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ASPECTS OF INTERCULTURAL RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION OF HIGHLY SKILLED INTERNATIONAL FEMALE STAFF IN SLOVENIA

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Abstract

The research analyses drivers of and barriers to highly skilled female applicants going through the recruitment process in Slovenia as highly skilled self-initiated international expatriates (SIEs). The qualitative research methodology was designed with six in-depth interviews with female respondents from Russia, Belarus, Latvia and Sweden. Theoretical frameworks of G. Hofstede, E. T. Hall, F. Trompenaars and C. Hampden-Turner and cultural intelligence competence models were applied to define HRM processes within the analysis. The findings demonstrate that the future female employees ought to consider not only general working aspects but also cultural differences and similarities, which affect the international HR selection and recruitment process and appear to be drivers of and barriers to SIEs. Necessary intercultural competences (cultural awareness, proactivity, sensitivity, flexibility, reflexivity, open mindset, readiness to challenges) and certain fields of knowledge (procedural, culture-specific, legal knowledge) for the entry level of the recruitment process in Slovenia are identified. The main contribution of this research is estimated within the IHRM perspective as the representation of the highly skilled female employees' side within the recruitment process in the international arena. Moreover, it may improve intercultural cooperation within the female expatriates' recruitment and selection process and enrich personal intercultural competences concerning the employment culture in Slovenia and the European Union.

Keywords

culture • self-initiated expatriates • intercultural competence • recruitment practices • international human resource management

1. Introduction

Nowadays, active globalisation processes increase international mobility among highly skilled professionals, that is, expatriates, as employees working permanently or temporarily outside their country of birth or citizenship (Perera, Chew, and Nielsen 2018). In 2021, the total number of expatriates was around 87.5 million worldwide, including different types of expatriates with various roles in their destination countries (Finaccord 2022). Thus, global talent pool members become 'international boundary spanners', who aspire to build up their careers and achieve professional goals abroad. However, the intercultural and international environment is quite demanding and requires certain cultural awareness as well as personal qualities such as adaptability, flexibility, global mindset, openness to cultural challenges, low ethnocentrism and sensitivity (Chun and Ariss 2015; Barmeyer, Stein, and Eberhardt 2020). Furthermore, candidates from different cultural backgrounds could perceive work differently and vary regarding how they react

to feedback, resolve conflict, approach leadership and view work-life balance (BBI Communication Sweden 2022). This creates a need to define specific intercultural competences (ICCs) of highly skilled professionals recruited for working in the international environment.

A significant amount of research has been conducted into the phenomenon of the expatriation and international assignment (Enderwick and Hodgson 1993; Kawai and Strange 2014; O'Donohue, Hutchings, and Hansen 2018) because of a great tendency of the growing self-expatriation (Cerdin and Selmer 2014). Most of the research studies have mainly focused on both female and male expatriates (Caligiuri and Lazarova 2002) and on the period of cultural adjustment (Salamin and Davoine 2015), from when the expatriates start working in an organisation and getting used to the new environment, culture and surrounding. Only a few articles regard the procedure of hiring/job acquisition itself, and the intercultural component and ICC for highly skilled expatriates

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(both male and female expatriates) within this process (e.g., an article by Marian Van Bakel, Marinel Gerritsen and Jan Pieter van Oudenhoven 'Impact of a local host on the intercultural competence of expatriates' (2015) (Van Bakel, Gerritsen, and Van Oudenhoven 2015)), thus, there is an inquiry referring to this particular issue, and it is possible to suggest that this field of study requires further investigation.

In addition to this, a significant body of the research on the topic devoted to the international human resources management (IHRM) is regarded from the view of human resource specialists (McNulty, De Cieri, and Hutchings 2009; Meyskens et al. 2009; Andresen and Göbel 2010; Chun and Ariss 2015; Pintar, Martins, and Bernik 2017; Perera, Chew, and Nielsen 2018). However, there is a clear gap considering the issue from the side of highly skilled employees at the entry level, when the potential candidates go through the recruitment process (e.g., reviewing applications, interviews, and screening and selection procedures), facing different cultural aspects of the employers' side, as well as certain legislative issues, such as labour and immigration law (Cerdin and Selmer 2014).

It is also vital to mention that the research is conducted within socio-cultural frameworks in the international recruitment process in Slovenia, a European Union (EU) country. The specific competences required from international highly skilled female professionals at the recruitment stage by medium-size businesses in the EU, specifically Slovenia, are not well known. Although few empirical studies have been conducted on the phenomenon of the highly skilled expatriation in Slovenia (Pintar, Martins, and Bernik 2017), almost none of them has been dedicated to the selection and recruitment process within the aspect of female applicants.

Therefore, our study is devoted to filling in this gap in knowledge and regards the issue of international expatriates from the perspective of the international human resource (HR), considering the impact of the local Slovene employment culture on the initial stages of recruitment procedures for highly skilled female expatriates in medium-size business organisations. To be precise, the research is aimed to explore the potential drivers of and barriers to female international applicants and define essential competences and fields of knowledge (for instance, procedural, culture-specific and culture general knowledge (Stone 2006)) for the entry level of the recruitment process, specifically in Slovenia, and also certain cultural differences together with similarities, which may have a considerable impact on international human resource (IHR) selection and recruitment procedures and decisions. The following research question is formulated: What are the barriers to and drivers of highly skilled self-initiated female expatriates at the entry level of the recruitment and selection process in medium-size business organisations in Slovenia? In this regard, the main purposes of the present research are to investigate and delineate the process of

recruitment and selection within the local employment culture in Slovenia related to highly skilled self-initiated female expatriates; identify ICCs essential for highly skilled (female) expatriates at the entry level of the recruitment and selection process in medium-size business organisations in Slovenia; and determine the main drivers of and barriers to highly skilled, professional female expatriates during the recruitment and selection process in medium-size companies in Slovenia. The scientific relevance of this research mainly lies in its contribution to IHRM dimensions within the intercultural business not only in Slovenia but also at the Europe level and in raising awareness about different aspects of the female expatriates' recruitment and selection process.

2. Theoretical Background

To enquire into the topic more deeply, it is essential to establish the conceptual system of the research within the field of the International Human Resource Management (IHRM) as follows: culture, self-initiated expatriates, ICC of candidates and recruitment and selection practices.

2.1. Cultural intelligence competence model

2.1.1. Culture

For the purpose of the current research, the general concept of culture is used. It assumes culture as a system surrounding people all around in their everyday life and determining values, principles, rules, standards, norms of behaviour and cooperation in groups, communities and organisations, even in a whole society (Thomas 2010; Flowerdew 2015; Hinner 2017). Considering this perspective, cultural norms and beliefs are presumed to determine the existence of each individual, their perceptions, behaviour, attitudes towards the organisation of work and lifestyle. Furthermore, the aspect of culture is considered quite dynamic due to the strong impact of globalisation, which might lead not only to the mixing of culture but also to certain tensions and contradictions. The main challenge here is the variety and complexity of managing the interaction of the global and local aspects. There is no single best way to establish cooperation, and people are to adapt their patterns of behaviour to the local characteristics of the market, local legislation and the socio-political and cultural systems of one or another country (Jelovac and Rek 2010). All this leads to the important concept of intercultural cooperation, and interculturality linked to the concept of ICC.

2.1.2. Intercultural competence

The notion of interculturality is based on the term 'intercultural', indicating the cooperation or interaction of people from different cultural groups (Avanzini 2001). Regarding the notion of ICC, it is necessary to outline its second relevant

component – competence. The term competence might include different characteristics, for example, knowledge, skills and attitudes, so that, in general, it may be understood as an ability to act effectively so as to cope with new situations and circumstances (Stone 2006). Therefore, within the concept of interculturality, competence may be regarded as an ability to successfully cooperate with people from different cultures, maintaining the respect, predicting and avoiding conflicts.

Many researchers came to the conclusion that the phenomenon of the ICC includes different dimensions essential for an effective intercultural dialogue (Earley and Ang 2003; Berry 2005; Hunter, White, and Godbey 2006; Peng, Zhu, and Wu 2020). In 2006, Darla K. Deardorff in her article 'Identification and Assessment of Intercultural Competence as a Student Outcome of Internationalizations' considered the issue of the ICC in a greater detail and outlined its key components: adaptability, ethnorelativism, empathy and flexibility (flexible mindset). Regarding the notion of the ICC, the researcher represented it as 'the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on <...> intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes' (Deardorff 2006, 247). This definition of the concept is regarded as the core of this study.

There is no doubt that modern world has become absolutely culturally diverse nowadays; thus, it is vital and relevant to know how to communicate and adapt effectively to other cultural environments, for either personal or business reasons. This brings the discourse to another important part of the research that is connected with international human resources management and its main component – expatriation.

2.2. Expatriation and international professional candidates in Slovenia as a part of the EU

2.2.1. International human resource management

The concept of expatriates has become quite real throughout the last decades owing to the dynamic globalisation process as it was perceived by David Held and Anthony McGrew in their article 'The Global Transformations Reader' (2003) – 'a process that embodies the spatial organisation of social relationships and creation of transnational and interregional interactions, and interconnectedness' (Held and McGrew 2003, 3–4). This process created the necessity to cope with the management of human resources across national borders, the so-called expatriate management. It might have significantly different principles and approaches in comparison to HR management on site. All this has led to a relatively new sub-field within the management studies – international human resources management (international HRM or IHRM) (Evans, Pucik, and Barsoux 2002).

2.2.2. Expatriation: notion and classification

The notion of expatriates is presumed to have no integrated definition, undergoing changes throughout the whole historical perspective and being a constituent part in the IHRM. However,

in the article 'A qualitative study of expatriates' perceptions of and process of responses to psychological contract breach' (2016), Hasuli Kumarika Perera, Yin Teng Chew and Ingrid Nielsen summarise the concepts and consider the notion as 'employees of business organisations who work temporarily outside their country of birth or citizenship to achieve an organisation-set goal' (Perera, Chew, and Nielsen 2018, 1454). Most of the researchers classify expatriates into different types according to the criterion of the relocation mode and initiative for the move into assigned or organisational expatriates (relocated and/or sponsored by the employer) and self-initiated expatriates (SIEs), who are hired from the local or international labour market or may find a new job in a host country just before they relocate (Cerdin and Selmer 2014; Perera, Chew, and Nielsen 2018).

A new phenomenon of SIEs tends to be quite under-researched and almost non-mentioned in international management studies as these tend to be mostly focused on the corporate, assigned expatriation, its processes and procedures (Thomas, Lazarova, and Inkson 2005; Berry and Bell 2012; Cerdin and Selmer 2014). Furthermore, many research studies are devoted to migrants; therefore, it is vital to make a distinction between them, on the one hand, and SIEs on the other hand (Al Ariss 2010). Firstly, migrants are considered the people who move from one less developed country to another more developed country. SIEs tend to relocate within well-developed countries, aspiring to improve their career perspectives, while migrants have to move due to some personal or other reasons (difficult political situation, economic instability). Secondly, migrants are considered to live in the host country for more permanent periods of time than SIEs, who are mostly open to new perspectives and career offers. However, according to some researchers, there is now a tendency for SIEs to settle in the new country on a more permanent basis (Richardson and Zikic 2007; Al Ariss 2010; Cerdin and Selmer 2014). It might also be connected with a quite unstable situation in the global labour market due to the COVID-19 pandemic as well as restless political situation in several countries.

In addition to this, as mentioned earlier, although many research studies have been devoted to both male and female highly skilled expatriates, there might be some limitations and even negative stereotypes regarding the recruitment of women. For example, female candidates might not be valued as professionals (particularly, in those cultures that are biased on the side of men) (Malul, Shoham, and Uddin 2016); managers within multinational companies might be less likely to select women for international assignments, suspecting that they would not be accepted by foreign country executives, co-workers, etc. (Salamin and Davoine 2015).

In their article 'A model for the influence of social interaction and social support on female expatriates' cross-cultural adjustment' (2002), P.M. Caligiuri and M. Lazarova elicit that

men and women do not differ on their desire to terminate their global assignments, but women tended to be less cross-culturally adjusted in countries with low female workforce participation and a lower percentage of women managers. The primary challenge here is the host nationals' cultural norms towards working with women. In addition to this, women are exposed to additional work and non-work challenges on expatriate assignments (Caligiuri and Lazarova 2002) to compensate for the gender gap (Salamon and Davoine 2015; Malul, Shoham, and Uddin 2016). There is a great significance for female expatriates' personality, their skills and the availability of possible opportunities for interaction: openness, willingness to communicate, sociability/extroversion and ability to establish interpersonal relationships (Caligiuri and Lazarova 2002).

An international migrant has been assumed to be more male figure, whereas women's willingness to go abroad and expatriate is considered to be more affected by their family roles (Chun and Ariss 2015). Therefore, it is possible to suggest the existence of unique barriers that women expatriates face during the recruitment process: institutional barriers and discrimination due to the informal and subjective selection systems for expatriates caused by cultural constraints and corporate resistance.

In their recent article 'Fostering longevity attitudes in women expatriates: the role of general and targeted types of organisational support' (2019), Emily M. David, Sabrina D. Volpone and Anup M. Nandialath provide us with the data from recent surveys: in 2019, only 25% of expatriates were women (David, Volpone, and Nandialath 2019). However, as it is determined in the survey 'Expat Insider 2021 Survey' by InterNations GmbH, the proportion has expanded, and in 2021, it was 46% for women (Expat Insider 2021 Survey: The Future of Working Abroad 2021). Thus, in the light of the increased need for expatriates, organisations cannot avoid this aspect anymore if they want to maintain a strategic competitive

advantage, and many management scholars (e.g., S. Shortland in 'Female expatriates' motivations and challenges: The case of oil and gas' (2018) and A. Varma and L. Russell in 'Minimizing cross-cultural maladaptation: How minority status facilitates change in international acculturation' (2016)) support this point of view: 'expatriate gender diversity [simply] makes sound business sense' (David, Volpone, and Nandialath 2019, 2).

2.3. Employment for internationals in Slovenia: legal practices

Regarding Slovenia as a part of the EU and considering the aspects of the research sampling, it is vital to state that highly skilled employees play an important role in the European labour market as they contribute to the EU's competitiveness within certain economic sectors, which might be affected by particular labour and skill shortages (Migration and Home Affairs 2021). Moreover, one of the fundamental freedoms of the common market within the EU is an opportunity for European citizens to work outside the home labour market, free movement of people and labour force. In 2009, the EU introduced a migration procedure, especially for highly skilled non-EU candidates – the 'EU Blue Card'. Its crucial point is to facilitate access to the labour market and provide necessary and favourable conditions for the process of relocation of highly skilled expatriates (Migration and Home Affairs 2021). Furthermore, in December 2011, the Single Permit Directive was adopted, settling special rights for non-EU workers to legally reside in one or another EU state: the right to equal treatment with nationals in the country (Direktiva 2011/98/EU Evropskega parlamenta in sveta 2011; Migration and Home Affairs 2021). It is connected with the expatriates from the third countries – non-EU third-country nationals (TCNs). According to the Foreigners Act (Zakon o tujcih (ZTuj-2)), which partially transposes certain EU directives into the legal order of the Republic of Slovenia, Slovenia, as a part of the EU, considers a third country as any country that is not a member of the European Economic Area (EEA) or the Swiss Confederation (Uradni list Republike Slovenije, št. 91/21 2022).

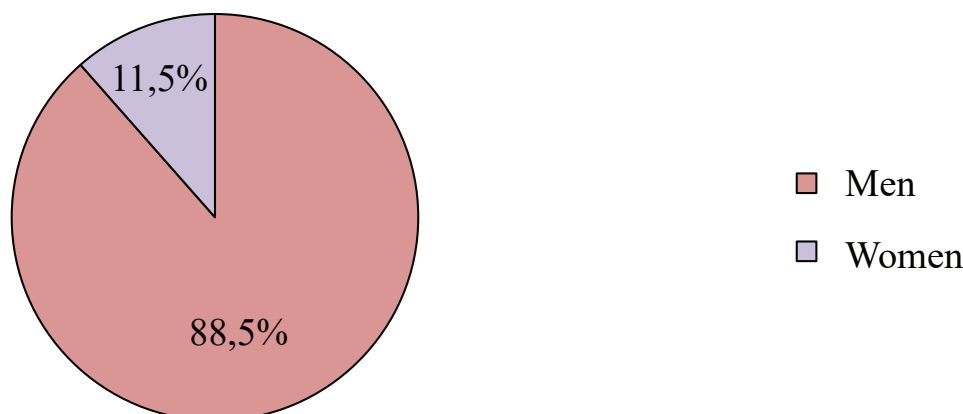


Figure 1. Employed highly skilled immigrants in Slovenia in 2019.
Source: Statistični urad Republike Slovenije 2020.

As far as equal treatment is concerned, it is possible to notice that according to the study on the movement of skilled labour carried out in 2018 by ICF Consulting Services Ltd for the European Commission, skilled EU migrants are mainly affected by the national environment, regulation and policies since they have different requirements for the employment procedure in the EU countries in comparison with non-EU residents. The point is that such migrants do not fall under the category of free movement and have to pass through more formalised procedures, if they want to enter the European labour market (study on the movement of skilled labour – Final report 2018; Republika Slovenija. Ministrstvo za notranje zadeve. Informacije za tujce 2021).

According to the Republic of Slovenia Statistical Office, in 2019, there were 18,835 employed highly skilled immigrants with foreign citizenship in Slovenia: 2162 women and 16673 men correspondingly (Priseljeni zaposleni prebivalci po: Dejavnost, Leto, Državljanstvo, Spol 2020). Therefore, it is possible to consider that female employed immigrants constituted only 11.5% of the employed immigrants in Slovenia in 2019 (Figure 1).

3. Research Design and Methodology

3.1. Research methodology

The present article is written within the qualitative interpretivist paradigm, phenomenology and inductive approach (Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)). The interpretivist paradigm is highly applicable for the intercultural management studies as it provides local understanding of culture and the explanation of social order (Bryman 2012; Barmeyer, Stein, and Eberhardt 2020). Moreover, phenomenology is concerned with how individuals view the world and the surrounding environment, helping to consider people's 'common sense thinking' and interpret their actions from their point of view (Bryman 2012). The data collection technique differs in theoretical and empirical parts of the article. In the theoretical part, descriptive methods

(documentary analysis) were used to gather data from secondary sources (peer-reviewed articles, books, surveys, reports, statistics) about principal theoretical concepts (culture, ICC, expatriation, self-initiated expatriates, IHRM) along with actual employment policy and labour law both in Slovenia and in the EU. The empirical part of the study uses the method of in-depth interview, in particular semi-structured interview, to analyse the entry level of the recruitment process for highly skilled self-initiated international female expatriates in medium-size business organisations in Slovenia and arrive at a conclusion about possible drivers and barriers along with needed ICCs. This approach also helps regard cross-cultural cooperation within the comparative point of view as, according to main social research theorists, only the comparison method allows revealing hidden and non-obvious facts about different social and cultural phenomena. The method of semi-structured interview is chosen owing to its flexibility: while interviewing, it might be necessary to ask follow-up questions, change the order of questions or exclude one or another as the respondent might have previously referred to it. This type of interview is also considered as 'life history interviewing' since it relates to the respondents' lives experiences and opinions (Bryman 2012), so it is presumed to be suitable for the current study as respondents are most likely to share their personal background and their own stories about the process of employment in Slovene companies.

3.2. Sample description

The sampling method for the study is convenience sampling; the unit of analysis is individual as the research is based on personal experience and life stories of the interviewees (Bryman 2012). The population of the research is international (non-Slovene) highly skilled female expatriates in Slovenia with employment experience. The sample of the research is six highly skilled self-initiated international (non-Slovene) female expatriates currently living in Slovenia with an experience of being hired in Slovene medium-size companies. Respondents' age, origin, approximate time living in Slovenia and cultural background (not the main criteria for the sampling) are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographics of the respondents.

Respondent	Country of origin	Age (years)	Cultural background (as stated by the respondent)	Time living in Slovenia (years)
Respondent 1	Belarus	33	Belarus	2.5
Respondent 2	Latvia	ND	The United Kingdom and Latvia	3
Respondent 3	Sweden	ND	Sweden	10
Respondent 4	Russia	35	Russia, Poland and Denmark	5.5
Respondent 5	Russia	ND	Russia, the Netherlands and Belgium	11
Respondent 6	Latvia	ND	Latvia	17

Source: Gromova, own research, 2021.
ND, not determined.

The research covers specifically medium-size business organisations in Slovenia, but not large organisations, in view of the easier network solutions and accessibility of the HR departments and employees. Moreover, the recruitment and selection process in medium-size companies may differ from the recruitment and selection process in large companies. Thus, there might be a complication within the sampling procedure and the generalisation of the results, so more interviews might be needed. Furthermore, the research is aimed at business organisations, but not at organisations in the public sector since the latter would have different requirements for the recruitment and selection process and might be oriented only to the citizens of one particular country.

3.3. Research process organisation and data collection

An interview guide was prepared, as well as some follow-up questions, which might have helped adjust the interviewing process. Initially, contact with possible interviewees was established via email or LinkedIn with the help of the contact letter. All the ethical and confidential aspects were discussed with all the interviewees in advance through the electronic consent form (Google Forms), where they could be acquainted with all the details of the research and look through the interview questions.

The respondents were asked about their cultural, educational and professional backgrounds; their experience in the selection and recruitment process in Slovene companies; their expectations and attitude towards the recruitment and selection process; possible drivers and barriers; and possible recommendations for future international professionals who would look for a job in Slovenia. The respondents were interviewed in English to unify the answers. All the interviews were recorded for the following transcription and quoting (with the preliminary respondents' agreement).

4. Data Analysis: Interpretation of the Results

Recorded interviews were transcribed and coded to outline the main categories the respondents told about. In this case, the method of open coding was used to compile collected data into specified categories. This method helps reduce the amount of data by converting it into smaller fragments (Bryman 2012). Thus, the transcripts of the interviews were divided into topics (six in this case) connected with main research questions and assumed during the interviews. The topics are as follows:

1. reflection about cultural and educational backgrounds,
2. description of the professional career path and working experience,
3. recruitment/selection process in Slovenia: general impression and expectations,

4. barriers within the recruitment/selection process in Slovenia,

5. drivers within the recruitment/selection process in Slovenia and

6. recommendations for other international professionals who would look for a job in Slovenia – ICCs.

Within each topic, respondents' answers were analysed, and key notions were outlined concerning the main research problem. Then, key notions were added in the following categories:

- improvement for the recruitment and selection process in Slovenia;
- drivers at the entry level of the recruitment and selection process;
- recommendations for self-initiated expatriates;
- barriers at the entry level of the recruitment and selection process;
- Slovene employment culture;
- characteristics of self-initiated expatriates; and
- Slovene cultural features.

To start analysing the categories, their relevance is to be defined concerning the main researched issue – drivers of and barriers to highly skilled female expatriates during the recruitment and selection process in medium-size business organisations in Slovenia. Thus, the categories were divided into three levels, as presented in Tables 2–4:

Interpretation of the research results is founded on the understanding of the main categories and their interconnection with the main problem and research questions of the study.

As it has been mentioned previously, relocation and expatriation are always connected with intercultural clashes, cooperation and communication, which is why it is vital to regard an issue of national cultural dimensions to outline the certain aspects of the selection and recruitment process among the international (female) expatriates (Harrison and Michailova 2011). National culture as a phenomenon is regarded in the article, according to Geert Hofstede's definition, as a collective programming of the mind that distinguishes group members from other members (Hofstede 1991). Therefore, certain features of the national culture might also have an impact on the selection and recruitment process and might be considered and interpreted within the data analysis on the basis of cultural dimensions drawn by the studies and articles of the following scientists, dealing not only with the culture itself but also with the phenomenon of cultural dimensions, intercultural relationships, communication and cooperation – Edward T. Hall, Geert Hofstede, Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner:

- a communicative model of culture by Edward T. Hall:
 - high-context/low-context cultures – the level of explicitness of the messages within the culture provided with gestures, mimic, body language, voice, verbal and non-verbal messages;

Table 2. Categories of the first level.

Categories of the first level		
Slovene employment culture:	Drivers at the entry level of the recruitment and selection process:	Barriers at the entry level of the recruitment and selection process:
○ importance of having a degree/education to get a job ○ no strict interview scheme during the selection procedures ○ ability of promotion ○ high value of personal acquaintances while job search ○ ability to get a job through a personal invitation ○ lack of formality while interview ○ English language in CV as an exception ○ easier to find a job through the Slovene website, rather than through international websites ○ focus on personal communication, rather than on hard skills, during the interviews ○ several stages during the selection and recruitment procedures ○ recruitment and selection process in English ○ strict selection and employment process in international companies ○ standards ○ value of network ○ a lot of interviews ○ need to prove uniqueness/unique skills to get a job (for third-country nationals) ○ more chances for women to get higher positions in global companies ○ non-classic hiring procedure ○ less hiring through open calls and positions ○ different interview/selection procedures in big and small companies ○ easier than it seemed to be ○ official and stiff employment procedures ○ no expectations ○ seamless but hassle ○ high value of the employer's experience of hiring expatriates before ○ possibility of easier promotion if you are already in the company, and people know you and recognise you ○ personal conversation during the first job interview ○ no gender issues ○ it depends on the period and reason of the immigration	○ fast answer from the company while job search ○ friendly atmosphere during interviews ○ company support within the legal procedures ○ positive recruitment process ○ pleasure to work ○ easy-going and young-minded colleagues ○ fast and easy legal procedures for the EU citizens ○ support and help from employers ○ no complications ○ plenty of new possibilities ○ changes in HR practices ○ well-organised process ○ good communication ○ zero stress ○ freedom and trust between employees ○ good organisational culture ○ no micromanaging ○ good management ○ orientation of the companies to the specific market	○ challenges during the process of resettlement ○ small and closed market ○ lack of adaptation process in Slovene companies ○ few multinational companies ○ difficulties without knowledge of the Slovene language ○ slow selection process ○ unpreparedness for the unusual system of selection and recruitment ○ a lot of documents to get residence permit (for third-country nationals) ○ malfunctioning of the Slovene working agency ○ challenging ○ HR incompetence ○ difficult to find a job regardless of expatriation ○ difficult recruitment process ○ language barrier ○ more difficult for women to find a job ○ difficult to find a job in Slovenia for women in family-based companies ○ old-styled mentality ○ women are not preferable in the business and on top-positions, regardless of their experience ○ regulational and governmental problems ○ complicated legal procedures for expatriates ○ more difficult relocation procedure for expatriates from third countries in comparison with the EU citizens ○ challenging job searching ○ no possibility to get language courses for EU citizens ○ lack of equal adaptation programme for EU and non-EU citizens ○ lack of help from the state ○ unfairness ○ hard to get into the job market ○ no welcome package, arranged adaptation process for the expatriates ○ cultural differences ○ no personal contact at work before the employment ○ too different from the local culture ○ not so many barriers ○ unexpected challenges ○ difficulties within some process in authorities ○ bureaucracy ○ long procedures to get residence permit/working visa ○ lack of knowledge of English in the authorities ○ bad communication and disrespect toward authorities

Source: Gromova, own research, 2021.
CV, curriculum vitae.

Table 3. Categories of the second level.

Categories of the second level	
Improvement for the employment and selections process in Slovenia:	Recommendations for self-initiated expatriates:
○ improvement in the HR sphere ○ more help and attention to expatriates while hiring ○ digitalisation ○ allow companies to be set up in Slovenia and hire people ○ to make the legal relocation procedure easier and faster for highly skilled internationals ○ to allow more job advertisements in English ○ more accessible job market for the expatriates ○ to make the adaptation process for the expatriates equal ○ HR needs to be aware of peculiarities of hiring third-country expatriates ○ company should help with documents and visas	○ knowledge of foreign languages ○ ability to take responsibility for their own life and career ○ need to show motivation and interest ○ to be more initiative to find a job ○ to use all opportunities ○ to know people who could recommend you to the position ○ to be prepared for challenges ○ to make friends as soon as possible ○ to start from job searching sites ○ intrinsic value ○ persistence ○ creativity ○ thinking out of the box ○ flexibility ○ self-confidence ○ nothing is impossible ○ preliminary research of the labour market ○ value of international companies ○ to go with a flow ○ to be open for opportunities ○ not over-complicating ○ to be focused on Slovenia and Slovene language ○ have an educational degree ○ to have all the documents prepared/translated ○ to build a network ○ to search for a company that you fit into ○ to search for a job in a big company ○ to search for a job while being in Slovenia ○ to be confident ○ to be open for the possible cultural differences ○ to look for unique benefits and skills to highlight your importance for the company ○ to learn more information about the Slovene job market ○ to be part of the expatriate community ○ to be involved ○ to learn Slovene language and culture

Source: Gromova, own research, 2021.

Table 4. Categories of the third level.

Categories of the third level	
Characteristics of self-initiated expatriates:	Slovene cultural features:
○ professional switch ○ interculturality ○ different cultural backgrounds ○ highly educated ○ highly skilled	○ less regulations ○ less straight culture ○ hand-to-hand connections ○ importance of personal connections ○ subjectivity

(Continued)

Table 4. (Continued)

Characteristics of self-initiated expatriates:	Slovene cultural features:
○ constant self-development ○ multi-profile education ○ strong connection to native culture ○ ability to self-reflection ○ intercultural professional background ○ travelling a lot ○ self-decision about moving to another country ○ interest in international professions ○ working in a big international company ○ wealth of intercultural experience while working ○ using foreign languages at work ○ experience of living and working abroad ○ experience in different professional fields ○ hard working ○ readiness to make lots of effort to achieve the goal ○ active life position ○ linguistic skills ○ proactive ○ get contacts with someone who can help with the job ○ open to new experiences, especially intercultural experiences ○ energetic ○ interested in their job ○ solid working background ○ ambitiousness ○ learning by doing ○ purposeful ○ constant learning process ○ combination of work and education process ○ self-confidence ○ ready for changes ○ ready to explore ○ problem-solver ○ self-presentation skills ○ stress-resistant ○ communication skills ○ willingness to change life, explore the world, get international experience, grow and study ○ keen on challenges ○ love for research ○ analytical mind	○ less equality both in society and in organisation ○ distinct respect to authorities ○ open culture ○ open-mindedness ○ slow life ○ high quality of life ○ Slovene as a difficult language to learn ○ English as a working language only in international companies ○ high value of the team and collective ○ communication with colleagues apart from work ○ friendliness ○ importance of the local language ○ combination of formal and informal working styles ○ multiculturalism in international companies ○ value of personal agreements ○ importance of valuable friends ○ lack of punctuality ○ interconnection between cultural background and employment procedures ○ different approaches towards women in culture ○ women are strong personalities in the Slovene culture ○ straight-forward women in Slovenia ○ close mindset ○ strong traditions ○ people may work in companies for many years without changing workplace ○ people are ready to help ○ a lot of cultural influence from Italy and Austria ○ value of qualification ○ high value of having working and living experience in Slovenia ○ patriarchal society ○ no prejudices ○ accent on personal qualification ○ progressive ○ European cultural values

Source: Gromova, own research, 2021.

- monochronic/polychronic system of time – a measure that shows how people of one or another culture perceive time: as a sequence (monochronic) or as a synchronisation (polychronic) (Hall 1976);
- cultural parametric dimensions by Geert Hofstede:
 - power distance (high/low power distance) – the distribution of the power, level of participation in the decision-making process within the culture;

- individualism/collectivism – a cultural framework of people either being ready for taking care only of themselves (individualism) or where the interests of the particular group are more important than the interest of an individual (collectivism);
- masculinity/femininity – measure of cultures' preferences either for masculine features and values (leadership, achievement, toughness, consolidation of social roles) or for feminine features and values (cooperation, empathy, consensus, weak divisions of gender roles);
- high/low uncertainty avoidance – extent of the feeling to which the culture's members try to deal with ambiguity, risks and unknown situations;
- long-/short-term orientation – the attitude towards the past, how the members of the culture associate themselves with their past and focus on it while dealing with difficult situations (Hofstede 1980);
- cultural factors by Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner
 - universalism/particularism – the degree of importance of rules, standards, beliefs, laws (universalism) or friendship, personal relationships and interconnections (particularism) within a certain culture (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 2011).

The respondents interviewed within the research represent four different cultures (Russian, Belarussian, Swedish and Latvian), and it is essential to regard them together with the Slovene culture, the main culture of the research. Thus, as far as Edward T. Hall's theory is considered, studied cultures might be divided into high- (Russia, Belarus, Slovenia) and low-context cultures (Latvia, Sweden). In high-context cultures, most of the elements of communication do not convey the whole message, people from such cultures have strong bonds with the community, relationships tend to be more important than tasks and time is more flexible. Low-context cultures presume lower engagement to relationships and highly organised time. Regarding the criterion of the perception of time, studied cultures might also be characterised as monochronic (Latvia, Sweden) and polychronic (Russia, Belarus, Slovenia) (Hall 1976).

According to the model of national culture differences by Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner, studied cultures might be divided into universalistic (Latvia, Sweden) and particularistic (Slovenia, Russia, Belarus) cultures regarding the attitude towards rules (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 2011).

The framework for national and organisational cultures by Geert Hofstede is represented in Figure 2 in the form of indexes assigned to certain cultural factors:

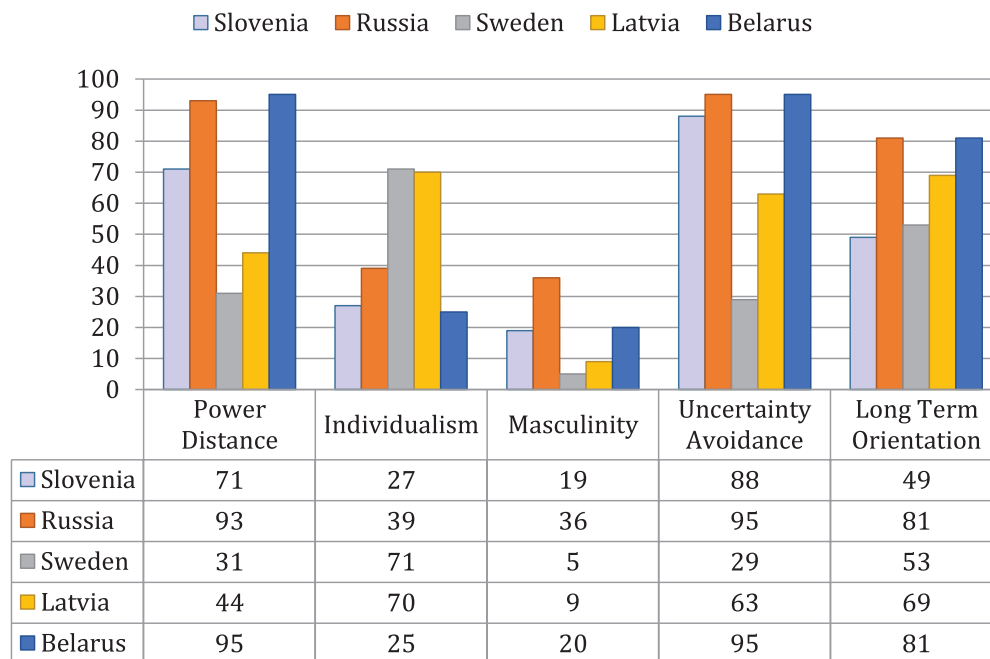


Figure 2. Cultural features for Slovenia, Russia, Sweden, Latvia and Belarus.

Source: Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov 2010.

5. Key Findings

5.1. Slovene employment culture

Regarding and analysing the respondents' answers, it is possible to conclude about the respondents' perception of the Slovene employment culture. Thus, they cannot characterise Slovene employment culture as definitely fast or definitely slow – different respondents presented different assumptions according to their native cultural features ('In Belarus everything is very fast <...> Here you can wait for 14 days and this is totally normal' (respondent 1)); ('...pretty much within a day or two I got reply from this company where I am currently working' (respondent 2)). Nevertheless, they agreed that the Slovene employment culture is oriented mostly to personal relationships and interconnections ('In Sweden we work a lot more 'by the book' <...> in Slovenia, a hand-to-hand is maximized connections" (respondent 3)) due to both cultural and local labour environmental reasons (size of the labour market) ('Slovenia is rather small, everybody knows each other, market is extremely small' (respondent 5); '...they said about me to one colleague and that colleague basically invited me to come and work for them' (respondent 6)). This feature as well as the absence of the strict procedures during the selection process in the company correlates with high power distance, which is not transmitted through the relationships between people, but mostly through the importance of having a confirmation of a certain status (for instance, having a degree) ('...I thought it would be a job interview <...>, but she started explaining me when I can come, where I will live...' (respondent 6); 'I do not have a Master's degree, but in Sweden it is not as important as it is here' (respondent 3)). Furthermore, it should be remembered that everything depends on the company, whether it is an international company, which may introduce values and norms from other cultures, or a more local company, which may have its own rules and traditions. The fact that there are a few international companies in Slovenia coupled with the size of the labour market leads to the significant importance and influence of the local culture on all employment aspects and procedures, provoking closeness and orientation on the inside, rather than on the outside (e.g., respondents mentioned that it was easier to find a job in Slovene websites, but not in global websites). In addition to this, it is possible to outline that described aspects do not strictly relate to female self-initiated expatriates, but may also refer to male expatriates, having more general, not gender-specific one.

5.2. Drivers at the entry level of the recruitment and selection process

The main drivers at the entry level of the recruitment and selection process in Slovenia for the interviewed respondents are connected, firstly, with the people's attitude (constant

support from future colleagues, warm and friendly atmosphere during the job interviews: '...I was expecting that it would be about <...> my work and their questions were like: "What about your hobbies?"' (respondent 1); 'The recruitment process was extremely positive' (respondent 2); '...I had the current support from the employers' (respondent 6)) and, secondly, with the good organisation of the employment procedure itself. This aspect might be connected with such a feature of the Slovene culture as feministic, collectivistic (according to Geert Hofstede) and particularistic (according to Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner), so there is a high value of equality and solidarity, as well as a great importance of personal relationships (Hofstede 2001; Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov 2010). In addition to this, the respondents from EU countries mentioned easy and understandable legal procedures to get a work-based residence permit as an important driving aspect: '...it was very easy in terms of paperwork <...> I did not need any visas and all the documents were settled very quickly' (respondent 6). As mentioned earlier, the respondents presented their personal subjective opinion, which is influenced by their previous cultural and professional experience and apparently by their native culture and cultural frameworks. For instance, for respondent 3 (Sweden), a lower level of regulations in Slovenia (than her native country) tended to be a barrier, whereas for respondent 4 (Russia), it was an advantage as it helped her to get a job and also get a promotion. However, it is vital to mention that outlined drivers at the entry level of the recruitment and selection process are still not connected with the gender of the applicant.

5.3. Barriers at the entry level of the recruitment and selection process

Considering the barriers within the recruitment and employment process to highly skilled self-initiated female expatriates in Slovenia, it is possible to outline that all of the respondents agreed on the fact that their expectations about the process itself did not correspond to reality – they thought it would have been much easier: '...I was totally not ready for this' (respondent 1); 'Job searching in Slovenia is very-very challenging' (respondent 2); '...it is not without difficulties going through' (respondent 4). As far as the legal procedures are considered, there is a difference of which citizenship has an applicant as law assumes different procedures for expatriates from different countries: for the third-country nationals (TCNs), there are very high bureaucracy barriers, when they need to provide a lot of documents, wait for a very long time to get a residence permit and face with rough treatment ('I do not think that it should be so complicated that you need to provide everything' (respondent 1); '...all kind of authorities that you have to go through <...> I did not expect that it would be so much hard <...> bureaucratic <...>' (respondent 4)).

5.4. Improvement for the employment and selection process in Slovenia

The main improvements for the employment and selection process in Slovenia, as proposed by the respondents within the research, are connected with the functional procedures of the employment, to be precise; the HR practices for expatriates' adaptation and assimilation within the completely new culture; legal procedures during the process of receiving residence permits ('...for highly skilled, highly qualified people, it should be easier <...> you just need to have a very quick process to hire and start working, but not to wait for 6 months' (respondent 1)); and more general aspects such as the closeness of the Slovene labour market and its perspective to become more open for international professionals ('...you have to allow companies to come here and give them a land to build a company...' (respondent 4)).

5.5. Recommendations for self-initiated expatriates

One of the most important recommendations from the respondents is to speak and to learn foreign languages, and especially be focused on the Slovene one, if an expatriate would like to move in this very country, find a job and be promoted in the future: '...you have to know Slovene, you cannot expect to be in a higher position without knowing the language' (respondent 3). In general, the major recommendations for the potential self-initiated expatriates who might be willing to come to Slovenia are closely connected with the improvement of personal qualities ('What I would probably recommend is really to look for unique benefits and skills that a person could offer to the company and highlight them more and to try to find the right fit' (respondent 6)) as well as the upgrade of hard skills ('...if you have an education from other country, get a chance, immediately, to translate it to Slovene by a professional translator. If you don't have it, you will have issues' (respondent 3)). It is also important to make a preliminary research of the Slovene job market as well as of the Slovene national culture so as to be prepared for the possible upcoming issues both from cultural (customs, traditions, norms, values) and general points of view (legal procedures, everyday life).

5.6. Characteristics of self-initiated expatriates

Respondents' answers and their stories helped make a portrait of a self-initiated expatriate, his/her main characteristic, qualities and soft skills, and it definitely correlates with the theoretical part of the article, where different researchers' points of view about self-initiated expatriates' qualities are represented, which are as follows: cultural awareness, proactivity, adaptability, sensitivity, flexibility, reflexivity, global mindset, openness to cultural challenges, low ethnocentrism and prepared for constant self-development. These personal features together with the recommendations mentioned in the

previous subchapter might be practical for the expatriates not only while going through the selection and recruitment process precisely in Slovenia but also in other foreign labour markets.

5.7. Slovene cultural features

Firstly, a geographical proximity of Slovenia with Italy, Austria and other European countries has a great impact on the Slovene culture. For instance, Slovenian culture is as polychronic as an Italian culture, according to Edward T. Hall's paradigm (Hall 1976). Within this context, most of the respondents characterised the Slovene culture of life as a slow one, especially in comparison with their previous experience of living in quite big cities: 'After Brussels <...> moving to a small town <...> I appreciate the quality of life, when you get your family, it is like a little paradise' (respondent 5).

Furthermore, as a solid part of the EU, common European values are inherent in Slovenia ('Slovenia is very progressive, it has more European cultural values, quite open' (respondent 5)). Thus, according to respondents' feedback, despite high power distance, there is a lot of informality within the interpersonal communication, which lead directly to the high value of personal connections ('...as more friends you have, as more valuable they are, the better for you' (respondent 4)). Moreover, Slovene society with its long-term orientation is not plain and pays a great tribute to traditions; for instance, it could be seen within the gender issue during promotion and employment processes: employees may work here in companies for many years without any changes, and women get the top management position more rarely than male employees do ('Slovenia is still a patriarchal society' (respondent 5)). On the contrary, Slovene women are quite straightforward and strong ('...Slovene ladies have more straight-forward approach' (respondent 3); 'Slovenia <...>, here, they (ladies) are very strong personalities' (respondent 4)), and there is no pronounced gender gap within the country.

5.8 Limitations and implications

This research regards only the female side of the international highly skilled expatriate community in Slovenia, and the researcher has focused only on the individuals' own stories and experiences. Thus, only one point of view has been explored, and this research lacks a balanced view of both female and male self-initiated expatriates.

In addition, the elements of drivers and barriers indicated by the interviewees within the research might not be representative for every expatriate's opinion. Most of the respondents have previously been immersed in various intercultural situations before coming to Slovenia due to some personal or professional reasons; therefore, they might have a higher level of consciousness and awareness than the general expatriate population. So even though the researcher fulfils the quality indicator of reliability, it is not possible to

assess own findings as completely representational due to the mentioned limitations.

Different time periods of living in Slovenia might also be considered a limitation for the research as the respondents came to Slovenia in different time periods during various situations in the country and in the world. Laws and legal procedures tend to change and be adapted throughout the time; therefore, it may lead to the difference in some respondents' assumptions.

Based on the mentioned limitations, additional research might be warranted in the future. Thus, it would be valuable to explore the topic aiming also at male respondents since they might have entirely different opinions and points of view considering the recruitment and selection process in Slovenia. Furthermore, it might be essential to compare the results of the study with the SIEs from other countries, especially from countries near Slovenia (Italy, Austria, Croatia, Hungary), to explore possible similarities and differences within outlined drivers and barriers.

6. Conclusion

In the light of the global trends in the labour market, it is impossible to deny the high value of highly skilled, highly educated and potential international candidates who are willing to build their career abroad, obtain and exchange new skills and experiences (including intercultural experiences). The core part of these candidates represent international professionals – self-initiated expatriates, who take a voluntary decision to move abroad and develop their professional path in foreign labour markets, and a significant part of this population represents women, a category of expatriates that has been omitted in research studies and surveys for a long period of time, regarded mostly as a category of expatriates who move abroad due to their spouse career, children or other family reasons. However, global tendencies clearly show that the situation is not the same anymore, and female self-initiated expatriates represent a great part of the modern global labour force. Therefore, these members of the population have become the core of the research focus.

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