

Intercultural relations between the Slovene national minority and the majority population in Italy after the independence of Slovenia

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Abstract: The socio-political changes which took place after the fall of the Berlin Wall had an effect on intercultural relations between the Slovene national minority and the majority population living in the Friuli Venezia Giulia region in Italy in terms of the increased prestige of Slovene culture and language in this area. An improved intercultural dialogue encouraged more members of the majority population to learn Slovene or enrol their children in the Slovene medium and bilingual Slovene-Italian educational system. At the same time, the Slovene national minority is not at all well equipped for the integration of non-Slovene speakers and learners in its educational system as well as in the community itself.

Key words: Berlin Wall, education, Friuli Venezia Giulia, intercultural relations, Italy, Slovene national minority

Introduction

The central research question of this paper is how the main transformations concerning the intercultural relations between the Slovene national minority and the majority population living in the Friuli Venezia Giulia (FVG) region of Italy affected the Slovene national minority in terms of linguistic and cultural expression in the traditional Slovenophone settlement area following certain relevant socio-political changes as a result of the fall of the Berlin Wall. According to Boileau, Strassoldo & Sussi (1992: 12, 36–37) national minority groups such as the Slovene national minority in Italy can be defined as non-dominant minorities who live in an environment governed by the dominant majority (in this case, namely the Italian national majority). The authors argue that ethnic identity and language are both fundamental criteria which determine the power relations in a society or state. Intercultural relationships can be thus defined in terms of power between these dominant and non-dominant social groups. These groups recognize each other as different on the basis of their history, language and culture. They enjoy cultural autonomy based on the separate structure of organizations and institutions aiming to maintain their respective ethnic and linguistic communities. Minorities possess varying degrees of socio-political power and therefore also different possibilities of articulating and pursuing their collective interests in the processes of socio-political decision-making (Boileau & Sussi, 1981; Bufon, 2004; Nečak Lük 1998; Roter, 2005). This is a central issue in diversity management related to the public use of minority languages in addition to the official language in nationally, culturally and linguistically mixed or multicultural and multi-national environments consisting of several historically present national and linguistic groups such as the cross-border area between Italy and Slovenia.

The phase after the fall of the Berlin Wall was characterized by a transition from “conflict to harmony” of the Italo-Slovene cross-border and intercultural relations (Bufon & Minghi, 2000:119). The democratization and successful political and economic “story” of Slovenia (Bufon & Gosar,

2007: 165; Ramet, 1998) as well as its European integration contributed to a more relaxed socio-political atmosphere where minority rights are discussed within the frame of European and Italian national and local legal provisions (Vidau, 2013, 2015a). In addition, the communication between the Slovene national minority with its kin state of Slovenia is no longer seen as a way of changing political borders, but as a contribution in reducing their effects and implementing integration processes (Bufon & Gosar, 2007: 163). According to Rigo and Rahola (2007: 82), this regional redefinition included multilevel changes: border transformations on a regional level, domestic political factors which directly involved the Slovene minority condition on an internal level and the European Union's integration and enlargement process and cross-border cooperation policies on a broader European level.

The "normalization" of the Italian-Slovene cross-border relationship brought a more spontaneous intercultural coexistence with cooperation activities in different fields (science, education, trade, technology, etc.) and in many projects financed by the EU (e.g. INTERREG projects) and local authorities. O'Dowd (2002: 27-32) defines cross-border interaction as a "new symbolism of open borders and cooperative action" which may create a cross-border "we-feeling" or a sense of common identity as the restoration of cross-border links facilitates the (re)generation of social capital and trust. Favretto (2004: 169) talks of a "rediscovery of the Mitteleuropean legacy" in the 1990s with a revival of historical links and commonalities with ex-Habsburg countries and a new perception of Central European countries as inclusive in Europe. She argues that especially in Trieste, it represented a desire and aspiration to open a new chapter in the life of the city. Still, Bufon and Gosar (2007: 173) point to evidence of various limits, such as the lack of proper infrastructure (lack of transportation corridors and large urban centres) and institutional decision-making to support cross-border communication (i.e. a forum for cooperation between municipalities of the border area, other common social, economic, and cultural institutions, etc.). Nevertheless, if the micro-level is taken into consideration, a high number of ethnically mixed

marriages, widespread kinship networks on both sides of the border, everyday interethnic contacts, and daily migration for work, shopping, school, or informal socializing are characteristic of this cross-border area (Sedmak, Mikolič & Furlan, 2007: 204).

Bufon (1993: 235) underlines that the border population tend to maintain the traditional cultural and social links often rooted in the relatively stable period preceding the appearance of the border. The whole Upper Adriatic region is, according to the author (2002: 177), an area with rather stable geographical and demographic features and long-lasting spatial and social relations: while political borders moved considerably, people and their cultures did not. In the contemporary political framework this border represents a zone of contact more than a line of separation (Bufon 1993: 239). Still, this situation of contact can produce both conflict and coexistence, depending on the political function it assumes (Bufon 2002: 177).

The cross-border region between Italy and Slovenia can be considered an example of how European integration works after the collapse of the bipolar system and a “real laboratory of studying contemporary geo-political transformations” (Bufon & Minghi, 2000: 119). Bufon and Gosar (2007: 161) highlight that Europe is facing the challenge of integrating the many nation-states interests into one operational system which is not an easy task as Europe is still the homeland of nationalism and the continent where political borders and diverse territorial and cultural identities are interrelated.

This area also provides an interesting illustration of some apparently paradoxical processes. Firstly, Bufon and Minghi (2000: 119) argue that the greater the conflict created by the political partition of a previous homogeneous administrative, cultural and economic region, the greater the opportunities for such a divided area to develop into an integrated cross-border region in the longer run. Moreover, cross-border cooperation and integration challenged the established practices between

the different local ethnic groups which had previously lived quite separately (Bufon, 2002: 178). New forms of micro-nationalism and other conservative attitudes of “self-preservation” may come up as a reaction to a more intensive communication between them (Bufon, 2002: 178).

Methodology

The question of how the above mentioned socio-political transformations after the fall of the Berlin Wall affected the Slovene national minority in the FVG region regarding the use of the Slovene language in the regional school system and among the majority population will be argued using two socio-linguistic indicators: the changes in the ethnic and linguistic background of youth attending kindergartens and schools with Slovene as the medium of instruction (Slovene medium schools) and the bilingual kindergarten and school with Slovene and Italian as the medium of instruction (bilingual Slovene-Italian kindergarten and school) and data regarding the Slovene linguistic courses for adults in the FVG region. Both of these show an increased prestige in the Slovene language among the majority population compared to the past. Moreover, relevant and still unresolved sociological features regarding how to improve a minority friendly environment in the Slovene speaking area in the FVG region will be illustrated, such as the perceptions of discrimination and inequality of Slovene language and culture in the public dimension as well as the challenge of teaching Slovene language in schools with Italian as medium of instruction (Italian medium schools).

The paper is based on an analyses of the relevant scientific literature regarding the above mentioned themes. Particular attention is dedicated to the most recent empirical studies. These studies were done mainly in the Slovene related environments in the FVG region, such as Slovene medium and bilingual Slovene-Italian kindergartens and schools or organisations offering Slovene language courses for adults, or among

individuals belonging to the Slovene national community. Some of these studies include a comparison with the Italian national community living in Slovenia and Croatia. On the contrary, there are few studies on the theme of intercultural relations between minority and majority communities in the FVG region conducted among the majority population or Italian medium schools. Thus, the paper will focus mainly on the case study of the Slovene national minority and its point of view.

The Slovene national minority in the Friuli Venezia Giulia region

The Slovene national community in Italy is a border-area national minority in the traditional sense of the term. Its traditional settlement area in the Friuli Venezia Giulia (FVG) region covers a total of 39 municipalities along the border with Slovenia (Bogatec, 2004). From a formal aspect, according to the list of municipalities drawn up on the basis of the Norms Concerning the Protection of the Slovene Linguistic Minority in Region Friuli Venezia Giulia (Law 38/2001), the presence of this community is documented in a more narrow territory of 32 municipalities in the provinces of Gorizia (Gorica), Trieste (Trst) and Udine (Videm or Viden) in the areas of Benecia (Benečija), Resia (Rezija) and Val Canale (Kanalska dolina).

Slovenes in the provinces of Trieste (Trst), Gorizia (Gorica) and Udine (Videm) have established a thriving network of activities, institutions and associations which focus mainly on cultural and sports activities in the framework of professional institutions or in grassroots associations, parishes and other centres (Kosic, Medeot & Vidau, 2013). Slovene medium kindergartens and schools have been set up in the provinces of Trieste (Trst) and Gorizia (Gorica) and a bilingual Slovene-Italian kindergarten and school centre in S. Pietro al Natisone (Špeter) in the province of Udine (Videm). Media communication in Slovene takes place at the level of public radio and television within the regional

headquarters of Italy's national public broadcasting company RAI and through various forms of print and online media. The Slovene language can be used in the local administration in official documents as well as in place names and road signs in the legally defined area. The Slovene national community also has its political representatives elected to various administrative and political bodies, such as the Italian Senate, the Regional Council of Friuli-Venezia Giulia and other provincial and municipal bodies. There are various legal provisions regulating the minority rights of this community deriving from the post-war international agreements and recent Italian laws. Among these, the most relevant is Law 38/2001 regarding the protection of the Slovene linguistic minority which regulates the different areas of interest related to the public use of the Slovene language and the Slovene medium and bilingual Slovene-Italian educational system in Italy.

Members of the Slovene national minority in Italy speak both standard Slovene, which is the state and official language in the Republic of Slovenia, as well as its various local dialects or variants (Janežič, 2004; Sussi, 1998). Moreover, they are all fluent in standard Italian and/or its local dialects. In the province of Udine (Videm) there are also examples of individuals who only speak a local Slovene dialect, but due to the lack of educational opportunity in the Slovene language, are not familiar with standard Slovene. They have since been given this opportunity through the establishment of a bilingual Slovene-Italian kindergarten and school centre in San Pietro al Natisone (Špeter) which first operated as a private school, but was subsequently incorporated into the state educational system.

Unfortunately, there are no current estimates regarding the number of members of the Slovene minority in Italy in the twenty-first century. According to the most recent population estimate from 2002, Italy is home to 95,000 members of the Slovene minority, a total of 100,000 speakers of Slovene and a total of 183,000 people who understand the language (Bogatec, 2004). There are considerable differences between the population estimates from the 1970s and the 1990s, according to which

members of the Slovene minority number between 46,882 and 96,000 (Sussi, 1998).

The history of Slovenes now living in Italy is closely tied to the history of the entire Slovene nation and to the history of the Slavic tribes who had settled in this area in the sixth century. The beginnings of a national formation can be traced back to the sixteenth century, to the period of the Protestant Reformation and Counter-Reformation which marked the consolidation of the Slovene language (Sussi 1998). Slovene national identity in the modern linguistic, social and political sense began developing, for the most part, in the nineteenth century during the period of European movements for the establishment of modern nations and nation states. At that time, the first Slovene reading clubs, societies, and political organizations were formed within the Austrian Empire in Trieste (Trst) and Gorizia (Gorica). For a short period of time between 1797 and 1866, the regions of Benecia (Benečija) and Resia (Rezija) were joined together with the rest of the Slovene settlement territory under the Habsburg Monarchy, but after that they were annexed to Italy.

The Slovene settlement area of Trieste (Trst), Gorizia (Gorica) and Val Canale (Kanalska dolina) was severely affected by the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire after World War I, which denoted a transition to Italian rule. This shift was followed by a period of forced assimilation which reached its peak during the Fascist period. What followed were various forms of violence launched against institutions, associations and representatives of the Slovene minority and other citizens of Slovene nationality (Stranj, 1992; Sussi, 1998). As a result, Slovenes had already begun developing forms of an illegal anti-Fascist resistance movement by the mid-1920s. From 1941 onwards, this movement found its outlet in the Liberation Front of the Slovene Nation under the auspices of the Yugoslav National Liberation Army, an anti-Nazi and anti-Fascist resistance movement. During the post-war period, the Slovene settlement area bordering Italy was divided into several political units. Benecia and Val Canale were immediately re-annexed to Italy. The area of Trieste (Trst),

Gorizia (Gorica) and Istria (Istra), on the other hand, was divided into two parts: Zone A comprising Trieste (Trst) and Gorizia (Gorica) came under Anglo-American administration and Zone B covering Istria (Istra) came under Yugoslavia (Stranj, 1992; Troha, 2003). With the Paris Peace Treaty of 1947, Gorizia (Gorica) was annexed to Italy and thus separated from its hinterland. As for Trieste (Trst), provisions were made for the establishment of the Free Territory of Trieste (Trst), which never actually came into effect. Trieste (Trst) in Zone A and part of Istria (Istra) in Zone B remained divided in this way until 1954, when under the London Memorandum an agreement was reached between the two parties, namely that Zone A with Trieste (Trst) would remain under Italy, and Zone B with Istria (Istra) would remain under Yugoslavia. This delineation was confirmed by the 1975 Treaty of Osimo concluded between Italy and Yugoslavia.

Interethnic tensions were not resolved despite the delineation of the border between Italy and Yugoslavia having been agreed upon at the international level between the two states and the Anglo-American Allies under the above mentioned agreements. The state border could not be perfectly in line with the ethnic border and thus did not satisfy the claims over these territories from various national groups. Ethnically mixed areas with a Slovene population on the Italian side of the border and with an Italian population on Yugoslavian territory remained as they were, thus provoking the need for proper legal protection of minority rights for both national minorities. This was partially resolved with the norms given by the London memorandum and its Special statute. The latter laid down a number of political and social rights for the Slovene minority in Italy, namely the right to use their language in interactions with administrative services and judicial authorities; the right to bilingual public signs and bilingual printed publications; the right to bilingualism in educational, cultural and other organizations; the right to public funding intended for these organizations; and the right to instruction in their mother tongue and the right to preserve the existing Slovene schools (Stranj, 1992; Troha, 2003). The territorial scope of these rights was limited only in the area of

the former Zone A which covered the present Province of Trieste (Trst). This meant that the Slovene population in the area of Gorizia (Gorica) and Udine (Videm) was in a different legal position. In the area of Gorizia (Gorica) certain acquisitions from the period of the Allied Military Government between 1945 and 1947 were preserved (e.g., the public use of Slovene language and bilingual signs in some municipalities with an entirely Slovene population). In the area of Udine (Videm), the Slovene population was not legally recognized until 2001, and until the adoption of the Protection Law 38.

In addition to the already complicated interethnic relations, the ideological and political dimension of the Cold War division between the democratic/capitalist and totalitarian/communist systems emerged and prevailed until the late 1980s. The Italo-Yugoslav border made up a part of the Iron Curtain, thus the issue of minority protection was consequently perceived as ideologically supporting the “enemy” living “inside” each state: the Slovenes in Italy because they were seen as supporters of the Yugoslav regime and the Italians from Istria, Fiume and Dalmazia as related to the previous fascist regime (Rutar, 2005). The Slovene community in Italy used to be in Italian understanding seen as a “Communist” and thus a potential threat to the “Italianità”, to European civilization and to the whole Western world (Kappus, 1995: 36; Mihelj, 2012: 280-282). Thus, it was almost impossible to treat the minority protection discourse outside the ideological contraposition until the recent geopolitical changes in the FVG region in the 1990s as a result of the end of the Cold War: the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the independence and democratic transition of Slovenia in 1991 and the EU integration process.

The linguistic background of the population attending the Slovene medium and bilingual Slovene-Italian kindergartens and schools in the FVG region

To present the transformations concerning the intercultural relations between the Slovene minority and the majority population in Italy, some data regarding the Slovene language in education in the FVG region must be considered. Education is fundamental for the preservation of minority languages as it is a vehicle of inter-generational transmission, vitality and modernization, not only of language but also of identity, and thus contributes to the maintenance and development of the minority community. Over the last 25 years the educational system with Slovene as the language of instruction as well as the bilingual Slovene-Italian kindergarten and school in Italy experienced a relevant shift from being the educational system for Slovene minority members (and thus minority language speakers only) to being an educational system promoting the learning of the Slovene minority language – which is also the official language of the neighbouring Republic of Slovenia – for the whole regional territory. Thus, the right to education in Slovene has, in practice, evolved from being a right belonging to minority members as legally guaranteed to an opportunity to learn Slovene for the any member of the population who choose to do so. If we consider children in their first year of schooling (aged six) enrolled in all elementary schools in the provinces of Trieste (Trst) and Gorizia (Gorica), 10 percent are enrolled in Slovene medium schools (data for the school year 2012–2013, Bogatec, 2015: 7). This being the case, Slovene medium and bilingual Slovene-Italian kindergartens and schools in the FVG region are the primary environment where one can observe intercultural relations as members of both the minority and majority population are in attendance there. The classroom can be an observatory of socio-cultural changes as the cultural, linguistic and ethnic changes can be detected in the cultural, linguistic and ethnic characteristics of the pupils and students (Bogatec & Zudič Antonič, 2012).

Diagram 1: Enrolment in Slovene medium and bilingual Slovene-Italian kindergartens and schools in Italy from 1990/1991 to 2014/2015 in the provinces of Trieste (Trst) and Gorizia (Gorica) and San Pietro al Natisone (Špeter) in the province of Udine (Videm) (Bogatec, 2015a)

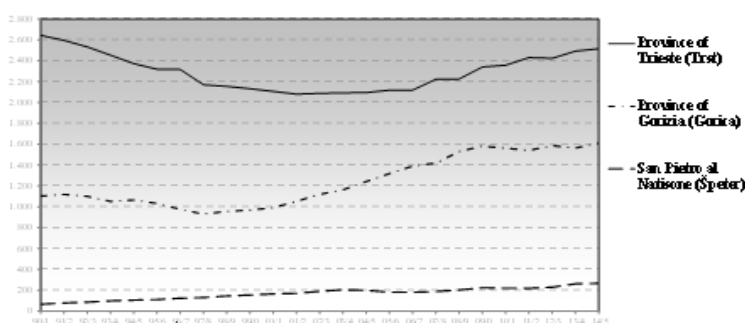
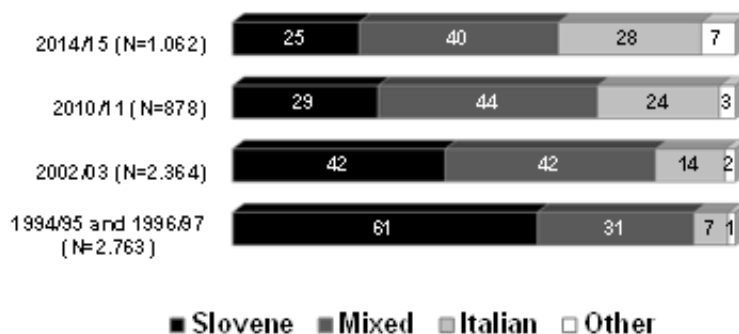


Diagram 1 illustrates the trends concerning the enrolment of children in Slovene medium kindergartens and schools in the provinces of Trieste (Trst) and Gorizia (Gorica) and in the bilingual Slovene-Italian kindergarten and school in San Pietro al Natisone (Špeter). The relevant socio-political changes after the fall of the Berlin Wall had an impact, particularly in the provinces of Trieste (Trst) and Gorizia (Gorica), not immediately, but in the long term (seven to fifteen years after) (Bogatec, 2015: 7–8). Just after 1990, the population decreased for some years. The positive effects of better inter-ethnic and cross-border relations can first be seen in the province of Gorizia (Gorica) where from 1997 onwards the

kindergarten and school population in Slovene schools consistently grew. Later, from 2001 onwards, the negative trend also stopped in the Slovene kindergartens and schools in the province of Trieste (Trst), where the population started to grow from 2006 onwards. The trend in the bilingual kindergarten and school in San Pietro al Natisone (Špeter) is different, as the population slightly but consistently increased from 1990 onwards.

The monitoring done by Bogatec (2015, 2015a) shows that the increased number of pupils in the above mentioned educational system is due to the enrolment of children from mixed Slovene-Italian families, Italian families or families with a migrant background, the latter mainly from the former Yugoslavian area, namely Serbs, Croats and Bosnians. From Diagram 2 it is evident that the share of children from Slovene families is half compared to that of the mid-nineties. The share of children from mixed Slovene-Italian families grew from the mid-nineties until 2003 and then remained stable, while the percentage of children from Italian families increased more than three times. Also, the number of children from migrant families grew. A recent study emphasizes that due to this situation the Slovene medium and bilingual Slovene-Italian educational system in the FVG region face relevant intercultural educational issues related to multi-linguistic and multi-ethnic classes and to proper intercultural educational approaches which are in some aspects similar to those intercultural issues faced by the Italian medium schools with a high presence of pupils from migrant families (Bogatec, 2014: 27).

Diagram 2: Ethnic background of pupils and students enrolled in Slovene medium and bilingual Slovene-Italian kindergartens and schools in Italy from 1994/1995 to 2014/2015 (Bogatec 2015a)



Similarly, the studies of Pertot (2014) regarding the ethnic and linguistic identity of students attending Slovene medium senior secondary schools in Italy illustrates that the share coming from mixed Slovene-Italian families and Italian families is higher than in the nineties. At the same time a recent study done by the author (Pertot, 2014: 46) concerning the use of Slovene and Italian languages among students in their last year in Slovene medium senior secondary schools in the provinces of Trieste (Trst) and Gorizia (Gorica) show that in the last decade, the percentage of students who declared themselves to be mother-tongue Slovene has decreased (-10 percent). However, Pertot (2014: 46) also mentions that three quarters of these students affirm that Slovene is their mother-tongue and Slovenes are their affiliation group. According to Pertot (2011: 38), this data confirms that “not just the border between Slovenia and Italy fell, but also the borders between the minority, Slovene community, and the majority,

Italian community". She claims that at least some members of the young generation experience new identity options, where the Slovene and Italian elements are in interaction. On the one hand it can be said that the Slovene minority group is evolving towards transculturality as, according to Sedmak (2009: 16, 2009a: 90–91) and Pertot (2014a) they tend to overpass the defined cultural borders and to bring together at least two cultures, their own and that of the environment where they live. The authors discuss "cultural hybridity" and "plural identities" which are characteristic for minority members and can coexist as well provoke internal tensions and contradictions. On the other hand, from other empirical studies it was found that young people attending Slovene medium schools in Italy (Pertot, 2014a: 80; Kotic, 2014: 99) as well as adult members of the Slovene national community in Italy (Sedmak, 2009: 218, 2009a: 90–91) mainly preserve an identification with Slovene culture and language and at the same time a traditionally local identification with the Slovene minority community (Slovene in Italy, member of the Slovene community) prevails which is also geographically defined (from Trieste-Trst, Charst-Kras, Gorizia-Gorica, etc.). This kind of identity tends to remain stable in the long term, as Pertot (2014: 79) observes among students of Slovene medium senior secondary schools in Italy in the period considered between 1989 and 2011.

From the above presented data it can be said that a positive socio-cultural and linguistic evolution of intercultural relations between the Slovene minority and majority populations in the FVG region is a process which gradually developed after the political changes at the beginning of the nineties and afterwards. The increased interest from Italian families in enrolling their children in kindergartens and schools with Slovene as the language of instruction is one of the indicators which suggests a more positive attitude towards the Slovene language (Brezigar, 2015: 156). According to Bogatec (2004: 31) this data can be interpreted as "a gradual bridging of the gap between the majority and minority population". Those parents interviewed who had enrolled their children in Slovene medium schools believe that it has a positive impact on a child's growth, such as the

development of openness and solidarity with other cultures and a sense of equality as well as cultural enrichment (Bogatec, 2008: 68).

The promotion of the use of the Slovene language also among children of mixed Slovene-Italian and non-Slovene families and their inclusion in the Slovene culture can help to preserve the features of the Slovene medium and bilingual Slovene-Italian educational system in Italy and thus of the minority itself (Bogatec, 2004: 31). Moreover, Jagodic (2015: 204) emphasizes that attracting potential new Slovene-language speakers can gradually slow down or even reverse the negative demographic post-war trends. The gaining of potential new speakers represents a path to follow in order to avoid the gradual disappearance and ultimately extinction of the Slovene minority in Italy (Brezigar, 2015: 163; Jagodic & Čok, 2013: 117).

There are, however, also various risks resulting from new forms of assimilation and the decrease in minority members and Slovene language speakers due mainly to a lack of strategies and policies appropriate for handling the new situation. Parents from Slovene families are concerned about the fact that this situation restricts the knowledge and the use of Slovene language, particularly in informal situations in the school as the use of Slovene tends to shift to Italian (Bogatec, 2008: 70). Indeed, the findings of a recent study suggest that Slovene medium and bilingual Slovene-Italian education do not result in a satisfactory linguistic reproduction of the Slovene minority in Italy (Brezigar, 2015: 157).

Moreover, various analyses underline that the proficiency level of Slovene is decreasing and that possibilities for using Slovene are diminishing due to multilingual communication which is making forays into the traditionally Slovene linguistic area, such as schools with Slovene as the language of instruction or Slovene sport associations (Bogatec, 2004: 31; Bogatec & Bufon, 2008: 68–69; Brezigar, 2015: 156–158). Similarly, data regarding the compulsory teaching of the Italian language on the Slovene part of the border indicates a very low level of proficiency (Čok,

2009, in Čok & Cavaion, 2015: 210). This can also be related to the fact that neighbouring languages, namely Slovene in Italy and Italian in Slovenia, suffer from a lack of prestige in the eyes of teenagers on both sides of the border between Italy and Slovenia (Furlan, 2002, in Čok & Cavaion, 2015: 209). Cavaion (2012, in Čok & Cavaion, 2015: 209) argues in her research that in the teaching practice of neighbouring languages, instruments and strategies in cross-border contacts among teenagers and schools should be improved in order to develop a positive attitude towards the learning of these languages and the support of intercultural dialogue.

However, according to recent empirical studies, the real problem is not the multilingual communication itself but the lack of any authority to administer and supervise a strategic approach towards educational issues (Bogatec, 2004: 31; Brezigar, 2015: 158). Opinion leaders among the Slovene minority in Italy interviewed by Brezigar (2015: 157–158) point out that the minority monolingual educational system in the provinces of Trieste (Trst) and Gorizia (Gorica) has not adequately dealt with the transition from teaching in the Slovene language (to mostly Slovene pupils or pupils from mixed marriages) to teaching the Slovene language (to a growing population of Italian and in some cases immigrant pupils). Such a situation needs the appropriate institutional and professional support for teachers and educators (Brezigar, 2015: 163) in order to develop teaching skills, proper teaching aids and materials for teaching Slovene to pupils and adults who are not familiar with the language (Brezigar, 2015: 157–158). Moreover, according to Jagodic (2015: 204), it is necessary to have a plan of Slovene-language learning for successful language acquisition as well as to develop the minority language towards revitalization and modernization. The vision of enlarging the traditional boundaries of the minority represents a major challenge for the Slovene minority living in the FVG region (Jagodic, 2015: 206). On the one hand, the traditional concept of ethnic communities has to evolve as this new socio-political frame requires that the Slovene language be addressed and marketed separately from the issues of identity (Pertot, 2007, in Jagodic, 2015: 206). On the other hand, there is also a resistance from the more conservative powers within the

same Slovene community in Italy who would like to maintain the ethnic and linguistic “purity” of the current speakers and traditional Slovene speaking environments (Jagodic, 2015: 206).

Another central question for the Slovene national community in Italy is the intercultural dimension of the private sphere represented by mixed families, where one of the partners is Slovene speaking and the other Italian speaking or a Slovene speaking person whose partner is of a migrant background. Sedmak (2009: 27) and Bogatec (2004: 32) highlight that the mixed marriage should be seen as a vehicle for the acquisition of minority members and not of assimilation as it once was considered in the past. They believe that these families can be potential vehicles of the values of Slovene culture as it is possible in a mixed marriage to preserve, transfer and thus propagate the Slovene language. For Sedmak the question is how to maintain diversity in the long-term as a good legal framework and an effective state support of the minority institutions is not enough. Indeed, Sedmak (2009: 27) discusses the vitality of the Italian national minority in Slovenia and Croatia that even if this minority has a good level of state support for their cultural and linguistic maintenance with a well-developed political rights and rights to use Italian in the public sphere, there is still the “natural historical and demographic negative trend” of the decrease in its members and assimilation with the majority population culture.

Learning and teaching Slovene as a second or foreign language among adults in the FVG region

The growing interest in learning the Slovene language and culture in the FVG region can be noticed also among adults. It can be considered another indicator of the growing prestige of the Slovene language in this Italian area after the fall of the Berlin Wall. From a recent study done on the participants and teachers of Slovene courses in the provinces of Trieste (Trst), Gorizia (Gorica) and Udine (Videm) a steep rise in the number of

Slovene language courses for adults organised both by public and private institutions is evident in the last twenty years (Jagodic & Čok, 2013). Between 2002 and 2012 there were 7.768 participants in these courses (Jagodic & Čok, 2013: 23). Jagodic and Čok (2013: 117) argue that “Slovenian is no more perceived and treated as a problem”, thus this can be interpreted as an indicator of better relationships between the Slovene minority and the majority population of the FVG region.

From the data regarding the ethnic background of adults attending Slovene language courses it emerges that there is a tendency among them to re-establish their connection with the Slovene language as many of them descend from Slovene families (Jagodic, 2015: 195). From the data it is evident that participants generally have at least one parent or grandparent who speaks/spoke Slovene, while others have a Slovene-speaking partner or Slovene-Italian bilingual partner. There are also many cases of learners who have at least one child enrolled in a preschool or school with Slovene as the language of instruction. The perception of Slovene as the language of the autochthonous minority is a common feature of the group of the participants surveyed, even if the main reason for attending a Slovene course is to learn the language of their neighbour on the other side of the border, namely the Republic of Slovenia (Jagodic & Čok, 2013: 27; Jagodic, 2013: 49, 118).

Nevertheless, the learning of Slovene among the majority population presents some problematic questions which require an answer. The above mentioned survey shows that the basic language courses do not, in practice, enable the participants to become fluent Slovene speakers (Jagodic & Čok, 2013). This is a basic question as the knowledge of the minority language should enable the majority population to “experience” the minority culture (Brezigar, Bešter, Medvešek & Žagar, 2012: 65–66). This is due to the system of teaching Slovene itself which should be improved. The current educational offer is rich in courses for beginners, however, there is a lack of intermediate and advanced level courses (Jagodic, 2015: 199). Thus, the linguistic competence acquired appears to

be relatively low. The analysed experiences of teachers outline other various limits such as the need for accreditation of the institutions and the issuing of certificates of language knowledge as well as a lack of training of the teaching staff and lack of a broader promotion of the Slovene language courses at the local level (Mezgec, 2013: 118).

Moreover, the participants in Slovene language courses experience a lack of opportunities to use Slovene in everyday life (Jagodic, 2015: 202). Even if these speakers have a conversation with Slovene minority members, the latter will often linguistically adapt to majority-language speakers, even when they are aware the latter are learning the minority language (Jagodic, 2015: 202). Paradoxically, the author evidences a more consistent use of Slovene in interactions with the citizens of Slovenia in comparison with the Slovenes in Italy. Thus, he suggests the importance of educating native speakers, especially members of the Slovene minority, to be more persistent in the use of the Slovene language with learners, even though they cannot speak the language fluently (Jagodic, 2015: 206). This is related mainly to the status of Slovene in the FVG region as a minority language, thus having traditionally the role of intragroup communication between the members of the minority community. Moreover, the presence of spoken and visual Slovene in public spaces is limited, even if the situation slightly improved due to Law 38/2001 on the protection of the Slovene minority (Vidau, 2013, 2015a). According to Brezigar (2015: 156), an increase in the interest in the minority language does not automatically result in an increase of minority language use. Paradoxically, she observes that more people are able to speak Slovene, but in practice, less actually do so.

The adoption of measures and standards of linguistic performance for both children in the educational system and adults attending language courses, and the establishment of an appropriate institutional and professional support for teachers and educators is, for Brezigar (2015: 163), a fundamental path. Similarly, Jagodic (2015: 205) emphasizes that the need to systematize the educational offer is urgent, for instance by establishing a centre for teaching Slovene as a second/foreign language.

How to improve a minority friendly environment in the FVG region

It can be said that the Slovene minority-majority population relations have certainly improved in the last 25 years due to the socio-political changes after the fall of the Berlin Wall. But other data indicates that more work should be done. The removal of the political, legal and physical barriers does not also mean the automatic cancellation of mental and political boundaries as emerged in an empirical study done among the population of the village of Škofije on the Slovene side of the border (Kralj & Renner, 2009: 57). These boundaries refer to the inter-ethnic relations between the minority-majority populations on each side of the Slovene-Italian border as well as between populations on the cross-border level.

Recent empirical studies illustrate that nationalistic and adverse positions of the majority population towards the Slovene minority still survive from the past (Sedmak, Mikolič & Furlan, 2007: 201; Rigo & Rahola, 2007: 86), which still support a sense of discrimination among the Slovene minority members (Medarič, 2009: 184). For the Italian-speaking community Fascism is taboo, minimized and basically repressed, which goes hand in hand with a non-perception of the Other, as emerged in some interviews with informants concerning identities on the Slovene-Italian border (Carli, Sussi & Baša, 2002: 50–51). Indeed, from the results of a study regarding ethnic identities in the FVG region, it emerged that on the one hand the majority of respondents (both of Italian and Slovene community belonging) support the integration of the minority culture in the Italian one, but on the other hand more than half (55 percent) of the respondents belonging to the majority population would experience no regret if they lived in a region without any minority (Segatti & Guglielmi, 2008: 77–79). However, a recent study shows that the perception of being discriminated against among students attending Slovene medium senior secondary schools in Trieste (Trst) and Gorizia (Gorica) has significantly decreased in the last decade, but it is still present among the half of the respondents (Vidau, 2015).

Moreover, Slovene minority members still express their concern about the inequality in the practice of using Slovene in public (in place names, public signs, documents, etc.) by public bodies in the legally defined Slovene speaking area (Kosic & Flego, 2008: 140; Medarič, 2009; Pertot, 2009: 201; Sedmak, Mikolič & Furlan, 2007: 203). In the areas where visible Italian-Slovene bilingualism is used in road signs, names of places and other public signs, the latter are often destroyed in acts of vandalism with Slovene names sprayed over, thus denigrating the expression of multilingualism. This concern about the public use of the mother-tongue can also be related to some features of the collective identity of the Slovene community. A study done by Sedmak (2009a: 72) describes it as characterized by a more intensive need to express their own national identity in the environment compared to the Italian community in Istria, while Medarič (2009: 113) notices a strong awareness of belonging to a minority community.

Members of the Slovene minority in Italy also experience a feeling of being closed off, a lack of interest and knowledge from the majority population towards their community (Kosic & Flego, 2008: 140; Medarič, 2009). In the province of Udine (Videm) there are some cases where certain local majority entities (ex. some majors of municipalities which are legally included in the Slovene speaking area) continue to engage in aggressive politics towards the minority component (Jagodic, 2015: 189). Some studies indicate that the Slovene national community in Italy is in fact less recognisable in the majority population environment than the Italian national community in the Slovene Istria (Medarič, 2009; Sedmak, 2009). The latter can be interpreted considering that a basic knowledge about the Slovene minority is almost entirely absent among the majority population (Vidali, 2009: 10–103). This is due to various factors. First, a one-way bilingualism characterises the Trieste (Trst) area compared with a two way bilingualism which characterizes the Slovene Istria border area (Čok & Cavaion, 2015: 216). Thus, the burden of bilingualism is still almost

exclusively carried by members of the Slovene community who are bilingual as they also speak at least one variant of Italian language, while members of the majority, with rare exceptions, usually do not even have a passive knowledge of the Slovene language (Jagodic, 2015: 189). Nevertheless, the bilingual competences and long-lasting trans-border relations of the Slovene community have as well been advantages in exploiting the border economy related to the service sectors and small business activities, as witnessed by the responses of participants in a study concerning the socio-economic situation in the FVG region (Rigo & Rahola, 2007).

Second, the Italian educational system does not provide for learning Slovene in the kindergartens and schools with Italian as the language of instruction. That being said, the situation is improving somewhat due to a bottom-up process of introducing the teaching of Slovene in some schools thank to the initiative of culturally aware parents and school directors and teachers. Slovene is taught as an optional study programme in two junior secondary schools with Italian as the language of instruction in the province of Trieste (Trst). Nevertheless, Čok and Cavaion (2015: 215) highlight that Slovene is at the very beginning of its introduction into the compulsory mainstream education system and not thus at all “well-equipped” from an organizational and methodological viewpoint. They also stress the importance of promoting tertiary socialization meant as “the development of competence to assess and compare one’s own experiences and values with those of other/foreign people, the turn from ethnocentrism and narrow identifications to ethno relativism, common values and the acceptance of differences existing between various groups” (Čok & Cavaion, 2015: 211).

Third, the institutional bilingualism is less than adequate, even though the public use of the Slovene language is regulated by several pieces of legislation arising from national and regional laws (Jagodic, 2015: 190). Indeed, especially in urban areas of Trieste (Trst) and Gorizia (Gorica) the

majority population has limited possibilities of coming into contact with the minority language (Jagodic, 2015: 190).

Fourth, the behaviour of the Slovene minority itself has to be taken into account. It tends to be closed towards the majority population, which indicators, are for example, the intensity of ethnically mixed partnerships and families as well as a tendency to have relationships inside the minority community (Sedmak, 2009: 210). This behaviour can help partly to its conservation, but not to its recognition in the broader society (Medarič, 2009: 121). Moreover, the less intensive contact between the minority and majority communities can be an indicator of discrimination and prejudices which can be seen in contemporary society in the form of avoiding contact with and maintaining distance from social groups such as linguistic minorities (Ule, 2005, in Medarič, 2009: 121). However, it is up to the minority community to self-promote in the wider environment with strategies, activities and actions aimed at building ties with centres of power as well as to promote the minority's unique cultural and linguistic heritage, as stated by Brezigar (2015: 163).

Conclusions

After the socio-political transformations brought on by the fall of the Berlin Wall in the FVG region and in the cross-border area between Italy and Slovenia one can observe better and more peaceful intercultural relations between the Slovene minority and majority population compared to that of the 20th century. It can be said that these relations have certainly improved in terms of quantity (e.g. number of adults attending Slovene courses, number of pupils enrolled in Slovene medium and bilingual Slovene-Italian kindergartens and schools) and quality (e.g. higher prestige of Slovene language, cooperation oriented political atmosphere). The analyses presented in the paper demonstrates that the Slovene national minority in the FVG region can now express its presence also through the

teaching of the Slovene language in the Italian medium educational system and among the majority population. Moreover, persons from the majority population have the chance and the choice to include Slovene language and culture in their cultural background. They can enrol their children in Slovene medium or bilingual Slovene-Italian kindergartens and schools as well as they can themselves attend a Slovene language course. Thus, all the previously mentioned social changes regarding the status of Slovene language and culture are paths which lead to an intercultural perspective of the regional territory. At the same time, other studies show that the Slovene national minority is not at all well equipped for the integration of non-Slovene speakers and learners in its educational system as well as in the community itself. Due mainly to a lack of strategies and policies appropriate for handling the new situation there is also a risk of developing new forms of assimilation due to the less than proficient learning of the Slovene language and thus a decrease in Slovene language speakers.

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