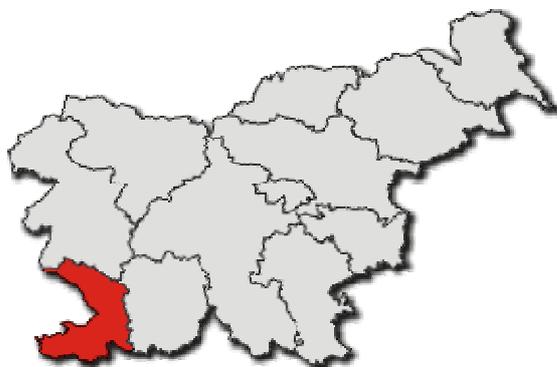


**EUROREG**  
**Regions, Ethnic Minorities and European Integration**

**Policy report on the Italian minority in Slovenian Istria**

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*Slovene Istria, where the Italian minority in Slovenia is settled, is part of the Littoral-karstic (Obalno-kraška) statistical region and part of the Primorska historical and geographical region.*

## **The Italian minority in Slovenian Istria**

Italians in Slovenia live in the border region adjacent to Italy (in the Primorska (Littoral) historical and geographical region and in the Obalno-kraška (Littoral-Karstic) statistical region). Although the eligible area of cross-border cooperation between Italy and Slovenia (Phare in the past and Interreg III A Italy – Slovenia for the present) also includes the Goriška statistical region on the Slovenian side of the border, there is not a substantial Italian community in this area. Within the structure of the ethnically mixed areas in Slovenian Istria (the Koper, Izola and Piran municipalities), the proportion of Italians in the total number of inhabitants is somewhat more pronounced only in the town of Strunjan/Strugnano (approximately 20%), while elsewhere it rarely exceeds 10% with the total percentage being under 5%. Most of the Italian minority in Slovenia – some 75% - live in urban centres, where they represent only a small portion of the population.

The state assigns to Slovenia's Italians (and Hungarians) the status of "ethnic/national community" and guarantees full legal protection of their collective and individual rights. According to 2002 census there were 2,258 members (0.11%) of the Italian minority living in Slovenia. Among the Italian population, there was at the beginning of the 1990s a large proportion of older people and only a small increase in the younger generation. The number of inhabitants who declared their mother tongue to be Italian is greater than the number of people who declared Italian ethnic affiliation (3,762 (0.2%) according to 2002 census). The decrease in ethnic identity affiliation in the period 1991-2002 would have been significantly lower if mother tongue was taken into account. In sum, the reduction of the Italian minority group cannot be explained only in terms of assimilation or emigration; methodological factors must be considered as well.

Following the constitutional changes within Yugoslavia in 1974 (i.e. greater autonomy of individual Yugoslav republics), the Italian community became socio-politically and independently organized within the framework of the newly established Self-Governing Interest Communities of Italian Nationality of Koper, Izola and Piran, and the Coastal Self-Governing Community of Italian Nationality. These organizations serve as an instrument for the protection of the special rights guaranteed to its minorities by the state. In the period of socialist Yugoslavia, the Italian Union (*Unione degli Italiani*), with its seat in Rijeka (Croatia), was a joint organization of the Italian communities in Slovenia and Croatia. Today it is registered as an association for the preservation and development of the Italian national culture and linguistic identity of the Italian national community. Its purpose is to maintain and foster relationships with the Italian community in Croatia and in the mother nation. It is registered both in Slovenia and Croatia, with seats in Koper and Rijeka.

As previously stated, members of the Italian community often define themselves as such merely on the basis of language. At the same time a high level of loyalty towards the Slovene state is apparent; they feel Slovene Istria to be their home. The presence of the Italian minority in Slovene Istria is made evident by bilingual public inscriptions, bilingual identity cards and passports, a high number of mixed marriages etc.

## **The EUROREG study of Italian minority in Slovenian Istria**

The policy report will point out the main findings and problems in particular, which occur in the case of the Italian minority living in Slovenia and should be taken into consideration more thoroughly. Additionally some political recommendations regarding the position of the Italian community in Slovenia will follow.

In accordance with the project objectives, the case study report strived to respond to the following four research questions:

- 1) What have been the effects of EU integration and cross-border cooperation initiatives on the Italian national community and on minority communities in terms of rights and protections, political participation, socio-economic activity, cultural vitality and mobilisation after the dissolution of communist regime and the creation of new independent Slovene (and Croatian) states in comparison to conditions in the former Yugoslavia?
- 2) How and to what degree has the Italian national community in Slovenia been involved in cross border cooperation up until now? Does cross-border cooperation promote integration between minority and majority populations (Italians in Slovenia and Italians in Italy) or between two minority populations (Italians in Slovenia and Slovenes in Italy)?
- 3) According to respondents, what are the main threats to minority identity, culture and interests in the multi-cultural European sphere?
- 4) How do minority and majority representatives perceive their regional or national-ethnic identity in relation to the EU and European values?

### **Main findings**

- In terms of **the implementation of minority rights for the Italian ethnic community in Slovenia**, little improvement has been perceived either in the context of EU integration and cross border cooperation initiatives affecting the Italian national community, or in the comparative context of the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the communist system and the subsequent formation of the first independent Slovene state and a democratic system. To the contrary, members of the minority community perceive even greater tensions with the majority population (although it is generally limited to small or specific groups of individuals). Interestingly enough, the economic autonomy of the minority community has become even more tenuous under the new market conditions. The government has yet to fulfil its obligation to provide a foundation for the greater economic independence of the community. Both the federal Yugoslav constitutions (1946, 1953, 1974) and the constitutions and various laws of the republics and autonomous provinces explicitly provided for the protection of ethnic minorities. In theory, Yugoslav standards were even higher than the standards in other European states, but in fact an ever-widening gap between theory and practice was already emerging in the former Yugoslavia. Today it appears that the discrepancy between theory and actual conditions persists in the independent democratic Slovenia as well.

The dissolution of Yugoslavia was a major turning point in the post-war history of all of its successor states. For the position of the Italian minority community in Slovenia, the turning point was more economic than political. The previous regime had, for political and ideological reasons, trumpeted the presence of the Italian minority every chance it got. It

wanted to demonstrate to Western Europe (and above all to Italy and Austria) how tolerant the Yugoslav state was and how well it treated its minorities. A similar phenomenon occurred during the process of Slovene independence when the newly emerging state needed international confirmation of its democratic standards, its new legislation, etc. But as indicated above, the crucial challenge remains the consistent implementation of law into practice.

- The second objective referred to **the involvement of the Italian national community in cross border cooperation programmes**. A certain continuity can also be observed in this respect. Already within the framework of the former Yugoslavia (especially from the 1960s on with the increasing openness of borders), the political, economic and geographical position of Slovenia became stronger. This came into play first in the Alps-Adriatic Working Community in the context of Central Europe, second in the Central European Initiative, and finally within the European space as a whole. The advantages of this position continued to increase, especially with the collapse of the Eastern bloc and subsequent EU membership. The intensified development of border regions and the linkage between regions and across national borders provided additional opportunities to Slovene minorities in neighbouring countries and to the Italian and Hungarian communities in Slovenia. These included the potential of playing an important role making economic, cultural and other linkages between the Slovene state and its neighbours. The open frontier made the rapid economic development of the region possible, particularly on the Slovene side of the border. To summarize, the dissolution of the federal Yugoslavia, the establishment of two new sovereign independent states (Slovenia and Croatia), the process of transition from a communist to a democratic system, the implementation of a free market economy and last but not least the European integration process and its financial and other opportunities, all had an affected on the border region and on the position of the Italian community within it. The interviews highlighted three noteworthy consequences of these changes: the division of the Italian ethnic community between two independent and autonomous states (Slovenia and Croatia), complicated further by the fact that only one of the two states became a member of the EU in 2004; economic weakness and dependence of the Italian minority community on government subsidies, and; the political significance of European integration and cross-border cooperation opportunities. After the changes, Italians on both sides of the newly established Slovene-Croatian border began to lose the will and interest to engage in border matters. There was one important exception: that the Italian community in Croatia, which is numerically superior (approximately 20,000) to the corresponding community in Slovenia (approximately 2000), feels a stronger affiliation to its Italian identity. Therefore the European integration will have an important effect on the Italian community in the entire Istria region, and in its Slovenian part in particular only when Croatia becomes an EU member state and when the border between Slovenia and Croatia becomes less rigid again.

After Slovene accession to the EU, minority communities were no longer needed to legitimise the democratic values of Slovene state. Moreover, the Slovene government lacks the political will to help the Italian minority become economically independent (perhaps the most burning issue effecting minority members). The transition from the socialist central planning system to free market conditions proved to be a disadvantage to the Italian community. This stands in marked contrast to the Slovene community in Italy. Socio-economic conditions in post-war Yugoslavia did not foster prosperity in business and development of trade in general, or for the Italian community in particular. As a result, today – sixty years later – the Italian community still suffers from the lack of a poor economic foundation. The economic foundation of a community has an important influence on all of the

other activities of that community (culture, sports, etc.) and on their overall financial condition, which in turn has the potential to foster independence and autonomy. In the absence of vibrant economic life the community becomes by necessity dependent on state and local governments. Worsening the situation of the Italian community in Slovenia, current measures to cut overall state spending extend to minority protection as well, despite the fact that community organizations are financially dependent on state support. As far as cross border cooperation programmes are concerned, EU CBC funds are extremely limited and are not made up of ongoing investment funds, but of start-up funds intended to trigger change (the long-term goals being to make both the state and individuals begin thinking in developmental terms and that cooperation between regional communities will continue after the project has formally ended). Because Slovenia is at the beginning of the programme period, the effect of EU programmes will be evident only at the end of the period, in 2010.

CBC projects are often implemented in border regions that have been the location of specific historical tensions. The Slovene-Italian CBC region is characterised by regions or provinces where the political influence of the prevailing regional governmental has been decisive. This may be one of the reasons why CBC sought above all the cooperation between the two minorities in this region, rather than between the minority and majority. Cooperation between the Italian community in Slovenia and the Slovene minority in Italy emerged on the basis of concrete mutual interests and the need to achieve certain goals through cooperation. This format simply didn't exist in the past. Real concrete opportunities spurred real concrete cooperation as self-interest compelled both sides to get involved in projects. The advent of such close and positive cooperation between the Slovene minority in Italy and the Italian minority in Slovenia has generated important findings. One of them is that minorities should not be used as an instrument of state for negotiations between state institutions and governments. Minorities sometimes suffer from the similar problems as majority populations, and cooperation and interaction are a far better and more powerful method of seeking solutions than instrumentalisation. Another important finding is that CBC projects have the potential to lift minorities out of their own isolated space or reservation. Minorities need to mix with the broader environment and be integrated as equals into Slovene and Italian (majority) institutions. The principle problem experienced by the Italian minority in Slovenia is that there is little connection and cooperation with members of the majority community and this problem has not yet been solved. As far as the Italian minority community in Slovenia is concerned, one of the most troubling obstacles is that the community lacks skilled and trained specialists who would be able to handle project documentation, preparation, and implementation. Hopefully, the Europa Office will be successful in correcting this shortfall. The major problem preventing the Italian minority community from taking a more active role in CBC projects is the lack of start-up capital that is a condition for participation. The Italian state could be an important actor in providing its Slovene minority with financial means, but the historical memory and prejudice on both sides of the border are still acute. The Italian government (similar to its Slovene counterparts) still doesn't seem to understand the necessity for the economic independence of ethnic Italians in Slovenia. Until the 1980s or 1990s, the Italian community in Slovenia was all but invisible to the Italian state and particularly to the Italians who opted out of Yugoslavia after World War Two. To them, the Italians who remained in Yugoslavia were traitors. The Italian government woke up to this minority population about fifteen years ago when Yugoslavia began the process of disintegration. Though negative historical memories still clouded the picture, the Italian government began to follow the fortunes of the Italian community in Slovenia via the Italian Union. Moreover, Italy as a whole is hardly aware of the existence of the Italian minority in Slovenia. When the Italian state refers to Italians living abroad, it almost never mentions Italians living in Istria

who are – besides Swiss Italians – the only autochthonous Italian community living outside of Italy.

- The third objective of the study was to define **the main threats to the minority identity, its culture and interests**. According to respondents, inconsistent implementation of bilingualism, the lack of economic autonomy, problems in educational, mass media, and several socio-demographic issues are the main obstacles to community mobilization. Mobilization has occurred within the Italian Union whose activities are no longer limited to the cultural and social, but encompass the sphere of economics and politics as well. After Slovene independence the Italian community started to diversify and its organizations to multiply. Numerous new associations were established not only among the minority population, but the majority as well. Members of the Italian community began to establish new associations on the basis of separate or special interests (sports, music, culture, etc.), on the initiative of the Italian Union, internal differences and disagreements. Associations have played an important role in the socialization of their members and in cultural mobilization following the foundation of the new independent Slovenia. This is in contrast to self-governing associations that remained, at least at the beginning of the 1990s, more or less political entities, a partner in dialogue with the state. Reactions of the majority representatives have been varied. In some municipalities, the community's activity was perceived as a normal democratic process, organizing people according to their private interests. In others, the transition period had evidently not ended and the post-independence outburst of Slovene nationalistic feelings, still prevailed. In addition, some tensions can be discerned within the Italian community itself, as the interests and authorities of the self-governing organizations and the Italian Union have started to become more complex and to overlap. More accurately, the activities of the self-governing associations and the Italian Union have started to look redundant, though both have played an important role in the preservation of Italian culture and the cultural mobilisation of the Italian community. The Italian Union has become a representative body of the Italian ethnic community in Slovenia, Croatia and particularly in Italy, representing it in interactions with the Slovene, Croatian and Italian governments. Indeed, the Slovene government has consented to the demands of the Italian Union on several occasions (R25, R26).
- Finally, the fourth objective was to research **respondents' perceptions of their regional or national-ethnic identity in relation to the EU and European values in general**. One of the most important common observations, irrespective of ethnic or national affiliation, was scepticism about the European Union although many also expressed hope for better (cross border) cooperation and cohabitation despite historical disputes and divisions. A certain identification with Europe therefore can be discerned, despite the fact that affiliation to national/ethnic identity still dominates (particularly among the majority population). Explicit (though more frequently implicit) associations with the former Yugoslav identity as a "transnational" identity appeared in responses. Some respondents also expressed a certain tentative optimism about common European values (solidarity, freedom, peace, cooperation, communication, interaction, etc). These values presuppose the cohabitation of numerous heterogeneous identities and are in any case more evident to members of the minority community who have more identities to juggle than to members of the majority population who have fewer. However, it can be difficult to harmonize numerous identities, and the identity of the Italian minority in Slovenia is rather like a collection of things in small portions: Istrian in accordance to the place they live, Italian by ethnic identity, Slovene by citizenship, and European now as well. It is a complex identity and, perhaps because of it, Italians in Slovenia are the first real citizens of the nascent Euroregion.

## Concluding remarks

In terms of cross-border cooperation opportunities, European integration has undoubtedly opened a wider space of interaction and communication in the border region. At the same time, the countervailing force of globalisation poses new challenges to minority communities. If the Italian ethnic community in Slovenia has any ambition to become a relevant actor, not only in the region but also in cross-border cooperation processes in the broader European space, it is essential that internal conflicts within the minority community be minimised as much as possible. The various Italian organizations and associations should make an effort to combine their critical potential. This is especially important because the minority community is so small (in absolute numbers). By augmenting its position in the region, the Italian minority community might be able to circumvent two of its major problems: the internal problem of aging community members and deficit of younger members, and the external problem of the new relations with the government that occurred with the independence of Slovenia.

## Policy recommendations

- **Consistent implementation of legal minority rights into practice, the financing of this implementation, and punitive actions when laws are not administered, particularly in the field of:**
  - **bilingualism:** local officials of the government and local municipal administration should not break the rules of bilingual oral and written communication since the municipal decree on bilingualism is very precise and calls for sanctions when its provisions are violated ; violations can be observed particularly when it comes to consistency in bilingualism of all signs and inscriptions **(1)**, deficiency (inadequacy) of Italian language on public signs and inscriptions **(2)**, public use of Italian language on the state and municipal level **(3)**, presence of minority/Italian symbols in public **(4)**  
*Bilingualism means more than just use of two languages; it has to do with the representation of a territory where two different cultures, histories and traditions intermingle.*
  - **education:** the Slovene state should provide its citizens, and particularly its young ones, with the knowledge that not only Slovenes live in Slovenia, but other nationalities and ethnic groups as well, e.g. the Italian minority community is not much discussed in Slovene textbooks; mention of it is limited to a few school courses ; consequently recognition of the Italian minority community among the broader Slovene population has been declining recently, particularly after the 1990s **(1)** ; there should also be more sufficient state financing for the training of Italian teachers and professors in Italian language in the Italy because despite daily use of Italian within the Slovene environment, minority members are not able to follow ongoing changes in his or her native language **(2)** ; the decreasing enrolment in Italian schools could be stopped at least to a certain extent with high quality education, good teachers and modern working conditions, which would ensure that Italian schools won't be empty **(3)**
  - **mass media:** TV Koper/Capodistria should be aired in Italy, at least in neighbouring Trieste also on the grounds that additional money through

advertising can be raised; TV Koper/ Capodistria should also be aired in Croatia

- socio-economic issues: aging of the Italian population, the increase in mixed marriages, the increasing movement of people and extended childhood are some of the reasons for general decline in the population; although this is a general trend, it has a more crucial effect on minority communities than it does on the majority **(1)**; because younger generations no longer see any benefits in officially declaring themselves Italians employment options of the community should be improved: there are few working places where Italian language is officially used - journalism and education have been virtually the only areas where the community regularly offers working position in Italian language to its members **(2)**; the community and indeed the whole society will need to continue providing circumstances that will make young people recognise the benefits of their ethnic affiliation and begin to identify themselves as minority members **(3)**
- **Provision of conditions for the economic independence of the Italian community:**
  - the Slovene and Italian government still need to understand the necessity of this fact and to achieve political will for its accomplishment: the system of financing needs to be changed in an effort to enhance the economic autonomy of the Italian community and governments should provide starting capital for projects and stronger investment funds that would have a long-term benefit to the community (small entrepreneurs, business initiatives etc.)
  - the Italian minority community does not have the short-term resources to participate in CBC projects
  - Interreg and other CBC programmes are more or less “soft” projects, which could lead to more substantial investment projects in the future ; the intermediate goal is to build and increase the level of trust between partners in the programme: recognition, knowledge and trust are preliminary conditions for further cooperation, collective planning, investment, and the solving of common problems
- **Achievement of more intensive fluctuation, reciprocity, and mutual cooperation (economic, political, cultural, educational etc.) between both Italian communities in Slovenia and Croatia** (particularly after Croatia joins the EU)
- **Minorities should not be used as an instrument of state for negotiations between state institutions, national governments and/or in the European context**
- **Cooperation (cross border, majority-minority, minority-minority etc.) and interaction should represent a method of seeking common solutions** (in the area of entrepreneurship, agricultural, environmental, cultural and social issues etc.)
- **CBC projects and other programmes for creating an inspiring and stimulating environment in border regions can be effective for the minorities not to be left to their own isolated space or reservation:**
  - minorities need to mix with the broader environment and be integrated as equals into Slovene and Italian institutions of the majority population ; the

principle problem experienced by the Italian minority in Slovenia is that there is little connection and cooperation with members of the majority community

- the Italian and Slovene governments need to organically and systematically include the Italian minority in European CBC projects
- **The necessity of improvement of the minority skilled and trained specialists for the preparation and implementation of EU and other projects**
- **Greater awareness of majority populations in Slovenia and Italy of the minority's existence:**
  - majority mass media are less and less interested in minority issues although it should be just the opposite
- **Reconciliation of activities and interests within Italian community with the intention of combining the critical potential of the whole community and of becoming more attractive for younger generations:**
  - the Italian community needs to undergo certain changes in terms of its own internal organization with the goal of increasing its potential: more energy and people's willingness to work on events, projects, implementation could all significantly contribute to the cultural recognition and visibility of the Italian minority in Slovenia and Italy; if the minority would demand it, the Italian language might become more present not only in terms of formal bilingualism, but in everyday public life - this would in turn allow a more open discussion of minority issues  
*Without the critical voice of the Italian minority, it will be extremely difficult to address the discrepancy between adequate formal legislation regarding minority rights and everyday practice.*
- **Creating a general atmosphere (and the Slovene government should be instrumental in this) where being a minority member has a positive connotation in the region and in the state and where cooperation and cohabitation of people with different ethnic, national etc. affiliations would prosper despite historical disputes and divisions:**
  - the first step on the micro level should however be that parents, or at least one parent, in mixed marriages in particular must speak Italian with the child at home so that the child will not feel like a foreigner in Italian schools and in his or her broader environment because of his or her Italian ethnic identity