase refers to migrants who move from their first country or region of immigration to another country or region without returning to their country or region of origin.
  - 4 This is the phase in which migrants who have already returned to their country or region of origin return to the country or region in which they previously lived.
  - 5 This phase describes the process in which migrants return to their country or region of origin and migrate again, but not to their previous country or region, but to a different destination.
  - 6 This term refers to migrants who move regularly between their country or region of origin and other destinations. It can also include seasonal migration which depends on climatic conditions or seasonal work.

The migration of descendants of emigrants to the country of origin of their ancestors is often discussed in the context of diaspora studies. Diaspora is defined as an ethnic group that has moved geographically away from its original homeland and is linked by a collective memory, a sense of belonging and a longing for its original homeland (King, Christou, 2011; Tsuda, 2016). In diaspora research, various concepts have developed to describe the migration of the descendants of emigrants to the country of their ancestors. King and Christou (2011) introduce the concept of counter-diaspora migration as a migration that is opposed to the process of diaspora formation. Tsuda (2019) uses the broader concept of diasporic return, which includes the return migration of first and 1.5 generation emigrants<sup>7</sup> as well as the ethnic return migration of the descendants of emigrants.

To avoid terminological confusion, we will use the term „migration of the descendants of emigrants to the country of origin of their ancestors“ in this paper to describe the case of migration of the descendants of emigrants to the country of origin of their ancestors. However, we will use the term „return migration“ exclusively to describe the migration process of people returning to their country of emigration.

### 3 SLOVENIAN DIASPORA IN ARGENTINA

According to unofficial estimates, there are currently around 30,000 Slovenian emigrants and their descendants living in Argentina (Slovenes in South America, 2022). The mass migration of Slovenes to this country took place in three main periods: in the second half of the 19th century, during the two world wars and after the Second World War (Žigon, 1998, Slovenes in South America, 2022).

Among the first Slovenians to settle in the territory of present-day Argentina were Jesuit missionaries who arrived there from the mid-17th century (Mislej, 1995). In the second half of the 19th century, Argentina accepted European immigrants for geopolitical (e.g. in 1878 due to intergovernmental agreement between Argentina and Austria Argentina accepted some 200 to 300 families) and economic reasons (e.g. poor agricultural conditions and poor harvests). During this period, around 1000 Slovenians immigrated to Argentina, mostly as Austrian and Italian citizens (Repič, 2006). They settled mainly in the northern provinces of Formosa and Chaco as well as in Entre Ríos and Santa Fe and in the cities of Córdoba, Mendoza and Buenos Aires (Repič, 2006; Žigon, 1998).

7 Many researchers determine the generational affiliation of families with migration experience based on the genealogical order of births. They assign the parents to the “first generation”, while their children, regardless of their place of birth, are assigned to the “second” or “next generation”. Other authors differentiate the generational affiliation according to the place of birth of the children of immigrants. Those who were born in the country of origin and grew up in the host country are classified as part of the ‘1.5 generation’, while children born in the host country are defined as part of the ‘second’ or ‘next generation’ (Tsuda, 2016).

During the world wars, Argentina experienced another large wave of Slovenian immigration - it is estimated that between 25,000 and 30,000 Slovenians immigrated to Argentina at that time (Žigon, 1998; Repič, 2006). The reasons for immigration were initially political (e.g. after 1922 there was an intensive emigration of the Slovenian population from Primorska region to Argentina during Italian fascism), and later also economic (e.g. between 1926 and 1929 as a result of the Great Depression) (Žigon, 1998). Slovenian immigrants mainly settled in the larger cities such as Buenos Aires, Rosario and Córdoba, where they were mainly employed as industrial workers (Repič, 2006; Žigon, 1998). During this period, Slovenian immigrants also began to organise themselves politically and culturally, they established national homes where they took care of the Slovenian language and education, founded Slovenian associations and published the Slovenian press - Slovenian magazines and other newsletters (Repič, 2006; Žigon, 1998).

After the Second World War, Argentina experienced the last major wave of Slovenian immigration, which was associated with political refugees fleeing the new socio-political order, communism, in Yugoslavia (Žigon, 1998; 2001), hence this wave of immigration is often referred to as »Slovenian political emigration« (Žigon, 1998; 2001). According to Žigon (2001), an estimated 89 Slovene refugees had immigrated to Argentina in 1947, and by 1955, an estimated 5,282 Slovene immigrants had arrived in Argentina, most of them in family groups, but some of them also immigrated independently (Žigon, 2001). The Argentine authorities took a positive view of the new Slovene immigrants, which enabled the Slovene community to organise itself socially and culturally. Seven Slovenian national homes were built in Buenos Aires, where various cultural, sporting, religious and other activities were organised in addition to education.

The Slovenian post-war emigrant community in Argentina still maintains a rich and diverse cultural and social life. Education plays a key role in maintaining the continuity of the community, as it enables the transmission of Slovenian language and culture to the next generation of emigrants and their descendants. In the early stages, the education system consisted mainly of religion and Slovenian courses, which were formalised in 1950 and expanded into official Slovenian elementary school in 1966. Currently, the Slovenian community in Argentina maintains kindergartens, elementary school and secondary schools that offer educational programmes to complement the Argentine school system, including the Slovenian language, Slovenian history, geography, religion and singing (Žigon, 2001).



## 4 RETURN MIGRATION OF SLOVENIAN EMIGRANTS AND MIGRATION OF THE DESCENDANTS OF SLOVENIAN EMIGRANTS FROM ARGENTINA

Researchers who have studied the return migration of Slovenian emigrants from Argentina and the migration of their descendants describe two major waves of immigration to Slovenia: the first after 1990, particularly immediately after independence, and the second after 2000, following the economic crisis in Argentina (Lukšič-Hacin, 2006c; Repič, 2006). Our research has revealed a third wave, which mainly concerns the immigration of descendants of Slovenian emigrants and coincides with the Covid-19 epidemic. Official data on the exact number of people who immigrated to Slovenia in each period is not available. Repič (2006) cites estimates by the Slovenian emigrant association »Slovenia in the World«, according to which around 200 Slovenian emigrants and their descendants immigrated from Argentina after 1990 and around 230 more after the end of the economic crisis in Argentina in 2002 and up to 2005. Today, the association no longer provides estimates of immigration, as many emigrants are now mainly dependent on the help of their acquaintances, relatives and friends already living in Slovenia.

There are very few scientific studies that deal with the return migration of Slovenian emigrants and their descendants from Argentina. Two qualitative studies were carried out in 2006 (Lukšič-Hacin, 2006c; Repič, 2006). In the following, we present some of the most important results of both studies, in particular a demographic overview of the target group we studied.

Repič (2006) states in his study that most immigrants who moved from Argentina to Slovenia were integrated into the Slovenian community in Argentina, where they either grew up or had active contact with it. Within this community, they took special care to preserve their knowledge of the Slovenian language, their collective memory of Slovenia as their country of origin and their historical awareness of the political emigration of their ancestors. This contributed to the formation of a strong group identity and a symbolic and spiritual connection to the homeland of Slovenia. The characteristics of the Slovenian community in Argentina had a significant influence on the individual's decision to return migration and on the process of return migration itself. Repič (2006) describes that for many, migration meant a »return to Slovenian roots« (ibid., p. 170), and points out that some Argentine-born immigrants referred to themselves as »returnees« when they arrived in Slovenia, as this allowed them to legitimise their origins and belonging (Repič, 2006), most felt that they were immigrants in Slovenia despite their Slovenian citizenship (Lukšič-Hacin, 2006c). Both surveys found that immigrants immigrated either alone or with their families, although Lukšič-Hacin (2006c) recorded more cases of family immigration in her study and Repič (2006) found a higher proportion of immigration among younger members of the Slovenian



community who had already acquired Slovenian citizenship. Most of the immigrants had visited Slovenia at least once before immigrating to Slovenia (Repič, 2006). When analysing the migration motives of Slovenian emigrants and their descendants from Argentina to Slovenia after 1990, Repič (2006) and Lukšič-Hacin (2006c) found that the decision to migrate during this period was often related to the political changes in Slovenia. Slovenia's independence was often cited as a decisive attraction factor, especially in the first years after 1990, but after 2000 the push factors from Argentina – the economic crisis in Argentina, the increase in crime and the general deterioration of life security in Argentina – prevailed (Lukšič-Hacin, 2006c; Repič, 2006). Among the emigrants who left Slovenia after the Second World War, the study by Lukšič-Hacin (2006c) found that the reasons given for emigration were often independence, Slovene citizenship and the desire to return to the country of origin. The descendants of Slovenian emigrants born in Argentina, on the other hand, cited their Slovene roots and Slovene origin as the main motives for emigrating. In addition to these reasons, they also mentioned employment, education, advancement, studies, the economic crisis in Argentina and personal reasons such as love or divorce. Repič (2006) also reports similar results on the reasons for migration. Immigrants moved to Slovenia either temporarily or permanently. The first waves of immigration were characterised by independent immigration, while in later periods immigrants were often assisted in their immigration to Slovenia by relatives, friends, priests and benefactors, such as non-governmental organisations like the Slovenian Association of Emigrants in the World, Rafael's Society, Karitas and the Slovenian Emigrants' Matica (Lukšič-Hacin, 2006c; Repič, 2006). Lukšič-Hacin's (2006c) research showed that immigrants encountered a number of problems when moving to Slovenia, mainly related to the availability of information on official procedures. They had the greatest difficulties with the organisational and financial aspects of moving, obtaining documents, finding housing, obtaining recognition of educational qualifications obtained abroad, improving their education and language, and integrating their children into the Slovenian school system. According to Repič (2006), after immigrating to Slovenia, Slovenian immigrants from Argentina used networking strategies that were already familiar to them from the Slovenian communities in Argentina. In Slovenia, they formed a network of informal and social connections, mainly through the association »Slovenia in the World«, founded in 1991, and forged community bonds based on shared experiences, their country of origin, national identity and heritage. Language has retained its role as an important marker of integration and national identity, in Argentina it was Slovenian, in Slovenia it has become Spanish. Immigrants also contributed to the establishment and deepening of relations between Argentina and Slovenia, characterised by frequent visits and travel, various forms of cooperation and the maintenance of contact through letters, telephone or other means of communication (Repič, 2006).

## 5 METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The aim of the study conducted in 2022 was to investigate the return migration of Slovenian emigrants from Argentina to Slovenia and the migration of the descendants of the emigrants to the country of origin of their ancestors, Slovenia. Through semi-structured interviews conducted within a biographical-interpretative-narrative methodological approach, we investigated who are the individuals of the Slovenian emigrant community in Argentina who migrate to Slovenia, what are the key factors that trigger this migration process, how do the individuals (re)integrate into their country of origin or the country of origin of their ancestors, how are transnational connections established between Slovenia and Argentina, and how do the individuals perceive their national identity.

The biographical-interpretative narrative method is a qualitative research approach in which semi-structured in-depth interviews are used to collect data. It is a qualitative approach to the study of social phenomena that focuses on the collection and analysis of personal narratives or stories. This methodological approach is important for understanding the subjective experiences and perspectives of individuals, which is crucial when studying complex and multi-layered processes, including migration. It allows researchers to include not only general and objective information in the study of the process, but also the personal experiences of individuals that contribute to the emotional, cultural and social aspects of the migration process. The biographical-interpretative narrative approach enables »an empirical treatment of the complexity, diversity and variability of migration by emphasising individual experiences« (Pajnik, Bajt, 2006, p. 74). This approach therefore enables an understanding of individuals' personal and unique migration journeys, including motivations for migration, experiences of integration and coping with identity change. Using biographical narratives, researchers can examine how migrants maintain connections to their home country and how these connections influence their lives in the country of immigration (Eastmond, 2007). Despite the focus on individual experiences, the method can also reveal broader patterns and trends and thus contribute to a better understanding of migration processes. On the other hand, it should be noted that this methodological approach can also have some limitations. One of these is subjectivity, as the data obtained is often subjective and based on the personal views of the interviewee. This means that different interviewees may perceive and interpret the same process or phenomenon differently. Another limitation is the fact that life stories do not always reflect the experiences of the entire population, so that the data obtained cannot be generalised. Furthermore, focusing exclusively on the stories of the interviewees can lead to neglecting broader social, political and other factors that influence the phenomenon or process under study (in our case, return migration). When interpreting the data collected using a biographical-interpretative methodological approach, the researcher must be careful to avoid misinterpretation or bias. Despite its limitations, it is worth

noting that this approach offers valuable insights into personal experiences and perspectives that quantitative research approaches cannot capture.

As part of our research, we conducted a series of semi-structured interviews between May 20 and July 27, 2022. In total, we conducted 12 interviews with 17 respondents. Some of the interviews were conducted as group interviews, as they were families who had moved together and shared the migration experience. Potential interviewees were contacted in advance, the purpose of the research was explained and the areas of investigation were presented. Once consent was obtained, we agreed with the interviewees on the method and timing of the interview, taking into account their preferences and availability. To ensure the comparability of the data, we aimed to conduct the interviews in a uniform manner and emphasised personal and direct communication with the interviewees. Of the total of 12 interviews, 9 were conducted in person and three via online tools. All interviews that were conducted in person were also recorded on tape. After the interviews were conducted, a transcription process followed in which the voice recordings were converted into verbatim text transcripts. These transcripts served as the basis for further data analysis, in which the content of the interviews was analysed and the interviewees' responses were systematically categorised in order to structure the data into meaningful clusters. Once categorised, we began an in-depth analysis and synthesis of the information with the aim of understanding and interpreting the meanings that interviewees attached to their migration experiences.

A questionnaire was developed for the semi-structured interviews and divided into three thematic sections. The first section focused on the interviewees' personal information, their experiences of living in Argentina, their knowledge of the Slovenian language and their connections to Slovenia. The second section aimed to examine the migration process of the interviewees themselves, including their motives, preparations and experiences of migration. The third section focused on the interviewees' experiences of living in Slovenia and the ways in which they maintain their ties with Argentina.

When selecting the interviewees, we took into account various demographic parameters such as gender, age and year of immigration to Slovenia and also tried to capture the geographical diversity of emigration locations in Argentina. Although the focus of the research was on both Slovenian emigrants and descendants of Slovenian emigrants, we interviewed only one Slovenian emigrant, and we also interviewed individuals who stood out from this sample. These included interviewee P, a Slovenian-born descendant of Argentinian immigrants, and interviewee M, who is of Argentinian origin and participated in the interview as a family member to share his experience of immigrating to Slovenia. Nevertheless, both were included in the demographic analysis. Most of the interviewees expressed a wish to remain anonymous, which was achieved by naming the interviewees after consecutive letters of the alphabet, ordered by the date of their immigration to Slovenia.

The demographic profile of the respondents was as follows: The average age of respondents was 36.13 years, with 47% men and 53% women. Of the respondents, 15

were born in Argentina and two in Slovenia. Most of the interviewees, 11, had moved from the province of Buenos Aires, 3 from the province of Tucuman and 2 from the province of Río Negro. With the exception of interviewee M, who was of Argentinian origin, all other interviewees were of Slovenian origin. All interviewees came from the Slovenian emigrant community that emerged after the Second World War. At the time of the interviews, the majority of the interviewees, i.e. 10, had the status of a worker, 3 were students, 2 were unemployed – which may be related to the fact that they had only been in Slovenia for a short time and were still looking for a job, and one interviewee had the status of a pensioner.

## 6 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the following, the results of the qualitative research are presented in more detail in three sections (Life in Argentina, Migration to Slovenia, Life in Slovenia), as this is the most comprehensive way of outlining and detailing the characteristics of the Slovenian community that migrated from Argentina.

### 6.1 Life in Argentina

In this study, we first examined the linguistic profile of members of the Slovenian diaspora who immigrated from Argentina. Within the Slovenian community in Argentina, the Slovenian language was the central distinguishing feature of Slovenian emigration. As we wrote in the introduction, knowledge and preservation of the Slovenian language played an essential role in maintaining and strengthening their national and cultural identity. The Slovenian community in Argentina carefully preserved the Slovenian language through various forms of education, such as primary school classes, language courses and cultural activities aimed at preserving the Slovenian language and culture. All this not only reflected the desire to preserve the linguistic heritage, but also played an important role in strengthening community ties and maintaining awareness of a common Slovenian identity.

We identified five main groups of respondents according to their attitudes and knowledge of the Slovenian language before moving to Slovenia. The first group included nine interviewees whose mother tongue was Slovenian and whose first language was Spanish, which they had learned upon entering the Argentinian school system. In the second group there were three interviewees from mixed marriages who were taught in both languages, Slovenian and Spanish. The third group included one interviewee (N) who learned Spanish after immigrating to Argentina, the fourth group included one interviewee (A) who emigrated from Argentina at a young age and never learned Spanish, and the fifth group included one interviewee (P) who is a descendant of Slovenian immigrants from Argentina and grew

up bilingual. For most of the interviewees, Slovenian language was either their first language or one of their first languages. The exceptions were interviewees A, N and P. Most of them participated in organised Slovenian education in Argentina, which included kindergartens, schools and high school courses. In Argentina, the interviewees spoke Slovenian in the family circle and within the Slovenian community, while communication with peers and Argentinian families was mostly in Spanish, as interviewees B and G mentioned:

*»I learned most of my Slovenian from my grandparents, because my parents worked and my grandparents took care of me from an early age. And then I also spoke Slovenian with all my aunts and uncles, because the culture of speaking Slovenian at home was in the family /.../« (interviewee B, 2022).*

*»It's very sad, but we speak Spanish with our fellow citizens. But I've noticed that the community in Bariloche – they all speak Slovenian with each other. And on every occasion /.../ I've seen my cousin, and she speaks Slovenian with her children. And when they're around, we speak Slovenian, which is sometimes a bit strange. We think: why are you suddenly switching, we've always spoken Spanish? But then you get used to it and that's the right way. Because otherwise, unfortunately, the language slowly gets lost« (interviewee G, 2022).*

For most interviewees, entering the Argentinian school system was a turning point in their language skills. Some interviewees (e.g. F and G) pointed out that they continued to speak Spanish in the Slovenian environment after entering and graduating from the Argentinian school system, reflecting the complexity of their identity:

*»/.../ The (home) environment was more Slovenian than Argentinian. As soon as you go to school, the Argentinian culture starts to dominate« (interviewee F, 2022).*

*»When I speak, Spanish is easier. But why? Because my whole time at school was in Spanish. And I think that shapes you a lot. When I read, it's easier for me because I learned in that language and grew up in that environment« (interviewee G, 2022).*

In the following research, we have also tried to shed light on the diversity of national identity in the Slovenian community in Argentina. The interviews reveal four main ways of defining the national identity of the Slovenian community in Argentina: dual identity, Slovenian identity, composite identity and the identity of the descendants of Slovenian immigrants. Most respondents expressed a sense of dual identity. Most of them, including interviewees H, B and J, emphasised difficulties and uncertainty in defining their national identity:

*»In my opinion, this is the most difficult question because I don't know the answer. They ask you whether you feel Slovenian or Argentinian, and you don't know whether you feel both or neither /.../ It's a bit special. I'm both« (interviewee H, 2022).*

*»The problem is – because I don't know. And I definitely asked myself that as a teenager. Now I don't, I don't care anymore. I basically stopped bothering with the question, but I was in a dilemma. I mostly came to the conclusion that I'm Slovenian in Argentina and Argentinian in Slovenia« (interviewee B, 2022).*

*»We felt Slovenian there because we weren't quite Argentinian. /.../ We had a lot of Slovenian habits. We were Slovenians in Argentina. Then you come here and you feel so - you're neither one nor the other. You're not quite one thing, you're both all the time« (interviewee J, 2022).*

A few interviewees identified themselves primarily as Slovenes and emphasised their Slovenian identity. These were both people who were born in Slovenia and later moved to Argentina, as well as those who were born in Argentina but were active in the Slovenian community there:

*»I almost have to say that I am Slovenian. I still have a very large part of Argentina in me, but we moved so many years ago that I am no longer at home in Argentina /.../« (interviewee E, 2022).*

The third group expressed in the interviews their multilayered, i.e. composite or and-and-identity (Milharčič Hladnik, 2011; Vižintin, 2015), which combines Slovenian, Argentinian and other cultural elements. They identified with several cultures at the same time, which reflects their diverse heritage:

*»My genes are a cocktail, Slovenian on my father's side, Argentinian and Peruvian on my mother's side. Except that my grandfather, my mother's father, was half Indian. I am proud of this unusual and interesting combination, which gives me the feeling of being completely Argentinian, Slovenian, Peruvian and Indian« (interviewee D, 2022).*

Others are descendants of Slovenian immigrants who feel a special connection to Argentina, even though they were born and raised in Slovenia, and therefore we have labelled their identity as that of descendants of Slovenian immigrants. In the description, this is emphasised by the interviewee P:

*»When I was growing up, my parents had a very distinct accent, and it was always a bit annoying. Every time they read a book, everyone knew, even if they didn't know them, that they weren't from here. So I always felt a bit like a foreigner, even though*

*I was born here. Their whole identity was a bit foreign, although the goal was always to come here and be Slovenian /.../« (interviewee P, 2022).*

Respondents related their national identity to their place of birth, length of residence in a particular country, language, cultural characteristics and contact with relatives and friends in Argentina. The results of the survey show the complexity of the definition of national identity among immigrants from the Slovenian community in Argentina and illustrate the influence of intercultural interactions on the formation of national identity.

As part of our research on the migration experiences of Slovenian emigrants and their descendants from Argentina to Slovenia, we analysed the role of previous contacts and visits to Slovenia in their decision to migrate. Most of the interviewees had regular contact with relatives, friends and acquaintances in Slovenia prior to their migration. These contacts were established through various communication channels: in the past through letters and phone calls and more recently through online platforms and applications as well as social networks. Our survey results show that nine of the respondents had visited Slovenia on various occasions before moving to Slovenia – family vacations, visits to relatives and friends, family celebrations, graduation trips and educational courses (e.g. courses for Slovenian language teachers). These experiences left a strong impression on many interviewees and even awakened a deep emotional desire in some to move to Slovenia. This is how interviewee H describes his experiences during a visit to Slovenia:

*»I visited Slovenia for the first time in 1997, when I was 13 years old. We were here with my family, visiting family for a whole month. And it was so beautiful that I cried a lot when we had to leave. Back then I only thought or knew or wished that I would come here« (interviewee H, 2022).*

The description underlines the importance of personal experience and emotional attachment to the country of origin for the decision to migrate. It also underlines the fact that migration decisions are not only shaped by economic or political reasons, but also by personal and emotional ties.

## 6.2 Immigrating to Slovenia

In the second part of the study, we concentrated on the migration process itself. First of all, we were interested in the temporal dimension of return migration or immigration to Slovenia. The people we interviewed reflect different waves of return migration or immigration associated with the typical migration periods we described in the introductory sections of this paper. Four periods of immigration to Slovenia can be derived from the results of the interviews:



- after 1991: one interviewee and her family immigrated to Slovenia after Slovenia gained independence,
- after 2002: three of the interviewees immigrated to Slovenia after the economic crisis in Argentina in 2002,
- 2012—2019: immigration of individual respondents to Slovenia for various reasons,
- 2022: the largest number of interviewees (5) immigrated to Slovenia this year, which indicates a possible new wave of immigration after the Covid-19 epidemic, which, as we wrote in the introduction, is not yet documented in any scientific or academic literature, but was described in our interview by interviewee H:

*»/.../ More and more Argentinian Slovenians are returning. Last year it was crazy. Three, four, five whole families every month. You hear about someone all the time« (interviewee H).*

As part of the survey, we were also interested in the reasons why Slovenian emigrants and their descendants moved from Argentina. The majority of respondents cited the economic situation in Argentina as the main reason for moving, followed by the deterioration in general security and the increase in crime. In the interview, interviewee B described several crime-related incidents that influenced the decision to move:

*»/.../ Crime was definitely one of the reasons. My mother, for example, was robbed. I know that once she was walking down the street and a motorcyclist came with a knife and took her handbag. But that's a classic in Argentina. /.../ Then our car was stolen from in front of the house« (interviewee B, 2022).*

Those who moved as singles emphasised in the interviews that the decision to move was influenced by the search for better personal or professional opportunities, while parents who moved with their families often expressed the desire to secure a better future for their children. Interviewee J emphasised the importance of family and sacrifice for better opportunities for the children:

*»We said, let us all go together for their sake. Let us go as a family. /.../ Family is important to us. So that they can grow up in the family, we have to sacrifice that today. We have to leave something behind and start over so that they can have something better in their lives. That was the most important thing, that they will have more opportunities in the world« (interviewee J, 2022).*

The decision to migrate often depended on the jobs or scholarships already arranged in Slovenia. Interviewee E emphasised that a migration would not have been possible without a guaranteed job:

*»We made the decision after he had already confirmed that he had got the job, when only the final negotiations was still pending. If he had not got the job, we probably would not have moved« (interviewee E, 2022).*

Some of the interviewees (5) mentioned Slovenian identity, patriotism and Slovenian roots as an important factor in their decision to migrate, but never as the only or primary reason, which is also underlined by interviewee A's description:

*»(My parents) were Slovenians through - they grew up in the Argentinian world and all that, but I think they had this awareness of where they came from because of their parents. They had in the back of their minds that they would come back. Well, and then they did come back." /.../ The economic instability in Argentina probably also contributed to this. /.../ The main reason was certainly that my dad got a job« (interviewee A, 2022).*

The results showed that the decision to migrate from Argentina to Slovenia was often multi-faceted, with a combination of economic, security and family factors influencing the final decision to migrate.

Next, we were interested in how Slovenian emigrants from Argentina and their descendants chose to reside in certain town in Slovenia, as we wanted to understand how various factors influenced this decision. The majority of interviewees stated that the main factor influencing their choice of residence in Slovenia was good transport links to Ljubljana, while interviewees A and D emphasised their desire for a natural environment and good transport links:

*»/.../ daddy was looking for something like Bariloche, with lots of nature, some water to swim in. I think it was important for him that we were in nature, but not cut off from the capital« (interviewee A, 2022).*

*»We had no particular place in mind. Of course we were looking for a quiet and beautiful place, but above all we were looking for good connections, relative closeness to Ljubljana, closeness to the necessary infrastructure for daily life« (interviewee D, 2022).*

The survey also showed differences in places of immigration between individual and family immigration. Individuals who immigrated independently often chose closeness to urban centres, especially Ljubljana, because of its liveliness and vibrancy. Those who immigrated with the whole family, on the other hand, chose a quieter, more natural environment outside the major urban centres. For 10 respondents, the original place of immigration was in the Osrednjeslovenska statistical region, three migrated to the Jugovzhodna Slovenia statistical region and one to Goriška. However, it should be noted that further internal migration was common, with individuals who migrated to Slovenia on

their own initiative mostly moving closer to Ljubljana, while families moved to more rural and suburban areas. The study found that the original place of residence of ancestors had no significant influence on the immigrants' choice of place of residence, only three interviewees stated that they had moved close to the places where their ancestors had lived, but this was more by chance than a conscious decision.

In the survey, we were also interested in how Slovenian emigrants from Argentina and their descendants used various sources of help and support when immigrating to Slovenia. We analysed how social networks, family members, relatives and institutional structures influenced the migration process. The majority of respondents stated that contacts with relatives, friends and acquaintances in Slovenia were crucial for their migration. These contacts provided not only moral and emotional support, but also practical help, e.g. in the form of advice, assistance in finding accommodation and integration into the new social environment. Interviewee (J), who immigrated to Slovenia in 2022, emphasised the important role of the Facebook group "Argentinos en Eslovenia" and the Slovenian embassy in Buenos Aires in obtaining Slovenian citizenship for her children, while interviewee C, who immigrated in 2003, highlighted the support of Karitas. This aspect underlines the importance of community and solidarity among people who are willing to help newcomers. In addition to moral support, some interviewees also highlighted the financial and logistical support they received from relatives and friends, which was crucial in easing the transition and adapting to the new social environment. The results show how different forms of support contribute to the successful immigration and integration of Slovenian emigrants from Argentina into Slovenian society. They emphasise the importance of social networks and solidarity as key factors in the migration process.

The interviews revealed that most of the interviewees had already obtained their Slovenian citizenship before moving to Slovenia. However, some of them had to obtain the documents for their family members. The interviewees emphasised their satisfaction with the functioning of the Slovenian system and the helpfulness of the people, although some had difficulties getting their diplomas nostrified for certain professions, as interviewee F also pointed out:

*»What I have, a high school education, I'd have to do here again. The public sector won't hire you if you don't have at least a degree. It's a bit weird because it's not necessarily the case that if you have a degree you're good enough. I understand that for a doctor, but it's not the same« (interviewee F, 2022).*

The search for an apartment was mostly carried out with the help of relatives, acquaintances and friends who had already lived in Slovenia. They helped them find accommodation, passed on information and in some cases offered them a place to stay. Most immigrants had already looked for accommodation before moving to Slovenia, which helped them to avoid major problems in their search.

In terms of employment, some of the interviewees had already found a job before arriving in Slovenia, while others had not found a job in their profession or had encountered the aforementioned problems related to the recognition of educational qualifications and the nostrification of diplomas. For the family members of Argentinian origin, the job search took a little longer, which was related to language barriers and obtaining the necessary documents.

With regard to schooling, some of the interviewees and their family members continued their education after the immigration, although they were confronted with language barriers, as interviewee I also notes below. Thus, additional Slovenian language courses after immigration were in some cases necessary for successful integration into the Slovenian school system:

*»After I arrived, I learned Slovenian at school, and then I had Zoom every Friday, like office hours, so I practised Slovenian because we were in quarantine and I didn't have that contact» (interviewee I, 2022).*

### 6.3 Life in Slovenia

The results of the survey showed that age plays a very important role in the integration of immigrants into Slovenian society. From the interviews, we learned that those who immigrated during their school years and integrated into a new environment in Slovenia often faced major integration problems, including feelings of isolation and bullying at school. Although most eventually felt accepted, some expressed that the adjustment process was lengthy, especially for those who were integrated into existing groups (classes) at school, major challenges were observed especially in the last three years of primary school, as also highlighted by interviewees E and C:

*»When I came to ninth grade, I got into a group that was already formed and just waiting to go (to high school). That's not exactly a welcoming environment. In fact, I spent a whole year just waiting for elementary school to be over« (interviewee E, 2022).*

*»I would be lying if I said it was easy to integrate into a social environment, especially at that age, at least I can say that for myself, well. I know that we had some problems at the first school we moved to, that we also experienced bullying, nothing drastic, but yes. For me personally, it was also difficult because it was a big change to move into an environment where people are generally not so open and there are circles with some closed groups« (interviewee C, 2022).*

However, the majority of interviewees who immigrated to Slovenia later reported predominantly positive integration experiences, which they attributed to the existing contact networks in the country. These networks enabled them to integrate more quickly into their new social environment, as interviewee F also reported:

*»I felt very well accepted, without any problems. I first made contacts with acquaintances and relatives, but I also remember that I immediately made contacts at work« (interviewee F, 2022).*

Nevertheless, the interviewees pointed out certain challenges, such as intercultural differences and adapting to the Slovenian language. Some (e.g. interviewee O) mentioned a large gap between their knowledge of Slovenian, which they learned and spoke in Argentina, and the modern Slovenian spoken in Slovenia today.

*»And I do not understand everything they say here. /.../ In Argentina, the language has stood still in time. Even we know when a Slovenian comes to Argentina that he is Slovenian ... because he speaks Slovenian! Not what we mix up. Slovenian language has developed over the last thirty years« (interviewee O, 2022).*

In the survey, we found that the majority of respondents use Slovenian language mainly in formal situations, e.g. in public appearances or when communicating with older family members, while the use of Spanish language predominates among their peers. In conversations with other Argentinian immigrants, Spanish predominates or a combination of the two languages, which is often mixed, which interviewee P refers to as “Slovenian-Spanish” - a mixture of Spanish and Slovenian. Based on the results of the interviews, we hypothesise that the language of communication in the home environment in Slovenia depends on language habits in Argentina, personal choices and the length of stay in Slovenia. Most immigrants consciously choose to keep Spanish at home, which was confirmed by interviewee B, who said that they mainly speak Spanish at home to maintain the connection with their Argentine family:

*»At home, here in Slovenia, we mostly speak Spanish. And why is that? Mainly because when my brother was born in 2003 and another brother in 2006, I tended to speak Spanish at home. If not, it is often the case that in such a mixed environment there is a mixture, namely the Spanish-Slovenian that my brothers speak. And so we actually spoke more Spanish at home. So that they can speak it well and get along with their mother's side of the family in Argentina, especially for that reason. Today we only speak Spanish with each other, and of course a little Slovenian too« (interviewee B, 2022).*

On the other hand, interviewees A and E stated that they had given up communicating in Spanish and mainly spoke Slovenian at home:

*»We tried to spend one day a week in Spanish. But, as I said, it's so unnatural for me to speak to my parents in Spanish« (interviewee E, 2022).*

*»My mother told me that when we came here, she didn't think about speaking to us in Spanish because our mother tongue is Slovenian. It was only when we were a bit older that she tried to teach us something and took Spanish lessons with us, but not much« (interviewee A, 2022).*

The immigrants in Slovenia also maintain some Argentinian customs and traditions. The most frequently mentioned are the preparation of Argentinian dishes, drinking mate tea and Argentinian wines. Watching football is also popular among them, ten respondents described it as a typical Argentine habit that they still practise:

*»I watch football and I like it because it's crazy in Argentina. It's like a religion. Especially at the Mondial. For the World Cup, I take a holiday when I can. I'm joking a bit, but it's true. I won't go to work on the day Argentina plays« (interviewee H, 2022).*

The process of preserving Argentine culture among immigrants from Argentina in Slovenia mirrors the reverse process of preserving Slovenian culture that these individuals and families practised in Argentina before moving to Slovenia. Interestingly, they actively preserved the Slovenian language and customs in Argentina, while some of them preserved the Spanish language and Argentinian culture in Slovenia. This pattern of heritage preservation, together with mutual connections, contributes to the formation of a unique Argentine-Slovenian immigrant community. This community exhibits similar characteristics and cultural preservation strategies as the Slovenian immigrant community in Argentina, demonstrating the importance of preserving cultural identity in a changing environment.

In the study, we were also interested in the interactions of the interviewees with other Slovenian immigrants from Argentina, we were interested in how often they meet and under what circumstances. We found that respondents have regular encounters in both formal and informal contexts. Formal encounters include attending Argentinian fairs and events organised by the Slovenian Association of Emigrants in the World. This association organises various events such as the pilgrimage to Brezje, the celebration of the Argentine National Day on 25 May, theatre performances and concerts. We have noticed that newcomers are more involved in the association's activities, while those who immigrated to Slovenia earlier often find other ways to build social networks outside of these formal gatherings. Despite these formal gatherings, informal gatherings with family and friendship events predominate.

The survey also investigated how respondents maintain their transnational links with Argentina. We found that all respondents maintain regular contact with relatives and friends in Argentina, with social media being the predominant method of communication, and one respondent pointed out that he communicates with his grandparents in Argentina via phone calls. Visits between the two countries are also frequent,

with two respondents stating that they visit Argentina several times, especially now that they are financially able to do so.

In the survey, we were also interested in the long-term residence of immigrants from Argentina. Five of the interviewees had planned to stay in Slovenia permanently from the outset, while nine interviewees had initially only planned to stay temporarily or on a trial basis. At the time of our interview, however, most of them expressed the intention to stay in Slovenia permanently. Interviewee H, for example, said that he had initially decided to stay for a trial period, but then decided to stay in Slovenia permanently:

*».../ I had no intention that it should be permanent. I said, "Let's give it a try." /.../ it was still kind of an open option, but slowly I realised that it's good here too. Now this year, at the end of last year, I've come to terms with it, I've said, "This is it It's fine, I mean, I've no reason to go anywhere else. If something goes wrong, maybe I'll think about it, but the intention is to stay permanently« (interviewee H, 2022).*

Two of the interviewees emphasised that a return to Argentina is not ruled out in the future:

*»I need to feel that I belong - where I live. That's why for me it's either Argentina or Slovenia. But it's still hard to say that we'll live here all our lives. I honestly don't know what will happen. /.../ If something happens to our parents and they need us to be there for them and take care of them. /.../ And if anything happens, we're ready to leave everything and go« (interviewee G, 2022).*

The rest of the respondents do not plan to return to Argentina, except for visits or trips. However, three of the interviewees who were still students at the time of the survey expressed a desire to move to other countries such as Spain, Germany or Austria for economic and professional reasons.

## 7 CONCLUSION

Our research on Slovenian emigrants and the descendants of Slovenian emigrants from Argentina who immigrated to Slovenia has revealed several important findings, which on the one hand confirm and on the other hand complement and build on the research carried out in 2006. The interviews with respondents confirm several waves of immigration to Slovenia, which were more intense especially after Slovenia's independence in 1991 and after the economic crisis in Argentina around the year 2000, as also reported by Lukšič-Hacin (2006c) and Repič (2006). However, our research has revealed a new wave of immigration of Slovene emigrants and their descendants from



Argentina in the period after the Covid-19 epidemic, suggesting that the process of return migration of this community is still ongoing and by no means negligible and should receive more attention in future research.

We found that the immigrants to Slovenia were mainly those emigrants and descendants who were actively involved in the Slovenian emigrant community in Argentina, as Lukšič-Hacin (2006c) and Repič (2006) also emphasised in their research. While the preservation of linguistic and cultural practises was important for integration into Slovenian society, it was not the predominant trigger for return migration. The main trigger for return migration, according to our findings, was the economic situation in Argentina, together with security issues and the desire to provide better future opportunities for their children.

In connection with the definition of national identity, respondents emphasised their Slovene identity, dual identity, composite identity and the identity of the descendants of Slovene immigrants. Most descendants of Slovenian immigrants from Argentina experience a split in the definition of their national identity, although this is not true for all of them. Some identify with a dual or composite identity that reflects their mixed ancestry. It should be noted that the definition of national identity of the Slovenian diaspora is much more complex and complicated than that of an ordinary citizen, a member of the majority nation in their own country.

The survey also confirmed that immigrants from Argentina are actively building transnational links between Slovenia and Argentina. They keep in touch with friends, relatives and acquaintances and make visits and trips between the two countries. Some do not rule out the possibility of returning to Argentina, reflecting the dynamic nature of transnational migration processes.

Our findings show the complexity and multi-layered nature of the migration experiences of Slovenian emigrants and their descendants from Argentina. Nevertheless, it should be emphasised that our research was qualitative and based on a biographical-interpretative narrative method, which brings a different insight into otherwise “traditional” migration research. In qualitative research, we primarily aim to discover particularities, differences and atypicalities that are more difficult to explore in so-called traditional quantitative research. The life stories we used in our research use a small, atypical sample whose answers cannot be generalised and related to the entire population of Slovenian emigrants and their descendants who immigrated from Argentina. However, the results of our survey can certainly serve as a basis for further research on the return migration of the Slovenian diaspora and their integration into the immigrant milieu.

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