Exploring the Impact of Migration on Family Cohesion and Well-Being in Slovenia and Beyond

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ABSTRACT

Migration represents one of the defining social and legal challenges of contemporary Europe, profoundly influencing family structures, social cohesion, and human well-being. This paper critically examines how migration affects family well-being in Slovenia and other European nations, focusing on key dimensions such as housing, healthcare, employment, and family reunification. Using a multidisciplinary, systematic approach, the research integrates case studies, judicial precedents, secondary sources from Scopus-indexed journals, European Union directives, and United Nations reports. The analysis reveals that inadequate access to sustainable housing, healthcare, and employment remains a persistent obstacle for immigrant families, often leading to economic insecurity, mental health issues, and social exclusion. Moreover, restrictive and bureaucratic family reunification procedures exacerbate emotional strain and undermine the right to family life protected under European and international law. Despite these challenges, Slovenia demonstrates partial progress through inclusive employment policies and humanitarian initiatives aimed at supporting integration. The paper concludes that addressing the complex interplay between migration and family well-being requires a holistic legal and policy framework rooted in human dignity, equal-

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ity, and solidarity. It advocates reforms to immigration law, labor market access, and family reunification procedures to strengthen both migrant families' resilience and host communities' social cohesion.

Keywords: Migration; Family Well-Being; Slovenia; European Union Law; Family Reunification; Human Rights; Social Inclusion; Employment; Housing; Integration Policy

Migracije in družinska blaginja v Sloveniji: analiza pravnega okvira in izbranih socialnih vidikov

POVZETEK

Migracije predstavljajo enega osrednjih družbenih in pravnih izzivov sodobne Evrope, saj pomembno vplivajo na družinsko življenje, socialno kohezijo in blaginjo posameznikov. Prispevek kritično obravnava vpliv migracij na družinsko blaginjo v Sloveniji in drugih evropskih državah s poudarkom na dostopu do stanovanja, zdravstvenega varstva, zaposlovanja in družinskega združevanja. Raziskava temelji na interdisciplinarnem in sistematičnem pristopu, ki vključuje analizo znanstvene literature, poročil mednarodnih organizacij, pravnih virov Evropske unije in Republike Slovenije ter izbrane sodne prakse. Posebna pozornost je namenjena razlikovanju med ekonomskimi migranti, prosilci za mednarodno zaščito in osebami s priznano mednarodno zaščito, saj njihov pravni status bistveno vpliva na obseg pravic in možnosti vključevanja v družbo. Ugotovitve kažejo, da omejen dostop do ustreznega stanovanja, zdravstvenega varstva in zaposlitve pogosto povzroča ekonomsko negotovost, socialno izključenost ter negativne posledice za duševno in telesno zdravje migrantov in njihovih družin. Analiza nadalje ugotavlja, da zapleteni in administrativno zahtevni postopki družinskega združevanja lahko podaljšujejo družinsko lo-

čenost in otežujejo uresničevanje pravice do družinskega življenja. Čeprav slovenski pravni red zagotavlja določene mehanizme zaščite in integracije migrantov, ostajajo številni izzivi povezani z učinkovitim uresničevanjem teh pravic v praksi. Prispevek zaključuje, da je za učinkovito varstvo družinske blaginje migrantov potreben celovit pristop, ki združuje spoštovanje človekovih pravic, socialno vključevanje ter uravnoteženo migracijsko politiko.

Ključne besede: migracije, družinska blaginja, družinsko združevanje, mednarodna zaščita, ekonomski migranti, Slovenija, Evropska unija, človekove pravice, socialna vključenost, integracija migrantov

1. Introduction and Research Objectives

Family well-being is a multidimensional concept that warrants contextual analysis to be fully understood. It should not be analyzed unidimensionally, considering its broad nature. According to Sano et al. (2021), family well-being occurs when all family members are safe and healthy and have adequate access to economic and educational opportunities. It may constitute access to essential services and physiological needs, as well as economic stability, cohesion, and emotional support. Hong-ngam et al. (2021) indicated that economic empowerment, especially access to job opportunities, provides families with financial security, enabling them to meet physiological needs and fostering their happiness. In addition, Izzo et al. (2022) and Palimaru et al. (2022) prioritized family cohesion and stability as the core social aspect that makes people feel loved and appreciated, thereby maximizing happiness. Villalonga-Olives et al. (2022) added that the social network, which creates a sense of belonging, provides the requisite emotional support that serves as a critical buffer against conventional mental illnesses, such as depression and stress. Therefore, various studies paint family happiness from different lenses.

Migration would massively disrupt these dynamics that foster family happiness. Miklos asserted that migration, especially to unfamiliar territories, would disorient a person's life due to cultural differences, financial struggles, and societal inequalities that destabilize family dynamics, ultimately undermining a person's health, happiness, and overall well-being. In addition, migration leads to family separations, which can promote mental illnesses (World Health Organization, 2023). In Europe, migration currently extends beyond geographical relocation and demographic shifts to encompass social reforms and legal interventions that reshape traditional conceptions of family and identity (del Río et al., 2025; Vertovec, 2023). Consequently, European nations, including Slovenia, would realize changing family dynamics, primarily the structure, due to migration, causing destabilizing effects in families and societies.

It is critical to recognize the distinctions among migrant groups, which define their legal rights and ultimately determine their overall well-being. Tsegay (2023) and Metcalfe-Hough (2022) introduced economic and international protection migrants, with the former gaining greater economic benefits than the latter. Notably, despite economic migrants needing to satisfy predetermined thresholds to qualify for family reunification and residence, they can immediately get jobs based on their proficiencies via work visas (Metcalfe-Hough, 2022). These distinctions, which fundamentally rest on legal definitions, mean that migrants face the systems diversely depending on their categorization, causing differential effects on housing, healthcare, family reunification, and employment, which are the central themes of this research. Therefore, the study's fundamental question is: How does migration in Europe, using Slovenia as the primary case study, affect families' happiness and overall well-being through the lenses of housing, healthcare, employment, and family reunification? Below are the research objectives:

- To determine the core issues migrant families face in Slo-

venia regarding accommodation, healthcare, employment, and family cohesion, while recognizing the legal distinction within the group (recognized and non-recognized migrants) and analyzing them in context.

- To understand how legal frameworks bolster or derail the migrant families' well-being.

The study's central premise is that migration in Europe, with Slovenia as the case study, primarily harms migrants' family dynamics through systemic barriers that hinder their economic and social well-being and create legal hurdles that deter family reunification.

2. Legal Framework

2.1. Economic Migrants and International Protection Beneficiaries

It is critical to legally distinguish between economic migrants and recipients of international protection to understand how migration affects the cohort's family well-being holistically. Due to legal distinctions that impose limitations, the groups enjoy different benefits, resulting in uneven access to education, employment, healthcare, and housing. In Slovenia, economic migrants are foreign nationals, especially from developing countries, who reside in the state after acquiring work visas or temporary residence permits (Tverdostup, 2024). Slovenia's Aliens Act is the core legal framework governing residence, determining immigration status, entry, eligibility for employment, and qualification for family reunification (Žaberl et al., 2024). It is challenging to fully benefit from being an economic migrant, as the law requires applicants to prove they have sufficient funds, suitable accommodation, and adequate health insurance before initiating family reunification protocols (Žaberl et al., 2024). On the other hand, the International Protection Act governs applications by asylum seekers and international protection

beneficiaries (Murphy, Stapleton, 2024). The Slovenian law ensures that asylum seekers get state-sponsored accommodation and access to emergency healthcare (UNHCR, n.d). In addition, recognized refugees can obtain employment without necessarily acquiring work visas and also get comprehensive health insurance (UNHCR. (n.d.-a)). This analysis shows the distinction between the two migrant categories, which can lead to different outcomes for family well-being.

The above legal distinctions have a significant impact on migrants' family welfare. Notably, asylum seekers whose verification and integration into the system are still pending can only access emergency medical services and cannot get jobs of their choice due to the three-month restrictions (UNHCR. (n.d.-a)). Conversely, recognized refugees enjoy the same employment, social support, and healthcare benefits as other Slovenian citizens (UNHCR, n.d; UNHCR. (n.d.-a)). Disregarding these differences, which are evident in most studies, undermines a researcher's ability to understand the full extent of migration's effects on families.

2.2. European Union Legal Framework

The European Union (EU) sets minimum legal standards to safeguard migrants' welfare across member states, allowing sovereign countries to adjust their national policies within the parameters set by the organization. A notable guiding framework is the Family Reunification Directive 2003/86/EC, which stipulates the rules for reuniting migrant families, primarily from developing countries (Groenendijk & Strik, 2022). It emphasizes the criticality of family reunification, terming it a prerequisite for making family life possible and facilitating the integration of migrants into the fabric of their new societies (Groenendijk & Strik, 2022). Nonetheless, the directive is merely a base, and the member states have the freedom to set the conditions for granting work visas and temporary residence, which

explains the widespread imposition of requirements such as suitable accommodation and comprehensive health insurance (Groenendijk & Strik, 2022). Under the Aliens Act, Slovenia adheres to the directive by facilitating quick family reunification, provided the applicants meet the minimum threshold: residing in the country and holding a temporary residence permit for at least 1 year (Žaberl et al., 2024). However, the amendments to the law have added new clauses, such as higher income thresholds and language testing requirements, for eligibility for family reunification. These eligibility criteria illustrate the tension between two legitimate objectives of migration law: the protection of family life and the management of migration flows. While the Family Reunification Directive recognizes family unity as an important element of integration, Member States retain significant discretion in determining admission conditions. Consequently, national immigration policies often seek to balance the protection of family life with broader public interests, including migration management, labour market considerations and public resources.

The European Court of Human Rights also set a legal precedent encouraging family reunification for migrants. In its interpretive role, the court has held that legislation such as the European Convention on Human Rights is legally binding to protect the right to respect for private and family life, which extends to reunification (Kullmann, 2022; Friedery, 2022). Nevertheless, the court's judgment in S.F. v. FINLAND *(Application no. 35276/20)* indicated that Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights does not guarantee family reunification, and the decision rests on a host country's determination (European Court of Human Rights, 2024). Hence, despite the continental effort to promote family reunification, the sovereignty of states remains supreme, explaining why the final decision lies with them.

2.3. National Legal Framework: Slovenia

Slovenia has laws, some of which are informed by EU legislation, that directly affect migrants and their well-being. Notably, the International Protection Act specifies the conditions for recognition of international protection in Slovenia, which entail asylum procedures and the rights of recognized refugees (Murphy, Stapleton, 2024). In addition, the Aliens Act regulates the entry, assimilation, and departure of migrants in Slovenia. The country also has the Healthcare and Health Insurance Act and the Employment, Self-Employment, and Work of Foreigners Act that govern migrants' access to jobs and medical services (Strban, Mišič, 2022; Albreht et al., 2022). Overall, Slovenia has established laws governing immigration.

3. Methods

The research employed a systematic, multidisciplinary framework that integrated case studies and secondary sources (reports and articles) to examine the effects of European migration on family dynamics, cohesion, accommodation, health, employment, and social inclusion, with a focus on Slovenia. This mixed-methods approach ensured data triangulation and enhanced the reliability of the findings. Specifically, it employed scholarly sources from Scopus, European Union Directives or reports, and judicial cases to answer the research question: How does migration in Europe, using Slovenia as the primary case study, affect families' happiness and overall well-being through the lenses of housing, healthcare, family reunification, and employment? The inclusion of legal instruments, such as the EU Family Reunification Directive 2003/86/EC and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, provided a normative dimension to the analysis. The selection of sources was thorough to ensure the study incorporated reputable articles that answered

the fundamental question. Most importantly, the researcher selected only peer-reviewed journal articles and credible reports from reputable databases, including Scopus, European documents, and migration journals. To ensure the research meets the highest academic standards, this study utilized exclusively peer-reviewed sources. The inclusion criteria required that the selected articles were written in English and published at least five years ago to capture foundational data within the field. The strategy ensured that the study used up-to-date sources that highlighted the economic and social effects of migration. After setting the criteria for selecting articles, the researcher used keywords and phrases (Table 1) to construct search queries that retrieved compatible articles and reports. Subsequently, the researcher screened the articles to select those that were compatible with the study. This systematic approach ensured that the study utilized credible and sufficient sources.

Keywords	**Phrases/Sentences**
Family well-being	✓ Components of family well-being
Migration	✓ Effects of migration in Europe on family well-being
Family dynamics	✓ Effects of migration in Europe on family dynamics.

4. Findings and Discussion: Analysis of Challenges to Family Well-Being

4.1. Housing

Despite accommodation being an integral factor in family well-being, access to housing varies significantly across migrant cohorts. In Slovenia, the authorities provide state-funded accommodation for asylum seekers throughout the reg-

istration, verification, and recognition procedures (UNHCR. (n.d.-b).). After receiving recognition status, the government provides integration units in Maribor and Ljubljana for 1 year, subject to statutory reviews for possible extensions, or provides state-funded private accommodation (UNHCR. (n.d.-b).). According to a UNHCR (2024) report, 9 out of 10 (87%) refugees in Slovenia live in private accommodation, either in shared units (63%) or on their own (24%). Only 23% of the population can afford their accommodations independently (UNHCR, 2024). This outcome indicates that Slovenia falls behind its neighbors in empowering migrants, especially asylum seekers, to secure adequate accommodation, a condition for family reunification. Specifically, 78% and 62% of refugees in Romania and Poland, respectively, can afford accommodation independently; they pay their rent on time (UNHCR, 2024). Besides, 1 in 5 refugees in Slovenia reported that their living conditions were unconducive, citing insufficient bedding and inadequate showers as their main concerns (UNHCR, 2024). Furthermore, 65% and 14% of the refugees in Slovenia received medium- and short-term accommodations, respectively, indicating uncertainty about housing arrangements. Hence, despite the Slovenian government's efforts to make the lives of migrants, particularly asylum seekers, easier, its housing initiatives are inadequate, as most migrants cannot access long-term, conducive accommodation that would enable family reunification.

Research shows that inadequate housing deters family well-being in different ways. According to Mansour et al. (2022), conducive accommodation is a critical social determinant of health, as it supports mental wellness and promotes physical well-being by addressing structural hazards. In addition, Wimalasena et al. established a connection between poor housing and respiratory complications. The authors highlighted that unhygienic conditions and lack of structural protection against severe weather, which some refugees cited, would cause or intensify pneumonia and

asthma (Wimalasena et al., 2021). In line with Wimalasena et al.'s argument, Lorentzen et al. (2022) established a positive correlation between substandard housing, characterized by pest infestation, allergens, inadequate ventilation, and molds, and cardiovascular and respiratory diseases. Padgett (2020) added that homelessness, poor housing, or uncertain accommodation triggers mental illnesses like depression and anxiety. Scheeren et al. (2022) also stated that families need a conducive home, entailing enough space, hygiene, and security, to be happy. This premise aligns with the EU countries' discretion to assess a migrant's financial status and ability to afford housing before accepting and facilitating family reunions. Therefore, for migrant households, particularly asylum seekers, housing insecurity compounds the problems of forced displacement from their homes, disrupting family well-being.

4.2. Healthcare

Access to healthcare in Slovenia depends mainly on migrants' categories. The report by UNHCR (n.d.a) indicated that asylum seekers in Slovenia only get emergency medical services and mental health treatment. They are not covered by the national health insurance system, which is a major concern. It should be noted, however, that the limitation of healthcare coverage for asylum seekers is not unique to Slovenia but reflects a broader European approach aimed at providing essential healthcare during the asylum procedure while reserving full social rights for persons granted international protection. Conversely, recognized refugees receive compulsory, full coverage health insurance and are accommodated in social welfare services provided by the Slovenian government (UNHCR. (n.d.-a)). Consequently, the unrecognized refugees must depend on pro bono clinics to get medical assistance, especially related to issues not categorized as mental health or emergency. In addition,

due to the limited number of foreigners who speak Slovene, Bielińska et al. (2022) noted that the language barrier impedes migrants' access to the necessary healthcare. They need interpreters to maneuver the Slovenian healthcare system, and the government does not provide this service. In an independent survey conducted by UNHCR (2024) targeting Ukrainian refugees in Slovenia, the outcome showed that 71% of the migrants needed immediate medical attention, which was deterred because they were unrecognized refugees. Besides, the research found that 15% of Ukrainian migrants struggled to access basic health services (UNHCR, 2024). 11% of the population had unmet healthcare needs, a figure that was slightly above the regional average (UNHCR, 2024). These struggles were mainly due to financial limitations, regulatory restrictions, and language barriers (UNHCR, 2024). Despite these concerns, it is vital to note that the issue is common across Europe due to similar local laws. For example, a majority of European countries restrict migrants' access to full healthcare coverage, only accommodating essential medical services. Despite this acknowledgment, the asylum seekers' problems are compounded in Slovenia due to legal restrictions, communication barriers, and financial limitations, diminishing their quality of life, health, and general well-being. Similar concerns regarding restricted access to healthcare and social services among migrants in Slovenia were also identified by Global Call for Action Against Poverty.

4.3. Employment

Access to employment opportunities also largely depends on the migrants' categories. According to UNHCR's (n.d.a) report, asylum seekers in Slovenia can apply for jobs within the jurisdiction after 3 months, provided the delay in the process is not attributable to them. However, the refugees who have been legally recognized have unlimited access to

the labor market without needing the statutory work permits (UNHCR. (n.d.-a)). The law requires employers to recognize them as Slovenian citizens and accord them the same employment benefits as other residents (UNHCR. (n.d.-a)). In spite of these provisions of the law, which are meant to protect the refugees in the labor market, their implementation is subject to concern due to the significant non-compliance. Notably, international protection does not guarantee the refugees' integration into the job market, as most asylum seekers lack the academic qualifications and documents required in Slovenia to secure decent jobs (Danaj et al., 2023; Beznec & Gombač, 2023). The authors also noted that some professions in Slovenia are highly standardized and context-specific, warranting that immigrants enroll in Slovenian schools to pursue further education, a process that might be difficult for most asylum seekers, as they lack the resources to complete other courses. In line with the above assertions, the UNHCR report noted that the unemployment rate among Ukrainian refugees after moving to Slovenia increased from 3% to 54%. These statistics indicate that unemployment is a major issue for refugees in Slovenia.

Evidence suggests that language barriers worsen the issue of immigrants' unemployment, particularly in Slovenia. According to Pandey et al. (2021), Norheim and Moser (2020), and Agyekum et al. (2021, p. 228), language barriers can limit immigrants' access to education, healthcare, employment, and community participation. Gabrielli and Impicciatore (2022), Udayar et al. (2024), and Ahmad (2020, p. 840) likewise identify language proficiency as an important factor in labour-market integration. Concisely, most employers prefer people who are fluent in the country's language to promote excellent communication and relationships with customers and colleagues. Failure to secure sustainable work limits immigrants' capacity to care for their families. Consequently, they may fail to meet their families' needs, thereby derailing their happiness and overall well-being.

4.4. Family Reunification

Family reunification is a major legal ramification that affects the well-being of migrants in Slovenia and across Europe. The Family Reunification Directive 2003/86/EC gives recognized refugees or economic migrants the right to be reunited with their family members (Groenendijk & Strik, 2022). Under the Aliens Act, Slovenia complies with the directive by providing formal procedures for entry, integration, and family reunification (Žaberl et al., 2024). Hence, the recognized refugees in Slovenia can initiate the formal steps to reunite with their families. However, with the recent reforms to the reunification requirement in Slovenia, which introduced stricter language proficiency requirements and raised the income threshold, it has become harder for refugees to apply to be reunited with their families legally (Danaj et al., 2023). In addition, the economic migrants are denied the right to reunification for up to two years (Žaberl et al., 2024). Thus, the current Slovenian system makes family reunification complicated.

The European Court of Justice's (ICJ's) press release 60/23 stated that the family reunification law applies to European countries, using Belgium as an example. Mrs. X and Mr. Y, both Syrian nationals, married in 2016 and had two children before 2018.[1] The father traveled to Belgium in 2019 and left his wife and children in Syria. Mr. X was recognized as a refugee in Belgium on 25 August 2022. Mrs. X and her children submitted a reunification application via email. They considered their case an "exception," eliminating the need to travel to a Belgian diplomatic post to submit the application. Nonetheless, the Belgian Immigration Office rejected the premise and directed them to use the designated channel provided by law. Mr. X filed a suit against the office in the Brussels Court of First Instance to have their reunification application registered. It was impossible for Mrs. X to physically access

[1] CJEU, Afrin, Court of Justice of the European Union, C-1/23 PPU, 18. 4. 2023

the Belgian Offices due to political instability and security concerns in Syria.

The judgment advised governments to create flexible mechanisms for family reunification applications. Hence, Mr. X's case was plausible. The S.F. v. FINLAND case also held that sovereign states may reject reunification applications.[2] In this case, the applicant had not filed the documents within the 3-month legal margin and had failed to provide sufficient financial resources. This example shows that despite the European courts' attention to family reunification to ensure household harmony, sovereign states retain the right to impose conditions to minimize the inflow of migrants into their respective countries.

Overall, national laws, including Slovenian provisions, set stringent reunification measures, resulting in rigid, bureaucratic registration procedures that may curtail family reunification. The lengthy procedures, financial proof, and language testing are among the main deterrents to family reunification in Slovenia and Europe. The constraints prolong family separation, which inflicts emotional harm on parents and children, derailing their well-being.

4.5. General Discussion: Conclusion

This analysis highlights the paradox between EU expectations enshrined in its legislation and the national laws that reflect the sovereignty of the respective countries. The EU legal frameworks, including the Family Reunification Directive and the European Convention on Human Rights, reiterate the importance of family reunification (the right to family life), which fosters unity. Nonetheless, as the analysis highlights, sovereign states set family reunification requirements that prioritize immigration control over family well-being. In Slovenia, it is evident that its reunification and overall migra-

[2] ECtHR, S.F. v. Finland, Application no. 35276/20, 8 October 2024, ECLI:CE:ECHR:2024:1008 JUD003527620.

tion policies are selective and conditional, despite immense progress in the sector as the nation takes in more asylum seekers. The country admits more immigrants when it serves its national interests, including when the labor market demands specific skills and proficiencies, but curtails the influx of migrants when its migration control threshold is exceeded or contravened. The analysis indicates that migrant family well-being is pursued alongside other policy objectives, including migration management, labour market needs and public policy considerations.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study suggests that migration in Slovenia and Europe may significantly affect family well-being through a combination of economic, social and legal factors. The findings derived from the analysis of legal sources, policy documents and academic literature indicate that migrant families frequently encounter challenges related to housing, healthcare, employment and family reunification. Housing insecurity and substandard living conditions undermine physical and mental health, reinforcing evidence from Hasan and Mansour et al. (2022). Limited access to healthcare, driven by financial, linguistic, and bureaucratic constraints, further exacerbates vulnerabilities, as noted by Global Call for Action Against Povertyand UNHCR. Employment obstacles, including the non-recognition of foreign qualifications and language barriers, impede economic stability and families' ability to meet essential needs, as documented by Gabrielli & Impicciatore and Udayar et al. (2024). Family reunification, although legally guaranteed under Directive 2003/86/EC, is hindered by administrative delays, underscoring the need for flexible and effective procedural mechanisms, as demonstrated by European case law. These findings confirm the hypothesis: migration challenges family well-being, but targeted legal frameworks and policies can mitigate these

effects. A holistic, rights-based approach that ensures access to sustainable housing, healthcare, employment recognition, and expedited family reunification is essential for fostering migrant family cohesion, social inclusion, and integration. Ultimately, the well-being of migrant families serves as a key indicator of the effectiveness and humanity of European migration and human rights policies. Enhancing family welfare not only fulfills legal and moral obligations but also strengthens social cohesion, economic resilience, and the overall inclusivity of host societies.

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