

FOLLOWING EUROPEAN STORIES

AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDY OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

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Seven years have passed since Slovenians have been granted the opportunity to take on posts within the EU institutions as Slovenian EU officials or Slovenian Eurocrats. How can life stories or biographical narratives aid in research focused on this first generation of Slovenian Eurocrats? What can they tell us about the shape of contemporary European integration processes? The authors in the following pages will identify the key theoretical and methodological issues that researchers face when engaging integration as a social phenomenon.

Keywords: *European Union, Eurocrats, bureaucracy, Slovenia.*

Minilo je sedem let, odkar imajo Slovenci priložnost, da se kot evrokrate zaposlujejo v institucijah Evropske unije. Do katere mere lahko življenjske zgodbe oz. biografski narativni intervjuji služijo kot učinkovito analitično orodje pri raziskavah prve generacije slovenskih evrokratov? Kaj nam lahko takšne pripovedi povedo o podobi sodobnih evropskih integracijskih procesov? V pričujočem prispevku avtorja razbirata osrednja teoretska in metodološka vprašanja, s katerimi se spoprimejo raziskovalci, ki preučujejo integracijo kot družbeni pojav.

Ključne besede: *Evropska unija, evrokrate, birokracija, Slovenija.*

Seven years have passed since Slovenia, together with nine other states from Central and Eastern Europe, became a member of the European Union in 2004, thus participating in the single largest expansion of the European Union to date. It has also been seven years since Slovenians have been granted the opportunity to take on posts within the EU institutions as Slovenian EU officials or Slovenian Eurocrats. How can life stories or biographical narratives aid us in research focused on this first generation of Slovenian Eurocrats? What can they tell us about the shape of contemporary European integration processes? The authors in the following pages will identify the key theoretical and methodological issues that researchers face when engaging integration as a social phenomenon. Secondly, they will assess the extent to which biographical narratives as an ethnographic tool can aid us in analyses of Europeanization.¹ Finally,

¹ We wish to stress that the use and study of biographical narratives in social science research is quite well-developed (though less so in anthropology), and the state of affairs in this arena transcends the boundaries of the analytical discussion we elaborate here. In the context of this article we are dealing with the ethnographic significance of life stories or biographical interviews as a tool for exploring our specific research questions. We wish to mention here in particular the volume edited by Jurij Fikfak, Frane Adam and Detlef Garz (2004) and published by the Scientific Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, which discusses a range of qualitative methods, including the role of biographical narrative as a mode of qualitative research (see Kazmierska 2004). Furthermore, in this article we are also dealing primarily with our experience employing the BNIM method (Wengraf 2008).

the authors will present the concept of living long distance that best characterizes the grounded experiences of the first generation of Slovenian Eurocrats living in Brussels.

The discussion that will unfold below is based on three years of research and was conducted for a project focused on members of this first generation of Slovenian Eurocrats working in the EU institutions in Brussels as a way of studying a strand of Europeanization from the ground up.² It was an interdisciplinary, albeit primarily ethnographic research project that included the collection and analysis of biographical interviews and narratives in accordance with the BNIM method. During the course of the research project, the researchers conducted extended, unstructured biographical narratives or life stories with approximately 50 Slovenian Eurocrats.

By Eurocrats we refer to the heterogeneous group of Slovenians working across the EU institutions based in Brussels: the European Commission, the European Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee, and the Committee of the Regions. Among this first generation, we have also included those employed at the Slovenian Permanent Representation of the European Union who represent an important group of so-called national Eurocrats -- those who are based in member states but are involved in the daily operation of the European Union.³ In so doing we not only agree with those researchers that argue the significance of these social actors in the everyday operation of the European Union; furthermore, we consider them to play an important role in shaping the postnational landscape in which Slovenian Eurocrats operate.

THE ISSUE OF INTEGRATION AND THE LIMITS OF THE EU BUBBLE

Anthropological research is traditionally carried out in small, bounded locales that are amenable to participant observation, a research methodology that requires the researcher to spend time on a daily basis with his informants, participating and observing in a range of activities of the cultural group under focus. A number of renowned researchers have carried out such localized research within the EU institutions themselves (including Abélès 1992, Bellier 2000, MacDonald 1997, Shore 2000, Thedvall 2006) and in socially important locales linked to the operation of the EU in Brussels, which together form what is often referred to as the EU bubble. Such work has enabled anthropologists to gain insights into the everyday practice of the heterogeneous

² The Anthropology of European Integration was conducted by Tatiana Bajuk Senčar and Jeffrey David Turk; it ran from 2007 to 2010 and was funded by the Slovenian Research Agency of ARRS (J6-9245). See Bajuk Senčar (2009, 2010, 2011) and Turk (2009 and 2011) for more discussions of research results.

³ For more anthropological research on national Eurocrats see Geuihen, Hart, Princen and Yesilkagit (2008) and Thedvall (2006), among others.

culture of the EU institutions. Anthropologists rightly argue the necessity of grounded ethnographic research and the analytical significance of exploring the agency of social actors in specific contexts that become then fieldsites for research. It is not possible to research the experiences of Slovenian Eurocrats without taking into account the EU bubble, the concrete geographic location in which Slovenian Eurocrats live their daily lives and construct their social worlds. However, in light of the reality of globalization and the sorts of phenomena that anthropologists explore within this broader context, the significance of locality and groundedness in the case of integration must be analytically reassessed.

This does not however mean that the EU bubble as a social phenomenon is analytically insignificant. Both researchers, having lived for long periods in Brussels, can attest to this and to the fact that one can come across persons who can live in the bubble for years and do not live fully in the city of Brussels in which the EU institutions are located. The EU bubble can be understood as mapped onto part of Brussels's urban landscape. The majority of the EU institutions are situated in what is considered the EU quarter, where Eurocrats spend their long working days and a significant deal of their leisure time. In addition, the EU bubble can be understood as a physical manifestation of a social group whose profession operates as a social distinction.⁴ Eurocrats are recognized as a social group by the remaining residents of Brussels, a group of persons distinguished from other residents by, among other things, their high salary. The argument that these high salaries of the Eurocrats have raised real estate prices in Brussels for the rest of its residents is something one hears so often that it has become virtually common urban sense. Thus for the remaining residents of Brussels, Eurocrats play an important role in shaping Brussels's urban/real estate landscape. In addition, the children of EU officials normally attend one of the four existing European schools in Brussels that exist primarily as schools for children of Eurocrats, and these schools have their distinct schedule of school holidays. One of our informants, who worked in another EU agency in one of the member states, explained how the social and physical contours of this bubble can become even more pronounced in other cities across Europe. In these cases, agencies are built in geographically discrete locations, and one can even observe the emergence of professional Eurocrat families in which employees have numerous family members (even of different generations) working within the same agency.

It is thus not surprising that one is tempted to reify the EU bubble when researching Eurocrats and the EU institutions. However, staying within the EU bubble is not necessarily an effective analytical strategy when researching the issue of integration. From an anthropological point of view, integration is a complex phenomenon to study

⁴ There are approximately 22.000 persons working in the European Commission, 7.600 persons working in the European Parliament and 3.400 persons working in the European Council. This adds up to approximately 33.000 persons in a city of little more than a million inhabitants.

since by definition integration implies exchange, flux, and the transgression of boundaries, all attributes that are not necessarily associated with culture as a traditional object of anthropological field research. In the case of Slovenian Eurocrats who take on positions within the EU institutions, integration also presupposes migration and travel. Thus exploring integration implies exploring many of the quintessential phenomena that characterize our globalized world.⁵

In addition, integration does not necessarily refer to a neutral process but instead to an agonistic or contested one. The parties involved may have not only different but potentially contesting interests, agendas and priorities that each strives to realize during the integration process; however, these interests, agendas and priorities are considered such common sense that they become depoliticized or even elided in the processes that comprise integration. It is therefore the task of analyst to identify and to maintain a critical distance from all these integration agendas while at the same time engaging these visions in order to shed light on the ways in which interested parties use them to integration dynamics. If the analyst fails in this regard, a dominant ideology of integration may uncritically accepted as social truth instead of as social construction and numerous social actors and groups are literally written out of accounts of integration. Failure to maintain critical engagement can lead to two analytical dangers in the study of integration: the negation of agency and the presumption of cultural essentialism.⁶

The negation of agency in this case can result from the assumption of a »clean slate«, where previous identity and social formation of social actors is not considered to inform the way that these same actors make cultural sense of their experiences when making a space for themselves in a new institution. The aim of the EU institutions when training new recruits is to aid these persons to become EU officials, to attain a certain level of professional expertise and a particular identification with EU institutional culture, so to speak. If one takes into account the initial training that Eurocrats undergo, this also includes inculcating them with a certain attitude towards the multiculturalism that is the identifying feature of the staff of the EU institutions. Providing training to “aid” EU officials so they may understand and properly engage this multiculturalism at the level of institutional culture insofar as it informs workplace interactions is the extent to which EU official discourse taking into account identity and difference at the level of individual officials. Agency is accorded to EU officials only in terms of the degree to which they “adapt” to EU institutional culture norms.

⁵ Here our research depends heavily on the extensive opus in anthropological research that deals with the global dimension of today's world (Appadurai 1996, Ferguson and Gupta 1997, Tsing 2000, among others) as well as that research that deals with the consequences this has for anthropological research methods (among others Amit 2000 and Marcus 1998).

⁶ The use of the term critical engagement is inspired by Anna Tsing's (2000) approach to globalist projects and discourse.

Engaging integration solely from the point of view of the EU institutions in effects flattens understandings of Europeanization given that the negation of agency also implies shifting analytical attention away from cultural difference despite a formal inclusion of multiculturalism in integration discourse. How does one account for cultural difference on the part of the persons joining the EU institutional network?

The second analytical danger, that of cultural essentialism, can make itself felt when reducing processes of Europeanization to involve simply a definitive movement from one culture to another -- a shift of allegiances, if you will. While in the early stages of research on the EU institutions, anthropologists were keen on shedding light on the administrative culture of the institutions themselves, later investigations in anthropology as well as across the social sciences has documented and analyzed the heterogeneity of administrative cultures across the EU institutions. Yet this documented heterogeneity seems to be often elided in theories of integration or socialization, which may run the danger of subsuming this documented heterogeneity into a presumed, common EU culture whose shared values and code of conduct are to be internalized by its members. Sociologist Gerard Delanty (2000) refers to a similar presupposition in what he terms the »myth of cultural cohesion« -- i.e., that cultural cohesion is a prerequisite to social integration -- common in integration theories. According to Delanty, the prevalence of cultural cohesion in theories of supranational integration such as that of the European Union is based on particular conceptualizations of the nation-state and on essentialist views of culture. While recognizing the differences in levels of cultural cohesion in both cases cited above, homogenous or essentialized views of culture can lead to shifting one's focus away from the specificity of integration processes on the ground to only an image of integration itself. In the case of the EU institutions, this means that socialization is equated with integration into a presumed common administrative culture whose shared values and code of conduct are to be internalized by its new and established members. In addition, this can also result in the essentialization of the nationality of Eurocrats themselves.

For us the key to maintaining a critical distance from such analytical dangers has been by focusing on individual social actors who experience instances of socialization on a daily basis. In our research, we thus aimed to develop a means to capture all the dimensions of integration processes that were relevant for Slovenians. In order to do so, we began by applying the anthropological principle of focusing on ground-level, everyday experiences of particular social actors as a means of shedding light on the emerging reality of integration through observation and narrative. Yet upon conducting initial interviews we came to realize that in order to understand how Slovenians as Slovenians make a space for themselves within the EU institutions we could not limit ourselves to a focus on the activities and experiences that occur within the physical limits of the EU institutions themselves. This would be an example of the issue of

the negation of agency or the presumption of the blank slate. We felt that this would mean, to paraphrase Arjun Appadurai (1996), to incarcerate, or limit them in time and space in a fashion that would not allow for the potential scale and dimension of context that they may invoke in their identity construction. Our goal -- ethnographically speaking -- was to understand how Slovenians, who had recently arrived in Brussels made cultural sense of their experiences within the EU institutions. As Thedvall (2006) employs what she terms pendulum movements to trace the links between the geographical movements of national Eurocrats and their shifting sense of identity, we wished to define the field in such a manner so that we as ethnographers could trace the contours of the agency with which Slovenian Eurocrats constructed a sense of self through practice and narrative. In what terms do they narrate these experiences, in what terms do they express senses of belonging and dislocation, particularly in relation to the EU institutions? These narratives, understood in the broader cultural context of their life histories, will provide us with the analytical basis for defining the criteria in accordance to which one can elaborate a sense of integration for our Slovenian interlocutors.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVES

Thus we made an analytical and methodological decision that transformed our project into a multi-site research project, employing a strategy described by George Marcus (1998) as "follow the life or biography". Such a strategy entails prioritizing the life history, activities and narratives of social actors under study to define the social and geographical boundaries of one's fieldsite. These will in turn serve as a "guide to the delineation of ethnographic space within systems shaped by categorical distinctions that may make these spaces otherwise invisible. These spaces ... are shaped by unexpected or novel associations among sites and social contexts suggested by life history accounts" (Marcus 1998:94).

Collecting life histories encourages one's interlocutors to relate a variety of identity constructions as they recount the different stages of their lives. Ideally this would also include them placing their experiences in the EU institutions in the context of their life experiences in a manner that makes cultural sense to them. A narrative of this kind not only would provide researchers with a cultural account of a social actor's life but also the cultural logic that underlies the way that our interlocutors define themselves as Slovenians, as professionals and as Eurocrats across different social contexts. This sort of narrative provides a crucial counterpoint to observing Slovenian Eurocrats in action within the formal and informal contexts within the physical boundaries of the institutions themselves, giving us important insights into the range of factors that inform their sense of identity, their sense of identification with their workplace, and

thus also their sense of integration. Analyzing these shifting strategies of identification and the factors that underlie them provide the base criteria outlining the dynamics of integration as ground-level experience as opposed to abstract theory. How would Slovenians define our field of research for us through our narratives?

Within the context of this project we decided to collect biographical narratives using an open-narrative interview technique based in large part on the BNIM method (Biographical-narrative-interpretative method).⁷ Open-narrative interviews are characterized by the fact that they allow or require the interviewee to give their own form and sequence to their response to an initial, carefully worded question posed by the interviewer. This initial question requires the interviewee to improvise a coherent narrative on a broad subject -- the subject of their life, a task that requires him or her to quickly make a selection of significant events to string together according to a logic that they employ to structure their narrative. This method provides a strict methodology of open-narrative questioning for the interviewer, a methodology that is intended to allow the interviewee to structure their own narrative as freely as possible. The interview ideally has three phases. The first is the open-narrative phase, during which the interviewee responds to the initial question without any interventions on the part of the interviewer. Phase two begins once the interviewee has concluded his or her narrative, and during this session the interviewer may pose questions only concerning the themes brought up by the interviewee in order to encourage the interviewee to deepen certain aspects of his or her narrative. In the third phase, the interviewer may pose some concluding questions concerning issues not brought up by the interviewee.

EUROPEAN STORIES

The first generation of Eurocrats of any country represent a singular challenge to researchers because members of this group do not have the strongly established paths or models of operation at their disposal to aid them in attaining a position within the EU institutions. Persons from old member states benefit from the existence of multiple generations of EU officials from their home countries as well as an established infrastructure and set of social networks. One also has in the case of certain older member states even successive generations of EU officials in individual families. In such countries being a Eurocrat has become an recognized profession as any other. This differs substantially from the case of those persons who are among the first professionals who take on positions from new member states. While of course they have the same aids and the same infrastructure of the EU institutions themselves that is at the disposal of all potential applicants, they do not have the benefit of informal networks,

⁷ For more on the BNIM method please see Wengraf 2008.

cultural infrastructure or mentors from their own state. In a manner of speaking one can liken our informants to bricoleurs as understood by Claude Levi-Strauss, persons who manufacture a particular professional path from a number of disparate elements, skills as well as sets of social contacts.

Upon transcribing the interviews, the analysis of these life stories centered around a profile that we created for each informant. In this profile we sketched out the life story the informant related to us and the experiences around which the informant structured their story. We identified all the narrations of travel and change, both in the geographical and social sense, that brought the informant to their present position. Furthermore, we identified all the referential groups, cohorts or networks the informant mentioned through the course of the narrative, and in so doing began to create a system of categorization for our range of informants among Slovenian Eurocrats. We then searched for links between these factors and the narrated shifts in identity we found in the person's life story. Our aim in compiling these profiles was to shed light on links between the structure of each biographical narrative, key events, and geographical shifts as well as shifts in identity. When these links (or the lack thereof) were identified, we then focused on the system of coding and categories, the cultural logic that informants employed to render their life story coherent.

The purpose of compiling these profiles of our informants and their life stories was to explore their European stories. It is important to stress here even though our group of informants was extremely heterogeneous, each of them had -- to differing degrees -- significant European life stories that began before employment in the EU, some of them even having built up a significant professional experience linked with the EU that had taken place long their EU employment. Here I will mention the case of one of our informants. This person first came to Brussels in 1995 to participate in preparations for potential accession state countries as a civil servant, where the person working from 1994 to 1999. This was one of the first such events for potential accession state countries in this person's field of specialization, and it was the first such event to which the ministry in which this person was employed sent a representative, as it had only begun to organize a team to deal with accession issues. Upon accession, this person continued working on the so-called screening process through 1999. During this time this person also completed a Master's Degree, and the master's thesis dealt with Slovenia's accession to the EU. In the year 2000, this person moved to Brussels to work as a consultant for an international non-profit organisation connecting business and research communities in Slovenia with the EU institutions as well as other public and private bodies at the EU level. In the year 2003, this person then returned to the Slovenian civil service to only then be sent to Brussels to work at the Slovenian Permanent Representation to the EU to help in the initial preparations for Slovenia's Presidency. During this period, this person took the concours and in early 2007 assumed a position in the European Commission.

While such a professional history is not representative for the majority of our interlocutors, it does highlight the fact that our informants' European stories extend (sometimes extensively) before integration. A number of our informants with similar professional experiences to the person mentioned above now work in the middle to high level positions accorded to Slovenians across the EU institutions. We do not find among our interlocutors persons who apply for entry level jobs in the EU institutions upon finishing college with no previous experience or links to the EU or the EU institutions. Even those persons who came to work as administrative assistants that we spoke to held previous jobs in Slovenia that were linked to the European Commission, and it was their coworkers or supervisors who encouraged them to apply. The only persons who could be considered exceptions to this rule are the alumni of the College of Europe (at least one quarter of our interlocutors are alumni of the College of Europe) who did apply for the concours upon finishing their degrees.

Upon assessing these profiles, we realized that our interlocutors had through the course of their academic and professional career experiences constructed an autonomous set of contacts and relationships. By autonomous we mean that these are relationships that are linked to a particular person, and that these links and ties inform the way that this person makes a space for themselves in a new place. We can observe through the life and career histories of our informants a life and career history that suggests a progression between work in Ljubljana and/or work in Brussels, though not, to use Renita Thedvall's term, through pendulum movements. Here we are not only referring to the travel between two or more different locations but the fact that this person would always shift positions or roles with each geographic shift. These geographic shifts also as social shifts as a person becomes embedded in additional networks and sets of contacts through time upon taking up their present position in Brussels.

LIVING LONG DISTANCE

What happens to the complex positioning of our informants and upon their establishment within in EU institutions as Eurocrats? How does their positioning shift and what vision of integration emerges? Despite the wide range of experiences recounted by our informants, we would argue that the most accurate way to categorize this vision was in effect described by one of our informants as living long distance. This is akin to the concept of simultaneity argued by Levitt and Glick Schiller in migration studies, which refers to a transnational way life in which persons in essence maintain ties to the social world he or she leaves behind. Living long distance implies that our informants continue to remain embedded in an albeit continually shifting set of networks and that this embeddedness is evident in the understanding of their own identity as well as in their daily life. For example, upon beginning a biographical interview and asking

someone to tell us their life story, one of our informants prefaces her life story with the following words: “In essence a lot of factors came into play in my decision to come here, because I grew up in a family in which the parents worked abroad, so that maybe this was already a factor, knowing that going abroad is an alternative, that it is not ... an option that is closed off but that it is possible and that one can ... live long distance and be linked together.” (HU transcript) Another expression of an analogous perspective can be found in the words of another one of our interlocutors: “I do not have problems with this, I fit in quickly and now if someone asks me, where home is for me, right, where home is um, yes, that is literally where my bags, my suitcases are, this is a very relative concept.” (BZ transcript).

We have among our interlocutors a range of forms of living long distance. There are a few cases of persons who are literally living long distance -- meaning that during the week they live in Brussels and on the weekends they go home, where their families or significant others await them. This is a more common practice for certain Eurocrats from member-states neighboring Belgium, where distance is not that much of an issue. On the other end of the spectrum, you have persons who have come to Brussels and married Belgians, forming personal ties outside the narrow bounds of the EU bubble in Brussels but also forging a connection between these personal ties and the networks that link them to Slovenia. For the most part this implies that persons who even before moving to Brussels lived to varying degrees embedded in transnational or European networks, and that these networks serve to outline the social and geographic landscape in which they live and operate.

Collecting biographical narratives and creating profiles with which we were able to trace out the social landscapes that our interlocutors helped create enabled us to address certain ethnographic difficulties that we experienced in the field and that initially hindered our research. The first of these difficulties was the extent to which our interlocutors were dispersed across the EU institutions. There are approximately 400 Slovenians among the 33.000 Eurocrats working in Brussels, and these Slovenians are scattered across the different directorates, agencies and institutions of the EU.⁸ The fact that the work experiences of Slovenians in such a situation varied so widely made it difficult to compare their everyday work situations. Gathering and analyzing biographical narratives enabled us to identify certain connections that we were then able to explore further ethnographically. Another important issue was that of individualism. As mentioned earlier, our interlocutors did not have existing networks of other Slovenians or even Slovenian mentors at their disposal upon their arrival in Brussels. Instead they fashioned their own career path and structured their narratives strongly in terms of

⁸ The only Slovenians that work with other Slovenians are the Slovenian translators employed in the major institutions of the EU. In such cases you have as many as 30 Slovenians working together in a single unit. Small groups of Slovenians also work together in the cabinets of Slovenian MEPs. However, most of the Slovenians we spoke to did not work on a daily basis with other Slovenians.

individualism and professionalism. The material that we gathered through these interviews enabled us to critically engage Slovenian Eurocrats as complexly positioned social actors as well as their narratives of individualism and professionalism.

There are a number of factors that may affect the general validity of the living-long-distance model of Europeanization. If we look back to Slovenia's accession to the European Union, one is reminded of the fact that, in essence, a relatively short period of time has elapsed. Slovenians who have become Eurocrats have had a relatively short time to make a space for themselves in the EU institutional framework. Is it possible that the living long-distance approach linked to the lack of time that Slovenians have had to settle in? Or are they in essence developing a specifically European or transnational way of living that reflects the contours of the new European social reality? Given the general validity of this model despite the range of variety informants' stories we would argue that living long distance is a generally valid model of Europeanization as it seems to apply in the cases of persons with varying levels of European experience before becoming EU officials. We would argue that living long distance is not simply a reflection of the short period that these Slovenians have spent in the EU institutions expressed in narrative, although this thesis will be tested over time.

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PO SLEDEH EVROPSKIM ZGODBAM ANTROPOLOŠKA RAZISKAVA ŠTUDIJA EVROPSKE INTEGRACIJE

Minilo je sedem let, odkar je Slovenija z devetimi drugimi državami iz srednje in vzhodne Evrope postala članica Evropske unije in bila na ta način udeležena pri dozvaj največji širitvi Evropske unije. S tem imajo Slovenci že sedem let imajo priložnost, da se kot evrokrati zaposlujejo v ustanovah Evropske unije. Do katere mere so lahko življenjske zgodbe oz. biografski narativni intervjuji uporabni kot učinkovito analitično orodje pri raziskavah prve generacije slovenskih evrokratov? Kaj nam lahko takšne pripovedi povedo o podobi sodobnih evropskih integracijskih procesov? V pričujočem prispevku avtorja razbirata osrednja teoretska in metodološka vprašanja, s katerimi se spoprijemajo raziskovalci, ki preučujejo integracijo kot družbeni pojav, ter ocenjujeta, do katere mere lahko življenjske zgodbe oz. biografski pripovedi služijo kot etnografsko orodje pri analizah evropeizacije. Ob etnografski obravnavi položaja slovenskih evrokratov avtorja predstavita alternativo integraciji v konceptu »živeti na daljavo«, ki najboljše opiše usakdanje izkušnje slovenskih evrokratov v Bruslju.

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