

Sara Brezigar, Zaira Vidau

Political Participation of the Slovene Community in Italy: A Critical View of its Representation and Organisational Structure

The Slovene community in Italy faces new social challenges that arise from both the Italian society in general and the Slovene community in particular. However, the current European and global context and trends, including increased internal and international mobility and migration that result in increasing diversity at all levels and in all contexts, should also be taken into account. The organisational structure of the Slovene minority seems to represent a shrinking core of the community; it is becoming inadequate, and the minority's ability to have proper representation, particularly at the political level, is becoming questionable. A preliminary qualitative study was conducted in order to examine the community's political participation and explore possible best practices that could serve as a starting point for a new model of organisational structure and representation for the Slovene community in Italy. The aim of this article is to present the results of this study and reflect upon possible options for the future.

Keywords: political participation, political representation, Slovene national community in Italy, ethnic minorities.

Politična participacija slovenske skupnosti v Italiji: kritični pogled na predstavništvo in organiziranost

Slovenska skupnost v Italiji se sooča z novimi družbenimi izzivi, ki izvirajo tako iz italijanske družbe na splošno kot iz posebnih značilnosti slovenske skupnosti. K temu je treba dodati trenutni evropski in globalni kontekst, ki se sooča s povečano interno in mednarodno mobilnostjo ter migracijami, ki vodijo v večjo raznolikost na vseh ravneh in v vseh okoljih. Organizacijska struktura slovenske manjšine tako odraža in predstavlja vedno ožje jedro skupnosti in postaja neustrezna. Tudi politično predstavništvo skupnosti postaja vprašljivo. V prispevku avtorici predstavita rezultate kvalitativne študije, s katero sta preučili politično participacijo te skupnosti in raziskali obstoječe dobre prakse, ki bi lahko služile kot izhodišče za razmislek o novem modelu organiziranosti in predstavništva slovenske skupnosti v Italiji.

Ključne besede: politična participacija, predstavništvo, slovenska narodna skupnost v Italiji, etnične manjšine.

Correspondence address: Sara Brezigar, Inštitut za narodnostna vprašanja (INV) / Institute for Ethnic Studies, Erjavčeva 26, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia, e-mail: sara.brezigar@guest.arnes.si; Zaira Vidau, Slovenski raziskovalni inštitut (SLORI) / Slovene Research Institute, ul. Beccaria 8, 34100 Trst/Trieste, Italy, e-mail: z.vidau@slori.org.

1. Introduction

The participation of national minorities in public life is essential for any democratic society that wants to live in peace and to provide for social stability. The *raison d'être* of participatory mechanisms, particularly of minority participation, is to foster the integration of minorities in the societies in which they live, while encouraging the preservation of their identity and delaying, if not preventing, their assimilation.

A number of social, economic, political, historical and cultural factors contribute to the divide between national and ethnic communities within the state. However, one of the most important causes of conflicts between a particular minority and the majority population stems from the minority's perception that it cannot fully participate in the political, economic and social life of the country in which it lives. The minority feels discriminated against. Frequently, the minority also perceives that the state deliberately uses its system and resources to deprive the minority of its cultural and linguistic identity. Therefore "[e]ffective participation in public affairs serves to avoid the feeling of persons belonging to minorities, that they should use other, less acceptable means for their opinions to be considered" (Palermo & Woelk 2003, 240–241). By building trust, participation in public affairs can create loyalty to the state and to the society to which the minorities belong (Palermo & Woelk 2003, 240–241). Moreover, the right of national minorities to political participation represents a limitation of the absolute rule of the majority, which prevents "a permanent monopoly of power by any social structure and enable[s] equal competition of political actors in their struggle for (political) power" (Žagar 2005, 48). It relies on the fundamental principles of "self-rule" and "power-sharing" (Schneckener 2004, 18–23).

Among the different forms of participation of (national) minorities and their members,¹ the focus in this article will be the central one, i.e. political participation. One aspect of this concerns decision-making processes (representation and other forms of political participation), while the other relates mostly to the self-organisation of the community (and its self-governance) (Medda Windischer 2009, 212; Marko 1999). The aim of this article is to present the results of a study conducted on both aspects of (political) participation of one such national minority – the Slovene community in Italy.²

From a historical perspective, the Slovene community in Italy is a highly developed and well integrated community in terms of self-organisation and community structures (Bogatec & Vidau 2016; 2017). However, its internal organisation is becoming increasingly inefficient and outdated, as the community faces new challenges that arise from social changes within the Italian society in general and the Slovene community in particular. Unfavourable demographic trends (Jagodic 2017), a general lack of interest in politics (Giovannini 1988; Tuorlo 2006; Bertozzi 2015), changes in lifestyle and means of communication

particularly among young people (Vidau 2017d) that include less personal contact and less (real) community life, higher demands on parents in terms of their professional and family lives (that leave less time to devote to community issues) – these and other changes put under pressure the organisational structure that has been supporting the functioning and preservation of the Slovene community since the aftermath of the Second World War. Social and political circumstances have changed considerably in the past decades and the community's organisational structure seems to be either too slow to adapt or unable to do so.

Furthermore, from a historical point of view, the majority of the Slovene community in Italy used to elect their political representatives by voting predominantly for either the ethnic party Slovene Union (Slovenska skupnost) or the current left or centre-left parties (Vidau 2016b; 2017b; 2017c). Recently, however, this trend has weakened. Voting patterns and trends are changing and a growing number of members of the Slovene community seek their political representation among other parties that are ideologically on the right or centre-right of the political spectrum that, traditionally, have not attracted many voters from this community.

The result of these processes is that the current organisational structure of the Slovene minority seems to represent a shrinking core of the community, and that the minority's ability to have proper representation at the political level is becoming questionable. For these reasons, organisational and institutional reforms are needed within the community in order to adjust its structures and functioning to the new social reality. Similarly, a solution should be adopted within the Italian system of political representation that would enable and promote minority representation at all levels, in order to secure adequate representation of the Slovene community and foster its ability to preserve its language and culture.

To investigate how these needs for change could be best addressed, a pilot study was conducted in 2017 as a preparatory activity for the Second Regional Conference on the Protection of the Slovene Linguistic Minority³ (Brezigar & Vidau 2018). The study examined the views and opinions of 16 representatives of the Slovene national community in the region Friuli-Venezia Giulia (FVG):⁴⁵ among them were five elected political representatives, seven presidents and directors of primary Slovene organisations and institutions in the provinces of Trieste/Trst, Gorizia/Gorica and Udine/Videm/Viden, the spokesperson of the representative body of the Slovene community, and three journalists working for Slovene media in Italy.

The interviews focused on the efficacy of the current representative bodies of the Slovenes in Italy in their relations with individual governmental authorities, and local and provincial government, as well as on the internal structure and decision-making processes of Slovene organisations and institutions. The respondents were asked to assess the current system of representation by elected

Slovene-speaking political representatives. They gave their opinion on the role and effectiveness of the Slovene umbrella organisations – the Slovene Cultural and Economic Association (Slovenska kulturno gospodarska zveza – SKGZ) and the Council of Slovene Organisations (Svet slovenskih organizacij – SSO) in the contemporary socio-political context. At the same time, they expressed their views on the reforms required of the existing bodies and institutions, as well as suggesting potential new representative bodies and channels. The main aim of this article is to present the results of this study and reflect upon possible future options.

The first part of the paper will briefly touch upon some theoretical issues and models of political representation of national minorities in Europe that could be useful when considering possible changes to the organisational structure and representation of the Slovene community in Italy. A brief outline of the current status of the Slovene community will then be given and the results of the study presented. Finally, the research results will be summarised and recommendations offered for future development and reforms.

2. Political Participation of (National) Minorities

The main objective of the political participation of minorities is to ensure effective inclusion and equality among citizens of different ethnic origin. This “substantive equality” (Lantschner 2008, 60; Verstichel 2010) is the fundamental justification for approaches and mechanisms that ensure the representation and participation of national minorities.

Several mechanisms can ensure effective participation. They are easily classified on a continuum between two poles: from the individual right to vote to equal representation of the various (ethnic and national) communities that constitute the state (Marko 1999). Between these two poles lie equal participation in electoral processes, proper representation in the parliament and other elected bodies, including guaranteed seats in those bodies, the establishment of effective consultative bodies and mechanisms, the general participation of members of national minorities in cultural, social and economic life, as well as in public affairs, and the improvement of economic opportunities for members of national minorities (Marko 1999). Several countries (e.g. Slovenia, Romania, Croatia) have come up with solutions that could be placed on this continuum and lean either towards some sort of guaranteed political representation or a lower electoral threshold (or both).⁶ The experiences of these and other states suggest that under certain circumstances, some participatory mechanisms are more useful and effective than others, and thus suggest that a contextual approach is of paramount importance.

Since the Slovene community lives in Italy, its natural tendency is to look for possible solutions among other minorities in the same state. In particular, the

South Tyrol model is frequently perceived as a role model to follow. However, other solutions, used elsewhere in the EU, should also be considered.

In terms of participation, the province of Bolzano relies heavily on mechanisms that strive to ensure equal representation of the communities present on its territory (the Italian, German and Ladin communities) and prevent their marginalisation. In practice, this means, for example, that mechanisms ensure a proportional representation of different communities among employees in most of the public sector. Moreover, political representation is linked to representation of ethnic groups⁷ through a system of self-declaration of membership or affiliation to ethnic communities that is embedded in the electoral system. The result of this model is that the ethnic affiliation of the political representatives is roughly in accordance with the proportion of the respective communities on the territory. Palermo (Marko et al. 2007) explains that the South Tyrol model, (implemented in accordance with the Second Autonomy Statute) includes two dimensions: the historical-ethnic dimension that functions as a sort of defensive minority protection and results in coexistence by means of segregation; and the linguistic-territorial dimension that gives autonomy to the whole region in order to integrate through cooperation (Marko et al. 2007).

To summarise, the South Tyrol model is based on the self-declaration of citizens regarding their ethnic affiliation and *de facto* counting of the members of each community (Lantschner & Poggeschi 2008; Katics 2013). Historically, such counting has been strongly opposed by the Slovene minority in Italy. Formally, because they feared that the existing inadequate protection of the minority would undermine truthful self-declaration of minority members or that counting would result in their discomfort.

Moreover, the South Tyrol model grants minority representation through elections. However, a minority can actually elect its representatives, be adequately represented and can relevantly influence decision-making and/or authority only if it is concentrated and sufficiently numerous on the territory (particularly in electoral districts), ideally representing a local and/or regional majority. Unlike the German community in the South Tyrol, the Slovene community in Italy does not represent the local majority on the territory where it lives, and so its ability to seek its representation through general, particularly proportional elections is severely hindered. When the absolute size and its territorial dispersion (Dobos 2016, 87) hinder political representation of a distinct community through general (public) elections, special arrangements should be adopted to ensure it.

An example of such special arrangements are those in place for the Hungarian and Italian national minorities in Slovenia, where a double voting right of persons belonging to these minorities and guaranteed seats in representative bodies were introduced. Persons belonging to those minority communities vote twice. First, like all citizens, they vote according to their political or ideological

conviction or preference; second, they cast a vote to elect the representative(s) of their community in respective bodies that have guaranteed seats, as well as the same status and powers as other elected representatives. At the national level, the constitution guarantees a seat for each of two national minorities in the National Assembly (Komac 1999; Žagar 1992).

An active, often dominant and decisive role of the state in conceptualising and regulating the status of minorities and regions as well as the organisational structure and institutions of minority communities can provoke concerns and potentially cause a duplication of representational structures and institutions. For example, in Slovenia beside the state-established self-governing communities that represent the minority *vis à vis* the state and its bodies (Komac 1999, 68), the Italian community has also an umbrella organisation (Italian Union / *Unione Italiana*) that represents the community *vis à vis* the Italian state and is one of forms of this minority's self-government. In this case, the umbrella organisation that functions as a point of reference for 52 associations elects its own representatives through internal elections (among members). Still, the Slovene state regards it merely as a private cultural association.

With its double voting right, special electoral registers and a top-down organisational approach, Slovenia is, however, a rather extreme example of how a state can regulate and ensure minority representation. Other solutions involve options that do not require a double voting right or a special electoral system. On the German-Danish border, for example, two different models have been adopted to guarantee the representation of minorities – the Danish minority in Germany and the German minority in Denmark.

Since the revision of the Danish-German border in 1920, both Denmark and Germany have on a number of occasions officially recognised the national minority of the neighboring state in their territories, finally defining the status of both minorities in the Bonn-Copenhagen Declaration (1955). Since then, Denmark and Germany have developed consultative and other bodies to protect minorities in the area and ensure their representation (Becker-Christensen 2014).

Both minorities have two types of bodies and organisations. On the one hand, organisations that are managed by the minorities – the umbrella organisation *Sydslesvigsk Forening* (SSF) and *Bund Deutscher Nordschleswiger* (BdN). Each minority has also its own political party: the *Sydslesvigsk Vælgerforening* in Germany is an independent party that has a special status, as it does not need to reach the 5 per cent threshold to be represented in the State and Federal Parliament (Becker-Christensen 2014, 7), whereas the *Schleswigsche Partei* (SP) in Denmark is essentially a sub-organisation of the umbrella organisation BdN that elects both the candidates and the leader of the party.

In 2007 new electoral rules were introduced in Denmark when the Danish Structural Reform reduced the number of municipalities from 270 to 98 mostly

larger entities, in order to facilitate the political representation of the German minority. Such mechanisms included both an increase of mandates and special provisions if the minority cannot reach this threshold: 25 per cent of the votes that a full mandate requires is enough to secure a minority representative that has no voting rights, but has the right to speak in the council and to be represented in municipal committees (Becker-Christensen 2014, 14–15).

Umbrella organisations and political parties represent one aspect of the participation and representation of the two minorities. Another aspect includes bodies set up by the Danish Government, and the German Federal Government and the Schleswig-Holstein State / Land Government⁸ that are particularly interesting in the light of needs of the Slovene community in Italy and discussions of necessary reforms.

The German minority has no representative in the Danish parliament. Instead, in 1983 a special office, the Secretariat, was set up in the parliament to represent the interests of the German minority (Becker-Christensen 2014, 10). The Secretariat monitors the work of parliament and relates the political opinion and views of the minority in parliament and to the public. The head of the Secretariat is a representative of the German minority and he/she is elected by the leadership of the BdN. This constitutes an important link between the self-organisation (self-governance) of the minority (its internal structure that culminates in the leadership of its umbrella organisation BdN) and the mechanisms of representation established by the state (the Secretariat and other bodies)⁹.

In contrast, in Germany it is the Prime Minister of Schleswig-Holstein who appoints the Commissioner for Minorities and Culture in the Land of Schleswig Holstein. The Commissioner is therefore a civil servant whose task is to develop and maintain contacts between the State Government, the State Parliament and minorities. His work is independent of the (political) representatives of the Danish minority in Parliament. The Commissioner is a representative of the majority that deals with minority issues and defends the government's position, which could be in the most extreme cases even hostile to the minority.¹⁰

A study conducted by Schaefer-Rolffs and Schnapp (Schaefer-Rolffs 2014; Schaefer-Rolffs & Schnapp 2014a; 2014b) showed several weaknesses of the German model and pointed to the Danish one as being more effective and better accepted by the minority. The shortcomings of the German Commissioner include, for example, the paternalistic structure of the Commissioner's office that works "for" the minority and its top-down approach that regards the minority as a passive object in need of care. The Commissioner is appointed by the governing coalition, which puts him/her in a difficult position with regard to representing and gaining the trust and support of the minority population (Schaefer-Rolffs 2014), which is, as previously discussed, essential for effective political participation (Palermo & Woelk 2003, 240–241).

In contrast, the Secretariat in Denmark has a very participatory structure that is oriented towards direct minority participation (Schaefer-Rolffs 2014). A strong link in the Head of the Secretariat between the self-organisation of the minority and the structure of representation established by the state, from a formal point of view, might be missing in the case of minorities in Slovenia.

Although none of the cases discussed above represents a practical solution that could be easily transposed to serve the Slovene minority in Italy, they provide interesting starting points for a discussion on possible changes to and reforms of the organisational structure and representation of this community.

3. The System of Representation and Organisation of the Slovene Community in Italy

In terms of its political activities, the Slovene national community as a traditional national minority is integrated into the Italian political system and reflects its characteristics concerning the legislation and implementation of elections at national and local levels, as well as political parties. Traditionally, members of the Slovene national minority identify mainly with leftist or centre-left parties, as these political forces support their claims for minority rights and public use of the Slovene language. To a lesser extent, Slovene voters and elected representatives are present also in contemporary political movements as well as in some centre-right and rightist parties, which were traditionally not favourably disposed to minority protection. However, recently some of these movements and parties have shown either a neutral or positive attitude to the minority. Moreover, the analysis of the electoral results on a national and regional level in Friuli Venezia Giulia¹¹ in 2018 concerning Slovene speaking voters confirmed that they have changed their political stance (Gabrovec 2018; Majovski 2018; Verč 2018). They vote less on an ideological or ethnic basis and affiliation. They seem to put more trust in political forces that, in their opinion, will solve practical issues, such as creating job opportunities or stopping immigration.¹²

Political representatives of the Slovene national community in Italy have so far been regularly elected to provincial and municipal bodies on the territory of the 32 municipalities where the State Protection Law 38/2001 is applied¹³, the Regional Assembly of the Autonomous Region of Friuli Venezia Giulia and to the Italian Parliament. The question of political participation remains unsettled in legislation and current legal provisions as neither the State Protection Law 38/2001 nor the Regional Protection Law 26/2007 in fact regulate the political participation of the Slovene national minority (Vidau 2016a; 2017a). However, the electoral Law of the Autonomous Region of Friuli Venezia Giulia (Regional Law 17/2007) provides for a reduced threshold in the election of a candidate from a Slovene political party (in practice, the Slovene Union). At all local or state-level elections, the Slovene ethnic party and Slovene candidates competing

within national and/or regional Italian parties and movements work closely in various groupings.¹⁴ Within individual parties, these coalitions allow for the election of political representatives who are recognised as members of the Slovene national community and who promote its interests.

For specific socially and politically important events and meetings with the authorities, a joint representation is usually formed.¹⁵ Although the composition of this body may vary according to needs, it normally consists of the already elected national, regional and local political representatives. Typically, it comprises one representative from the ranks of left-centrist and leftist parties in addition to representatives of the two umbrella organisations SKGZ and SSO.

The Slovene national community has no legally guaranteed forms of administrative or political autonomy at the provincial or municipal level. As a result of post-war historical developments, it does have its own organisations, which also operate at the political level. They include two main umbrella or representative organisations, which bring together the majority of Slovene institutions and organisations from the provinces of Trieste/Trst, Gorizia/Gorica and Udine/Videm/Viden. These are acknowledged as reference organisations for the Slovene national community in Italy by the Regional Law No. 26/2007. These two organisations are an expression of the civil society, but they also appear in the political arena as interlocutors with various European, national and local political institutions in Italy and Slovenia.

After the Second World War, demands were voiced for the recognition of the presence of Slovenes, for Slovene schools and for the public use of Slovene. Under the the fascist regime. the Slovene community suffered severe physical, cultural, economic and moral repression and damage. In fact, a new set of Slovene cultural institutions and organisations, as well as a new educational system, had to be re-established in the post-war period. Bajc and Klabjan (2008, 29) argue that the Yugoslav government and its political and ideological orientation supported the post-war reconstruction of Slovene organisations and institutions in Italy, stressing also the active participation of this community in the national liberation struggle and the Liberation Front. In 1954, the first umbrella organisation of Slovenes in Italy, the Slovene Cultural and Economic Association was established. The counterbalancing Council of Slovene Organisations was formed later on, in 1976, as the result of the activities and organisations of Catholic and liberal Slovenes in Italy established in the 1960s (Troha 2004, 146–147). According to Bajc and Klabjan (2008, 29), this ideological division based on communism and anti-communism, conditioned the socio-cultural as well as political organisation, activities and participation of the Slovene minority that was expressed also in the electoral system. The authors claim that this division meant a separation (and duplication) of minority organisations and institutions in the cultural, media, social, political and economic fields, as these organisations operated under the ideological auspices of one or the other parent organisation.¹⁶

4. Elected Political Representatives and the Umbrella Organisations: A Critical View

One of the topics of discussion in the study on the representational and organisational structure of the Slovene community in Italy from 2017 (Brezigar & Vidau 2018) concerned the Slovene political representatives and their coordination in the framework of the joint political representation. Respondents No. 1 and 4 explained that occasionally the umbrella organisations, SKGZ and SSO, acted as representatives of the Slovene community in Italy. On other occasions, this role was assumed by a joint representation consisting of either the umbrella organisations, elected political representatives and a representative of the Parity committee¹⁷, or the umbrella organisations, a Slovene councillor in the Regional Council and a Slovene Member of Parliament in Rome. In short, according to our respondents, formulas vary depending on contingent circumstances.

Respondents No. 9 and 10 assumed a critical stance towards the current form of joint political representation, stating that its members failed to function in a coordinated way, which made them ineffective. In their opinion, this body does not have established rules of operation and appointment or election of its members. Rather, it acts on a case-to-case basis.

With regard to the question of what attitude should be adopted towards the Slovene-speaking elected representatives within those parties traditionally not favourably disposed to minority issues, our respondents were generally in favour of open dialogue and cooperation. Respondent No. 11 expressed the view that, in terms of ideology and party affiliation, the present political body of Slovenes in Italy was quite diverse. The respondent added that the core of this community remained affiliated with traditional centre-left parties and the related two umbrella organisations. However, several members of this community also supported centre-right parties and contemporary political movements. He noted that this situation was a consequence of the fact that the Slovene minority no longer felt pressurised by the country's majority community. This respondent felt that today the members of the minority community were much less united by their national affiliation. His statement was similar to that of Respondent No. 3, who made the observation that the individual national affiliation no longer represents a priority (in elections). Respondent No. 7 stated that the Slovene-speaking elected representatives might also be the voice of centre-right parties and other movements, and that they should enter dialogue with the traditional minority structures. Similarly, Respondent No. 6 maintained that it was necessary to keep in contact and have a dialogue with such political representatives, and that they should be appraised pragmatically – not only on the basis of their ideology, but primarily on the results of their work. Respondent No. 1 stated that one third of the members of the Slovene community in Italy today no longer supported the traditional centre-left parties. The respondent

expressed the view that, on the one hand, this could pose a danger, as it diminished the political power of the Slovenes in Italy, but on the other, it could present an opportunity as it facilitated the development of a positive attitude towards minority issues also within centre-right parties.

We explicitly asked our interlocutors whether they felt that the SKGZ and the SSO were representative in relation to both the authorities and the Slovene national community in Italy. Respondent No. 15 stressed that the umbrella organisations were the interlocutors to the FVG Region – a scenario, which guaranteed that the Slovene community existed as a recognised entity. Respondent No. 5 found the cooperation of the umbrella organisations with the political authorities in Rome and Ljubljana positive. Respondent No. 13 also gave a positive assessment of the representativeness of the umbrella organisations due to the fact that these organisations were present on the ground and their bodies held regular meetings.

Respondent No. 10 confirmed that members of the Slovene national community in Italy were affiliated with the SKGZ and the SSO – in the extent to which members of modern society were still affiliated with any external structures. According to Respondent No. 16, the SKGZ and the SSO reflect the entire active Slovene community in Italy, considering also that many Slovenes in the country are no longer members of any organisations (while in the past most opted for one of the options). Respondent No. 10 found the problem of representativeness of the umbrella organisations a consequence of growing individualism and socio-political inactivity of members of society. Likewise, Respondents No. 3 and 11 expressed the opinion that the issue of representation was a general social problem occurring not only in the umbrella organisations, but on a wider scale concerning and within individual parties, trade unions, etc. They added that the situation in the field of political participation mirrored the general social crisis occurring within politics and within traditional forms of political representation, organisation and political parties, particularly in Italy. Respondent No. 7 observed that many Slovene-speaking individuals were not involved in the operation of Slovene organisations and institutions. He added that he had realised through personal experience that the community could attract inactive individuals only by offering high quality cultural, sports and other activities and services.

Respondent No. 9 expressed the view that the representativeness of both umbrella organisations was weak, and that a more organised political representative body was needed that would voice the clearly formulated and substantiated demands of the minority and conduct skilful negotiations with the authorities. Currently, the authorities have several interlocutors: in addition to the two umbrella organisations, there are also political parties; and the respondent felt that it would be better if only one subject was to communicate with the authorities.

Respondents No. 1, 3, and 5 explained that the SKGZ and the SSO umbrella organisations did in fact represent members of civil society, but that these were only their own members, while political representatives were backed by the voters legitimising their operation. They therefore felt it was necessary for the representative body of the Slovene national community to be composed of both the umbrella organisations and elected political representatives.

5. Proposals for New Representative and Decision-making Bodies

Our respondents proposed various new forms of representative bodies, which within the system of organisations and institutions of the Slovenes in Italy, in their opinion, would lead to more efficient processes of decision-making, governance and management. They expressed the belief that new forms of representation could help overcome some of the principal problems they perceived. Among the latter, they mentioned the lack of a programme and a short- and long-term vision for the future of this community, which prevented the achievement of any tangible results and resulted in issues being resolved only on a case-to-case basis, as pointed out by Respondent no. 12. Respondent No. 1 found that when designing such an action programme, the issue of the Slovene language¹⁸ and the associated identity question¹⁹ of who was at present considered a member of the Slovene national community in Italy should take precedence. Similarly, Respondent No. 16 highlighted the issue of current conceptions of identity of the Slovenes in Italy, which were not delineated clearly; increasingly, they contained either the Slovene or the Italian component. Thus, the question of how to identify the members of the Slovene national community in Italy remains an open one.

In the following paragraphs, respondents' views will be summarised on how, drawing on their extensive knowledge acquired through years of experience, they envisaged a new representative body of the Slovenes in Italy. Such a body could, on the one hand, formulate a programme and vision for the functioning of Slovene organisations and institutions in Italy, while on the other hand, its leadership would be elected democratically by the members of this community. Outwardly, such a representative body would have, with its clearly defined mandate, goals and demands, greater negotiating power in its relations with the authorities at the national, regional, and other levels in Italy and Slovenia.

The analysis of the interviews yielded two proposals for a representative body, which would be, as mentioned, democratically elected and would hold the power to decide on behalf of the Slovene national community in Italy: it would take the form of a parliament or assembly, or of a unified umbrella organisation.

Respondent No. 6 perceived the need for a representative body that would function as a sort of parliament with elected members, which would have

the power to make decisions on behalf of the Slovene national community. Elections would allow for higher and broader participation of the members of the Slovene minority, who would thus also take on the responsibility of electing their governing body.

Based on the responses collected in the course of the interviews, some characteristics of a potential parliament as the representative and governing body of the Slovene national community in Italy can be defined.

Respondent No. 6 suggested that the parliament, organised in specific departments, should draft a programme of activities for Slovene organisations and institutions. Explicitly mentioned were the primary departments of education, agriculture, sport, culture, welfare, legal services, relations with public administration and the media.²⁰ Other important areas could include the province of Udine, the use and promotion of the Slovene language, connecting and networking with Slovenia as the kin country, and the promotion of the minority among the majority population, i.e. its recognition within Italy (Respondents No. 1 and 3). Several respondents emphasised the importance of the economy, the related employment possibilities, and the brain drain among young Slovenes in Italy (Respondents No. 3 and 11).

Respondent No. 6 expressed a need to compile an electoral register of all the members of the Slovene community in Italy. According to this respondent, community membership could be defined on the basis of such criteria as: having attended the Slovene schools in Italy, being members of the Slovene associations and societies, or one's children attending or having attended the Slovene schools in Italy. Other respondents (No. 3 and 5) were sceptical of such an electoral system, as, in their opinion, it would involve a census/count of the members of the Slovene national community, which they opposed. Some people might not wish to register in such a census for fear of exposure. In order to avoid such counts, Respondents No. 5, 7, and 12 suggested that the electoral roll should consist of the existing members of the Slovene societies and organisations in Italy, which would be simpler than compiling an electoral roll anew. In their opinion, this is a well-defined voting pool that would allow for a wide range of people to participate in the processes of electing their representatives.

Respondents No. 1 and 6 noted that such a parliament could act on the basis of an amendment to Regional Law No. 26/2007 on the protection of the Slovene linguistic community in Italy or another relevant regional law. Respondent No. 7 perceived the idea of starting from a regional legislative basis too ambitious. He proposed that, in the first phase, the election of this body would take place internally among members of Slovene organisations and societies, while in the second phase a body would be formed in accordance with a new regional legal basis.

Respondent No. 16 proposed a similar representative body, namely a regional council of the Slovenes in Italy. It would consist of elected political repre-

sentatives of the Slovenes in Italy and representatives of their umbrella and primary organisations. Similar to the parliament structure mentioned above, the regional legislation would grant this body the jurisdiction and legitimacy for making decisions on financial matters, as well as on strategic and developmental aspects, which would then be binding for the Slovene organisations and institutions in Italy.

Another proposal arising from the interviews was one of a representative and executive body developed on the basis of a transformation of the two umbrella organisations' operation.²¹ Respondents No. 3, 5, 9, and 11 proposed a merger of the SKGZ and the SSO into a single organisation with a unified membership and a single steering committee, an organisation which would be an expression of various ideological views and would have a "national defence" character. Respondent No. 5 expressed the view that these two organisations are in effect duplicates as they are dealing with the same problems, also in terms of financing. Respondent No. 3 stated that this was unlikely to happen, although some members were already members of both organisations and the differences between them were becoming less and less pronounced. If both were to be preserved, they should at least have a joint body for addressing current issues and decision making, an idea supported also by Respondents No. 3 and 13.

Respondent No. 1 was also in favour of the SKGZ and the SSO merging into a single organisation whose executive offices would merge and whose members would unite by individual sectors of activity. This respondent added that the leadership of such a unified umbrella organisation should be elected by a larger number of voters instead of just its members as had been the case to date. Such elections would give this body the legitimacy to represent the entire Slovene community in Italy. This would also encourage the democratic participation of a wider circle of the Slovenes. He added that the body itself and the election system should be governed by regional legislation.

The political participation and representation of a minority and its autonomy in this field are the key segments of (minority) autonomy in diverse societies. According to Žagar's model (2017) the Slovene minority in Italy has both formal and informal ways of participation. The formal one is weak, as the legally determined forms of participation are basically declarative except for the above mentioned Regional Electoral Law 17/2007 which provides for a reduced threshold in the election of a candidate from the Slovene political party. However, the informal participation is well developed with the inclusion in mainstream political parties, a minority political party and a structure of Slovene organisations and associations in different fields of activity which is also formally recognised by the regional authority. However, many of the above-mentioned respondents agree that the umbrella organisations SKGZ and SSO, as well as the informal system of participation, lacks of a common vision which should in their opinion be defined and pursued by a new form of body or assembly with clearly defined policy formulation and decision-making processes.

Thus, having diverse political representative and consultative bodies including a minority parliament/assembly as described above would give to the Slovene community in Italy a political arena which could express in a democratic way the internal pluralism and diversity of ideological/political and other opinions within the Slovene minority in line with the advanced models of social and political participation of (national) minorities and persons belonging to them as defined by Žagar (2017, 15). The interviewed representatives clearly expressed their need to have a higher level of inclusion and internal participation in decision-making processes concerning the government and managing of the most relevant minority issues, such as language policies, financing, education, the economy etc, compared to the ones they already have and which are based on the status of a membership to an association.

The respondents agreed that a more organised minority autonomy with a new political representative body would voice the clearly formulated and substantiated demands of the minority and conduct skilful negotiations with the authorities at local, regional and national level as well as in cooperation with the ethnic kin state as one subject would communicate with the authorities instead of several interlocutors.

In such a context where formal participation is weak and the scenario of having a new model of representative and decision-making body/assembly is still on a level of internal discussion, the two umbrella minority organisations SKGZ and SSO represent the core of the Slovene minority autonomy. Together with the Slovene elected political representatives, they communicate and negotiate with the authorities at different levels of local and national decision-making centres in Italy and Slovenia and de facto lead the Slovene community.

According to the respondents, the autonomy of the Slovene minority with a self-rule and management system could be either informal, with a form of private association based on individual membership, or formal with an assembly legally based in a regional law. A two-step process could represent a possible solution since a body/assembly elected by a pool of the existing individual memberships in the various Slovene organisations and associations is more immediate as it depends on the decision of the existing political actors of the Slovene community to start this process, namely the two umbrella organisations SKGZ and SSO and the Slovene elected political representatives. It could represent a pilot version of the model that would be then upgraded in the frame of a regional law in a form of a more effective political instrument with a legally defined political role.

6. Conclusions

This analysis of the current situation and *status quo* of representation of the Slovene community in Italy can be summarised in a few concluding thoughts.

The community is well aware of the fact that the current system of representation is no longer adequate and should be improved. As the analysis suggests, this could be done through the reform of current arrangements, the introduction of additional democratic procedures in the election and appointment of its representatives, as well as the establishment of new representative frameworks and institutions. The study suggests a strong need for a representative entity (a renewed concept of umbrella organisations and/or minority assembly/parliament) that would be legitimised to make decisions on behalf of the Slovene community in Italy. What is considered particularly important in this context is the introduction of adequate institutional arrangements in a form of a body that would be effective in making the required decisions and implementing the necessary measures. However, several ideas on representative bodies have emerged which cannot be consolidated into a single vision, with most respondents agreeing that a group of experts could prepare a proposal for representative arrangements, particularly a representative body of the Slovenes in Italy in compliance with the existing state and regional legislation.

The (albeit superficial) examination of a number of experiences among different minorities in the first part of this article, suggests that the representation of the Slovene community can be guaranteed in several ways, including (but not solely) careful design and preparation of constituencies and districts, and lower electoral thresholds. There are other positive discrimination measures that allow, for example, the election of the Ladin representatives in the provincial parliament and a representative of the KJC in the Regional Parliament in the South Tyrol model. Having already been implemented in Italy, these solutions would probably be easier to implement in terms of requirements of the legal framework in place.

However, from a content point of view, the best practice that could be considered is the Copenhagen Secretariat, where a civil society representative represents the minority in parliament. The Head of the Secretariat is appointed by the body representing members of the German minority in Denmark through democratic elections. The Head of the Secretariat certainly does not have the same powers as the Members of the National Assembly in the Slovenian Parliament. However, according to a survey carried out by members of the German minority in Denmark, this way of representation is good and effective, even when the abilities of a minority to elect its political representative is modest.

Finally, different participatory mechanisms at the national, regional or local level only make sense in an environment where there is general political will of the political establishment to accept the philosophy of participation as the fundamental concept of building society (Marko et al. 1997). Although such a climate was definitely lacking in the aftermath of World War 2, the border between Yugoslavia and Italy being not only a state border, but also a political and ideological border in a global sense, in the past two decades, especially since

Slovenia's accession to the EU and the Schengen Area, the barriers have gradually been falling, creating perhaps a social climate that is open to solutions of effective political participation of the Slovene community in a way absent in the past. However, recent political turmoil in Italy threatens this window of opportunity and time is of the essence if an improvement of the political representation of the Slovene community in Italy is being considered.

The autonomy model of the Slovene community in Italy that developed in the decades after World War 2 and based on a core of informal participation instruments with inclusion in mainstream political parties, a minority political party and a structure of Slovene organisations and associations in different fields of activity has weakened and become less effective particularly in the self-management of the minority community. The members of the Slovene minority are voicing new demands of participation also because of the post-ideological socio-political framework that has changed traditional electoral patterns. Thus, how to re-organise (taking into account the above suggested solutions) this model of autonomy should be considered and used as the basis for the development of tools to strengthen the autonomy of the Slovene minority in Italy.

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Notes

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- ¹ For a detailed model of such social and political participation see Žagar (2017).
- ² The Slovene national community in Italy is a border-area national minority in the traditional sense of the term, as it acquired the minority status in the process of nation-state formation in the Upper Adriatic from the second half of the 19th century onwards. Its traditional settlement area in the Friuli Venezia Giulia (FVG) region covers a total of 39 municipalities along the border with Slovenia. From a formal point of view, according to the list of municipalities drawn up on the basis of the State Protection Law 38/2001, the presence of this community is documented in a narrower territory of 32 municipalities in the provinces of Gorizia/Gorica, Trieste/Trst and Udine/Videm/Viden in the areas of Benecia/Benečija, Resia/Rezija and Val Canale/Kanalska dolina. There are various legal provisions regulating this community's minority rights deriving from the post-war international agreements and recent Italian laws. Among these, the most relevant is Law 38/2001 regarding the protection of the Slovene linguistic minority which regulates the different areas of interest related to the public use of the Slovene language and the Slovene medium and bilingual Slovene-Italian educational system in Italy. Slovenes in the provinces of Trieste/Trst, Gorizia/Gorica and Udine/Videm/Viden have established a thriving network of activities, institutions and associations which focus mainly on cultural and sports activities in the framework of professional institutions or in grassroots associations, parishes and other centres. A system of Slovene-language state schools has been set up in the provinces of Trieste/Trst and Gorizia/Gorica and a bilingual school centre in S. Pietro al Natisone/Špeter in the province of Udine/Videm/Viden. Media communication in Slovene takes place at the level of public radio and television within the regional headquarters of Italy's national public broadcasting company RAI and through various forms of print and online media.
- ³ On the basis of Article 10 of Regional Law No. 26/2007 on the protection of the Slovene national community, the Autonomous Region of FVG organises a Regional Conference on the Protection of the Slovene Linguistic Minority at least once every five years. Convened by the President of the Regional Council, the conference aims to provide a platform for the representatives of various minority organizations and provincial representatives to exchange views on the implementation of the measures stipulated by the protective Regional Law No. 26/2007. The conference was first held in October 2012. See Čok and Janežič (2014) for the topics covered at the first Regional Conference on the Protection of the Slovene Linguistic Minority.
- ⁴ To preserve confidentiality, respondents' names have been replaced with a number (e.g., Respondent No. #).
- ⁵ The aim of the study was to gather data on the minority perspective on the issue at hand for the purposes of the Second Regional Conference on the Protection of the Slovene Linguistic Minority. Therefore, interviews were conducted mainly with representatives of the minority. However, additional external respondents (such as representatives from institutions in Italy and Slovenia dealing with minority issues) would represent an added value to the study and will be considered as an additional source for future research.
- ⁶ Only a few countries have established reserved seats or communal rolls for minorities, whereas others use a lower electoral threshold for national minorities (Žagar 2017). In Slovenia, the National Assembly is composed of 90 MPs and two MPs are representatives of the so-called historical national minorities - Hungarians and Italians, through a system of double voting rights for minority members. A similar system applies to the Roma community at the local level. In Croatia, the political representation of national minorities is guaranteed by law in the parliament and in the bodies of local and territorial self-government. The Act on the Election of Representatives to the Croatian Sabor establishes that the representatives of 22 national minorities elect 8 representatives in a separate constituency: the members of national minorities that represent more than 1.5 per cent of the total population of Croatia are guaranteed at least one and not more than three seats, whereas the minorities that represent less than 1.5 per cent elect at least four representatives of all national minorities (cumulatively) (Ombudsman of the Republic

of Croatia 2005, Alionescu 2004, Jakešević et al. 2015). In Romania, minorities have been generally well represented, through both proportional representation and reserved seats, which proved to be essential in allowing minorities to secure their representation in parliament. The demographically large Hungarian minority has been consistently successful in gaining representation through proportional representation, whereas smaller minority groups have benefited from provisions on reserved seats (Protsyk 2010; Braun 2016). In some countries some members of parliament (MPs) belonging to a minority group manage to get elected as representatives of nationwide political parties (Alionescu 2004). Moreover, in countries where ethnic parties are forbidden (e.g. Turkey), this is the only form of parliamentary representation possible for minorities (Alionescu 2004).

- ⁷ The Presidency of the Province of South Tyrol has a German President for the first half of the mandate and an Italian one for the second half. Both of them can be replaced by a Ladin President. The Presidency consists of the President and two Vice-Presidents each of which belongs to another linguistic community. The composition of the provincial government must reflect the language or the ethnic composition of the provincial parliament, and only the Ladin community may be proportionally over-represented in the provincial government.
- ⁸ For a comprehensive explanation of the Danish-German model see Becker-Christensen (2014).
- ⁹ The Head of the Secretariat is also always a member of the Contact Commission that negotiates on matters concerning the German minority. It consists of the Minister of Education, the Minister of the Economy and the Minister of the Interior, a representative of each party in the Parliament and three members of minority organizations.
- ¹⁰ The German Federal Government in Berlin also appoints a Commissioner dealing with minorities – the Commissioner for Emigration and Minority Issues.
- ¹¹ Italy has a government led by the Five Stars political movement and the Lega party. The Autonomous Region of Friuli Venezia Giulia is led by a governor from the Lega party.
- ¹² There is no data on which to differentiate the votes in the provinces of Trieste/Trst, Gorizia/Gorica and Udine/Videm according to the ethnicity of voters (Janežič 2004). The mentioned trends can be extrapolated considering the electoral results in the 32 municipalities where the Slovene speaking community lives. The electoral results show that in some traditionally left or centre-left areas votes switched to contemporary political movements and right or centre-right parties, and also that there was lower participation in elections. Moreover, for the first time since 1964 the Slovene left-wing political candidate was not elected to the regional parliament in Friuli Venezia Giulia (Tence 2018). The candidate of the ethnic party Slovene Union (Slovenska skupnost) was elected, but also this party lost votes compared with regional elections in 2008 and 2013 (Gabrovec 2018; Verč 2018).
- ¹³ For more details concerning the number and allocation of elected representatives to municipalities see Vidau (2016b; 2017b). However, recent legal reforms of the Italian public administration at national and regional levels reduced the level of the participation of Slovene representatives in decision-making processes as the Provinces of Trieste/Trst and Gorizia/Gorica which had their own provincial governments with elected Slovene representatives, were abolished (Vidau 2017c).
- ¹⁴ Left-wing political representatives support political action within the framework of Italian left-wing and centre-left parties, in the form of separate sections and through Slovene candidates. On the other hand, the Slovene Union advocates a model of political participation through a single party and political autonomy on the basis of ethnicity (Valencič 2000, 188).
- ¹⁵ This practice was introduced in the 1970s, when the adoption of the law on the protection of the Slovene national minority in Italy became a transversal policy objective among Slovene politicians, which also triggered the need for a unified political approach to the Italian authorities (Stranj 1992).

- ¹⁶ For more details see also Vidau (2016b; 2017b).
- ¹⁷ On the basis of the Protection Law No. 38/2001, the Institutional Parity Committee for the Problems of the Slovene Minority has been established, which is responsible for the implementation of the mentioned law.
- ¹⁸ For more details about the Slovene language in Italy see Brezigar (2007), Čok and Jagodic (2013), Grgič (2016a; 2016b), Kaučič-Baša (1997), Mezgec (2012; 2016), Vidau (2014; 2015),
- ¹⁹ For more details about identity among Slovenes in Italy see Brezigar (2015), Pertot (2011; 2016; 2017), Pertot and Kosic (2014), Vidau (2018) and Zuljan Kumar (2016).
- ²⁰ For a detailed analysis concerning the various sectors of activity of the Slovene community in Italy in the last 25 years see Bogatec (2004; 2015) and Bogatec and Vidau (2016; 2017).
- ²¹ The Slovene national community in Italy gives the appearance of an anachronistic community that has failed to evolve structurally and ideologically after the collapse of the Berlin Wall and Yugoslavia (Bajc 2008; Klabjan 2008). Thus, the actual effectiveness of the system of the ideological division of Slovene organisations and institutions under the aegis of the two umbrella organisations has been at the forefront of public debate in the Slovene national community in Italy particularly since the beginning of the 21st century. It seems that the minority has not completed its process of "democratisation" in terms of bridging ideological duality or searching for organisational solutions that would respond to the need to operate in the contemporary society (Vidali 2008).