

SLOVENES IN ITALY: A FRAGMENTED MINORITY

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Abstract: The study examines the Slovenian-speaking minority in the northern Italian autonomous region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia. It explores the spatial fragmentation in the Slovenian settlement area in Italy and analyzes the socio-economic and demographic processes that exert influence on the minority. The work is based on the critical evaluation of the current status of research, of statistical data from the state censuses and results of own research on site. The Slovenian-language population in the entire region is currently estimated at about 46,000 people. The main settlement area is the eastern border region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia, which is characterized by different cultural and regional identities. While the Slovenian-speaking population of Friuli focuses more on its cultural and regional distinctions, the majority of the Slovenian-language group in Venezia Giulia considers itself a “national minority.”

Keywords: national minority, border area, Slovenes, Italy

Zusammenfassung: Die Studie untersucht die slowenischsprachige Minderheit in der norditalienischen autonomen Region Friaul-Julisch Venetien. Sie nimmt Bezug auf die räumliche Fragmentierung im slowenischen Siedlungsgebiet in Italien und analysiert jene sozio-ökonomischen und demographischen Prozesse Einfluss auf die Minderheit ausüben. Die Arbeit beruht auf der kritischen Auswertung des Forschungsstandes, offizieller statistischer Daten sowie eigenen Erhebungen vor Ort. Schätzungen zufolge beläuft sich die slowenische Sprachgruppe in der gesamten Region derzeit auf etwa 46.000 Personen. Hauptsiedlungsgebiet ist dabei das östliche Grenzgebiet Friaul-Julisch Venetiens, das durch unterschiedliche kulturelle und regionale Identitäten gekennzeichnet ist. Dabei fokussiert die slowenischsprachige Bevölkerung Friauls stärker auf ihre kulturellen und regionalen Besonderheiten, während sich die slowenische Sprachgruppe in Julisch Venetien mehrheitlich als „nationale Minderheit“ betrachtet.

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1. Motivation

Similar to neighboring Carinthia in Austria, the areas of the Italian region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia currently inhabited by Slovenes represent zones of retreat from a former major expansion, discernible today only by toponomastics. As early as in the 13th and 14th centuries, the Slovenian populated territory shifted largely away from the northern Italian lowlands. Today it forms primarily a 5-30 km narrow, mountainous strip in the west of the Slovenian-Italian border along almost the entire length between Austria and the Adriatic. Figure 1 shows where the Slovenian settlement area could prevail into the present: in the Valcanale, in the Slavia (valleys of Resia, Torre and Natisone as well as in parts of the upper foothills between San Pietro al Natisone and Prepotto), and in the provinces of Gorizia and Trieste.

Since the publication of Valussi's comprehensive work of 1974, numerous studies focused on the Slovenes in Italy. The anthology of Lipovec (2014) provides an itemization over the studies published by the Slovene Research Institute (SLORI) in Trieste. Examining the most important studies more closely, it becomes apparent that topics around the protection of minorities predominate. General representations of spatially differentiated analyses of the Slovenian settlement area are rare. In addition, most of the works focus on the situation of the Slovenes of Gorizia and Trieste; studies on the Slovenes of the Valcanale and Slavia are rather in the minority. This applies similarly to publications that originated outside the SLORI. While Bufon supplied a valuable overview in 1991 over the ethno-linguistic segment of Slovenes in Italy, his substantial subsequent works involve cultural, (geo-)political or cross-border aspects (e.g. Bufon, 2008; 2013); in-depth empirical analyses are, however, largely absent. In 2012, Čede et al. presented a study in German, addressing primarily historic development, group size and the protection of the Slovene minority in Friuli-Venezia Giulia. Brezigar published in 2014 one of the few works that studies explicitly the heterogeneity of the Slovenes in Italy. However, it is limited to the presentation of the dualism between the provinces of Gorizia and Trieste on the one hand and the Province of Udine on the other; empirical studies are missing here too.

In contrast to previous studies, this present paper highlights also empirical data. It investigates mainly the spatially differentiated reflections on demographic processes as determinants of the development of the language group, as well as a typology of ethnic identities. In addition, this work attempts to evaluate the current situation of the language group with an outlook to its future. Based on the deficit of research on the Slovenes in Friuli, the focus in the present study is directed more at the Valcanale and the Slavia.

The study builds upon a pool of methods that make it possible to unite diverse perspectives and approaches. Besides considering the current status of research, the official Italian statistics are evaluated. In addition to such quantitative facts, rigorous research visits of the authors provide deeper qualitative insights. Resulting from our current project "Amenity Migration in the European Alps,"⁶ supported by the Austrian Science Fund, findings from our own field research could be applied to the individual parts of the study area (fig. 1). Among the most important research methods on site are semi-structured interviews with the Slovenian population in the study areas. Expert interviews were performed with municipal employees and staff of official institutions. Specific methods of our empirical work are described in the correlating sections, specifically in chapter 6.

⁶ FWF-Project "Current Demographic Changes in the European Alps – Effects on the Autochthonous Linguistic Minorities" (P25315).

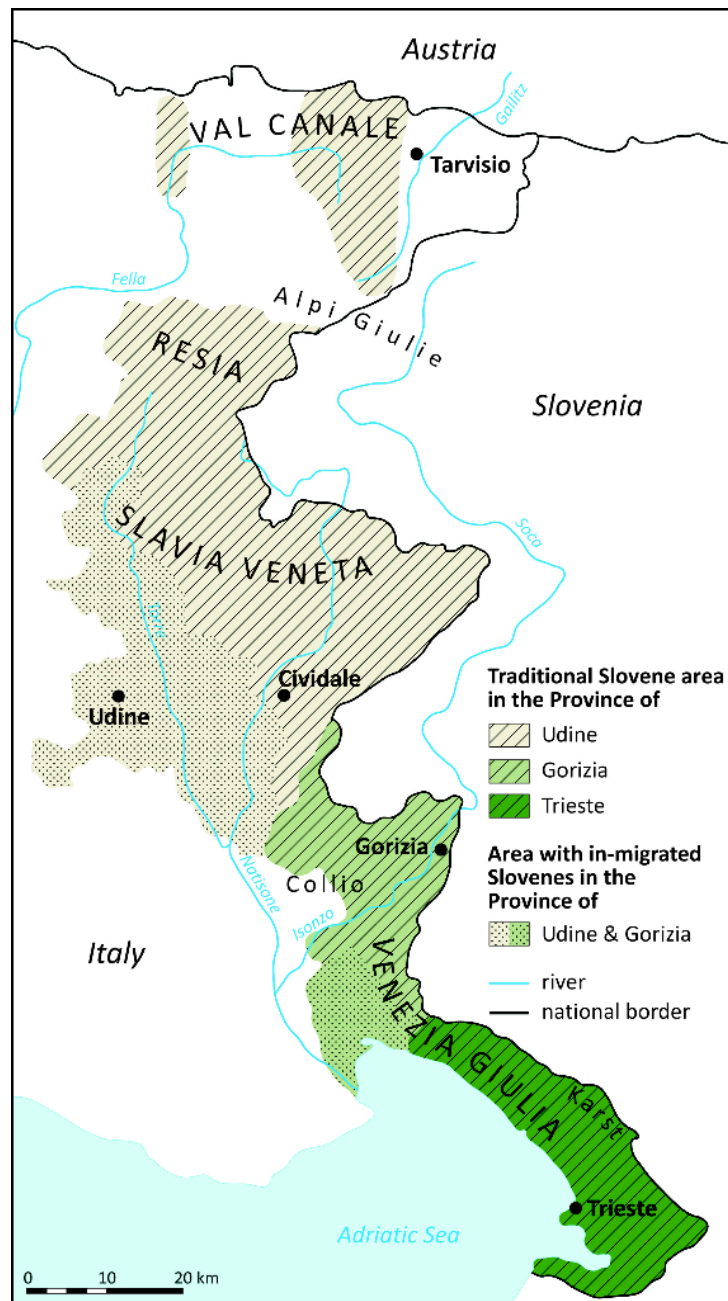


Fig 1. The Slovenian minority territory in the Italian Region Friuli-Venezia Giulia. Source: Valussi (1974), Steinicke (1991); modified by the authors

2. Minorities – Periphery – Regional Development

In the Eastern Alps, even the simple geographical question of the spatial distribution of ethno-linguistic minorities is not always easy to solve. Even though the minority areas can be distinguished by primordial characteristics, in a large number of minorities the objective ethnicity factors (language, religion or economic approach) do not agree with the denomination or ethnic identity, i.e. the subjective circumstances. Classical examples for such a “diffuse ethnicity” in the Eastern Alps are the German-language pockets of Zahre [Sauris] and Tischelwang [Timau], the Resia Valley [Rezija, Resia, Resie], the quadrilingual Valcanale [Kanaltal, Kanalska dolina, Val Cjanâl, Valcanale]⁷, as well as southern Carinthia (Steinicke, 1991; 2002).

In the latter area almost 12,000 Austrian citizens identify themselves as Slovenes. Surveys conducted in the 1990s, however, show that about 50,000 Carinthians spoke Slovenian at home (Steinicke & Zupančič, 1995). A demarcation of the settlement area based on the reported survey

⁷ For better readability, all toponyms will be kept in the official Italian form.

numbers is therefore highly problematic. Especially in the postmodern era in which identities and denominations are swiftly changed or newly constructed, ethnic tensions can therefore not be avoided.

It is equally problematic to give a general definition of “ethnic minorities” (cf. Steinicke et al., 2011a, p. 79f). Here the language practice often differs from country to country. This study is based on the Central European definition of terms (Steinicke, 2005). In addition to ethnic identification, the persistence and deep local roots of the distinct language groups (“autochthonous ethno-linguistic groups”) play the central role in the definition of ethnic or linguistic minorities. The Slovenian-language group in Friuli-Venezia Giulia is – objectively viewed – a “national minority.” Its politico-cultural center is in a neighboring, foreign country, and to some extent the ethnic group can rely on its available political, economic and cultural resources.

In Europe, many minorities can be identified that are disadvantaged in social, economic and infrastructural aspects and whose settlements are located in spatial distance to the commercial and administrative center of a state. Economic marginality often coincides with peripheral location. This applies, for example, to the Galicians in Spain, the Albanians in Italy or the Sorbs in Germany. The shifting of the minorities’ territory towards the state border is well demonstrated in the Alps – as in the example of the language group examined here.

Since socio-economic structural change occurs delayed in remote regions, ethno-cultural characteristics can remain well preserved. Especially in the settlement areas of small ethnic groups, isolation resulting from peripheral location supports the preservation of ethnic and linguistic diversity. Industrialization and enhanced intermarriage, however, eventually caused migration from the secluded niches into the central areas, which weakened the ethno-linguistic minorities both quantitatively and qualitatively and advanced their assimilation. A vast number of minorities suffered thus demographic and territorial losses, the extent of which depended on many variables. Closed settlement structures or politico-cultural derogations, for example, can mitigate this process. Also counter movements to globalization that express themselves among other in accentuating regional and local identities, can cause members of small ethno-linguistic groups to increasingly see themselves as enrichment of a region.

Peripheral areas in the Eastern Alps were equated with out-migration spaces until well into the 1990s. Due to the associated bio-demographic detrimental conditions, a depopulation process developed there that affected particularly the Slovenian territory in Friuli (Province Udine). Recent research findings show, nevertheless, that for the last two decades even in the remotest areas of the Eastern Alps a new type of immigration (“new highlanders” or “amenity migration”) developed (Löffler et al., 2014). The following chapters will also consider the phenomenon of “amenity migration” in the Slovenian territory in Friuli-Venezia Giulia and outline the ethno-geographical consequences.

Since the 1970s, the late-modern structural change has made the service industry the most substantial economic sector also in the settlement areas of ethno-linguistic minorities. With the progressive European integration, regions at the fringes of the states can present favorable socio-economic conditions. The peripheral location therefore offers benefits to the international transport industry, tourism and any kind of cross-border cooperation for the area and thus for the regional development (cf. Bufon, 2013). Disadvantages from the phase of industrialization thereby diminish: border areas with minorities can take on bridge functions not only culturally but also economically (Steinicke & Zupančič, 1995). The formerly “dead” border with communist Yugoslavia, too, has become an economic impulse factor for the studied language group (Čede et al., 2010, p. 220-223).⁸

According to the considerations of Kreck (2010, pp. 159-163), even tangible economic added value could arise from the coexistence of the majority population with the ethnic minorities, so for example in the sense of increasing the regional productivity. Although an empirical study of the EURAC (2007) could not quantify this for the border region Germany-Denmark, it could nevertheless show that minority groups have specific competencies that are relevant as regional-

⁸ Indeed, cross-border traffic between Italy and Yugoslavia also existed before 1991, which at times was quite brisk in Trieste, but strict controls kept the volume in check.

economic location factors. These include social and political dedication, social and human capital, intercultural dialogue or willingness to innovate, all of which can be significant pieces in the mosaic of regional development (Čede & Lieb, 2011, p. 118).

3. The Slovenian Settlement Area and Minority Protection

After the allotment of the Austrian Crown land "*Küstenland*"⁹ (coastal land, littoral) and the Valcanale to Italy after World War I, the Slovenian-speaking population in Friuli-Venezia Giulia experienced strong pressure to assimilate. Since Italy was among the victorious powers at the Peace Conference in Paris 1919/1920, no minority protection had been demanded from its government. When the fascists seized power in 1923, ethnic cleansing also became part of national politics in Friuli-Venezia Giulia. The repressive measures by Italy caused almost 100,000 non-Italian-speaking to leave this area during the fascist regime. Concurrently, until 1931, more than 120,000 Italians were settled in the *Küstenland*, the vast majority in the City of Trieste and its surrounding region (Purini, 2012, p. 133-134).

In Friuli, due to the expansion of the "Berlin Agreement" between Hitler and Mussolini into the "mixed-language territory of Tarvisio (Province Udine)" in the autumn of 1939, the Slovenian-speaking population of the Valcanale was also being integrated into the "Option" (for the German Reich) as it was applicable not only to the German-speaking group but to the entire "*popolazione allogena*," i.e. population with foreign origin (Steinicke, 1984). Although the Slovenian-speaking population of the Valcanale opted for the German Reich, their resettlement was delayed; thus they withstood the *Option* quantitatively almost unchanged, in contrast to the German-speaking residents. Consequently, after the Second World War the Slovenian-language group in the Valcanale was larger than the German minority, with to date more than 50% in the village Ugovizza and with just over 40% in Camporosso (Steinicke, 2008, and modification/updating of own research in 2015; cf. fig. 3).

Due to an annex to the London Memorandum, which controlled the drawing of the border between Italy and Yugoslavia at the Paris Peace Conference in 1947, the Slovenian-language group in the Province of Trieste has functioned under protection regulations since 1954. Supported by a correlating interpretation of the Statute of Autonomy for the Region Friuli-Giulia Venezia, the provinces of Gorizia and Udine followed suit in the 1960s. However, the implementation of these regulations remained partially unfinished. The Treaty of Osimo between Italy and Yugoslavia in 1975 established not only a territorial order enduring to this day in its validity but also a bilateral reinforcement of protection of the Slovenian-language group (Pan 2006, p. 220).

While therefore at least since the 1960s a certain minority protection existed for the Slovenian-speaking population of the provinces of Trieste and Gorizia, relevant provisions for the whole region and therefore also for the Slovenes in the Valcanale and in the Slavia became legislation only in 1999 with the State Law n. 482 (Gazzetta Ufficiale n. 297, December 12, 1999). In addition, with the "Regulations for the Protection of the Slovenian-speaking Minority of the Region Friuli-Venezia Giulia," a new law (Law n. 38 of February 14, 2001) was passed into legislation by the Italian Parliament in 2001, extending the older regulations of minority protection. About details of the protection measures and the impact of further legal modifications such as the Regional Law n. 26 of 2007 inform Pan (2006), Bernhard (2008), but most notably Vidau (2013).

Although in the provinces of Trieste and Gorizia the Slovenian group is now adequately protected, it should not be disregarded that for the Slovenes of the Slavia and the Valcanale the special arrangements have been in effect only for the past few years. It is conceivable that these protective provisions are no longer able to decisively stem the assimilation into the Romanic ethnicity.

4. Ethno-demographic aspects

According to the official Italian censuses of the postwar period, the Slovenian-language group (i.e. Slovenes) was recorded in 1961 in the Province of Trieste and in 1971 in the provinces of

⁹ "Venezia Giulia," in Italy to date the provinces of Gorizia and Trieste. Before 1918 "*Küstenland*" also included the upper Soča Valley (now a part of Slovenia).

Gorizia and Trieste (Valussi, 1974, p. 44 & 71). For the other areas only numerical estimates are in existence, of which Čede et al. (2014, p. 52) report in detail. However, most estimates do not sufficiently take into account the extent of depopulation as well as the consequences of an ageing population in the mountain regions. Different authors estimate between 15,000 and 40,000 Slovenes in the Slavia and the Valcanale. On January 1, 2015, both areas combined had a population of only 12,903 in total (ISTAT 2015). Even adding the Slovenian speakers migrated to Udine and its suburbs, the overall number would hardly amount to 15,000. In 1991 Steinicke, taking into account the figure by the ALPINA Study Group (1975), estimates 12,000 Slovenes for the entire Province of Udine. In that period already the worst population-biological ratios of the whole Friuli territory were evident in the Slovenian area. The birth deficit was in the 1970s at 16.4 per mille, increased in the 1980s to 18.2 and was in the period between 2010 and 2015 at 15.0 (Steinicke, 1991, p. 49; own calculations of ISTAT data). Such indications would propose to set this number today at no more than 10,000. For the entire region Friuli-Venezia Giulia, therefore, the number of Slovenian-speaking population can currently be given as 46,000.

Area	Slovenian-speaking population	Percent of overall population
Province Udine	10,000	1.9
Province Gorizia	11,000	7.8
Province Trieste	25,000	10.6
Friuli-Venezia Giulia	46,000	3.7

Tab 1. Slovenes in the provinces of Friuli-Venezia Giulia (2015). Sources: ISTAT (2015); modified by the authors

Certainly exaggerated are the figures of SLORI, which are based on an extrapolation of the Trieste Demoscopic Institute SWG of 2012: according to them, the numbers within the Slovenian-speaking population in the region Friuli-Venezia Giulia are twice as high (Brezigar 2014, p. 232). This would result in the unrealistic number of far more than 80,000 Slovenes in the provinces of Gorizia and Trieste.

The representation in figure 2 illustrates on the one hand the relative numerical strength of the Slovenian minority in the traditional territory, on the other hand also the percentage of Slovenian population that has been established in the Friulian plain by decades of emigration. Fridl et al. (2001) provided the cartographic basis but give no information on the survey methodology utilized. Since Valussi (1974), Steinicke (1991), and Bufon (1991) also created similar characterizations, the depiction of Fridl et al. represents likely a data compilation. The evidence given for the areas outside the traditional Slovene settlement area in Friuli-Venezia Giulia (cf. figure 1) should at any rate be treated with caution.

As discussed, parts of the Friulian Alps have lately become targets of the new in-migration – even if the migration balance remains negative and the total population is still declining. The latest demographic developments in this area basically do not differ from those in the valleys of the Italian Western Alps (Löffler et al., 2014; Čede et al., 2014). Although the number of immigrants is lower, even in the most remote parts of the traditional Slovene minority territory we can find new residents with origins outside the Alps. In the extreme east of the Italian Alps this migration process began later and has so far had only minor effects on the population development. The reason for this is associated with unfavorable population-biological structures: in the period from 2010 to 2015 in the Slovene settlement area in Friuli (without the Valcanale) the death rate never sank below 20.0 per mille, and the birth rate never rose above 7.6 per mille (own calculations of ISTAT data).

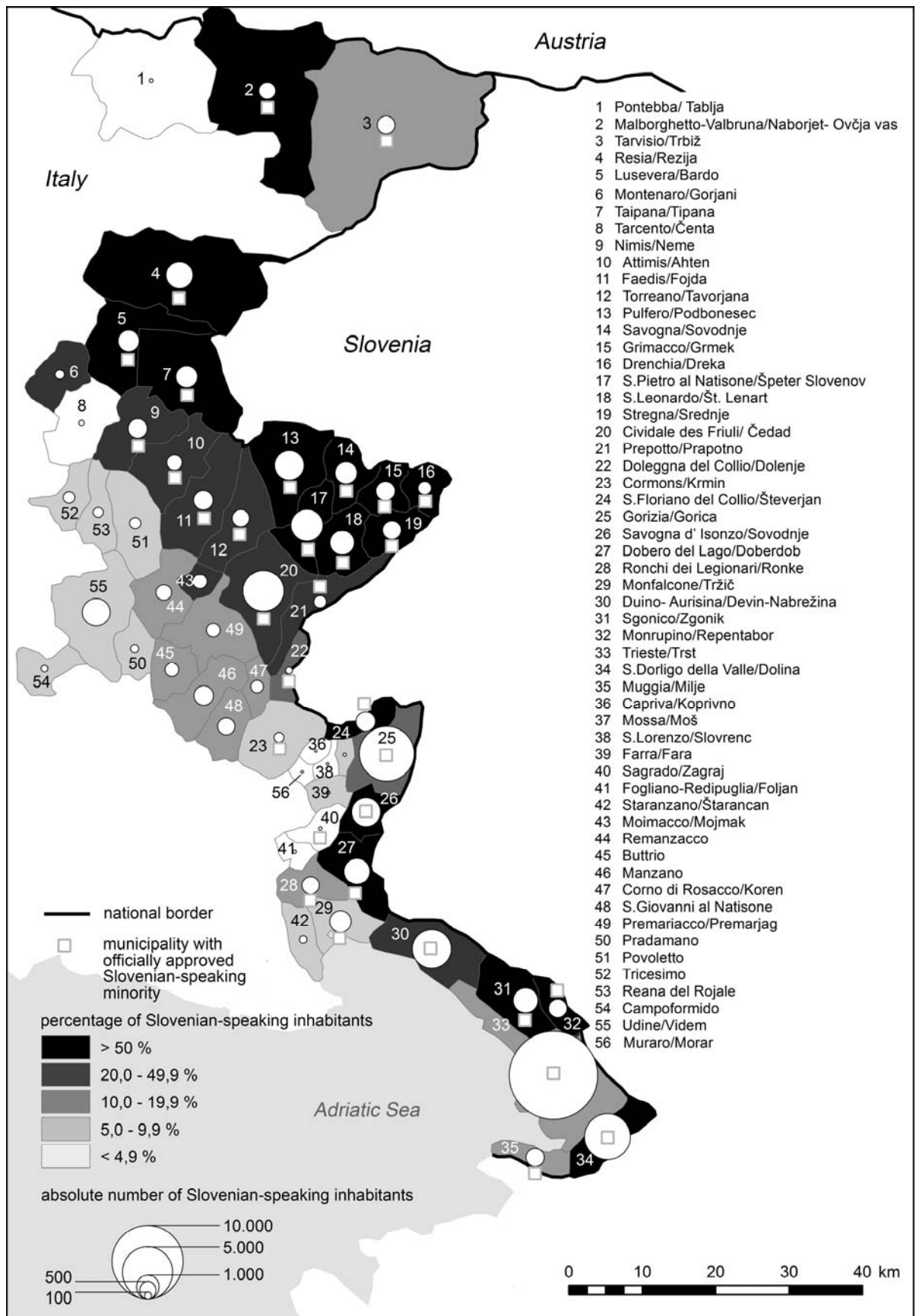


Fig 2. Number and proportion of the Slovenian-speaking population in the municipalities of Friuli-Venezia Giulia. Sources: Fridl et al. (2001), Čede et al. (2012), modified by the authors

The example of this region shows that net migration, viewed in isolation, hardly reflects the demographic phenomenon in question, since especially in this classic depopulation area parallel migration trends into the cities of the Po Valley continue. Nevertheless, in some Slavia and Collio mountain or foothill communities the influx of “new highlanders” even led to keeping the population number stable (Čede, 2014, p. 254). It follows therefore that they also counteract (further) overageing and declining birth rates.

While the impact on the socio-demographic composition of the population is gradually noticeable, the influence of immigrants on the tradition and culture is difficult to estimate. Indeed, they are in no way conducive to the preservation of the local Slovenian idiom. Examples from the Western Alps, the German language pockets in the Southern Alps, and also from the Resia Valley show that especially “new highlanders,” but also returnees, stand out through various activities designed to promote regional and cultural originalities (Walder et al., 2010; Löffler et al., 2014).

5. The dualism in Friuli-Venezia Giulia and the fragmented Slovene minority

The Region Friuli-Venezia Giulia was founded in 1948 (it has been autonomous since 1963) and now includes the provinces of Udine and Pordenone (i.e. Friuli) as well as the provinces of Gorizia and Trieste (i.e. Venezia Giulia). Thus, two areas with a distinctly different historical past were combined administratively. While Gorizia and Trieste after centuries of affiliation with Austria (Habsburg Empire) went to Italy after the First World War, Friuli (without Valcanale) in contrast was Venetian until the late 18th century, came in the 19th century for several decades under Habsburg rule, until 1866 it was awarded to Italy. The territorial development of the Valcanale in turn was similar to that of Gorizia and Trieste. In economic and demographic terms, Friuli and Venezia Giulia developed differently. Until the 1970s, Friuli was characterized by massive emigration (“Friuli migrante;” Zanini, 1964), which is still ongoing in the Friulian mountain region today and has thus resulted in unfavorable population-biological consequences – regardless of the new “amenity migration” (Löffler et al., 2014). The current Venezia Giulia benefited far into the 20th century from the economic impulses generated during the Habsburg period. To date, Gorizia and Trieste and their surroundings have not become out-migration areas.

Between 1866 and 1918, the Slovene language group in Friuli-Venezia Giulia was divided between the Kingdom of Italy and the Habsburg Monarchy (approximately at the ratio 1:2). In Italy, the Slovene language group was concentrated in the Slavia then. With about 5% around 1900, the share of Slovene-speakers in the total population of Friuli was higher than at the last official survey in 1921.

Due to the diverging historical development, the Slovene settlement area in Friuli-Venezia Giulia – as described earlier – can be divided into three categories: the Trieste and Gorizia region (Venezia Giulia), the eastern border of Friuli (Slavia), and the Valcanale in northeastern Friuli. The following sections will discuss this heterogeneity.

The Slovenes of Venezia-Giulia (provinces of Gorizia and Trieste)

With a share of 29.8% (1910: 56,916 Slovene-speaking citizens), Trieste was on the eve of World War I the largest Slovene city (Čede et al., 2010, p. 211). After the transition to Italy, this population segment was exposed to strong pressure to assimilate. Simultaneously, the Italian government attempted to resettle as many Italians as possible into the area. Thus, according to the 1921 census, the share of Slovene-speaking population in Trieste declined to 19.5%. If one believes the official sources, Gorizia and vicinity also recorded a decline between 1910 and 1921 – of 34.8% (10,790 Slovenes) to 22.7% (6,390 Slovenes) (Valussi, 1974, p. 68). During the fascist regime, nearly 100,000 non-Italian speakers had to leave Venezia Giulia. At the same time, more than 120,000 Italians were being settled there until 1931, the vast majority in the city of Trieste and its surroundings (Purini, 2012, p. 132-134). The last official censuses reported for Trieste 25,582 Slovenians in 1961 and 24,706 in 1971 (ISTAT 1965; 1974). After the Second World War, only one language census, in 1971, was held in the Province of Gorizia (1971: 10,533 Slovenes; cf. Valussi, 1974, p. 71).

As discussed above, the Slovenian-speaking population in the provinces of Gorizia and Trieste, the former *Küstenland* (without the Soča Valley) that currently encompasses a total of about

36,000 people (cf. table 1), enjoys a more effective minority protection than Slovenian-speakers in the Valcanale and in the Slavia. In Trieste it can even lay claim to schools, newspapers, a certain proportional ethnic representation in public office and to the recognition of Slovenian as an official language.

The development of the Slovenian-speaking population in the southern part of Friuli-Venezia Giulia has thus deviated from that in the Province of Udine, which is noticeable socio-economically as well as in ethnic identity. While today in the Slavia and the Valcanale diffuse ethnicities constitute the rule (as discussed below) and a part of the Slovenian-speaking population does not consider itself a national minority, a Slovenian society in the provinces of Gorizia and Trieste identifies itself as a national minority with Slovenia as the cultural motherland. For the construction of ethnic-oriented organizations that were able to strengthen or expand cultural privileges, this was of specific significance. The Catholic Church, which since the 19th century used its ethno-political authority for the Slovenian awareness in the *Küstenland*, must thereby not be disregarded. In the 20th century, the labor organizations applied similar influence (Jelen, 2006).

Since the provinces of Gorizia and Trieste are not out-migration areas, there is a substantial difference in the social and economic spatial concepts compared to those of the Slovenes of the Slavia and the Valcanale. As Fig 2 shows, the proportion of Slovenes in Trieste and Gorizia is highest alongside the Slovenian border. A correlation with a cultural or economic marginalization, however, does not exist (Kacin-Wohinc & Pirjevec, 1998; Bogatec, 2009). For the minority a well-developed cultural infrastructure (media, libraries, theaters, schools, organizations, etc.) is present in all communities. In contrast to Friuli, the Slovenian-speaking population of Trieste and Gorizia lives in settlements in urban and suburban areas, making these the beneficiaries of the urban-fringe migration as well as of amenity migration.

While in Friuli the Slovenian-speaking population suffered quantitative and qualitative losses for decades because of out-migration, the decline in numbers of speakers can here be attributed more to assimilation processes, which result from the increasing urbanization of the former *Küstenland* (Jagodic, 2011). Simultaneously, an economic change is evolving on the Karst plateau: new businesses emerge, seeking a symbiosis between culture, trades and agriculture; modified forms of “vacation on the farm” occur, and an increasing number of wineries convert to organic viticulture. Conversations with members of the minority reveal that these modern economic systems are suitable to keep the population in the countryside and to strengthen the Slovenian identity.

This trend, however, is at risk from future relentless changes in land use. Already, the narrow strip of Slovenian settlement is severed by railway, highway, power lines and the Transalpine Pipeline (TAL). Currently the main problems of the Slovenian minority are in the construction of an additional new carrier of traffic: the use of the Karst corridor for railway line PP6 (as a section of the new Baltic-Adriatic transport axis) would affect *Küstenland* Slovenes with negative impacts on the environment and the economy.

The Slovenes of Friuli – fragmented within the Province of Udine

From the foregoing deliberations it is already evident that, for a depiction of the Slovenes in Friuli today, a distinction must be made between the Valcanale and Slavia, mainly for reasons of dissimilar territorial development. Moreover, in the following sections the special case of the isolated Resia Valley will have to be examined.

Valcanale (Province Udine)

Situated in the extreme northeast of Italy, the Valcanale is the region where Europe’s three most important language families meet – the Slavs, Romans and Germanics – and no fewer than four distinct ethnic groups have settled next to each other and mixed in an overlapping pattern: the Friulians, Italians, Slovenes, and Germans (Fig 3). Today, they live side by side in a particularly limited space. Remarkably, the elder Slovenes in the Valcanale are using all four of these languages in their day-to-day conversations – a phenomenon which is quite unique in Western Europe (Steinicke, 1984).

As already discussed, the ethno-linguistic structure significantly changed as a result of the annexation of the Valcanale by Italy in 1919. On the one hand, a bilingual region has become a quadrilingual one, promoted by government-sponsored in-migration of Friulians and Italians, on the other hand a gradual loss among the two autochthonous language groups can be perceived (Mihalič, 2010). Especially the German-speaking population of the Valcanale suffered significant losses resulting from the *Option*, making them today only a fraction of the currently nearly 900 descendants of the old-established Germans and Slovenes (Steinicke, 2008).

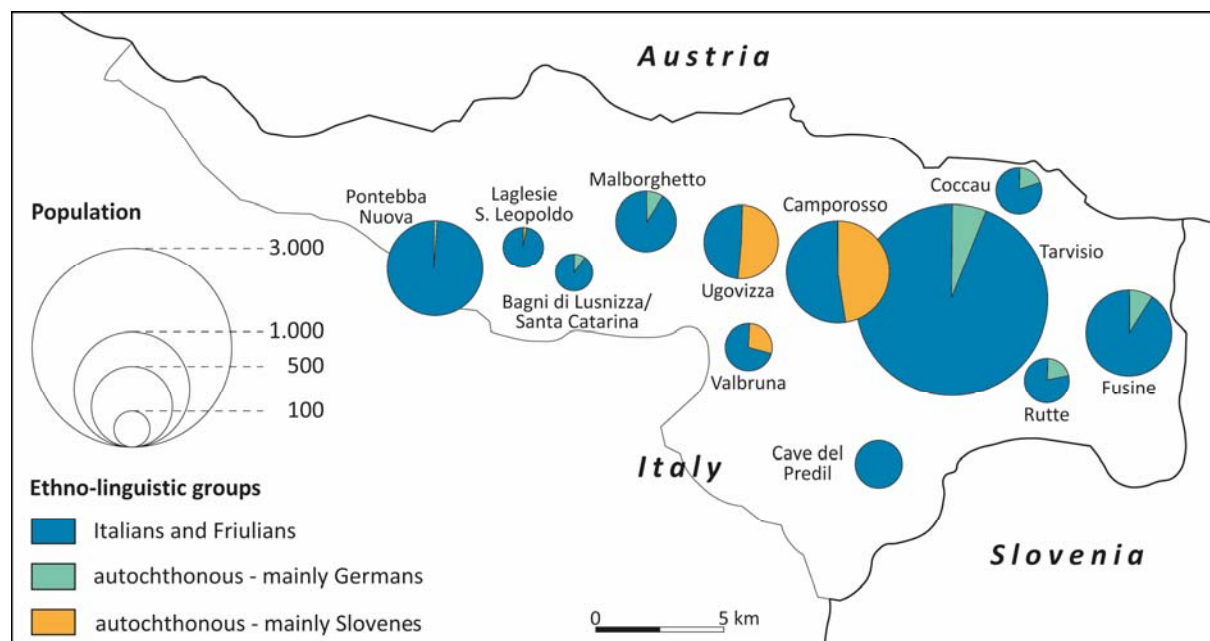


Fig 3. Autochthonous ethnic structures in the Valcanale 2015. Source: Steinicke (2008); updated by the authors

The decrease in minorities and thus also of the Slovenian-language group is a result of assimilation, mainly from intermarriage (Steinicke & Vavti, 2008, p. 18) but also from more recent demographic processes. Until well into the 1980s, the Valcanale presented an attractive immigration area through its labor supply in tourism, cross-border trade, and industry. In the early 1990s, however, a completely different development began: between 1993 and 2015, the two Valcanale communities Tarvisio and Malborghetto-Valbruna lost approximately 1,600 residents (from 7,056 down to 5,458). Nowhere in the valleys of Northern Friuli are the population losses greater in this period, both in relative and in absolute terms. The crisis of the Valcanale industrial enterprises as well as the EU accessions of Austria (1995) and Slovenia (2004), combined with the elimination of border- and tax officials, as well as military personnel, were the main reasons. Death rates that exceed birth rates and out-migration characterize the current demographic picture (Vavti & Steinicke, 2006a; Steinicke & Vavti, 2008; ISTAT, 2015). In addition, the amenity migrants to the Valcanale bring no demographic turnaround (Steinicke et al., 2011b).

Slavia (Province Udine)

As outlined at the beginning, these are the valleys of the Alpi Giulie and their foothills that were secluded for centuries. Since the Second World War the entire Friulian Alps and therefore also the Slavia have been faced with heavy population losses (Valussi, 1974; Steinicke, 1991; Steinicke et al., 2007; Čede & Steinicke, 2007; Varotto & Psenner, 2003; Pascolini, 2008; Čede et al., 2014 – cf. table 2); the municipality of Drenchia in the Natisone Valleys actually lost more than 90% of its population, the entire Slavia over 77% since WWII.

Valley/Area	1951	1981	2015
Natisone	13,107	5,991	3,645
Torre	5,218	1,885	1,344
Resia	3,350	1,547	1,064
Slavia Veneta	21,675	9,423	6,053

Tab 2. Development of the population number in the Slavia Veneta (years 1951, 1981, 2015). Source: ISTAT (1955ff.)

The demographic turnaround in most areas of the Italian Alps that began with amenity migration in the early 1990s is currently noticeable in the Slavia on the one hand through declining negative net migration (Löffler et al., 2014; Čede et al., 2014) and the disappearance of the ghost towns that could still be mapped in 2004 (Čede & Steinicke, 2007); on the other hand, the population losses have remained due to the high birth deficits (Walder et al., 2010, p. 182f.; Čede et al., 2014). With decreasing population figures, the number of Slovenian-speaking residents has also fallen sharply; in contrast to Carinthia, however, the ratio of Slovenes to Romanics proves to be remarkably stable (Steinicke, 2002). Only in traditional Slovenian populated areas of the foothill zone, the share of Slovenian-language speakers fell to below 40% in recent decades. Nevertheless, in the remote mountain areas four out of five inhabitants still use the Slovenian dialect in everyday life (cf. fig. 2).

Amid the “Slovenes” in the Slavia, the notion of “diffuse ethnicity” (Steinicke, 1991) must not be disregarded. Much like in the German language pockets in the south of the Eastern and Western Alps, since the late 1980s the opinion prevailed among the Slavia residents that their traditional language and culture contained sufficient distinguishing features that it seemed justified to be regarded as a distinct ethno-linguistic group. Like the Slovenes in the Valcanale, they apply the term “*po našem*” (according to ours). Most striking is this phenomenon in the Resia Valley, but also in the valleys of Natisone and Torre has this subjective feature a considerable impact on the ethnic and regional identity of its population (Steinicke, 1991).

As mentioned, a characteristic of postmodernism is that identities and faiths change and rebuild in the short term (Agnew & Brusa, 1999, p. 123). Nevertheless, the majority of the population of the Slavia does not even today see itself as a national minority that has its politico-cultural center in neighboring Slovenia. Instead, an increasing codification of the local (Slovenian) dialects can be perceived, which – similar to the German linguistic enclaves in the neighboring Friulian areas – applies only to a few hundred speakers, as well as the establishment of cultural movements that now also stipulate ethno-political demands.

Together with this subjective ethnicity, the assimilation into the Romanic ethnic group, which represents the majority outside the mountain areas, is fortified. The functional intertwining of the Slavia with the centers of the Friulian plain, which is reflected in the commuting lifestyle, but also still in the out-migration from the mountains, plays thereby the main role.

The debate over the “*po našem*” question deflects overall from the demographic and economic problems of the Slavia. In the near future, the few amenity migrants will unlikely be in a position to significantly alter the demographic developments and the unfavorable age structure and to generate economic impulses. Activities in the context of cultural self-assessment, such as art exhibitions, organic farming and return to the local cuisine associated with tourist valorization, have so far also not proven a stimulus for sustainable regional development.

Exceptional case Resia Valley (Province Udine)

The decline in the Slovenian-speaking population in Friuli is altogether more strongly connected with demographic processes than with the assimilation (cf. among other Steinicke, 2002). This is especially true for the Resia Valley where more than 80% of the population today speak the local Slovenian dialect. As late as the first half of the 19th century, access to the five main Resian villages was possible only by footpaths and narrow, imperiled cart tracks (Morassi & Panjek, 1984, p. 441).

More pronounced than in the rest of the Slavia is the phenomenon of diffuse ethnicity reflected in all fractions, which is also addressed by most authors (e.g. Quaglia, 1981; Longhino-Arketöw, 1984; Morassi & Panjek, 1984; Steinicke, 1991; Micelli, 1996; Maurer-Lausegger, 1999; on the Resian dialects Steenwijk, 1994; 1999). To explain this solely as a post-modern phenomenon certainly does not capture the situation completely. In conversations with locals one hears frequently the opinion that the Resians are linguistically either Russians or belong to a completely separate ethnic group. The particularly ancient sound level of the Slovenian spoken there (“*Rozajansko*”) has early on attracted Slavic (Ukrainian, Russian, and Polish) scientists and poets and enticed them to visit the Resia Valley. They studied the linguistic idiosyncrasies, collected sermons, wrote dictionaries and regarded the Resian language and culture not equivalent to the Slovenian, but rather considered it as autonomous.

This from a linguistic-scientific perspective untenable view (Matičeto, 1964), however, decisively influenced the regional identity of the residents of the valley. In his thematic map of the ethnic groups in the Eastern Alps, Becker (1971) left the Resia Valley as a “blank spot” because the respondent municipality was not in agreement which Slavic language was spoken there. The Russian interest in the Resia Valley and Friuli can be traced well into the second half of the 20th century. In 1980, Krasnovskaja, for example, still pursued ethnological questions and stressed the differences in customs between those of the Resia Valley and Friuli, but also of the neighboring areas.

Although immigration – apart from the return of migrant workers – has so far never played a significant role, the expansion of the interaction field has increased outside influences for the residents of the valley in times of globalization. The Resia Valley is therefore only to a limited extent the prime example of continuance in an ethno-linguistic space as it was until the 1980s. It must remain to be seen what impact the current return-to-the-traditional tendencies and the rejection of identification with the Slovenian cultural sphere will have on the ethnic structure. On the one hand, the aforementioned emphasis on regional and local identities strengthens the community consciousness, on the other hand, this can also – especially in light of the rejection of the standard language as in the Resia Valley (Longhino-Arketöw, 1984) – endanger the preservation of the language group.

6. Types of identities in the Val Canale and in the Slavia

As in other areas of overlapping different cultures, multilingual communities have also developed in the Slovenian-speaking Friuli that elude precise ethno-linguistic allocations. With a research project of the Austrian Science Fund (P16664-G03) on the ethnicity question in the Valcanale, the multi-layered complexity of the ethnic and regional identity of the long-established tri- and quadrilingual Valcanale settlers could be demonstrated by means of narrative and problem-centered interviews (Vavti, 2006; Vavti & Steinicke, 2006a and 2006b; Steinicke & Vavti, 2008). Our own observations in the Resia Valley and in the Slavia confirmed the results and suggest their transferability.

In contrast to the surveys in the Valcanale, the qualitative analysis was carried out fundamentally through semi-structured interviews. A total of 28 Slovene-speaking persons were interviewed in the communities Taipana, Savogna and Drenchia and in the Resian village San Giorgio. The main topic concerned cultural affiliation putting particular emphasis on questions focused on the regional and local as well as ethnic aspects. The respondents were allowed much flexibility in answering the questions, so that the semi-structured interviews were approaching biographical interview techniques. Already after a few conversations striking similarities with the results in the Valcanale could be detected, which suggested overall a takeover of identity types.

It is striking that equating Slovenian-speaking with Slovenian-minded is not applicable; obviously, such an attitude paves the way for assimilation. With regard to the endangerment of the ethno-linguistic diversity, the following identity types can be distinguished:

a) “*Traditionalists*”: they possess a pronounced village identity, are closely linked to the rural environment and distance themselves significantly from the so-called “other,” i.e. in-migrants (primarily Romanic people). They strongly identify with the customs and traditions of the village and often express ambivalent feelings towards modernization. The Slovenian language, and

particularly the respective village dialects are actively spoken in the family and the village environment and passed on to the next generation. Especially the older residents can be considered “traditionalists.” Most still speak the minority language but often do not align themselves “ethnically” and rather see themselves as people from Camporosso or Resia, etc., or as people of the Natisone valleys. Striking among some Slovenian-speaking Valcanale and Resia Valley residents is the clear delineation from the written language: the local village dialect is spoken, i.e. the “*po našem*.”

b) “*Committed fighters*”: compared to a), these are not so much connected with the village, but identify with “their own club.” They are involved with the association structures of the autochthonous population and participate actively in the survival of the minority group. Here, too, the mother tongue Slovenian remains preserved in the family and in the subsequent generation. Among the Slovenian-language group, however, within the younger generation problems of a socio-structural nature also appear: education and training increasingly take place in distant cities or abroad, leading to emigration and intermarriage.

c) “*Sallying cosmopolitans*”: this identity is comprised of many descendants of a) and b): they switch between two or more (language) worlds, often in the context of commuting between their own village and a domestic urban center or abroad. They recognize thereby the benefits of multilingualism for the work environment. As a result, clear ethnic self-identification is to some extent missing. This identity type is in contrast to a) and b) characterized by openness towards others and foreigners. Tolerance exists within the family towards all languages. However, for pragmatic reasons among the Slovenian-speaking residents, too, the Italian language dominates increasingly, which results in a progressive loss of their language for the next generation.

d) “*Slovenes with adjusted identity*”: This type is often the result of intermarriage. These are Slovenes in an assimilation process that ultimately leads to the disappearance of the language of origin, i.e. the complete assimilation into the Romanic ethnicity. What often remains, nevertheless, is a kind of “symbolic ethnicity” (Gans, 1979): one holds on to, for instance, the old customs and traditional architectural elements and feels emotionally connected to the ethnic origin, although the associated language is gradually lost. The adaptation to the Italian is sometimes also a strategy of conflict prevention: one does not want to offend anyone, for example, due to the changing history and thus connected loyalties, and therefore one adjusts to the linguistic framework of the Italian majority.

In summary it can be said that elderly residents often fit into the identity types a), b), d), or a mix thereof. Younger people, however, usually have less competency in the Slovenian language and frequently fall into the category of “cosmopolitans.”

7. Discussion and Conclusion

In spite of ambivalent information – as in most minority areas – on the size of the language group, its settlement area can be well defined. As described, this involves what was in the Middle Ages a much larger distribution area, which especially in the Valcanale and in the Slavia continues to shrink through assimilation processes. These two areas (including the Resia Valley) are characterized by their peripheral location associated with economic problems.

Nevertheless, this does not apply to the Slovenian-speaking population in the provinces of Gorizia and Trieste, which resides mainly in the suburban sphere of the two cities. Here several factors have a positive effect on the preservation and further development of the language group: favorable socioeconomic conditions for the inhabitants of suburbia, the upgrading of the formerly “dead” border to an attractive business location, and, finally, the effect cities have in increasingly instrumental roles for the preservation of ethnicity (Steinicke, 2001). This is particularly applicable to Trieste, which represented an important center of Slovenian identity as far back as the 19th century and still or again holds this function despite the reprisals of the Fascist period.

A key result of this work is the spatial differentiation of the Slovenian-language group, which is so distinct that one could question the existence of a single, uniform ethno-linguistic group. The cause of this spatial fragmentation lies in the different historical and political development reinforced by socio-economic disparities instigated by peripherization (Valcanale, Slavia) and

suburbanization (Gorizia, Trieste). Another reason is the unequal legal situation of the Slovenians in Italy.

The phenomenon of “diffuse ethnicity” in turn is related to the fact that certain Slovenian minority areas were separated from the cultural central space of the Slovenes by administrative boundaries, therefore interaction scarcely took place.

This was demonstrated especially in the exceptional case of the Resia Valley but also applies to the entire Slavia and the Valcanale, where in each case “*po našem*” consciousness is practiced as expression of diffuse ethnicity. This is consistent with the trend of emphasizing cultural individualities in terms of a new valorization of regionalism – also as a counter-movement to globalization – from which to construct regional or local identities. Thus, the linguistic groups increasingly consider themselves an enrichment of the region. In the study area, it is not (yet) empirically verifiable, however, whether this is further accompanied by a contribution to regional development and therefore to sustainable socio-economic enhancement of peripheral spaces (cf. Čede & Lieb, 2011).

A particularly notable characteristic is the strong distinction of the language group. This is summarized once again clearly in Tab 3, which presents a generalized comparison of the situation in Friuli (Province Udine, which comprises the Slovenian-speaking areas Valcanale and Slavia including the Resia Valley) and Venezia Giulia (Provinces Gorizia and Trieste). The overall status of the language group in the latter provinces is significantly more favorable, especially in regard to socio-economic and demographic processes as determinants of their development.

Although the phenomenon of amenity migration has progressively captured the Slavia and the Valcanale, its influence on ethno-geographical structures and processes remains modest, apart from the fact that the migration balances are no longer as negative as 15 years ago.

Friuli Prov. Udine	Aspects	Venezia Giulia Prov. Gorizia and Trieste
Valcanale, Slavia with Resia Valley	Distribution areas	Gorizia and Trieste with surrounding regions
11,000 people in the traditional settlement area	Current size of the language group	36,000 people
Pronounced periphery, passive spaces	Socio-economic framework conditions	Suburban and border location, active spaces
Overall still declining	Demographic dynamics	Favorable development
Regionally oriented, “ <i>po našem</i> ” consciousness	Ethnic awareness	Focused on Slovenia as the “motherland”
Essentially sufficient, but established too late (in 2000)	Protection of minorities	International standards

Tab 3. Basic configurations of the Slovenes in Friuli-Venezia Giulia (2015).

The overall assessment of the possible future of the Slovenian-language group varies thus from region to region. Next to areas where a threat to the continued existence of the language group can be detected (e.g. Valcanale), there are also those with a favorable development (e.g. Province of Trieste). Regardless, since a common denominator could be detected in a distinctive (re-)awakening of ethnic consciousness, be it related to Slovenia or “*po našem*,” there is at least an important cornerstone for the future viability of the language group in place.

The question remains to what extent competencies of the Slovenian-language group in Friuli-Venezia Giulia are already being used for regional development. A component of this is for example the bridge function of the minority to the neighboring country (Friedrich et al., 2007, p. 21) or its sponsorship of cultural activities (from individual events or language courses to the diversification of the media landscape), which would also benefit the majority population or enrich the regional tourism product. However, still far too little of this can be detected, both locally and also in the relevant Internet appearances of local and regional actors.

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