

Lara Sorgo, Sonja Novak Lukanovič

The Italian National Community in Slovenia during the Covid-19 Epidemic

The article presents the views and opinions of the members of the Italian national community regarding the organisation of their institutions and schools and regarding state borders with Italy and Croatia during the Covid-19 epidemic in Slovenia. The main purpose of the study, which took the form of a telephone interview, was to explore the situation of the Italian national community during this period. Given the uncertainty awaiting it in the future, the Italian national community will need to find new ways to get closer to its members.

Keywords: Italian national community, Covid-19, Italian Communities, schools with Italian as the language of instruction, state borders.

Italijanska narodna skupnost v Sloveniji v času epidemije covid-19

V prispevku so predstavljena stališča in mnenja pripadnikov italijanske narodne skupnosti glede organiziranosti narodnostnih ustanov in šol ter vprašanja državnih mej z Italijo in Hrvaško v času epidemije covid-19 v Sloveniji. Glavni namen študije, ki je potekala v obliki telefonskega intervjuja, je bil prikazati razmere, s katerimi se je spopadala italijanska narodna skupnost v tem obdobju. Glede na negotovost, ki jo čaka v prihodnosti, bo italijanska narodna skupnost morala poiskati nove načine, da se približa svojim pripadnikom in članom.

Ključne besede: italijanska narodna skupnost, covid-19, Skupnosti Italijanov, šole z italijanskim učnim jezikom, državne meje.

Correspondence address: Lara Sorgo, Inštitut za narodnostna vprašanja (INV) / Institute for Ethnic Studies (IES), Erjavčeva 26, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia, e-mail: lara.sorgo@guest.arnes.si; Sonja Novak Lukanovič, INV / IES, Erjavčeva 26, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia, e-mail: sonja.novak@inv.si.

1. Introduction

The SARS-CoV-2 (Covid-19) pandemic, which started in late December last year, quickly spread from China to Europe. The country most affected by the virus was Slovenia's neighbour Italy, where hundreds of infections were reported in just one month. Seeing the situation in the neighbouring country, Slovenia began to seek solutions straightaway, adopting a national plan to prevent the spread of infections in order to avoid a possible overload of the healthcare system. The first case of Covid-19 in Slovenia was reported on 4 March 2020 and on 12 March the Slovenian government officially declared an epidemic. Kindergartens and schools were closed on 16 March, and so were non-essential services such as cinemas and fitness and sports centres. Public transport and air transport were also suspended. A temporary prohibition of public events followed on 20 March. At the end of the month, movement between municipalities was banned, with the exception of a few emergencies such as business travel or assistance to family members (Government of the Republic of Slovenia 2020a).

Within a month, social life came to a halt. As non-essential services were closed, most people found themselves at home, waiting for work or on leave, while others continued to work remotely using a variety of digital platforms. Schools had to reorganise themselves very quickly to be able to implement remote learning or teaching in online classrooms and to ensure equal access to materials, assignments and knowledge to all pupils.

Adapting to the new way of life and work changed people's priorities and daily lives. Live meetings were replaced by virtual meetings and technology became a life necessity. Moreover, the virus also changed the dynamics of socialisation and rearranged interpersonal relationships: the young, more adept at using modern technology, helped their parents in using a computer, children provided for their parents by shopping for groceries and running errands for them.

In this context, also the Italian national community had to reorganise itself rapidly in line with government measures to curb the spread of infections. Already in the first week of March, even before the epidemic was officially declared in Slovenia, many planned events such as concerts and book presentations with expected attendance from Italy had been cancelled. Italy soon became an actual hotbed of Covid-19 in Europe, with hundreds of infections recorded on a daily basis. In order to minimise infections resulting from the movement of people between neighbouring countries, the Slovenian government ordered that borders be closed. The closure of the borders with the neighbouring countries, especially Italy and Croatia, was a major blow to all residents of Slovenian Istria, particularly the members of the Italian national community who found themselves cut off from their kin-nation and from the Italian part of the population of Croatian Istria. In fact, despite being a line of separation, the border is also a connecting element where the needs and desires for cooperation are concentrated. Cross-

border cooperation strengthens neighbourly relations between local or regional communities. As such, it is not always related only to the presence of a minority in the border area, but also to the presence of the majority population. Thus, also in the Slovenian-Italian and Slovenian-Croatian border areas, these two aspects intertwine. In our case, however, cross-border relations involve three countries and, consequently, several groups on both sides of the two borders, which leads to a much larger number and diversity of relations between them, not all of which are equally relevant for interethnic relations in the border area. Yet in our case, with the Italian community at the centre of our consideration, the complexity of the established model¹ of the Italian national community's integration and cross-border cooperation is changing and gaining new dimensions as a result of the current situation. In such regard, the question arises as to whether all these changes can affect the vitality of the national community. Assuming they do, we ask ourselves how members of the Italian national community did and will adapt to the new situation. Will there be a new model of organisation and integration? In an attempt to answer these questions, a study was conducted, the results of which are presented below.

In order to understand the new/different reality that changes the existing patterns of contacts of the members of the Italian national community with Italy as their nation of origin and with the members of the Italian national community in Croatia, the next chapter outlines the situation of the Italian national community in general.

2. The Italian National Community in Slovenia

Due to its geographical and strategic location, the territory of Slovenian Istria is a melting pot of different nations and cultures. Another characteristic of this area is the frequent changing of political authority, especially from the 19th century onwards when the governing countries and, consequently, borders often changed, which affected the composition of its population. After World War II, the Italian eastern border became a recurrent subject of debate. With the signing of the Paris Peace Treaty (in 1947), the Free Territory of Trieste was established, which comprised two zones: Zone A, which included Trieste, and Zone B, which included Slovenian Istria and was administered by the Yugoslav Army. Following the signing of the London Memorandum (in 1954), the entire Zone B came under Yugoslav administration and a significant part of the Italian population therefore moved to Italy.² The vacated towns were settled by Slovenians from the hinterland and members of other nations. With the Treaty of Osimo (in 1975), Yugoslav sovereignty over Zone B was finally recognised. This marked the beginning of the protection of the Italian minority (Sedmak 2005, 92; Ivetic 2006).

After the break-up of Yugoslavia in 1991, the autochthonous Italian population was separated by the new state border between Slovenia and Croatia. Members of the Italian nationality from Slovenian Istria, who had already been separated from their kin-nation, thus found themselves divided between two countries. At the 1991 census, 2,959 persons identified themselves as members of the Italian national community, and 3,882 persons listed Italian as their mother tongue (SORS 1991). At the 2002 census,³ 2,258 persons identified themselves as members of the Italian national community, and 3,736 people listed Italian as their mother tongue. This accounts for 0.11 % of the entire population of Slovenia. In the ethnically mixed area of Slovenian Istria, 81.5 % or 1840 persons identified themselves as members of the Italian national community, and approximately 18.5 % identified themselves as such outside the ethnically mixed area (SORS 2002). With Slovenia's accession to the European Union and the Schengen area and with the introduction of free movement, the divisions of the previous century were overcome, but the border with Croatia in Istria was strengthened, making the activity of the Italian national community much more difficult.

The constitutions of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the Socialist Republic of Slovenia already included provisions on the protection of national communities, which significantly contributed to the preservation of the Italian national community. In fact, Article 77 of the 1963 Constitution stipulated that Slovenia guarantees the free expression of affiliation, the equality of the Italian language, and the possibility of overall development and progress. The 1974⁴ Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Slovenia guaranteed the Italian national community and its members special rights under Articles 250 and 251: free use of their language, free expression and development of national culture, the possibility to establish special organisations for this purpose, free use of their national symbols. In the ethnically mixed area, the use of Italian was equal to Slovenian, and the members of minorities were provided with education in their own language. Slovenia was committed to foster the development of the community in all areas. It also supported the contacts of the Italian nationality with the kin-nation (Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Slovenia 1974; Klemenčič & Zupančič 2004, 184).

The 1991 Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia preserves and upgrades the special rights of the Italian national community. According to Article 11, in those municipalities where the Italian national community resides, the official language, in addition to Slovenian, is also Italian. Article 61 provides for the free expression of national affiliation, while the right to use one's language and script is guaranteed by Article 62. Article 64 determines the special rights of national minorities in the Republic of Slovenia, which are: the right to use their national symbols freely, the right to establish organisations and develop economic, cultural, scientific, and research activities, as well as activities in the field of public media and publishing, the right to education and schooling in their own language.

ages, the right to foster relations with their nations of origin and their respective countries, the right to establish self-governing communities in order to exercise their rights, the right to be directly represented in representative bodies of local self-government and in the National Assembly (Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia 1991).

The position of the Italian national community is further defined in other special laws, regulations, ordinances and statutes of municipalities in ethnically mixed areas, in legal acts, interstate treaties or agreements, and in international conventions.

The establishment of the first organisation of the Italian national community matches a complex historical and political context after World War II. In 1944, the Italian Union of the Istrian District (Unione degli Italiani dell'Istria e di Fiume) was formed. As the umbrella organisation of members of the Italian national community living in the former Yugoslavia, the Union's mission was to organise social and cultural life. Under its auspices, it gathered Italian cultural circles (Circoli italiani di cultura) and supported the development of Italian cultural and other institutions, such as the Italian Drama in Rijeka (Dramma Italiano di Fiume) founded in 1946 and the Edit publishing house founded in 1952. The Italian Union of the Istrian District strived for greater independence from state authorities and for a better position of the Italian community in the society. In the 1960s, it established contacts with the kin-nation and in 1964 it started a long-term cooperation with the People's University of Trieste (Università Popolare di Trieste). These organisations were very active in the field of culture: the Istria Nobilissima art and culture contest was launched in 1967 and the Centre for Historical Research in Rovinj (Centro di Ricerche Storiche di Rovigno) was established in 1968. Over the next decade, the need arose to reorganise the Italian Union to become a cultural and political organisation. In this light, the Italian cultural circles were renamed Italian Communities (Comunità degli Italiani). In the 1980s, their activities and commitments focused on culture and education, but at the end of the decade, some intellectuals began to advocate a greater political role of the organisations of the Italian national community (Giuricin & Giuricin 2008).

Slovenia and Croatia gained independence in 1991. With the establishment of a new state border, the Italian national community was cut in two. In the same year, a reformed Italian Union was formally established, committed to preserving and developing Italian culture and Italian language and exercising the special rights of the Italian national community. Today, the Italian national community in Slovenia is organised as the Coastal Self-Governing Community of Italian Nationality (CAN Costiera), which is the umbrella organisation for the municipalities of Ankaran, Koper, Izola and Piran, where members of the Italian nationality autochthonously reside. Within these municipalities, the Italian national community is organised into municipal self-governing communities of Italian Nationality, representing the members of the Italian national community

before local communities. In each municipality, members of the Italian national community elect their own members of the municipal council and also have their own deputy mayor.

The Italian national community manages educational institutions, cultural institutions and other societies operating in the Italian language. Schools are particularly important because they enable the preservation and transmission of the Italian language and culture. Educational institutions for members of the Italian community are part of the Slovenian public system and include kindergartens, primary and secondary schools. This model meets the specifics of the environment and takes into account the cultural and educational tradition of the national community. Schools on the Coast have an adapted curriculum, which means that in schools with Italian as the language of instruction, there are adaptations for the following subjects: society, geography, history, Italian as first language, Slovenian as second language. Textbooks, workbooks and other materials are all in Italian (Novak Lukanovič et al. 2011; Zudič Antonič 2018).

The Carlo Combi Promotional, Cultural, Educational and Development Centre has been operating in Koper since 2005. Its goal is to preserve, promote and develop the identity of the Italian minority, its language and culture. Radio and Television Koper-Capodistria, which operates under the auspices of Radiotelevizija Slovenija, plays a very important role in the field of public information for members of the Italian national community. The Koper-Capodistria Regional Centre was established in 1995, while the history of radio and television in Koper dates back to the post-war period. Publishing is carried out by the EDIT publishing house based in Rijeka, which publishes the newspaper *La Voce del Popolo*, the children's monthly *Arcobaleno*, the fortnightly *Panorama*, and the magazine on culture *La Battana*.

Italian Communities (*Comunità degli Italiani*) are organised as associations of members of the Italian national community. They played an important role in the post-war period when the Italian population turned from a majority to a minority. They are mainly active in the cultural, sports and social fields. Their main goal is to promote Italian culture, language and identity, to unite their members, and to preserve customs and traditions (Diabatè et al. 2012).

3. Study of the Impact of Covid-19 on the Life and Organisation of the Members of the Italian National Community

3.1 Background

In order to present how the Italian national community coped with the situation during the epidemic and to provide an assessment of the unpredictable circum-

stances, telephone interviews were conducted with selected representatives of Italian national community institutions.

The purpose of this study was to explore the views and opinions of members of the Italian national community regarding the situation of their institutions during the epidemic and to find answers to the following questions:

- How did the Italian national community organise itself during the epidemic?
- What were the challenges faced by the schools with Italian as the language of instruction?
- What is the respondents' opinion about the closure of state borders, which prevented the free movement of persons and contacts with the nation of origin?

The questions basically aimed to:

- determine how the Italian national community organised itself during the epidemic,
- identify the challenges faced by the schools with Italian as the language of instruction,
- find out what the respondents think about the closure of state borders, with an emphasis on the impossibility of free movement of persons and contacts with the nation of origin.

In the first phase, the study involved members of the Italian national community active in various areas of public life: the political council of the Italian national community, the Italian Communities, the self-governing communities of Italian Nationality, the education council, cultural and media institutions. Eleven selected individuals were included in the sample: nine were interviewed by phone and two chose to answer by e-mail. Most of the interviews were conducted in April, after which the study continued with an analysis of (mainly minority) media and of the measures and activities in the local environment. In the second phase of the study, we conducted four more interviews with representatives of ethnic institutions and repeated the interviews with selected individuals (in the field of education), whom we had interviewed in the first phase.

In order to obtain credible data, a series of questions on the organisation of the Italian national community, its institutions, bilingualism, education, the importance of cooperation with the nation of origin and the role of the state border was prepared. The methodological approach of the in-depth interview gave us the opportunity to ask additional questions with the aim of getting a clear picture of the situation.

3.2 Communities and Other Institutions

108

Italian community institutions quickly adapted to the new circumstances. The self-governing communities of Italian Nationality and the Italian Communities cancelled all events already in the first week of March (CAN Capodistria 2020; Costamagna 2020a; Drčić 2020a; Katonar 2020), even before the official declaration of the epidemic. Two factors in particular influenced such decision. First, the situation in neighbouring Italy, of which the members were well informed as most of the events involved the participation of guests from Italy. The second factor was the fact that the events organised by the communities are largely attended by elderly members who are most at risk for Covid-19 infection.

Due to the great uncertainty at the outset, the communities followed the measures set out at the national level and complied therewith at all times. In March and April, most people worked from home, communicated by phone and e-mail and used various communication channels such as Skype or Zoom. Occasionally, some employees went to their offices to perform the necessary administrative tasks (review of incoming mail, preparation of documents to be signed, etc.). Some other employees were home waiting for work. Since May, the offices had been open to members and the public upon previous agreement and in accordance with the guidelines set by the National Institute of Public Health (Costamagna 2020b; Drčić 2020b).

The CAN Costiera continued to work on some previously planned tasks and projects that were very important for the members of the Italian national community. These included a public tender to promote investment in the economy in the area where members of the autochthonous Italian national community live. Investments are in fact very important for micro, small and medium-sized enterprises, which can use these funds to upgrade existing production. Another important project was Raising the quality of national education for the Italian national community in Slovenia and the Slovenian national community in Italy, funded by the European Social Fund and the Slovenian Ministry of Education, Science and Sport.⁵ The project, which strengthened friendship and cooperation between two neighbouring minorities, included a didactic strategy that envisaged the presence of pedagogical experts (native speakers) in pre-school and school institutions during classes. It also provided educational courses and thematic workshops. Due to Covid-19, the project was implemented in a reduced format. As kindergartens and schools were closed in both Italy and Slovenia, the pedagogical assistants engaged in remote work, as this was the only approved and permitted method of implementing curricula considering the situation. The success of this type of work was an indicator that curricula can also be implemented by more flexible means, which confirms the fact that in the future other educational models should also be considered in addition to the classical one. The official end date of the project was 31 August 2020, but given the excel-

lent results achieved and the interest shown by the institutions, the possibility of continuing the project for another two school years is being considered (CAN Costiera 2020a).

During this period, the Council of the above institution held a correspondence meeting and adopted a draft joint ordinance on the implementation of bilingualism in all coastal municipalities. It is a joint ordinance on the implementation of bilingualism where the rules of previous ordinances have been observed, while obsolete articles have been revised.⁶ The draft ordinance must be submitted to the municipal councils of all coastal municipalities for approval and harmonised with the municipal statutes with the consent of the self-governing Italian national communities. The ordinance regulates the use of the Italian language in the ethnically mixed area where, in addition to Slovene, Italian is also the official language in all local, public and state institutions of the municipalities. Fully bilingual road signs and adaptations of existing ones that do not comply with the regulation (CAN Costiera 2020b) are also mandatory.

All communities were in contact with their members during the epidemic, mainly by phone or e-mail. This enabled and ensured that members received up-to-date information in Italian about the Covid-19 epidemic in Slovenia, about the rules of conduct, about state and municipal measures, etc. Other means of information were also used, such as posts on community websites or social networks (Facebook).

From the outset, the communities were aware that they needed to help vulnerable groups. This was mainly provided in close circles, i.e. through friends and family members. In such regard, the cases of Piran and Ankaran can be highlighted as examples of good practice. As quarantine and social distancing can also have a strong psychological effect on individuals, the Italian community of Piran organised a virtual Zoom meeting every Friday evening, where people could meet, share their impressions and thoughts, and gain additional information and answers to their questions. Zoom meetings were also important for maintaining contacts with fellow members from other countries, e.g. in Italy, Austria, Portugal and the US, who talked about how they spent their time during the epidemic. This same community also organised a campaign to help elderly members with purchases or other errands. In the Ankaran community, attention was paid to the youngest and the sewing of protective masks for children began in anticipation of the opening of kindergartens and schools. The community contributed fabric and materials, while members volunteered to sew smaller masks tailored to children's faces.

During the epidemic, the communities did not forget to implement and respect the provisions on bilingualism, thus keeping constant attention and calling on members to report any deficiencies in such regard. At the beginning of the epidemic, there were no instructions in Italian in medical facilities and in local healthcare in general. Some municipalities initially published information

on the measures only in Slovenian, but the situation improved when the Italian communities pointed to this problem. It is important to take into account the fact that a large number of members of the Italian community are elderly people who have difficulties understanding Slovenian. It is for this reason that the communities often translated and published key information and instructions on the epidemic in Italian themselves.

3.3 Education

Primary school was definitely the one with the most problems, especially in the beginning. As pupils are minors, there are also certain rules that teachers must take into account, such as the fact that pupils cannot have lessons in the online environment or that they may not be recorded. The school lent some school computers to families who did not have a computer, and the National Education Institute also helped by providing modems and tablets. Younger pupils heavily relied on the assistance of the parents to work with computers. It had thus been found that many parents did not have the necessary digital skills. In addition, as one of the primary school principals pointed out, the language of instruction at school – Italian – was a barrier to communication for some parents, especially in the case of first-graders who are not yet fluent in Italian because Italian is not their first language or because they come from mixed families. It was also emphasised that teachers invested a considerable amount of time in preparing lessons and materials and in informing parents.

When the epidemic in Slovenia was officially over (31 May 2020), all pupils gradually returned to school. Schools had to follow a certain hygiene protocol: a 1.5 m distance between school desks and a similar interpersonal distance, frequent washing and disinfection of hands, no gathering in hallways and around schools, use of face masks for employees and other professionals. The epidemic also changed the assessment of knowledge and national assessments for six- and nine-graders were not carried out this year.

It was much easier and faster to organise remote learning in secondary schools. Older children are in fact more independent in the use of technology and were immediately able to adapt to the new method of work. Nevertheless, teachers had to review the content of the curricula. For families who did not have a computer or had trouble using their home computer, the school lent some school computers that students would return when the learning process would go back to normal. As repeatedly pointed out, the greatest concern was the implementation of the *matura* exam and practical training for vocational school students. The schools constantly followed and adapted to the guidelines of the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport. Fourth-year students returned to schools at the end of May to start preparing for the *matura* exam. Exam dates were adjusted to the health situation, and the first exam (a written English test)

was held on 30 May (RIC 2020). Other students finished school by remote learning.

Practical training for vocational school students was also adapted. Article 46 of the Act on Intervention Measures to Contain the Covid-19 Epidemic and Mitigate its Consequences for Citizens and the Economy (2020) states:

If, due to the epidemic, secondary school students, apprentices and last-year students could not complete practical training by working and practical education at employers, such shall be recognised as completed if they have positive grades in all professional modules in the final year.

On such basis, final-year students continued to participate in remote learning and prepare for the final exam. For students who did not attend the final years, two options opened up: the first one envisaged that, in agreement with vocational subject teachers and employers, training would be adapted in such a way that part of the practical training would be replaced by more theoretical work, e.g. preparation of project assignments; the other option was to complete practical training in the summer. In the interview, the principal of the Pietro Coppo Secondary School in Izola, which offers secondary vocational, secondary technical and vocational-technical education in Italian, said that some students completed compulsory training already in December 2019 and so the epidemic did not cause any additional problems. Students who started training in February 2020 and had to suspend it due to the health situation were able to continue and complete the training as soon as the measures began to loosen, especially in the summer.

3.4 Cross-Border Cooperation

The border issue can be looked at from different angles, not only in geographical terms, but also from a legal, temporal and psychological point of view. After the end of World War II, the first negotiations for the demarcation of the border between Italy and the former Yugoslavia began, which was resolved by the signing of the Osimo Treaty in 1975. After the disintegration of Yugoslavia and with Slovenia and Croatia gaining independence in 1991, a new border with Croatia was set up on the Dragonja river.

With Slovenia's accession to the European Union and the Schengen area, all internal borders between EU Member States were abolished, including the border with Italy. This implies a free and easier movement of persons and goods and indeed represents an advantage for cross-border cooperation. Although the border with Croatia still exists although Croatia is now also a member of the European Union, members of the Italian national community consider the territory from Trieste to Croatian Istria as a single or common territory without borders in which they can now move freely.

The Slovenian government decided to close the borders and to control entry into the country on 12 March. Local border crossings were closed and four checkpoints were established on the border with Italy (Vrtojba – Štandrež/Sant'Andrea, Fernetiči/Fernetti, Škofije/Rabuiese and Krvavi Potok – Pesek/Pese) for the entry of persons who were not Slovenian citizens or did not have a registered permanent or temporary residence in Slovenia. This did not apply to freight transport (Government of the Republic of Slovenia 2020b).

All respondents agreed that border closure was indeed a problem, causing difficulties at various levels and representing an issue not only for members of minorities but for the entire population. All respondents agreed that border closure had a strong psychological impact on people and affected both work and economy, but understand during an epidemic, when there is state of emergency, there must be some sort of control.

We would like to highlight the opinion of some respondents regarding the closure of the state border. One of the interviewees said he had the impression that at the beginning of the crisis, even state institutions did not know exactly what to do. Personally, he was against any border closure, especially in Slovenian Istria, where it was reasonable to expect that certain measures would be implemented differently. It would e.g. be reasonable to expect that special exemptions would apply to those who had relatives and family members across the border, perhaps even elderly, sick and dependent relatives. He added that the closure of borders caused inconvenience not only for families but also in terms of work, namely for cross-border workers. Another interviewee mentioned that it was a period of great uncertainty and instability for national communities, especially in terms of preserving their linguistic and cultural identity. A third interviewee referred to the general aspect of the cross-border area, emphasising that this territory represents a world of its own that cannot live separated between borders. In his opinion, minorities certainly suffered the most, the Italian minority in Slovenia and Croatia, as well as the Slovenian minority in Italy, as both minorities were cut off from their homeland. It is these groups that have suffered the greatest damage in terms of cultural, social, institutional and personal contacts. Hopes remain that the governments of Italy, Slovenia and Croatia will understand the specifics of this territory and mitigate the situation at the borders in the future, should similar circumstances arise again, as expected in autumn.

Due to the spread of the epidemic in nearby Italy, the coastal population may have realised sooner what was happening and accepted any new measures with understanding. As they know the Italian language and, above all, have contacts with Trieste and Italy, they acted more responsibly, especially with regard to the restriction of movement and social distancing. In the interviews, many respondents replied that for many people who had relatives, friends and associates from Italy and Croatian Istria, the closure of the border cut off their interpersonal relations.

A similarly worrying situation was seen with regard to schooling, as it was not known how teachers and pupils living in the border area, either in Italy or in Croatia, would be able to attend school if schools reopened before borders. The Ministry of Education, Science and Sport sent out a message stating that in the first week after school reopening these students would continue remote learning, after which they would have to arrange for the status of cross-border workers (Botter 2020).

The working visit of the Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio to the Slovenian Foreign Minister Anže Logar of 6 June 2020 focused on the closure of the border (Drčić 2020c). Both countries were optimistic about 15 June, when border measures could be lifted and the two countries could work together to relaunch all forms of cross-border cooperation, contributing not only to the recovery in tourism and the economy, but also to the vitality of the Italian national community. An important turning point was 13 June, when the border with Italy opened to the inhabitants of Friuli Venezia Giulia. On 15 June, also local border crossings with Croatia were opened.⁷

During the epidemic, a key role was indeed played by minority media, such as the daily *La Voce del Popolo* and the Italian radio and television programme of the Koper Regional Centre of RTV Slovenija, which actively reported on the epidemiological situation in the border area, i.e. the area between Italy, Slovenia and Croatia.

4. Conclusions and Future Prospects

Initially, three questions were posed, the answers to which were sought in the replies of the interviewees and in the views and opinions of members of the Italian national community. While trying to answer those three questions, another crucial question opened up: is the Italian national community ready for the challenges of the future?

The analysis of the replies shows that the Italian national community is active mainly in the cultural and social field and that it strives in various ways to preserve its vitality, especially in the field of culture, language and identity. Although the whole world is struggling with a state of emergency and searching for a solution to get life back on track, members of the Italian national community are also aware that they need to find additional ways to fulfil their mission.

Education was the fastest to reorganise itself during the epidemic, as it has been promoting the use of ICT for years as an effective way of teaching. However, when teaching takes place entirely remotely, problems also arise, such as difficulty of communication with those parents who do not know Italian well or do not know it well enough. For the youngest pupils, the problem is computer skills, because they are not independent. There are other problems, as well, that

need to be solved if classes were to take place online again, such as appropriate support for children with special needs and other vulnerable groups.

As regards the border and cross-border cooperation, the psychological consequences of border closure and the difficulties in maintaining family contacts were the most prominent in the respondents' answers. Members of the Italian national community identify themselves on the basis of their language and the environment in which they live, and for them contacts with Italy are vital. Respondents did not provide any specific answers to what to do in case of border closure. In their opinion, more appropriate solutions should probably be found at the national level through an active foreign policy, as well as at the regional level by maintaining good neighbourly relations, with due account of the fact that a similar situation could reoccur. It is important that the Italian national community maintains contacts with the country and nation of origin and that both Italy and Slovenia are willing to cooperate in the development of the minority. This is not only about cultural and linguistic exchanges, but about recognising the presence of the Italian national community as a proof of the presence of Italian identity in the border area of Slovenian Istria.

The circumstances in which the Italian national community found itself at the time of the epidemic reinforced the meaning of the word community, which became a fundamental point of reference for members and a connecting element between people. It showed that an individual is important only as a member of a community. The challenges posed by the new circumstances related to Covid-19, which the Italian national community will have to face in the future, are great and unpredictable. But this diversity can also offer new opportunities in the sense of finding new and different ways of working, organising institutions, opening and connecting with the general public, connecting with different generations not only in a narrow local area but in a wider geographical area. Of course, the goal of all interviewees remains to continuously look for ways to preserve the vitality of the Italian national community in the changed circumstances.

References

- Act on Intervention Measures to Contain the Covid-19 Epidemic and Mitigate Its Consequences for Citizens and the Economy (Zakon o interventnih ukrepih za zajezitev epidemije COVID-19 in omilititev njenih posledic za državljane in gospodarstvo)*. Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia 49 (2020), 10 April 2020.
- Benedetti, E., 2015. Pravna zaščita italijanske manjšine v Sloveniji in slovenske manjšine v Italiji. In M. Tremul (ed.) *Analiza, izvajanje in razvoj zaščite narodnih skupnosti v Sloveniji in Italiji*. Italian Union, Koper, 13–28.
- Botter, D., 2020. Il Ministro Kustec conferma: "I residenti all'estero non rientreranno a scuola." *MMC RTV SLO*, 15 May 2020, <https://www.rtvsllo.si/capodistria/radio-capodistria/notizie/slovenia/il-ministro-kustec-conferma-i-residenti-all-estero-non-rientreranno-a-scuola/523943> (accessed 13 August 2020).

- CAN Capodistria – Comunità Autogestita della Nazionalità Italiana di Capodistria [Self-governing Community of Italian Nationality of Koper/Capodistria], 2020. La CAN di Capodistria si allinea alle disposizioni di contrasto al coronavirus, 10 March 2020, <http://www.cancapodistria.org/it/homepage/7-notizie/798-la-can-di-capodistria-si-allinea-alle-disposizioni-di-contrasto-al-coronavirus.html> (accessed 26 June 2020).
- CAN Costiera – Comunità Autogestita Costiera della Nazionalità Italiana [Coastal Self-Governing Community of Italian Nationality], 2020a. Innalzamento della qualità a scuola, 14 May 2020, <http://cancostiera.org/news-ita/2906-innalzamento-della-qualita-a-scuola.html> (accessed 10 June 2020).
- CAN Costiera – Comunità Autogestita Costiera della Nazionalità Italiana [Coastal Self-Governing Community of Italian Nationality], 2020b. Seduta per corrispondenza del Consiglio, 29 May 2020, <http://cancostiera.org/news-ita/2921-seduta-per-corrispondenza-del-consiglio.html> (accessed 10 June 2020).
- Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Slovenia*. Official Gazette of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia 14 (1963).
- Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Slovenia*. Official Gazette of the Socialist Republic of Slovenia 6 (1974).
- Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia*. Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia 33 (1991).
- Costamagna, B., 2020a. La CI e la CAN sospendono tutte le attività. *Capo4distria*, 9 March 2020, https://capodistria.rtvsl.si/news/comunita-nazionale-italiana/la-ci-e-la-can-di-pirano-sospendono-tutte-le-attivita/516640?fbclid=IwAR1SLskj2IPPKf4Uq0cNbDMkNLyfqNW3l_N30t-ofHoQD4mMQRwq_m8RVMM (accessed 26 June 2020).
- Costamagna, B., 2020b. La CAN di Pirano torna a riunirsi e parla anche del bando UPT. *Capo4distria*, 25 May 2020, <https://capodistria.rtvsl.si/news/comunita-nazionale-italiana/la-can-di-pirano-torna-a-riunirsi-e-parla-anche-del-bando-upt/525059?fbclid=IwAR0eFh53NqgRuO2tq1nrvagcqt4kTWw9L2S80qi4hZthfLKrL-nwrurOV7k> (accessed 26 June 2020).
- Decree on the Public Implementation of Bilingualism in the Ethnically Mixed Area [of the Municipality of Koper/Capodistria]* (Odlok o javnem izvajanju dvojezičnosti na narodnostno mešanem območju [Mesne občine Koper]). Official Publications of Primorske novice 22 (1998).
- Decree on the Implementation of Bilingualism in the Ethnically Mixed Area of the Municipality of Izola/Isola* (Odlok o izvajanju dvojezičnosti na narodnostno mešanem območju v občini Izola). Official Publications of the Municipality of Izola 3 (2001).
- Decree on Public Advertising [of the Municipality of Piran/Pirano]* (Odlok o javnem oglaševanju [Občine Piran]). Official Publications of Primorske novice 36 (2004).
- Dessardo, D., 2020. Sloveni con immobili in Croazia; confine più aperto. *MMC RTV SLO*, 10 May 2020, <https://www.rtvsl.si/capodistria/radio-capodistria/notizie/croazia/sloveni-con-immobili-in-croazia-confine-piu-aperto/523382> (accessed 10 August 2020).
- Diabaté, C., Vincoletto, R. & Tremul, M., 2012. *Conoscere.it: un viaggio nel mondo delle istituzioni italiane in Slovenia e in Croazia / Spoznati.it: potovanje v svet italijanskih ustanov v Sloveniji in na Hrvaškem*. Italian Union, Koper.
- Drčić, L., 2020a. Sospese le attività CI e CAN di Ancarano. *MMC RTV SLO*, 11 March 2020, <https://www.rtvsl.si/capodistria/radio-capodistria/notizie/comunita-nazionale-italiana/sospese-tutte-le-attivita-ci-e-can-di-ancarano/516823> (accessed 26 June 2020).
- Drčić, L., 2020b. Tornata a riunirsi la CAN di Ancarano. *MMC RTV SLO*, 14 May 2020, <https://www.rtvsl.si/capodistria/radio-capodistria/notizie/comunita-nazionale-italiana/tornata-a-riunirsi-la-can-di-ancarano/523803> (accessed 26 June 2020).
- Drčić, L., 2020c. Confine italosloveno, in settimana l'incontro tra Logar e Di Maio. *MMC RTV SLO*, 26 May 2020, <https://www.rtvsl.si/capodistria/radio-capodistria/notizie/slove>

- nia/confine-italosloveno-in-settimana-l-incontro-tra-logar-e-di-maio/525117 (accessed 10 August 2020).
- Giuricin, E. & Giuricin, L., 2008. *La Comunità nazionale italiana. Storia e istituzioni degli Italiani dell'Istria, Fiume e della Dalmazia (1944–2006)*. Centro di Ricerche Storiche, Rovigno.
- Government of the Republic of Slovenia, 2020a. Slovenija razglasila epidemijo novega koronavirusa. *Portal GOV.SI*, 12 March 2020, <https://www.gov.si/novice/2020-03-12-slovenija-razglasila-epidemijo-novega-koronavirusa/> (accessed 24 June 2020).
- Government of the Republic of Slovenia, 2020b. Vzpostavljene štiri kontrolne točke na cestnih povezavah z Italijo, *Portal GOV.SI*, 18 March 2020, <https://www.gov.si/novice/2020-03-18-vzpostavljene-stiri-kontrolne-tocke-na-cestnih-povezavah-z-italijo/> (accessed 10 August 2020).
- Ivetic, E. (ed.), 2006. *Istria nel tempo*. Centro di Ricerche Storiche, Rovigno.
- Katonar, G., 2020. Palazzo Manzioli sospende le attività. *Il Mandracchio*, 10 March 2020, <https://www.ilmandracchio.org/palazzo-manzioli-sospende-le-attivita/> (accessed 26 June 2020).
- Klemenčič, M. & Zupančič, J., 2004. Primerjava družbenega in prostorskega razvoja madžarske in italijanske manjšine v Sloveniji, na Hrvaškem in v Srbiji v obdobju po razpadu Jugoslavije. *Treatises and Documents, Journal of Ethnic Studies* 44, 158–200.
- Novak Lukanovič, S., Zudič Antonič, N. & Istvan Varga, Š., 2011. Vzgoja in izobraževanje na narodno mešanih območjih v Sloveniji. In J. Krek & M. Metljak (eds.) *Bela knjiga o vzgoji in izobraževanju v Republiki Sloveniji*. National Education Institute Slovenia, Ljubljana, 347–367.
- RIC – Državni izpitni center [National Examinations Centre], 2020. Koledar splošne mature, https://www.ric.si/splosna_matura/maturitetni_koledar/ (accessed 25 June 2020).
- Sedmak, M., 2005. Italijanska narodna skupnost v Republiki Sloveniji – Družbena (samo)umestitev. *Teorija in praksa* 42 (1), 89–112.
- SORS – Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, 1991. *Popis prebivalstva Republike Slovenije 31. 3. 1991*. SORS, Ljubljana.
- SORS – Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, 2002. *Popis prebivalstva Republike Slovenije 31. 3. 2002*. SORS, Ljubljana.
- Troha, N., 2002. Italijanska narodnostna skupnost v Sloveniji med letoma 1954 in 1990. *Zgodovinski časopis / Historical Review* 56 (3/4), 447–464.
- Zudič Antonič, N., 2018. Teaching in Plurilinguistic Environments with a Minority Language: Analysis of a Pre-service Training Project. *Treatises and Documents, Journal of Ethnic Studies* 80, 89–103.

Notes

- ¹ The model includes both contacts at the national level (enshrined in interstate treaties) and regional level (defined by regional agreements), as well as direct contacts, which are the most extensive.
- ² The position of the Italians in Slovenian Istria has changed completely. From a large nation they turned, after 1945, to a small national minority without a strong demographic, social and economic structure (Troha 2002, 451).
- ³ Comparing the 2002 census with the 1991 census, statistics shows a decrease in the number of members of the Italian national community. The demographic fluctuation of the Italian population can be explained by various arguments, such as non-determination of ethnic-national

affiliation, higher death than birth rates, mixed marriages, a different methodological approach at the 2002 census, exclusion of expatriates from the census, and other reasons (Benedetti 2015, 20).

- ⁴ Following the adoption of the Yugoslav and Slovenian constitutions in 1974 and the establishment of the relevant bodies to protect national communities, the Italian minority in Slovenia was among the most protected minorities in Europe (Troha 2002, 460).
- ⁵ The project represents the only funding outside the usual form of funding for the benefit of the Italian language education system. It officially started in 2016 and in four years a number of activities have taken place, such as the distribution of interactive blackboards for primary and secondary schools with Italian as the language of instruction.
- ⁶ The Municipality of Piran does not have a decree on bilingualism, but it does have a Decree on Public Advertising (2004). In the municipality of Izola, there is the Decree on the Implementation of Bilingualism in the Ethnically Mixed Area (2001). In the Municipality of Koper, the Decree on the Public Implementation of Bilingualism in the Ethnic Area applies (1998). The municipality of Ankaran does not have a decree on bilingualism yet.
- ⁷ Already on 10 May, the border was opened for Slovenian citizens and close family members who own real estate or a vessel in Croatia, for whom quarantine was no longer necessary (Dessardo 2020).

Acknowledgment

The article was written under the research programme Minority and Ethnic Studies and the Slovene National Question (P5-0081), funded by Slovenian Research Agency.