

# ETHNIC, REGIONAL AND NATIONAL IDENTITIES IN THE CONTEXT OF EUROPEAN CROSS BORDER COOPERATION OPPORTUNITIES: A CASE STUDY OF ITALIAN ETHNIC COMMUNITY IN SLOVENE ISTRIA

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## ABSTRACT

**Ethnic, regional and national identities in the context of European cross border cooperation opportunities: A case study of Italian ethnic community in Slovene Istria**

The article proceeds from the main research question about the effects of EU integration and cross border cooperation initiatives on the border region of Slovene Istria as a whole and Italian ethnic community in particular in terms of its socio-economic and cultural activity and identity issue. The authoress tries to expose the historical review of the cross border cooperation between Slovenia and Italy prior to the EU programmes and afterwards and the activity of the Italian ethnic community in the latter.

**KEY WORDS:** cross border cooperation, identities, Europe, Italian ethnic community, Slovenia, Italy, European Union

## IZVLEČEK

**Etnične, regionalne in nacionalne identitete v kontekstu evropskega čezmejnega sodelovanja: Študija primera Italijanske narodne skupnosti v Slovenski Istri**

Članek izhaja iz osrednjega raziskovalnega vprašanja o učinkih evropskih integracij in pobud čezmejnega sodelovanja v obmejni regiji Slovenske Istre, predvsem na primeru družbeno-ekonomskega položaja, kulturnih aktivnosti in identitetnih pripadnosti Italijanske narodne skupnosti. Avtorica poskuša proučiti zgodovinski kontekst čezmejnega sodelovanja med Slovenijo in Italijo v obdobju pred tovrstnimi programi Evropske unije in po njihovi uvedbi z vidika vključenosti Italijanske narodne skupnosti.

**KLJUČNE BESEDE:** čezmejno sodelovanje, identitete, Evropa, Italijanska narodna skupnost, Slovenija, Italija, Evropska unija

## INTRODUCTION

The relationship between the Italian and Slovene nations has a long history. Long before Slovenia became independent, the two nations lived side by side, not as two separated cultures, but partially in a mixed cultural environment. Nowadays ethnic (minority) communities can be found on both sides of the historically changing border: the Slovene community in Italy and Italian community in Slovenia. In Slovenia,

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the borderland in the south stretches from the Karst region, the lime stone region of Slovenia, to the north where the borders of Italy and Slovenia join Austria's, to the basin of the Alps.

As a number of researchers and authors have already claimed, the Italian ethnic community in former Yugoslavia deserves special attention because after World War Two – during which virtually the entire German minority community left the former Yugoslavia – it remained the only Western European ethnic minority in the country. Because of this distinction, both the Italian and Hungarian minority populations became the subject of attention and studies after the end of the war.

The following set of research questions will guide the present article:

- Has the historical trajectory of the cross border cooperation between Slovenia and Italy existed prior to the EU initiatives and what was the role of the Italian ethnic community?
- What have been the effects of EU integration and cross border cooperation initiatives on the border region as a whole and Italian ethnic community in particular in terms of their socio-economic and cultural activity and identity issue? This question should be explored on a comparative basis i.e. looking at changes in the situation after the dissolution of communist regime and the creation of new independent Slovene (and Croatian) states in comparison to conditions in the former Yugoslavia.
- How the Italian ethnic community perceive the existence of different ethnic, regional and national identities within the broader European space with regard to the cross border cooperation incentives?

## **METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK**

The article proceeds from the following three research methods:

- Socio-historical analysis in the tradition of English cultural studies: The latter exposes the main concept in the article, namely the concept of cultural (ethnic, regional, national etc.) identity which according to Stuart Hall (1996) does not signal that stable collective core of the self hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves' which a people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common, and which can stabilize, fix or guarantee an unchanging 'oneness' or cultural belongingness underlying all the other superficial differences. Rather it accepts that identities are increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions. Therefore they are subject to a radical historicization, and are constantly in the process of change and transformation through the relation to the »constitutive outside«.
- Qualitative method: In-depth interviews were conducted among members of the Italian ethnic community in Slovenia (Slovene Istria) and among members of the

majority population in the period between August 2005 and May 2006. There were thirty interviews which lasted from twenty to ninety minutes. Some difficulties did emerge in the selection and contacting the people because many of the Italian representatives discharged a variety of different public functions (deputy mayors, town councillors, coordinators and presidents of Italian organizations, etc). All the same, many of the respondents (particularly those employed at governmental institutions such as the National Agency for Regional Development) provided me with relevant material in response to the specific issues I raised.

- Secondary analysis of available statistical data (Statistical Yearbook, etc.).

### **THE ITALIAN ETHNIC COMMUNITY IN SLOVENE 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 or 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 (approximately 20%), while elsewhere it rarely exceeds 10% with the total percentage being under 5%. Most of the Italian ethnic community in Slovenia – some 75% – live in urban centres, where they represent only a small portion of the population (Komac, 1999: 25).

The state assigns to Slovenia's Italians (and Hungarians) the status of "ethnic community" and guarantees full legal protection of their collective and individual rights although a marked discrepancy between the provisions of the law and daily practice is perceived by members of the Italian ethnic community. According to 2002 census there were 2,258 members (0.11%) of the Italian community 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 group cannot be explained only in terms of assimilation or emigration; methodological and other factors must be considered as well.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Possible methodological changes include the fact that in 1991 and previous censuses, one member of the family identified nationality for the whole family, while in 2002 each person over fifteen years old was allowed to tell the census takers his or her ethnic identity. At the time of the census, many people were not available to report their ethnic identity to the census takers. It was possible

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, 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 ethnic 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 (Sedmak, 2004: 507). The presence of the Italian ethnic community in Slovene Istria is made evident by bilingual public inscriptions, bilingual identity cards and passports, a high number of mixed marriages etc.

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF CROSS BORDER COOPERATION IN THE REGION**

Within the framework of the former Yugoslavia from the 1960s on and especially with the increasing openness of political borders, the political, economic and geographical position of Slovenia had been growing stronger: first in the framework of the Alps-Adriatic Working Community in the context of Central Europe, then in the context of the Central European Initiative, and finally within the European space as a whole. "In comparison to other socialist countries in general and to the other Yugoslav republics in particular, the Iron Curtain began opening a good thirty years earlier in Slovenia. This was certainly the first significant step in opening Slovenia to Europe and the world" (Jesih et al, 1994: 11). Tendencies toward greater openness were also fostered by the concept of polycentric development, a trend that began to counter the

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for them to send a subsequent statement of ethnic identity to the census commission, but many did not do so. Therefore, some 126,325 persons (6.43% of the population of Slovenia) are included under the rubric »ethnic identity unknown". In 1991, the number had been only 2.21%. In addition, emigrants who were temporary workers abroad were not included in the 2002 census. In previous censuses, a person who had his or her permanent residence formally in Koper, for example, was included even if he or she had lived for a decade in Trieste or Hungary or elsewhere. The 2002 census included only those who actually lived at their official permanent residence (Klemenčič and Zupančič, 2004: 868).

depopulation of border regions and cause the rise of secondary regional centres along the borders with Austria and Italy. This ongoing opening was given further impetus by the collapse of the Eastern bloc. With the increasingly intensified development of the role of border regions and the linking of these with the regions across national borders, opportunities became available to Slovene minorities in neighbouring countries (in Friuli-Venezia-Giulia in Italy, in Carinthia and Styria in Austria, and in Porabje in Hungary) as well as to the Italian and Hungarian communities in Slovenia to play an important role in facilitating economic, cultural and other linkages between the Slovene state and its neighbours.

In the 1960s, for example, communist Yugoslavia and Italy signed several bilateral agreements that enabled the substantial flow of people, goods and services between the two countries. The increasingly liberal regime in the border region is also proven by the fact that, by the 1970s, there were seventy border crossings of various categories over the 235 kilometres of the Slovene section of the Yugoslav-Italian land border. In 1980, there were 17 million individual crossings of the Yugoslav-Italian border, most of them through Slovene border points (Klemenčič and Klemenčič, 1997: 291). The open frontier facilitated the rapid economic development of the region, particularly on the Slovene side. In Slovene and Croatian Istria, the tourism industry developed quickly. In the 1970s and 1980s, Italians were buying the cheaper gasoline to be had in Slovenia (and Croatia), while the residents of Yugoslavia left millions of American dollars in Trieste and Gorizia purchasing goods they couldn't find in Yugoslavia. "The importance of this region for the economic development of the wider Central European region is shown in the expansion of its ports. Three large ports developed on fifty kilometres of coastline: Trieste, Rijeka, and Koper" (Klemenčič and Klemenčič, 1997: 291).

To summarize, the dissolution of the federal Yugoslavia, the establishment of two new sovereign and independent states (Slovenia and Croatia), the transition from a socialist to democratic system, the implementation of a free market economy, and last but not least the European integration process in the 1990s and its (financial) opportunities, have all had an impact on the border region and the position of the Italian community within it. Interview results suggest that the following three consequences have been the most noteworthy:

- 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 an EU member in 2004;
- economic weakness and dependence of the Italian community on government subsidies;
- European integration and cross-border cooperation opportunities.

All three many-sided factors are mutually and interactively linked so it is impossible to analyse them individually, that is without at the same time taking into account influences one each other. Nevertheless, these factors represent major turning points for the community under study in this article.

## **SLOVENE TRANSITION TO DEMOCRACY AND FREE MARKET CONDITIONS**

In the conditions of change which began in the late 1980s and continued into the 1990s with the fall of communism, the subsequent restructuring of political, social and economic conditions and institutions, and the Slovene preparation for European integration processes, the Slovene-Italian frontier was not the most important “new” border in the region. After the dissolution of Yugoslavia, not only Italians in Slovenia but the whole border region has felt the new border between Slovenia and Croatia that emerged with the independence of both countries. The border was felt even more acutely with Slovene accession to the EU. Previously there had been close and intense connections between people on both sides of the border, not only in terms of familial ties but also in terms of economic, cultural and other interactions all of which became more tenuous after the dissolution of Yugoslavia and emergence of the new EU border. The Italian community had felt much stronger in the former Yugoslavia when Italians from Slovenia and Croatia were perceived as one community and enjoyed close ties. After the changes, Italians on both sides of the newly established frontier began to lose the will and interest to engage in border matters with one important exception: namely, the Italian community in Croatia which is numerically superior (approximately 20,000) than the corresponding community in Slovenia (approximately 2000) and feels a stronger affiliation to its Italian identity.

It is paradoxical that, despite the fact that the Italian community in Croatia has fewer legal rights (at least on paper), it probably has better possibilities for development and prosperity because of its size. Perhaps because of this situation, the process of assimilation is occurring with more intensity in Slovenia than in Croatia. This situation could change, however, when Croatia becomes an EU member state as the Italian community in Slovenia has already started to invigorate its relations with Croatia as well as with Italy. With independence, Italians in Slovenia lost the great majority of the Italian community to Croatia. This has handicapped the community in Slovenia both on the symbolic level and in the socio-economic areas of employment and education. New borders meant new legislation and employment laws. School systems, curricula and school terms are no longer compatible between the two countries and school textbooks are no longer the same. Within the common Yugoslav state, for example, many Italian parents from Croatia sent their children to Italian (mostly secondary) schools in Slovenia. After the dissolution of Yugoslavia, it has become much more difficult for Italians from Croatia to attend Italian schools in Slovenia at all, still less for adults to be employed in Slovenia. These incompatibilities have grown even more pronounced since Slovene membership in the EU. Nowadays, very few Italian students from Croatia attend Italian gymnasium in Piran or secondary school in Izola.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> In terms of secondary vocational schools, Pietro Coppo in Izola remained the only Italian vocational school in Slovenia after its independence. Prior to independence about 25% of students came from Croatia (Buje, Umag, Novigrad), but after independence this percentage has started

The dissolution of Yugoslavia affected the entire system of Italian schools in Istria. In Yugoslavia schools had been systematically established for the whole Istrian territory (both Slovene and Croatian), usually with different programmes in different locations. For example, the economics high school was located in Koper, Slovenia, the construction secondary school in Buje, Croatia, and so on. Today this system is no longer valid and students have fewer choices about what and where to study in the Italian language school system. There is the additional problem of so-called nostrification (equivalence) of school certificates and diplomas. This particularly affects the validity of Slovene degrees in Croatia, as Croatian legislation demands supplementary examinations in Croatian language, history and geography for those students who attended Italian school in Slovenia. The nostrification process is costly and time-consuming. Other forms of cooperation between the minority community in the region which is now divided among two separate states has without a doubt become much more difficult.<sup>3</sup> As previously mentioned, European integration will have an important effect on the Italian community in the whole Istrian region including its Slovenian part when Croatia becomes an EU member state and when the border between Slovenia and Croatia will become less rigid again.

What about the western Slovene border with Italy?

Despite the ideological, structural and institutional differences between the former socialist Yugoslavia and the independent Republic of Slovenia, at least one resemblance exists between the two countries in terms of the Italian community. Not all minorities in the former Yugoslavia had the same status. During Yugoslav times, the Italian ethnic community possessed special privileges because it had connections with and bordered on Italy, a Western country. This situation contrasted with that of the Hungarian minority in Slovenia, the Romanian community in Serbia, and the Albanian one in Kosovo. Because of its position in the border region between Yugoslavia and the West, and also because of its equivalent position between the Iron Curtain and western capitalist countries, the Italian community represented a handy means for the former state to show the West how well and correctly Yugoslavia treated its minority populations. Two motivations stand out above the others:

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to fall. In 1994, before problems with equivalence of school certificates emerged, 200 students were enrolled. According to one respondent only 120 students attend this school today.

<sup>3</sup> Slovenia continues to at least partially finance the activities of certain common institutions that work on behalf of the Italian minority in Slovenia but have their headquarters in Croatia (for example, the Italian Theatre in Rijeka/Fiume, the EDIT Publishing House in Rijeka/Fiume, the Centre for Historical Research in Rovinj/Rovigno). Regarding the right to information, the Slovene state is committed to support, among other things, the development of non-commercial public media that are intended to inform the Italian (and Hungarian) ethnic communities in Slovenia and Croatia. Slovenia also supports the publishing of printed media, but in an amount that is only 20% of the sum allocated for such activities in Croatia (Šabec, 2005).

1. To prove something to the rest of the world (and above all western countries) was more important than the proper treatment of all minorities in Yugoslavia. Accordingly when it came to economic problems, the state often intervened on behalf of the Italian community, and the latter never had to worry about acquiring additional state financing for events (albeit cultural not economic ones).
2. To justify the demands of the Slovene community in the Friuli-Venezia Giulia region (Italy) and in Carinthia (Austria), both of which represented an economic segment of the Slovene republic in the West. It was impossible for Slovenia or Yugoslavia to import from Italy (or Austria) without Slovene minority companies from Italy (or Austria) acting as mediators and the other way around (i.e. exports from Yugoslav republics had to go through Slovene minority companies). The main consequence was that the Slovene minority communities in Italy and Austria were economically strengthened during these years.

The special treatment of the Italian community did not end with the disintegration of Yugoslavia, but continued through the process of Slovene independence and for several few years afterwards during the period when independent Slovenia was striving for international recognition as a modern, democratic, pluralist state. After independence, Slovenia was determined to integrate into Europe and to become a full member of the EU, and its two ethnic communities represented a legitimisation and confirmation of Slovene democratic values.

This situation changed after Slovene accession to the EU a decade later. Today the minority communities are no longer needed to legitimise the democratic values of Slovene state and according to many respondents the Slovene government lacks the political will to help the Italian community become economically independent. Therefore a certain continuity from the Yugoslav period to the independent Slovene period can be observed as regards the economic position of the Italian community in Slovenia and the absence of a strong economic foundation and the ability to generate their own financial resources independent of state subsidies (for example, from private sector sources within the Italian community). Indeed, the transition from the socialist central planning system to free market conditions has proved to be a (economic) disadvantage for the Italian community. This stands in marked contrast to the Slovene community in Italy. The sources of the problem, which has been pointed out numerous times by community representatives,<sup>4</sup> can be found in socio-historical conditions. After World War Two, the Slovenes living in Italy simply continued their normal economic and business activities. Unlike on the other side of the border, neither the political nor the

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<sup>4</sup> In early January 2004, when the state and its special organs did not respond to the representative's calls for proper sanctions, the deputy of the Italian ethnic community in the Slovene parliament, Roberto Battelli, resigned his position as President of the Special Commission of the State Assembly for Ethnic Minorities.

economic system changed after 1945. During that period and particularly after 1954, not only did a substantial majority of the Italian population emigrate from this territory (so-called *esuli* or *optanti*) but particular policies were put forward that reduced the economic freedom of the Italian community – and this despite the London memorandum (1954) that called for the foundation of a minority bank also in Yugoslavia (similar to the Trieste Credit Bank for the Slovene community in Italy). This idea was not put into force on the Yugoslav side of border for ideological reasons mostly.

One of the consequences of this Italian emigration was the weakening of the Italian community, as not only workers but Italian tradesmen, small entrepreneurs and intellectuals emigrated as well. The majority of Italians who remained in Yugoslavia were farmers dependent upon their land and their cattle, older people, fishermen and other individuals “who had nothing to lose in the new system” as one of the interviewees said. They did not want to leave what little property they had behind. On the other hand the general 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 there is still a poor economic foundation for the Italian community. The economic basis of a community, however, has an important influence on all of the other activities of that community (culture, sports, etc.) and their overall financial condition, which has the potential to build independence and autonomy. In the absence of a vibrant economic life – and this is precisely what afflicts the Italians in Slovenia – the community becomes dependent on state and local governments. In addition, current measures to cut state spending on all levels extend to community protection as well, despite the fact that broader community organizations are financially dependent on state support. The ideological and socio-economic changes that occurred after the disintegration of Yugoslavia have shaken the Italian community and have forced it to adopt the new principles of the free market economy and the common market, and to accept cutbacks in state subsidies. Yet the main deficiency remains the same: the Italian community in Slovenia does not have its own economic sphere of activity and is not economically independent. The Italian community, looked at as a collective subject, cannot take advantage of these opportunities because it doesn't have the start-up capital to do so, or even to lobby political parties for additional resources. The process of lobbying for political advantages is extremely difficult for the minority community, because in principle it avoids taking political sides. When denationalisation and the privatisation of social property began in the 1990s, ethnic minority communities in Slovenia strived to get a piece of the privatisation cake. Certain measures were passed in Slovenia that looked promising in terms of the initial accumulation of capital for the Italian (and Hungarian) ethnic community. In 1995, a law on the use of funds acquired from the sale of property was passed on the basis of the already existing law for capital (ownership) transformation of assets that under the former socialist regime had been treated as “social property” (Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia, No. 45/95, 47/02). According to Article 7 of this law, 2.5% of the funds generated would be allocated to building an economic founda-

tion for the Italian (and Hungarian) community.<sup>5</sup> The Slovene government took some important first steps in this direction, but with few concrete results. In the end, too little effort was made by the Slovene government and, worse still, several bad loans were extended under the program and it was considered a failure. As a result, the Italian community has remained economically weak and has lagged behind the average in the southern Littoral-Karst regions, which otherwise is one of the most rapidly developing regions in Slovenia. Because of insufficient community funds and state cutbacks, social and cultural activity has become even more restricted. However, the Italian community continues to struggle for greater financial independence, knowing that its own economic foundation will make its existence easier (Jesih, 1994: 16). The procedure to establish its own financial company (*FINEURO*) began several years ago because the community wanted to use funds acquired by previously mentioned sale of common social property (from the former socialist system). For this, it needed to have a financial organization founded as a business company with its headquarters located in bilingual territory. The Slovenia government supported this project, giving EUR 25 million to both ethnic communities (two-thirds of the amount went to the Hungarian ethnic community and one-third to the Italian community). Thus far, however, the project exists only in the planning stage. The process needs time and, according to minority protection measures in the Slovene constitution and legislation, it is not sufficient to merely ensure conditions for the existence of these communities, but for their development as well.

As previously stated, the southern Littoral-Karst region, which contains three of the main bilingual municipalities (Koper, Izola, Piran), is among the most developed region in Slovenia. Therefore, the economic difficulties experienced by the Italian community cannot be blamed on general development problems in the region. There are, however, a number of specific problems that plague the three main bilingual municipalities although there are some important distinctions between them. One of the problems is traffic infrastructure, which is insufficient in terms of land transport from Koper and the Port of Koper to the north of Trieste (i.e. the northernmost port with access to the hinterland). The other are socio-economic conditions at least in one of the three municipalities. Izola, in comparison to Koper and Piran and Slovenia as a whole, has relatively high unemployment, and particularly among women in the last five years. The companies that previously employed unskilled female workers, *Delamaris*, *Mehanotehnika* and *Droga* to some extent, all confront a downturn in their businesses. Because of high daily labour migration (some thousand people in the region commute each day to go to work), this downturn has also been felt in Koper and Piran. Unfortunately, people are commuting to Koper and Piran for better paid work and in the other direction, from Koper and Piran to Izola, for unskilled and semi-skilled work. Izola, however, does not fall below the Slovene average, but only under

<sup>5</sup> These resources are earmarked for investments in the development of the agricultural economy, for supplementary activities in the rural area, cooperative organizations, small businesses and other economic infrastructure (Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia, No. 33/97, Article 3).

the average of the southern Littoral-Karst region, and particularly under the average of the Istrian area (especially in terms of education levels). This municipality suffers from low educational standards in general and this fact is responsible for many of its other problems. For example, it has caused difficulties in the socialization of certain population groups, and in particular immigrants (first, second and even third generation) who came to this region from other republics of the former Yugoslavia. Approximately 20% of Izola's inhabitants originate from this particular immigrant pool. Integration of this segment of the population has not been satisfying, particularly in terms of education. It is hard to explain the reasons for this situation, but it is repeated over generations. According to one respondent, a combination of social conditions lead to this situation and its consequences are not restricted to education. There is a high level of drug addiction and alcoholism in the region, though again broader social factors should be taken into consideration in order to find a more nuanced explanation for these phenomena.

## **EUROPEAN INTEGRATION AND CROSS BORDER COOPERATION ACTIVITIES IN THE ITALO-SLOVENE BORDER REGION**

Slovenia's entrance into the European integration process has not yet had a substantial impact on the (over)developed Slovene regions and the ongoing reduction of centralist regulation. Indeed because most measures and arrangements were defined and implemented during the pre-accession period, any effect has been muted. In this respect, the dissolution of Yugoslavia and subsequent foundation of the first independent democratic state in Slovene history represented a far more noteworthy change. Nevertheless, certain new (economic) potentials have emerged, though it would not be accurate to see EU accession as a distinct turning point in terms of practical economic factors as some respondents state. EU membership has had significance particularly on the symbolic level. In any event, the official accession of Slovenia as an EU member state in May 2004 proved that Slovenia's economic, diplomatic and political efforts since independence, as well as the orientation of Slovene policy after 1991 toward (Western) European countries (and away from the Balkans), had been successful.

Slovenia is perceived within the EU as a less-developed area. Since European regional policy refers not to small territories but to economically encircled areas, Slovenia is registered as one region in accordance with European criteria. Because of this definition, Slovenia as a whole lags behind the EU average and momentarily receives the maximum amount of EU aid. The state organs of Slovenia are authorized, however to decide (independent of the EU) whether EU development funds will be regionally directed to particularly needy regions or whether the aid will be invested in augmenting GDP and the competitive position of all of Slovenia (which some argue would result in strong development for all regions). Thus far, the Slovene government has

decided for the second solution, though there is an internal agreement that 60% of all EU funds will be directed to underdeveloped regions within Slovenia. The southern Littoral-Karst region where most of the Italian community is settled is defined as an (over)developed regions, second only to the Central Slovene region with Ljubljana as its centre. Therefore it is not entitled to regional development assistance.<sup>6</sup> However, it should be noted that the whole issue of regional development opportunities in Slovenia is part of a broader problem that has to do with Slovene regional structure and the size of separate regions. Currently, Slovene regions are so-called “statistical regions” and therefore do not accurately represent regional structure. There are currently twelve statistical regions that are too small in size to have any functional validity. If Slovenia were divided into two or three regions (this is currently being debated by the Slovene government), the regions could feasibly exercise an influence on centralised state organs. As it is, however, regions are too small and weak to have any effect on regional policy, to play a role as a serious negotiator or competitor with the state, or indeed to participate in the decision-making processes, and ultimately achieve greater decentralisation of the state. To the contrary, the process of increasing state centralisation continues with the establishment of even smaller municipalities within Slovene regions.<sup>7</sup>

Whether or not European integration will bring additional value to everyday life in border regions is difficult to predict. According to one respondent, it depends above all on the officials who are responsible at the state and local level, and secondly on the mentality and attitudes of the population as a whole. As far as minority populations are concerned, EU accession should offer new opportunities but in practice it will take a long time for any real change to occur. The fact is that EU CBC funds as a real factor in European integration are extremely limited (0.3% of Slovene GDP). Moreover, 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. It is unlikely, however, that there will be any substantial change since EU funds are so limited and they don't represent ongoing investment funds, but start-up funds to trigger change (the long-term goal being to make the state and individuals to begin thinking in developmental terms). Nevertheless, the Slovene government will have to gather the political will to resolve the problem of internal regionalisation process which would contribute to decentralisation of the state.

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<sup>6</sup> Since the Littoral-Karst region is among the most developed regions in Slovenia, it has not significantly benefited from state subsidies. For two years, it received only about EUR 200,000 annually. These funds were earmarked as stimulation funds for the eight municipalities of the Littoral-Karst region. Considering that the annual municipal budget of Koper alone is approximately EUR 42 million, this sum is almost inconsequential according to interviewee employed in the regional developmental centre.

<sup>7</sup> At the moment, there is strong pressure from some political parties in the Slovene parliament to separate the Koper municipality into two smaller municipalities (Koper and Ankaran/Hrvatini) on the grounds that the current Koper municipality is too large with a total population of less than 50,000.

As regards cross border cooperation (CBC) between Slovenia and its neighbours, including Italy, the latter existed already in the framework of the former Yugoslavia. As previously mentioned, most of the economic cooperation between the two states occurred through Slovene minority companies in Italy. The formal beginning of the Italy-Slovenia CBC yet took place in 1995. In Slovenia, a small state with many borders, only one among the twelve statistical regions (the Zasavje region) is not entitled to CBC funds according to current regulation. Its borderland status is of great significance to all of Slovenia in terms of development of entrepreneurship, agricultural and environmental issues, cultural and social cooperation, etc. At first CBC projects were mostly initiated by the central government and were orientated toward the development of physical infrastructure (border crossings, etc). As such, they had no higher purpose in terms of real collaboration. The main goal at that point was to use the money that was available. According to one of the respondents employed in the regional development agency there was no real cross border cooperation, as each partner involved in the project simply worked on its own side of the border. However, since 1998, intensive cooperation projects have been launched, some as a result of the modified European legislative framework. After 2000, the European Union demanded some common structures to decide upon projects, though there were still separate calls for application in Italy and Slovenia. Since that time, cooperation has expanded not only between Slovene and Italian partners, but also within the Slovene territory. Some modest improvement in terms of social, economic and institutional cooperation, if not actual integration, has been achieved during this period.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless because of the small budget allocation (which became even smaller since Slovenia's accession into the EU), only non-profit organizations and institutions can apply for those projects. This remains true after May 2004.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, according to analysis based

<sup>8</sup> Three stages can be differentiated in the evolution of CBC programmes in Slovenia. During the first stage, from 1995 to 1999, CBC was extremely weak, existing more on the rhetorical level. Italy and Slovenia each had its own separate CBC programme document. The second stage took place from 2000 to 2003. For the first time, the Slovene and Italian governments ratified a joint CBC document. Since then, there has been more cooperation and contacts between both sides and their respective administrations. Although projects became more cross-border in orientation, many were not real CBC projects, not "orthodox" CBC projects. The third stage began in 2004 (after EU accession). Standards and regulations became more unified. Prior to 2004, Slovenia was in the process of implementing pre-accession standards. Afterwards the rules changed and cooperation with Italians increased. Authorized institutions and agencies maintained regular weekly contacts. For the first time, they managed a simultaneous call for applications on both sides of the border in Slovenia, Friuli-Venezia Giulia and Veneto (the last two calls for applications were in 2004 and 2005). For the first time in CBC history, all applicants and partners were prepared for the project. Calls for applications have been made more uniform because of the specificity of administration and national legislation. Yet one obstacle still remains in the current programme period: separated accounts for Slovenia, FVG and Veneto.

<sup>9</sup> According to one of the respondents, project funds vary from period to period as per EU instructions. During the first CBC phase (1995–1999), the European Commission aimed at middle-size projects (EUR 200,000 – 400,000). There was also a Small Project Fund that targeted smaller projects (below EUR 50,000). After 2000, when intensive preparations for European structural

on hard data and to most member states involved in CBC projects, the programme has been one of the best instruments for European cohesion policy. According to the respondent from government office for local self-government and regional policy, CBC projects are low-budget, moderate in terms of funding, transparent, and by their nature and the philosophy of their implementation highly accommodated to real regional needs. CBC projects are small, usually already existing projects that people in the region originate. They are often highly effective in terms of increasing regional stability and maintenance of peace. Namely, 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 is decisive. As a result, the selection of CBC projects and their approval have generally been politically motivated, though in theory and according to project rules, project selection should be entirely professional and independent of political influence.<sup>10</sup> Because of this, some problems and frictions have emerged in certain projects, though where the minority group is a partner, good cooperation tends to prevail.

### **CHANGING OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSTRAINTS FOR THE ITALIAN ETHNIC COMMUNITY**

Up until now, the ethnic communities in Slovenia have not received special treatment within the CBC programme or only to a limited extent. There was one particular financial line from 2002 to 2003, dedicated only to cross border cooperation between the Slovene-Italian minority groups (either minority 1 – minority 2 or minority – home state cooperation). The reason for this exception was that some additional funds were found and a decision was made to earmark the money for minority projects. In general, each member state (or, in the case of CBC programmes, both member states) must decide whether the minority issue is crucial enough to be handled separately, that

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policy had just begun, only large investments projects were undertaken: for example, the ECO Adria project on the Slovene-Italian border for construction of sewage system purification plant. After Slovene accession to EU, Slovenia tried to stimulate and lead investors to medium projects (from EUR 200,000 to 800,000). The motivation for this shift was limited funds. Before 2004, Slovenia, being a non-member state, had extremely limited access to CBC projects. Funds were restricted to a relatively low amount (somewhere between EUR 2 and 2.5 annually) and the smallest investment project cost roughly EUR 2 million. This meant only one project each year. During that period, mostly public institutions applied for the funds. The Governmental Office for Local Self-Government and Regional Policy also negotiated an additional EUR 500,000 each year from the European Commission for the so-called Small Project Fund. The Small Project Fund basically became a sort of mini-CBC with very restricted funds covering all investment aspects: social care, cultural activities, etc.

<sup>10</sup> Something similar happened in Austria when the Governor General of the province turned down approximately ten projects in which the Slovene minority in Austria were slated to take part.

is if ethnic communities should be treated in a special way because of their minority status and have priority with respect to EU funds. For the last ten years, ethnic minorities in Slovenia have always been involved in CBC projects at least as applicants. However, there is sometimes a difference between the theoretical readiness of minorities to cooperate in EU programmes and the actual proposal and implementation of a concrete project.

Without a doubt, the allocation of funds for regional development and particularly CBC (Phare, Interreg) creates new opportunities for ethnic minority (and majority) activities. The question remains to what extent the community itself seizes these opportunities for CBC and what objective restrictions prevent it from participating as a partner or coordinator in these programmes. The Italian ethnic community in Slovenia has been most cooperative with the Slovene community in Italy (and surprisingly not with the Italian majority population in Italy), predominantly in the spheres of sports, culture and education, though not in sphere of economics. Their collaboration began in the 1970s with sports activities, and namely with the Minority Sports Competition. Today not only the Slovene community in Italy and the Italian community in Slovenia compete, but also the Slovene community living in Austria and minority groups from Croatia. At various times, between ten to thirteen minority groups have participated in this particular CBC as well as in other educational or cultural activities. In terms of CBC programmes funded by the EU the Italian ethnic community in Slovenia became active after 2000. The most important consequence of this collaboration is that the ongoing relationship between the Slovene community in Italy and the Italian from Slovenia has become more intense, close and fruitful, as some respondents says. The initiative came from the Slovene community in Italy that had established an entrepreneurial team called *Euroservis* (Trieste) that aimed at building intensive cooperation with and giving support to minority groups and others. Often they called for applicants from the Slovene side who needed a partner on the Italian side. The Euroservis team can locate partners on the Italian side of the border because they know the territory. Cooperation between the Italian community in Slovenia and the Slovene community in Italy emerged entirely on the basis of concrete mutual interests and the need to achieve certain goals through cooperation. The format simply hadn't existed in the past. Real concrete possibilities spurred real concrete cooperation as both sides were compelled by self-interest to get involved in these projects. As a result, a unified commission with members from Slovenia and from the region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia has been established that includes special minority board members from both Italian and Slovene ethnic communities. Some common European projects in which both the Slovene and Italian minority groups are systematically included arose from this particular context.<sup>11</sup> The advent of such

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<sup>11</sup> The following are some major CBC projects: *INTERREG 3A SLOVENIA-ITALY 2000–2006*: 1. AGROMIN: agricultural products of ethnic communities, typical produce, food products, and old recipes in the territory of Slovene Istria and Slovene Karst in Italy. The main goal of the project is to establish cross-border trade in typical local products, notably farming products such

close and positive cooperative between the Slovene community in Italy and the Italian community in Slovenia has generated some important findings. One of them is that ethnic minority communities should not be used as a state instrument for manipulation in negotiations between state institutions and governments. Ethnic minority communities sometimes suffer from the same or similar problems as majority populations, and cooperation and interaction are a far better and more powerful method of seeking solutions than state instrumentalisation.

According to the development agencies and some community members, one goal of CBC projects should be to lift minorities out of their own isolated space or reservation. Ethnic minority communities 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 community in Slovenia is that there is little connection and cooperation with members of the majority community. The same situation exists among the Slovene minority in Italy. The goal is to give the minority its own “added value” so it can contribute to the wider community, and not remain segregated in a ghetto. The Italian and Slovene governments need to organically and systematically include the Italian community in European CBC projects. Because this has not yet been achieved, it is difficult to assess the real effects of EU projects. It is simply too soon to judge. More practise and experience will be needed

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as olive oil, honey, and wine. A special book in connection with the project will be published. AGROMIN will be carried out by the Slovene Regional Rural Association (an organization of the Slovene community in Italy) in Trieste and the Coastal Self-governing Community of the Italian ethnic community in Slovenia. 2. MIN-TOUR: minority tourism. The objective of MIN-TOUR is the restructuring and expansion of tourism in the border area (the coastal and Karst regions in Slovenia, and the Trieste and Gorizia region in Italy). The restructuring is aimed at creating sustainable development in versatile and modern tourist services that highlight the local (minority) particularities of the area. The project, which has a value of EUR 356,210.35 is carried out by the Slovene company, Euroservis, in Italy and the Italian Union in Slovenia ([www.slowwwenia.net/novice](http://www.slowwwenia.net/novice), 10/8-2005). Both projects are part of the EU programme Interreg III A Slovenia-Italy and are valued at somewhat less than EUR 750,000. The project term is between April 2005 and April 2007. The Slovene partners in the AGROMIN and MIN-TOUR projects (Italian Union and Coastal Self-Governing Community of Italian ethnic community) need SIT 24 million (EUR 100,000) for their share. The Slovene government decided to help the Italian community in these projects drawing on the Government Office for Local Self-Government and Regional Policy and the Public Fund of the Republic of Slovenia for Regional Development and Preservation of the Settlements of Slovene Rural Areas (Ribnica). However, because no financial aid actually came from these two sources, the Italian community applied to the Governmental Office for Minorities to give funds to the community.

INTERREG 3A SLOVENIA-HUNGARY-CROATIA 2004–2006: IQ-EURO: The project is carried by the Italian Union in Koper/Capodistria and the Italian Union in Rijeka/Fiume (Croatia). The objective of IQ-EURO is to establish a special service in Koper/Capodistria on the model of Euroservis in Trieste that is specialized in the planning and implementation of EU projects. In December 2005, the Europa Office was opened in Koper. Using EU funds, the Europa Office will organize a special course for some fifteen people who will become “euro-planners” i.e. professionals who are able to negotiate extensive EU documentation, draw up quality applications and tenders, and actually implement projects. This project has been valued at EUR 145,000.

to evaluate the real impact of European projects, though they are certainly welcome because they provide motivation for cooperation. The major uncertainty remains that these projects will not really affect ethnic minority members and the ethnic community will underestimate their potential.

As far as CBC projects and the Italian 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, implementation etc. As a result, the community often doesn't manage its own project initiatives, but more commonly participates as a partner. Hopefully, the *Europa Office* in Koper (counterpart of *Euroservis* in Trieste) will be successful in correcting this shortfall. The second problem that prevents the Italian community from a more active role in CBC projects is the start-up capital that is condition for participation. Although these means are eventually refunded, the Italian ethnic community does not even have the short-term resources to participate in CBC projects. The stagnant relationship of the Italian community with the Slovene government paralyzes cross-border cooperation and hinders relations between Italy and the Italian border regions. Without the indirect interference of the Slovene government (though ironically in accordance with its legislation), a more vibrant relationship with Italy would help the Italian community to achieve greater economic independence. Together with the Slovene community in Italy, the region of Friula-Venezia-Giulia and its financial company *Fines* (Port Koper, Istrabenz, the Slovene company, and Bank of Koper) want to establish a consortium in which each of the partners contributes certain funds to be invested in various projects in and outside of the region. The Slovene and Italian ethnic communities (on either side of the border) should each put up 10% of the starting capital. The Slovene community in Italy has already provided funds in the amount of EUR 1.5 million while the Italian community in Slovenia has not done so because it has no independent resources. As a result, it may secede from the project, which is extremely important for the creation of development opportunities for the Italian community in Slovenia. On the other hand, it should be noted that the Italian government strategy to economically penetrate Yugoslavia (in the past) and Slovenia and Croatia (today) explicitly shuns the Italian ethnic communities in those countries despite the fact that four-fifths of all Croatian banks are owned by Italians. In Slovenia, the Bank of Koper is now Italian-owned, but the local Italian community is not even recruited as a linguistically skilled labour force. One of the reasons for this can presumably be found in the still divided historical memory and prejudice between the two border nations.<sup>12</sup> This is a pity since the programs represent an attractive way for the younger

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<sup>12</sup> The Italian government does finance the Italian community in Slovenia and Croatia in accordance with legislation that guarantees certain protective measures for the Slovene community in Italy and the Italian communities in Slovenia and Croatia. The Italian government finances the Italian community through the so-called Italian Union, which has the status of association in Slovenia. In accordance with this status, the Italian government earmarked EUR 4,650,000 in 2004 for the Italian community in Slovenia and Croatia to flow through the Trieste Adult

generation to become more active in community activities. In addition, they have the potential for creating interesting employment opportunities and making the Italian community more visible to and integrated with the broader majority population.

In this sense, Interreg programmes aim to achieve greater social and economic cohesion in regions. They are not large investment projects programmes, they are more or less “soft” projects, and yet they could lead to more substantial investment projects in the future.<sup>13</sup> 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. The most positive and long-lasting result of EU and CBC programmes is that cooperation between regional communities will continue after the project has formally ended.

### **CONCLUSION: CROSS BORDER COOPERATION AND ITS IMPACT ON THE IDENTITY ISSUE**

The general opinion of respondents was that regional and cross border cooperation is highly welcome and advantageous not only from the economic, political and cultural but from the identity (individual and collective) point of view as well because people of different (ethnic) identities no longer perceive each other as competitors and rivals but as partners whose collaboration continues even after a specific project

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Education Institute (*Università Popolare di Trieste*). EUR 2,200,000 earmarked for Italian kindergartens and schools, for the new gymnasium in the Pula Elementary School (in Croatia), for textbooks and other pedagogical material including computer equipment. The rest of the money went to Radio Koper/Capodistria (Slovenia) and Radio Pula/Pola (Croatia), the publishing house EDIT (Rijeka – Croatia), the Rovinj Research Institute (Croatia) and other associations. This procedure was part of implementation of an updated three-year-old law (No. 193/2004) that dealt with relations between Italy and the Italian communities in Slovenia and Croatia (*Primorski dnevnik*, 25. 11. 2004, p. 3).

<sup>13</sup> The municipality of Izola provides one of the few examples of effective regional cooperation. This is true despite the fact the state government notably failed to improve economic conditions for the development of sea fishing in Slovenia. The municipality of Izola recently finished a common project with the Italian region of Veneto in this area. According to local regional authorities, the professional-economic condition of the Slovene fishery industry lags behind the Italian and for this reason the project experience was very positive. As the Slovene ministry has failed completely in this industry, the Izola municipality, precisely through participation in the Interreg (*CACES*) project, gained important and useful knowledge and experiences about the common EU fishing policy. The Izola municipality is improving its knowledge in this area without the assistance of the responsible ministry on the state level, but instead with EU (Interreg) funds. “It comes to such paradoxes. Imagine the two partners in this project: on the one side you have the region of Veneto with approximately one million inhabitants, and then you have Izola with 15,000 people. But it is absolutely pointless to wait for the ministry to move when there are Italian partners who are interested in cooperation with us. And our municipality benefits”, says one of the respondents.

ends. This is not yet achieved, but remains a worthwhile goal. It is in the interest of all parties involved and the European context can provide an inspiring and stimulating environment. Despite the fact that one of the most important common observations regardless of ethnic or national affiliation of respondents was scepticism about the European Union and the European identity respectively, many of them also expressed hope for better (cross border) cooperation and cohabitation despite historical disputes and divisions, which can still be noticed in the region. "When I go to Trieste," says one of the respondents, "I am a Titoist and a communist, when I'm in Slovenia I'm a Fascist." 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. At this point, the Italian government began to follow the fortunes of the Italian community in Slovenia, though negative historical memories still clouded the picture. According to many respondents, most Italians who left post-war socialist Yugoslavia perceived the Italians who remained as communists or Titoists, as people who betrayed Italian interests. However, an important distinction should be made between the Italian government in Rome and the regional government in Friuli-Venezia Giulia, that is in the border region of Slovenia. The latter at least understands the situation on the border much better than they do in Rome. They have absorbed the historical fact that though the border moved after World War Two, not all the people moved with it. In any case, perceptions remain blurred. During recent times, Italians have gotten a somewhat clearer notion of this history, but it is a slow process. Therefore when it comes to the members of the Italian ethnic community in Slovenia many of them perceive themselves as Italians, but at the same time they recognise that they are not the same as Italians in Italy. Most likely, they identify themselves as Italians living outside Italy, but again it is a different sort of identification than, say, the identity of Italians who emigrated to Brazil or Argentina after World War Two. To Italians residing in Italy, the members of the Italian ethnic community in Slovenia are seen as somehow foreign, as not being perfect Italians. The Slovene ethnic community in Italy is regarded in the same way from the Slovene side of the border. As states one of the respondents, "minority members in general are neither fish, flesh nor fowl". This in-between position allows minority members to simultaneously have the insider's and outsider's viewpoint on particular matters which can be an extremely advantageous perspective. The identity of the Italian ethnic community in Slovenia is rather like a collection of things in small portions: Istrian according to the place they live, Italian by ethnic identity, Slovene by citizenship, and European now as well. It's an odd identity, and perhaps because of it, members of ethnic minorities in border regions can be in fact perceived as the first real citizens of a nascent Euroregion, which presupposes the cohabitation of numerous heterogeneous ethnic, regional, national and transnational identities.

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## POVZETEK

### ETNIČNE, REGIONALNE IN NACIONALNE IDENTITETE V KONTEKSTU EVROPSKEGA ČEZMEJNEGA SODELOVANJA:

*Študija primera Italijanske narodne skupnosti v Slovenski Istri*

Ksenija Šabec

Članek izhaja iz osrednjega raziskovalnega vprašanja o učinkih evropskih integracij in pobud čezmejnega sodelovanja v obmejni regiji Slovenske Istre, predvsem na primeru družbeno-ekonomskega položaja, kulturnih aktivnosti in identitetnih pripadnosti Italijanske narodne skupnosti. Avtorica poskuša proučiti zgodovinski kontekst čezmejnega sodelovanja med Slovenijo in Italijo v obdobju pred tovrstnimi programi Evropske unije in po njihovi uvedbi z vidika vključenosti Italijanske narodne skupnosti. V bivši Jugoslaviji je politični, ekonomski in geografski položaj Slovenije od šestdesetih let prejšnjega stoletja dalje, predvsem pa z izrazitejšim odpiranjem političnih meja postajal vse pomembnej-

ši: najprej v okviru Delovne skupnosti Alpe-Jadran, ki je delovala na področju Srednje Evrope, potem v Srednjeevropski pobudi in končno v celotnem evropskem okolju (Evropski uniji). Članek metodološko temelji na terenskem delu s poglobljenimi intervjuji med pripadniki Italijanske narodne skupnosti v Sloveniji (Slovenski Istri) in med pripadniki večinskega prebivalstva, ki je bilo izvedeno v obdobju med avgustom 2005 in majem 2006. Ugotovitve je mogoče skleniti v tri ključne točke, ki so zaznamovale devetdeseta leta do danes: delitev Italijanske narodne skupnosti med dve samostojni in neodvisni državi (Slovenijo in Hrvaško), ki je bila dodatno zaznamovana z vstopom Slovenije v Evropsko unijo leta 2004; ekonomska šibkost in odvisnost Italijanske skupnosti od državnih podpor ter evropske integracije in možnosti čezmejnega sodelovanja. Članek se dotika tudi vprašanja percepcije različnih etničnih, regionalnih in nacionalnih identitet na omenjeni študiji primera z vidika vpliva evropskih integracij in pobud za čezmejno sodelovanje.