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The Slovene Community in Italy and the Covid-19 Pandemic

Italy was the first country of the Western world to experience the outburst of the Covid-19 pandemic, and slowing it down required a swift and sizable adaptation of all aspects of life in Italy. Based on a preliminary qualitative study and relying on existing primary and secondary data sources, the author explores the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on the Slovene community in Italy. Although the community shared the same fate as the rest of Italy's population in terms of restrictive measures and limitations to human rights, the author argues that some of the measures had a different, sometimes disproportionate and harmful effect on the community. Similarly, the changes in *modus vivendi et operandi* of the minority and its members that appeared as a side-effect of the pandemic may alter significantly the functioning of the minority in the future, and wider integration processes in the cross-border region may be slowed down or even reversed.

Keywords: Slovenes in Italy, Slovene minority, Slovene community, Covid-19, border, integration, home-schooling, minority education.

Slovenska skupnost v Italiji in pandemija bolezni covid-19

Italija je bila prva država Zahodnega sveta, ki se je soočila z izbruhom pandemije bolezni covid-19. Na podlagi preliminarne kvalitativne študije in upoštevajoč razpoložljive primarne in sekundarne podatke in informacije avtorica raziskuje učinke pandemije covid-19 na slovensko skupnost v Italiji. Čeprav je skupnost delila usodo s preostalo populacijo v Italiji v smislu restriktivnih ukrepov in omejitev človekovih pravic, avtorica meni, da so imeli nekateri ukrepi na skupnost različne, ponekod sorazmerno večje in celo škodljive učinke. Razlike v načinu življenja in delovanja, ki so se pojavile kot stranski učinki pandemije, bi lahko pomembno spremenile delovanje skupnosti v prihodnje, procesi integracije v čezmejnem prostoru pa bi se lahko upočasnili ali celo zastali.

Ključne besede: Slovenci v Italiji, slovenska manjšina, slovenska skupnost, covid-19, meja, integracija, solanje na daljavo, manjšinsko izobraževanje.

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1. Introduction

Italy was the first European state and the first one in the Western world to experience the devastating effects of the Covid-19 pandemic that by October 2020 resulted in 350,000 infections and nearly 36,000 deaths, with the bulk of them shocking the world in the pandemic's first wave in spring (Johns Hopkins University & Medicine, 2020). Italy found itself in the enviable position of facing an epidemic with limited knowledge of the disease and no previous experience on how to deal with it. Its only source of information (and experience) was China, which was itself facing a surge of Covid-19 cases and was barely able to contain its wave of epidemic in Wuhan, province of Hubei.

In early January, when the pandemic was developing in China, Italy strengthened its health controls and provisions at international airports. But it was not until mid-February that the first clusters of cases were discovered in Northern Italy and the Italian Government proceeded to gradually implement measures to stop and later slow down the outbreak of Covid-19 – measures that eventually resulted in a widespread lockdown of the country and brought to a complete halt of public life by mid-March.

An additional burden to the already difficult situation was posed by measures implemented by other European countries. These included national bans on selling protective equipment to other Member States (including Italy) and tighter border controls and even border closures that further jeopardized the Schengen agreements, already under strain due to years of disagreements about illegal immigrations.

The Slovene community in Friuli Venezia Giulia is one of the national minorities living along the Slovene-Italian border. As such, it was affected both by the general measures adopted by the Italian state to combat the Covid-19 pandemic and by the change of border regimes. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the hidden costs of the pandemic for national minorities have been a concern for experts and scholars alike. The Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, in its statement of 28 May, stressed that the Covid-19 crisis has exacerbated the vulnerability of certain national minorities in Council of Europe member States and deepened existing inequalities, giving rise to discrimination, hate speech, stigma, and as a side effect of the implemented measures, endangered the enjoyment of some rights and freedoms including limited freedom of expression and unequal access to education (CoE Advisory Committee 2020).¹ The UN High Commissioner for National Minorities Fernand de Varennes warned that minorities were being used as scapegoats, instrumentalised by opportunists, nationalists and extremists (Eurac Research 2020b). In his opinion, some right-wing groups already started using the pandemic as part of a wider strategy, once the vulnerabilities of certain minorities became evident (Eurac Research 2020b).

De Varennes' opinion is to a certain extent shared also by Joseph Marko, who maintains that the pandemic has, under the guise of pro-human rights demonstrations, created a new wave of intolerance, of nationalism and racism, as for example in Germany, where anti-Covid measures protests are led by nationalists and anti-semitists (Eurac Research 2020a). According to Marko, every pandemic provides an x-ray of states and societies and reveals their strengths and weaknesses, in our case the strengths and weaknesses of liberal democracies and pluralistic and diverse societies (Eurac Research 2020a).

From a European point of view, the pandemic brought about a break-down of multilateralism that has already been losing its importance for some time, maintains Ilze Brands-Kehris (Eurac Research 2020a). The pandemic caused the closure of borders, a revival of bilateral agreements between countries (Marko in Eurac Research 2020a), and European integration was brought down to its knees both on the (wealthier) North - (poorer) South Divide and the East-West Divide when the closed borders restricted the free movement of workers from the East to the West, thus undermining the functioning of healthcare, geriatric care, nursing homes, agricultural and other industries (Erizanu 2020; Marko in Eurac Research 2020a). In this new polarized reality, incredible levels of micro-solidarity coexist with egotism (Marko in Eurac Research 2020a), and processes of increased social distancing coexist with the needs for better social cohesion.

Ilze Bands-Kehris (Eurac Research 2020a) sees the pandemic as an opportunity to revive multilateralism, since nobody can beat the pandemic alone. In terms of the impact of these processes on minorities, Palermo (Eurac Research 2020c) warns that conflicting processes are taking place, with states heavily relying on centralization – a side-product of which were border closures that deeply affected minorities and their relationship with kin-states (cf. Sia Spiliopoulou Åkermark (Eurac Research 2020c); Sergiu Constantin (Eurac Research 2020c)) – and, at the same time, showing solidarity to one another, as in the case of Italian patients being treated in Austria and Germany.

Marko (Eurac Research 2020a) adopts a gloomier view: he suggests that we are headed towards a marginalisation of national minorities, which can already be seen in the in-existent communication of Covid-related issues in national minority languages in Austria, a concern shared also by the Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (CoE 2020), which also observed a lack of relevant (Covid-related) information in minority languages (CoE 2020). According to Marko (Eurac Research 2020a), the marginalisation of national minorities leads to segregation and assimilation which could become the new normal of national minorities in Europe, replacing processes and patterns of integration. Although Andrea Carlà (Eurac Research 2020d) agrees that minorities are generally more affected by the coronavirus pandemic in social and economic aspects of their life, including health and schooling, Roberta Windischer-Medda (Eurac Research 2020b) warns that not

all minorities are equally vulnerable, especially if we concentrate on the economic aspects of their vulnerability.

The Slovene community in Italy represents a well-integrated community, both from a social and economic point of view. In an effort to understand the effect of the pandemic on this national minority in particular and to investigate how the life of its members has changed during the first wave of the epidemic and in its aftermath, a preliminary qualitative study has been conducted among representatives of the Slovene community in Italy.

After a short methodological introduction, the first part of the paper presents a short overview of the development of the pandemic in Italy, providing a factual framework and highlighting the most relevant sociological and psychological factors to understand its possible effect on the Slovene community. The paper then proceeds to present and discuss the most salient results of the study.

2. Methodology of the Study

The study represents a part of a larger qualitative study aimed at understanding the processes of changes in six fields of minority's life, namely schooling, political and economic participation, language, media and free-time activities (sport and cultural activities), with six separate, but for certain interviewees combined, questionnaires.

For the purposes of this paper, 15 interviewees, answering questionnaires related to schooling (5 interviewees), political participation (5), language (2), free time activities (3) were asked to answer an additional set of Covid-related questions. It should be noted that the interviewees in this section were not constrained by the topic of the basic questionnaire (related to schooling, political participation, language, etc.), but were asked a general set of questions, pertaining to

- their personal experience of Covid-19;
- their perceptions and observations related to the challenges, changes and opportunities that this new situation provides for the community, both inwardly and outwardly, in any of the fields covered, and in any other aspects raised by the interviewees themselves;
- and their outlook for the future, in particular in terms of the impact of the pandemics on the minority.

The body of interviewees comprised seven representatives and two former representatives of minority organisations, four schooling system employees, and two experts on minority issues. An important limitation of the study – beside the scope of preliminary qualitative studies – stems from the fact that interviewees were selected on the basis of the needs of the larger qualitative study and not based on the set of Covid-related questions, which would have probably been slightly different if that were the case.

Qualitative data were arranged by transcription and thematic coding of codes, concepts and categories, which enabled us to organise the concepts by relatedness (or connection) and a comprehensive analysis of qualitative data.

In order to provide a factual framework for the aforementioned study, existing primary and secondary data were used extensively, in particular news and legal documents pertaining to the development of the pandemic in Italy.

3. The Covid-19 Outbreak in Italy and Its (Side-) Effects on the Slovene Community

Being aware of the close ties between Italy and China (Ceccagno 2015; Times of India 2020; Bindi 2019; Santini et al. 2011, Wu 2008, Dassu 2000), as early as 26 January, with no Covid-19 cases yet detected in Europe, the Ministry of Health strengthened its operations at the two international airports in Rome (Fiumicino) and Milan (Malpensa) (Ministero della Salute 2020), including temperature measurements. On 31 January (ENAC 2020), just a day after the first two cases of Coronavirus had been detected among two Chinese tourists in Rome (Severgnini 2020), Italy already decided to ban all direct flights from China and declare the state of emergency (Delibera del Consiglio dei ministri 31 gennaio 2020).² The decision to ban direct flights was later criticised as ineffective, since passengers simply switched to indirect flights to China (Sciorilli Borelli 2020), but the declaration of the state of emergency enabled the Government to swiftly implement measures needed to deal with the outbreak of the pandemic.

This 2 days snapshot of the beginning of the pandemic is, in a certain sense, a good predictor of what was to come in the following months in terms of Italy's response to this unprecedented challenge. Italy was unprepared, had little knowledge about the disease and proceeded mostly with a pattern of trial and error. Unlike China and other Asian and African states that in the recent past had faced previous epidemics such as SARS, MERS and EBOLA, Italy had no experience whatsoever in how to deal with an epidemic of this magnitude. And, more importantly, neither had its population.

Since the first clusters of cases were detected in mid-February, Italy's response to the challenges of the epidemic had been swift and encompassing, prioritising the health and life of its population (at the expense of its economic interests). On 21 February, the Minister of Health Speranza adopted a Decree (Ordinanza 21 febbraio 2020) requiring people of the so-called red zones to either self-isolate or be put in compulsory quarantine. On 23 February, as many as 50,000 people were put into quarantine (Decreto-Legge 23 febbraio 2020), and restrictions tightened in the following few months with the adoption of nine Prime Minister's Decrees (DPCM 1–2, 2020; DPCM 4–10, 2020) that deeply affected the lives of the Italian population and put the country in a total lockdown.

The toll of the pandemics in Italy was extremely high in spring, both in terms of the number of Covid-19 patients requiring medical assistance and the number of deaths (CSSE 2020). The Italian society was transfixed by at least two important shocks – the photos of the Italian army trucks carrying out corpses of Covid-19 victims, because the facilities to dispose of the bodies in Bergamo were unable to cope with the number of corpses (Il Giorno 2020), and the knowledge that doctors were using war protocols when deciding whom to treat and whom to let die (Mellina 2020).

The outburst of the pandemic required an unprecedented and swift change of attitudes and behaviours among the population. Its slowness to understand the gravity of the situation and to adapt to it was evident when schools were closed to contain the outbreak and there was a mass exodus towards skiing facilities (Martini 2020). A similar mass exodus happened when a Prime Minister's Decree was leaked on 7 March, prescribing a lockdown of several Northern Italian Provinces and the Region Lombardia, producing a mass flight to Southern Italy (Ratto Trabucco 2020). And also before, when quarantine was enforced in the 11 red zones in Northern Italy, attempts to flee were reported (Santarpia 2020).³ These are only a few examples of the difficulties related to the required changes of attitudes and behaviours that in the following months extended far beyond limitations to personal freedom into new practices of home schooling and home-working and processes of digitalization and informatization on a massive scale in all areas of life.

For the Slovene minority in Italy, the pandemic initiated a process towards a life devoid of community interaction, including cultural and sports events and other activities that have been crucial for the maintenance and reproduction of the community itself for decades. Such activities, combined with schooling in Slovene, represent the cornerstone of the linguistic reproduction of the minority. For a considerable number of children, home schooling curtailed the opportunities to hear and speak the minority language, therefore weakening their linguistic skills and rendering the minority more vulnerable to processes of linguistic assimilation (Bogatec et al. 2020). The media of the Slovene minority in Italy provided additional educational materials and programmes as did other media in Italy and abroad (Bogatec et al. 2020), but for the Slovene minority in Italy the media space in the minority language is rather limited (Lantschner et al. 2012), which is especially true for TV contents that small children tend to consume on a daily basis. Whereas the tendency of the European countries to protect their population by tightening border controls and “retreating into themselves” resulted in Italy feeling abandoned in its time of need by its European counterparts (Indelicato 2020), the impact of the new regime on border communities, including the Slovene community in Italy, was more dramatic. It disrupted the lives of people crossing the border on a daily basis for family, schooling and work-related reasons, while the local economies on both sides of the border that had flourished

due to cross-border movement of people were put under severe strain and a decisive governmental action was required to limit the damage (Marussig 2020).

In order to gather a more detailed and in-depth understanding of the dynamics caused by Covid-19 in the case of the Slovene community in Italy, a qualitative study was carried out aiming to uncover the most salient changes faced by the minority. In the following chapters we will present the results of the study, assembled in (sets of) topics that were most frequently debated by interviewees, as well as their perceptions and opinions.

4. Results of the Study and Discussion

4.1 Specific Vulnerabilities of the Slovene Community

Most of the interviewees agree that the pandemic represented a shock for the Italian society in general and that the Slovene community faced some different or additional challenges. They identify the specific circumstances of national minorities as those defining a set of different challenges faced by the Slovene community in Italy. Interviewee 1 expressed these thoughts (shared also by interviewees 3, 5 and 6) as follows: "Covid was a great shock for the society, and especially for the Slovene minority, which is in a rather fragile and vulnerable state".

Some interviewees expressed the feeling that Covid-19 exacerbated the challenges that already existed for some time, such as the inclusion of non-Slovene speaking pupils, inadequate teaching methods for children who do not speak Slovene, a lack of didactic materials and tools, etc. (cf. Brezigar 2020; Brezigar & Zver 2019; Bogatec 2015). In this respect, interviewees seem to echo Marko's previously mentioned assessment that the pandemic provided an X-ray of our society (Eurac Research 2020a). Interviewee 4, for example, pointed out that this was by all means the case in education, where problems and challenges that had been there before became more evident and pressing.⁴ Interviewee 7, on the other hand, pointed out another specific vulnerability of the Slovene community, namely infrastructural problems (i.e. Internet connections) that also in pre-Covid times undermined the development of the economy in border areas. During the lock-down, these problems severely undercut the efforts of the community to function and caused numerous problems in home-schooling, as well. As interviewee 1 explained it:

[T]he infrastructure is lacking exactly in this border area [...] there are a lot of grey zones [...] Dolina/San Dorligo della Valle, Zgonik/Sgonico, Repentabor/Rupingrande do not have good internet connections. The same situation is with Sovodnje/Savogna d'Isonzo, Števerjan/San Floriano del Collio, Doberdob/Doberdo del Lago, Rezija/Resia is o.k., but Benečija/Slavia Veneta is all grey. There are areas of Carnia that are well serviced, so it seems to me that this has to do with the regional policy [...] and it puts our minority at a disadvantage (Interviewee 1).

4.2 Home-Schooling: Its Effect and the Specific Challenges for Schools with Slovene as Language of Instruction

Since home-schooling was a major challenge produced by the pandemic, it does not come as a surprise that several interviewees touched upon it. Interviewee 11 pointed out that schools with Slovene as language of instruction (hereinafter as schools with SLI) did not have the instruments to face this situation, and since the language of instruction was different from the one used in all the other public schools in Italy, the ability of schools with SLI to rely on the ad hoc instruments prepared for Italian schools was minimal: “Secondary schools seem to have adapted more easily, whereas primary schools and kindergartens faced the most severe challenges,” explains interviewee 11, whose estimate and perception could be attributed to a greater autonomy of older children in the learning process, less need of parent involvement in the day to day learning process, and the children’s higher level of linguistic skills in Slovene which could render the adaptation to distance learning easier.

Beside the infrastructural problems that made it difficult for families to adapt to home-schooling and the challenges that were common to home-schooling in general (lack of IT equipment and skills among children and parents) (Bogatec et al. 2020), interviewees pointed out additional challenges faced by schools with SLI. One of those seems to have been “the home schooling of non-Slovene speaking children, therefore those children who at home speak another language, possibly Italian”, explains interviewee 13. According to Bogatec et al. (2020), there are roughly one quarter of children attending schools with SLI that consider Slovene as their mother tongue, and more than 40 % that have another language (mostly Italian) as their sole mother tongue. In terms of institutions from kindergarten to secondary schools, the lower the level of education, the higher the percentage of children with non-Slovene languages as mother tongues, with kindergartens having on average 55 % of children with non-Slovene mother tongue (Bogatec et al. 2020). Given this situation, it is not hard to imagine the difficulties faced by parents, who frequently themselves did not speak Slovene and were unable to help children during their home-schooling efforts, leaving them to their own devices (Bogatec et al. 2020).

Interviewee 13 summarized the consequences of this long home-schooling period – which in Italy started on 5 March (DPCM3 2020) and continued to the end of the school year, with children getting back to school only in September 2020, as follows:

Non-Slovene parents relied on other structures [such as student’s home – *Dijaški dom*, author’s note] to help their children with homework or enrolled them into full-day schooling [as opposed to half-day schooling, author’s note] exactly because they were not able to help them with their homework in Slovene. And now these arrangements fell apart and they – [...] were desperate, helpless.

Interviewee 13 suggested that because of this bad experience, non-Slovene parents may decide to enrol children into Italian schools for the next school year, just to avoid another situation like this. Interviewee 1 pointed out that these are not empty fears, citing a case in Milje/Muggia, where in a particularly vulnerable school setting a whole grade 5 class (of 5 children) already switched to an Italian school at the beginning of the school year 2021/22, and a whole class was simply – gone. Bearing in mind that the interviewee has provided an explanation for these parents' decision that might or might not be true in this particular case, other interviewees (2, 5, 6, 12) have also made recollections of cases of parents that supposedly decided to switch schools and cited home-schooling as a crucial factor in such decisions. Similarly, interviewees 2, 6, and 7 expressed their concerns that this home-schooling experience may encourage Italian speaking parents to enrol their children into schools with Italian as language of instruction – therefore choosing a safer option for the future, in case the pandemic continues in the fall.

Several interviewees highlighted the pandemic as the factor that rendered the vulnerabilities of schools with SLI more evident, citing a possible emigration of children towards schools with Italian as language of instruction. However, during these interviews, another issue emerged, more unclear, about children moving from schools with SLI in Italy to schools in Slovenia. Although interviewee 13 points out that the closure of the border will probably cause parents who have enrolled children in Slovenia to rethink their decision, interviewee 1 maintains that, regardless of border issues, some parents have already decided to enrol their children into educational institutions in Slovenia, especially in kindergartens. Interviewee 1 points out that during the coronavirus crisis parents perceived that the structures in Slovenia were better organized and better prepared, due to Slovenia's more family-oriented policies. Although it is true that in Slovenia the schools (and kindergartens) re-opened already on 8 May and that schools could rely on multiple on-line resources for remote teaching, further research is needed in order to verify the actual dynamics the coronavirus set in motion regarding education among pupils of schools with SLI.

Nevertheless, based on these interviews, we can argue that schools with SLI were not winners in this situation, which seems to support Andrea Carlà's suggestions that minorities were generally more affected by the coronavirus pandemic in certain areas of life, including schooling (Eurac Research 2020d).

4.3 Closure of the Border

All interviewees agree that the closure of the Slovene-Italian border was probably the biggest shock for the Slovene community in this situation:

Although I can understand the fear, based on what was going on in Italy, the measures were really drastic. We've spent two decades increasing the border flow, with more and

more people living on one side of the border, working or going to school on the other, or different family members living on different sides of the border [...] we have built a common space, also from a residential point of view, the population got mixed [...] and it puts us now right back in the past (Interviewee 2).

The biggest shock, I think, it was for the young people, who have never experienced a truly closed border or barely remember border controls. Seeing physical blockades on the road [...] it was shocking, they were horrified (Interviewee 7).

What really hurt was that the most drastic measures – piles of stones being thrown on local cart tracks and roads – were taken by local political representatives, exactly by those who should have an understanding, a sensitivity for these issues (Interviewee 1).

Some of the interviewees (2, 7, 11) expressed their concerns about the damage to the local economy that “lives off trans-border life” (interviewee 7), others (interviewees 1, 9) pointed out that the centralized approach of the countries that retreated into themselves echoed Palermo’s conclusions on centralization of state’s responses (Eurac Research 2020c). Such a centralized approach, moreover, undermined any possibility of cooperation between the Region Friuli Venezia Giulia and the Republic of Slovenia, who shared a similar epidemiologic situation, as explained by interviewee 2. “On this cooperation we need to work”, explains interviewee 1.

Stemming from border issues, two new topics of discussion were developed during the interviews: one regarding the relationship of the Slovene minority in Italy with its kin-state, and the other about the impact of Covid-19 on European integration.

4.4 Relationship with the Kin-State

As regards the relationship of the Slovene community in Italy with its kin-state, most interviewees suggest that the border issue had a negative effect on such relationship. Interviewee 1 explains it in a comprehensive manner as follows:

The strong emotional ties between the Slovene community and the kin-state – at least for a part of the community – started to loosen already after the independence of Slovenia, when the border flow increased. The closure of the border with these physical barriers in the middle of the street that were circulating on media and social media didn’t help at all. [O]verall, it was a difficult year, with the new 12th June municipality holiday, then all the issues of 13 July, with the National House, Bazovica/Basovizza, the Foibe [...]. On the surface, of course we have seen a loosening of the ties with the kin-state, mistrust, unhappiness. [...] and although things were rational [made sense from a rational point of view, author’s note], from an emotional point of view it was more difficult. There is this sense of alienation from the kin-state. This feeling that in case of trouble, the kin-state will abandon us (Interviewee 1).

The feeling of abandonment is shared also by other interviewees. Interviewee 7, for example, explains that “the kin-state is far far away”, and interviewee 2 points out that “the gap between the minority and the kin-state has widened considerably”.

This situation, however, was not exceptional. As Constantin pointed out, most minorities were completely disregarded, even left out in the cold by their kin-states during the outbreak. As Palermo pointed out, Austria had little understanding for South Tyrol (Eurac Research 2020c). Constantin added that also the “most open border” in Europe between Germany and Denmark was abruptly closed, whereas Sia Spiliopoulou Åkermark from the Peace Institute in Åland Island stressed that Finland, not Sweden cut off Åland Island from the world (Eurac Research 2020c).

Although most interviewees agree that the closure of border was a low point in the relationship of the Slovene community with its kin-state, their views on the longer term impact of border closures (and subsequent introduction of border regimes) differ, with some (interviewees 2, 4, 5) pointing out that people will start making decisions on where to live, work and go to school in a different manner from now onwards, whereas others (interviewees 7, 9, 13) are more cautious about predicting any possible long-term effects.

4.5 The Effect of the Outbreak on the Functioning of the Community

A final set of observations provided by the interviewees pertained to the functioning of the community during the outbreak. Apart from the already mentioned challenges regarding schooling and infrastructure, most interviewees painted a picture that was well-balanced in terms of positive and negative consequences of Covid-19 for the community as a whole. From an organizational point of view, interviewee 4 stressed that the community has become more efficient in its work; that meetings are held online and that, unlike before the outbreak, there is usually a 100 % show rate of invitees, as observed by interviewee 1, who explained: “we travel less, but we are more connected”.

Interviewee 15 points out that from an organizational point of view the community is more efficient, more focused, and that an incredible improvement took place in the quality of the way the minority works. In areas such as culture, where activities had to be dropped due to social distancing, new formulas of online events (via streaming) have developed. “Culture is moving online,” explains interviewee 1, who also points out that this might bring also more understanding and interest for forms of culture that were previously underdeveloped in the community, such as painting exhibitions.

Moreover, from an economic point of view, interviewee 10 explains that the local tourism was revived and the “local reality came to life”.

A very significant observation of interviewees 1, 2, 7 and 9 regards the crisis as a sort of catalyst that has improved the cooperation abilities of primary organizations in the community, speeding up projects that under different circumstances would have taken years to develop and giving rise to incredible synergies, such as the cooperation between the Slovene Regional Economic Union (SDGZ) and Farmer's Union (KZ), or the project Digital School (Digitalna šola), that was born from a concerted effort of the Regional Office for Slovene Schools and the Slovene Regional Economic Union, with the financial backing of ZKB Bank.

According to interviewees 1 and 5, an important source of synergies was also the Central Office for Slovene Language that provided translations of documents and materials regarding Covid-19 to be used by public authorities on the territory where the minority lives (Slovenščina v javni upravi – Centralni urad za slovenski jezik 2020). According to interviewees 1 and 5, there was a spill-over effect from the work of the Central Office to the community, because these documents and modules were available also to minority organizations, possibly representing a small step towards improving the poor linguistic landscape of the Slovene community in Italy (Mezgec 2019).

5. Conclusion

Windischer-Medda (Eurac Research 2020b) warned that the Covid-19 outbreak might have different effects on different minorities, because of their different degrees of vulnerability. Differences stem from their socio-political and economic status, their linguistic standing, as well as the stage of development and implementation of their minority rights. In the case of Slovenes in Italy, the outbreak on one side exacerbated pre-existing vulnerabilities of the community, especially in the field of language and education, possibly taking them closer to a breaking point, whereas on the other hand it prompted an incredibly swift change of the *modus operandi et vivendi* of the community that was inconceivable before the pandemic. In a few months the scaffolding of the community was modernized, giving also rise to new processes of much needed horizontal cooperation. It will be left to see if this snowball will continue to roll and will bring to further changes that will render both the community more adaptable to future challenges and its functioning more suitable for the times to come.

The outbreak revealed in its crudest form the challenges of the educational system of the Slovene community in Italy and exposed its structural failings to a greater degree than ever before. This experience should serve as a final call to rethink the role of schools with SLI and to invest a major effort into diminishing their marginalization and strengthening their added-value in this environment.

Finally, the closure of the border could have jeopardized years of cross-border cooperation and the creation of a common cross-border space. Since several

minorities in Europe experienced the same fate, this seems to be, indeed, a phenomenon that exceeds the Slovene-Italian dimension and opens up important questions regarding European integration in the future. Again, it could be a wake-up call to put in place stronger, more resilient structures to safeguard integration processes, as one of the interviewees suggested, or it may signal a reverse process, as Marko (Eurac Research 2020a) suggests, towards segregation and assimilation of minorities.

Regardless, the closure of the Slovene-Italian border and the subsequent border controls imposed by the Republic of Slovenia pose a significant threat to the concept of a common Slovenian (cultural) space, which includes the kin-state and neighbouring Slovene minorities: it seems that in the minds of at least a part of the minority, the concept has lost its credibility and Slovenia's commitment to it, as well. It will be interesting in the future years to observe whether the Republic of Slovenia will try to restore faith in this concept and develop it, or let it rest in ashes.

Interviews⁵

Interviewee 1 – Primary organisation, answering the questionnaire on political participation.

Interviewee 2 – Primary organisation, answering the questionnaire on political participation.

Interviewee 3 – Public service, answering the questionnaire on schooling.

Interviewee 4 – Primary organisation, answering the questionnaire on political participation.

Interviewee 5 – Public service, answering the questionnaire on language.

Interviewee 6 – Public service, answering the questionnaire on schooling.

Interviewee 7 – Primary organisation, answering the questionnaire on political participation.

Interviewee 8 – Public service, answering the questionnaire on schooling.

Interviewee 9 – Primary organisation, answering the questionnaire on political participation.

Interviewee 10 – Primary organisation, answering the questionnaire on free time activities.

Interviewee 11 – Primary organisation, answering the questionnaire on language.

Interviewee 12 – Primary organisation, answering the questionnaire on free-time activities.

Interviewee 13 – Primary organisation, answering the questionnaire on free-time activities.

Interviewee 14 – Public service, answering the questionnaire on schooling.

Interviewee 15 – Primary organisation, answering the questionnaire on free-time activities.

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Notes

- ¹ It should be noted that also the Chair of the Committee of Experts of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages Vesna Crnić-Grotić expressed her concerns about the impact of the pandemic on national minorities, in particular about the widespread absence of regional or minority languages from official information and communication about Covid-19 (CoE 2020), and called for a renewed commitment to protect minority rights in Europe (Crnić-Grotić 2020).
- ² According to the Italian legal system, the declaration of the state of emergency allows the Prime Minister / President of the Council of Ministers to adopt Decrees of the President of the Council of Ministers (DPCM) that function as laws, but do not require the approval of the parliament. The Decrees, however, have a limited time-span of two months, after which they need to be adopted by the parliament as Decree-Law (Decreto-Legge) that has always a time-limited frame.

³ See also Gastaldi (2020), The Local (2020), Il Messaggero (2020).

⁴ On minority's challenges and problems in the field of education see Brezigar and Zver (2019), Brezigar (2020), Bogatec et al. (2020), Bogatec (2015).

⁵ In order to protect the anonymity of the interviewees, the list includes their affiliation to either public service or minority organisations (primary organisations), depending in which capacity they were invited to participate in the wider study, from which also the data for this paper originate. Participants from primary organisations include full and/or part-time employees and (paid and/or unpaid) formal representatives of organisations. Interviewees related to the public service include employees in the state, regional, and/or local apparatus, as well as teachers and/or other school-related employees.

Acknowledgment

Part of this study was carried out on the Institute for Ethnic Studies under the research project Analysis of the situation of the Slovene minority in Italy and its developmental perspective (Contr. Nr. Z-S-19/20), funded by the Government Office for Slovenians Abroad.