Social Inclusion Issues in Contemporary Housing Estates: The Case Study of Poljane, Maribor

Heřman Dušek,[1] Karelle Marneffe,[2]
Michelle Puškárová,[1]
Edgardo Ernesto Sánchez Castillo,[3]
Carolyn Steinicke,[4] José Ignacio Vila Vázquez[3]

[1] Mendel University in Brno, Faculty of Regional Development and International Studies, Brno, Czechia
xdusek3@mendelu.cz, xpuskaro@mendelu.cz
[2] University of Liège, Faculty of Sciences, Liège, Belgium
karelle.marneffe@student.uliege.be
[3] University of Santiago de Compostela, Faculty of Geography and History, Santiago de Compostela, Spain
edgardo.sanchez@rai.usc.es, jose.vila.vazquez@usc.es
[4] University of Bayreuth, Geographical Institute, Bayreuth, Germany
carolyn.steinicke@uni-bayreuth.de

Social exclusion in housing estates remains a pressing challenge in Europe, where concentrated poverty and marginalised groups face persistent barriers to integration. This paper examines the case of the Poljane public housing development in Maribor, Slovenia, asking whether its location within a low-density neighbourhood and the characteristics of its residents contribute to social exclusion and urban segregation. A mixed-method approach was applied, combining field observations, semi-structured interviews with stakeholders, and literature analysis. The findings highlight the deterioration of shared spaces, tensions between Roma and non-Roma residents, and the persistence of negative external perceptions, while also noting efforts at inclusion through NGO-led initiatives. Overall, the results confirm that physical decay, high density, and social fragmentation contribute to reinforcing forms of social exclusion in Poljane.

Vprašanja socialne vključenosti v sodobnih stanovanjskih soseskah: študija primera Poljane v Mariboru

Heřman Dušek,[1] Karelle Marneffe,[2]
Michelle Puškárová,[1]
Edgardo Ernesto Sánchez Castillo,[3]
Carolyn Steinicke,[4] José Ignacio Vila Vázquez[3]

[1] Mendelova Univerza v Brnu, Fakulteta za regionalni razvoj in mednarodne študije, Brno, Češka
xdusek3@mendelu.cz, xpuskaro@mendelu.cz
[2] Univerza v Liègu, Fakulteta za naravoslovje, Liège, Belgija
karelle.marneffe@student.uliege.be
[3] Univerza v Santiagu de Composteli, Fakulteta za geografijo in zgodovino, Santiago de Compostela, Španija
edgardo.sanchez@rai.usc.es, jose.vila.vazquez@usc.es
[4] Univerza v Bayreuthu, Geografski inštitut, Bayreuth, Nemčija
carolyn.steinicke@uni-bayreuth.de

Socialna izključenost v stanovanjskih soseskah ostaja pereč izziv v Evropi, kjer se revni in marginalizirane skupine soočajo s trajnimi ovirami pri vključevanju. Prispevek obravnava primer javnega stanovanjskega kompleksa Poljane v Mariboru, njegovo umestitev v redko pozidano sosesko ter kako značilnosti prebivalcev prispevajo k socialni izključenosti in urbani segregaciji. Uporabljen je bil kombiniran raziskovalni pristop, ki je vključeval terenska opazovanja, polstrukturirane intervjuje z deležniki ter analizo literature. Ugotovitve izpostavljajo propadanje skupnih prostorov, napetosti med romskimi in neromskimi prebivalci ter negativne zunanje zaznave, hkrati pa tudi prizadevanja za vključevanje prek pobud, ki jih vodijo nevladne organizacije. Rezultati potrjujejo, da fizična degradacija, visoka gostota poselitve in socialna razdrobljenost prispevajo k utrjevanju oblik socialne izključenosti v Poljanah.

1   Introduction

For several years, an increase in inequality and poverty has been observed in Europe, which can lead to social exclusion, especially when low-income households are concentrated in certain neighbourhoods (Chaskin, 2013; Musterd et al., 2017). Indicators and factors of exclusion can be multiple and are also linked to social identity or how a group is perceived by the majority, usually because this group does not share the same normative ideals and "their everyday practices or ways of life are considered inferior" (Zevnik & Russell, 2021, p. 43).

The inaccessibility to the housing system is a key factor for social exclusion (Musterd et al., 2017). Even when shaped by the same policy, housing estates can be heterogeneous (Vila Vazquez & Petsimeris, 2022), and this can create "varieties of trajectories of change" (Hess et al., 2018, p.10). As a result, we can observe some significantly downgraded estates alongside others that are more successful. This downgrading, which is also a cause of exclusion, can occur for multiple reasons, such as construction methods, the size of the settlement, population demands, or location within the city. These characteristics are important to consider during the conception of the housing development programme, as they will generate an inertia in the area that will shape the future of the housing development (Hess et al., 2018; Wassenberg, 2018). Furthermore, "the problematic start of some housing estates is in several cases /.../ [due to] the recruitment of the first residents" (Bolt, 2018, p. 61).

This paper analyses a case study of a public housing development in Maribor, Slovenia. The objective of the research is to verify whether the analysis of the case study confirms that the potential social exclusion of a neighbourhood is based on social and ethnic composition and has been reflected in certain urban fabric characteristics. Furthermore, it tries to determine whether the location within a low-density neighbourhood plays a major role in this exclusion and residential segregation. The article begins with the housing context and the policies that have shaped Maribor, and presents the chosen settlement more specifically. An analysis of field observations and stakeholder interviews enables a diagnosis of the neighbourhood in terms of social exclusion and management. The final section presents a discussion of the insights provided by the case study.

2   Context of Slovenia and Maribor

Since the end of the Second World War, the political context surrounding housing in Maribor has undergone multiple changes. Until the early 1980s, Slovenian cities were characterised by the development of high-quality residential blocks, following the principles of the international movement in planning, which offered a large stock of public housing units available for any kind of households in new Yugoslavian residential neighbourhoods (Skalicky & Cerpes, 2019). Following Slovenia's independence in 1991, the National Housing Fund of the Republic of Slovenia was established, and the country permitted the privatisation of social housing estates, thereby reducing the state's role. At that time, the number of state-owned housing units drastically declined (Skalicky & Cerpes, 2019). Between 1991 and 2002, the number of households decreased by 3.6% in Maribor and by 12.5% in the city centre (Sitar, 2008). On the other hand, the development of housing estates until 1991 helped to provide general access to housing units to citizens from different social classes, as a prototype of a quite egalitarian society; meanwhile, this kind of neighbourhood in Western Europe had been generating a process of stigmatisation and the source of deeper social issues, comparatively (Hess et al., 2018).

In 2000, the Ministry of Environment and Physical Planning defined a shortage of approximately 12,000 social and nonprofit housing units in Slovenia (Sitar, 2008). The country then adopted a National Housing Programme for the period between 2005 and 2015, but this has largely not been realised, with 70% of existing flats being older than 30 years in 2012 (Skalicky & Sitar, 2012). The stock was then divided into two forms: dense construction of non-profit and social housing on one hand, and single-family housing with low density and a lack of services on the other (Sitar, 2008). In 2025, the Slovenian government has reinforced the capacity of the state to fund and promote new state-based programmes of public rental housing (Sta, 2025), which might contribute to improving access to more affordable housing units.

Considering that the origin country and ethnic composition are significant dimensions of social exclusion, it is necessary to note that Slovenia recognises three minorities: Italian, Hungarian, and Roma (Zevnik & Russell, 2021). The first two are considered "national communities"; meanwhile, Roma are considered a "special community," and one of their larger urban settlements is located in Maribor (Zupančič, 2007). This situation creates an asymmetry in the access to the rights of

political representation and protection as recognised minorities by these three minorities. According to Zevnik and Russell (2021, p. 55), Roma are a marginalised group that "remain outside the political realm, subjected to racial abuse and deprivation".

3   Case study: Poljane housing estate

This study focuses on a specific site located in Poljane, Maribor – a small residential neighbourhood on Preradovičeva ulica street near the shopping mall Planet Tuš (Figure 1), among areas with a lower quality of residential environment in Maribor (Tiran & Koblar, 2017). In the early stages of the project, various collective housing neighbourhoods in Maribor were considered as potential case studies. On August 27th, a field visit was conducted to all the proposed neighbourhoods, allowing for direct observation of their physical, social, and spatial characteristics. Based on this comparative exploration, the neighbourhood on Preradovičeva ulica was selected for reasons that align with the research objectives: the recency of the intervention, explicit focus on social inclusion issues, manageable scale and clear boundaries, and public space configuration.
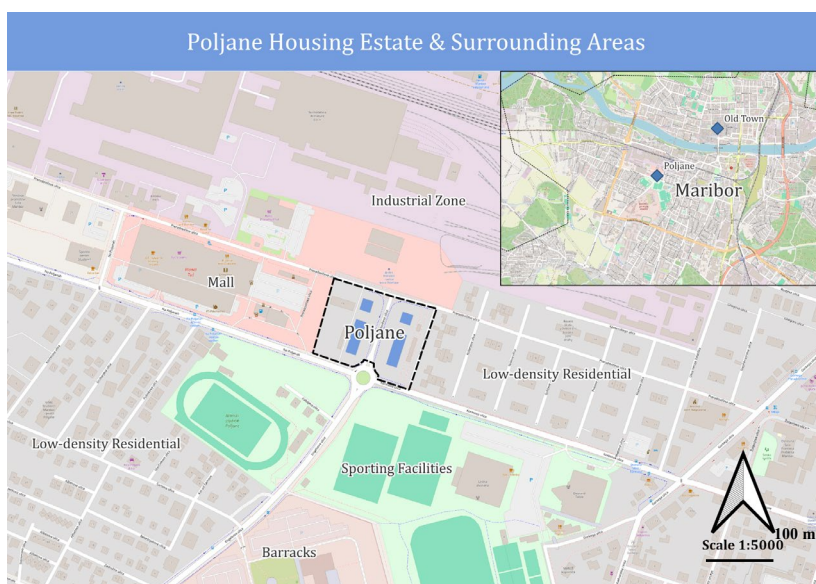

Figure 1*:* **Location map of the case study**
Author: Heřman Dušek, 2025; source: Open Street Map, 2025

Poljane is a social housing estate built by the multiple award-winning architect's office Bevk Perović. The project was initiated by the Housing Fund of Maribor and the Housing Fund of Slovenia in 2002, and its development was completed in 2007 (Bevk Perovic Arhitekti, n.d.). This development was undertaken during a period of crisis in social housing production, with 590 units built for 3,876 applicants between 1994 and 2005 in Slovenia (Sitar, 2008).

The housing project comprises four buildings (as shown in Figure 1) and 130 social housing apartments. The urban plan of the area and the two busy roads surrounding the settlement were limiting the possibility of creating exterior public spaces, which led to the construction of common spaces inside the building. The apartments' design is standard and "follows the industrial character of the surroundings," but "their individuality is expressed with colourful balconies," and their position on the façade is supposed to create a dynamic character (Bevk Perovic Arhitekti, n.d.).

4   Methodology

This research is structured as a case study, understood as "the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, to understand its activity within important circumstances" (Stake, 2005, as cited in Álvarez & San Fabián, 2012, p. 3). The research employs a mixed qualitative methodology in the perspective of Wynn and Money (2009), who argue that qualitative research seeks "the understanding of social phenomena from the experiences and viewpoints of social actors, and the interpretation of the meanings they assign to their actions, beliefs, and values" (Wynn & Money, 2009, as cited in Izcara Palacios, 2014, p. 13).

To develop a comprehensive and situated understanding of the case study, two methods were used: direct observation and semi-structured interviews, combined with a literature analysis. The order in which these methods were employed responded to the logic of the research process, starting with field observation and followed by interviews.

- Direct observation: On August 20 and 31, 2025, two field visits were conducted to document the physical characteristics of the area, the use of public spaces, and the dynamics of social interaction in everyday life. These observations served as a preliminary approach to the case, providing contextual and visual

information about the material and relational dimensions of the neighbourhood. They also informed the design and focus of the subsequent interviews.

– Two semi-structured interviews: Interviews were conducted with representatives of the Javni medobčinski stanovanjski sklad Maribor (JMSS) and the NGO *Kralji ulice*, which provided valuable insights regarding the project's objectives and the current issues it seeks to address. Interviews with residents of the neighbourhood, representing different socio-demographic groups, and individuals living in adjacent areas were attempted without success.

5   Results

The interview and field observation reveal several criteria of exclusion and inclusion that shape life within the housing blocks in Poljane. **Public spaces** are a recurring concern, with greenery, benches, and sports facilities often poorly maintained (Interview 1; observation). Some areas suffer neglect due to their specific location, such as being situated on hills, and there appears to be a general lack of care for shared outdoor environments (Interview 1; observation). Furthermore, **accessibility** aspects are also present: biking lanes, underground car parking, and access for persons with disabilities to the houses exist (observation).

The fabric of the **housing blocks** shows clear signs of ageing, although it was built in 2007. Facades, balconies, and external features are deteriorating. In addition, graffiti tags and other forms of vandalism represent another persistent issue in Poljane (Interview 2, observation). While tenants generally maintain their individual apartments, minor decay, such as broken blinds, is evident, as illustrated in Figure 2 (Interview 1; observation). This creates a contrast between personal care for private flats and the visible neglect of common and external areas. Surrounding the blocks, the neighbourhood includes football fields, sports facilities, family houses, a shopping centre, and a petrol station (observation). When the blocks were first developed, the wider community did not oppose them, but negative perceptions grew once tenants began moving in (Interview 1). Nowadays, children from the blocks play with local children, yet adults rarely mix, contributing to a sense of segregation (Interview 1).

Figure 2: Visible physical deterioration in a block of Poljane
Author: Michelle Puškárová, 2025

Social issues deepen this divide. Access to apartments is regulated by strict national conditions, requiring Slovenian or other EU nationality. According to the interviewees, Roma families, who tend to have more children, make up about 30% of the apartments and represent the largest number of residents due to the point-based system favouring families with children (Interview 1). Furthermore, Poljane offers the largest flats in terms of square meters among social housing options in Maribor, making them ideal for larger families (Interview 2). The NGO *Kralji ulice* provides essential support, including childcare, apartment management, and free workshops (Interview 1), as well as assistance with official documents (Interview 2). The office of migrants rents some apartments, where Afghan families live now (Interview 1). Despite the initial ease of construction, problems have persisted since tenants first moved in in 2007 (Interview 1). Challenges include loud environments, children avoiding school, criminal behaviour, and frequent police involvement (Interview 1). As Interview 1 indicates, conflicts within the blocks are common, particularly between Roma and non-Roma residents, often concerning house rules, noise, and the use of shared common spaces. These tensions contribute to an atmosphere of mistrust (Interview 1). The NGO is trying to connect all the tenants through workshops and events, but usually only Roma people attend: "*We are also inviting them (Slovene tenants) to our activities, it is for everyone. They decide not to come.*"

The **image** of the Poljane blocks reinforces these difficulties. Though located on Preradovičeva ulica, the buildings' closed facades and a lack of facing doors foster feelings of disconnection and isolation (observation). Poorly maintained outdoor areas heighten the impression of neglect, while many residents fail to appreciate their living environment, sometimes even damaging it (Interview 1; observation). Although there is recognition that more such housing is needed, opposition from neighbourhoods prevents its expansion (Interview 1). In addition, the Poljane buildings are often perceived by Maribor residents as a "Roma ghetto." As the social workers from *Kralji Ulice* mention in the interview: "*You ask anyone who is living in Maribor about this neighbourhood, they will tell you: 'Oh, this is like a Roma gypsy ghetto.'*"

A possible solution to the marginalisation of Roma people could be to disperse them across different areas within the mainstream population, rather than concentrating them in a single location, such as Poljane (Interview 2). An interviewee from *Kralji Ulice* supports this idea, stating: "*A good thing would be to relocate those people, they all live in the same place. But at the same time, it is not possible because there are no apartments that are so big. The solutions would be to build a new block or to put these families all around Maribor, not just in one place.*"

High **density**, referring to the number of tenants in the apartments and compared to the neighbourhood, intensifies these challenges. Compared to nearby single-family houses, the six-floor blocks accommodate much larger households, with Roma families often comprising five to six people per apartment (Interview 1; observation). While this density generates vibrant activity, groups gathering outside and children playing, it also amplifies tensions within the community (Interview 1; observation).

6   Discussion and conclusion

The case study revealed the role of design and housing management in shaping social exclusion within the estate. The observations align with the arguments of Musterd et al. (2017) and Zevnik & Russell (2021). The housing management and the general perception of estate inhabitants can reinforce segregation and marginalisation. Roma residents are related to the general perception of the estate and are clearly segregated. This process of segregation is visible in conflicts between Roma and non-Roma tenants and in the convergent characterisation of Poljane with trends of

ghettoisation by different stakeholders. Spatial concentration of marginalised groups, as noted by Hess et al. (2018), is a major factor of exclusion. While the project was made by a prestigious studio that wanted to provide public spaces for inclusion, interactions between different groups of inhabitants are kept to a minimum. The poorly maintained common spaces are generally used by the Roma families and children playing. The contrast between care for private apartments and neglect of public areas also suggests exclusion. The design itself was insufficient in building social inclusion.

The study partly confirms the hypothesis that the location of the estate–four high-density apartments within a low-density neighbourhood–does not help in including marginalised communities into broad society. Despite the otherwise good location, our analysis reflects a general sensation of isolation in this housing estate. Different housing management and perceptions of the marginalised communities would likely make this feeling less pronounced. The limits of this study come from the time constraint and the focus on both the institutional perspective of stakeholders and direct observation. Interviews with residents and their neighbours were not successfully conducted. As their experience could not be directly accessed, it would be necessary to conduct interviews with residents in further research. Future research could broaden the scope by incorporating comparative studies with other Slovenian or European estates developed during a similar period, particularly those where social exclusion is less pronounced.

While the estate provides much-needed social housing, its concentration of marginalised groups, poor maintenance and felt stigma undermine its role in urban integration and inclusion. Reconsideration of local strategies and programmes for social inclusion seems to be required. Overall, the combination of physical neglect, social fragmentation, and contested coexistence defines the exclusionary dynamics in these housing blocks.

References

Álvarez Álvarez, C., & San Fabián Maroto, J. L. (2012). La elección del estudio de caso en investigación educativa. *Gazeta de Antropología, 28*(1), Article 14. https://doi.org/10.30827/Digibug.20644

Bolt, G. (2018). Who Is to Blame for the Decline of Large Housing Estates? An Exploration of Socio-Demographic and Ethnic Change. In D. B. Hess, T. Tammaru, & M. Van Ham (Eds.), *Housing Estates in Europe* (pp. 57–74). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-92813-5_3

Chaskin, R. J. (2013). Integration and Exclusion: Urban Poverty, Public Housing Reform, and the Dynamics of Neighborhood Restructuring. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *647*(1), 237–267. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716213478548

Hess, D. B., Tammaru, T., & van Ham, M. (2018). Lessons Learned from a Pan-European Study of Large Housing Estates: Origin, Trajectories of Change and Future Prospects. In D. B. Hess, T. Tammaru, & M. van Ham (Eds.), *Housing Estates in Europe: Poverty, Ethnic Segregation and Policy Challenges* (pp. 3–31). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-92813-5_1

Housing poljane maribor. (n.d.). *Bevk Perović Arhitekti*. Retrieved September 2, 2025, from https://bevkperovic.com/project/housing-poljane-maribor/

Izcara Palacios, S. P. (2014). *Manual de investigación cualitativa*. Fontanamara.

Musterd, S., Marcińczak, S., van Ham, M., & Tammaru, T. (2017). Socioeconomic segregation in European capital cities. Increasing separation between poor and rich. *Urban Geography*, *38*(7), 1062–1083. https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2016.1228371

Skalicky, V., & Čerpes, I. (2019). Influence of Structural Changes in Politics and the Economy on the Quality and Integrity of Residential Environments in Slovenia; Maribor Case Study. *Prostor : Znanstveni Časopis Za Arhitekturu i Urbanizam*, *27*(2(58)), 236–247. https://doi.org/10.31522/p.27.2(58).4

Skalicky, V., & Sitar, M. (2012). The concepts on quality of life in the Maribor post-WW2 housing estates. *AR Arhitektura*, *12*(1), 18–25. https://www.dlib.si/details/URN:NBN:SI:DOC-7IR6WDMJ

Sta, D. (2025, July 17). DZ sprejel zakon: 100 milijonov evrov letno za javna stanovanja | 24ur.com. *24ur.com*. Retrieved from https://www.24ur.com/novice/slovenija/dz-sprejel-zakon-100-milijonov-evrov-letno-za-javna-stanovanja.html

Tiran, J., & Koblar, S. (2017). Kakovost bivalnega okolja v Mariboru. En V. Drozg, U. Horvat, & E. Konečnik Kotnik, *Geografije Podravja*. University of Maribor Press. https://doi.org/10.18690/978-961-286-074-5.14

Vila-Vázquez, J.-I., & Petsimeris, P. (2023). Limits of and opportunities for urban planning and social change in decaying housing estates: Some lessons from Barcelona. *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment*, *38*(1), 171–197. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10901-022-09934-4

Wassenberg, F. (2018). Beyond an Ugly Appearance: Understanding the Physical Design and Built Environment of Large Housing Estates. In D. B. Hess, T. Tammaru, & M. van Ham (Eds.), *Housing Estates in Europe: Poverty, Ethnic Segregation and Policy Challenges* (pp. 35–55). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-92813-5_2

Zevnik, A., & Russell, A. (2021). The problem of asymmetric representation: The marginalisation, racialisation, and deservedness of Roma in Slovenia. *Politics*, *43*(1), 54–69. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395721996550

Zupančič, J. (2007). Romska naselja kot poseben del naselbinskega sistema v Sloveniji. *Dela, 27*, 215-246. https://doi.org/10.4312/dela.27.215-246