RENE BOGOVIĆ

BECOMING ITALIAN IN RIJEKA: MINORITY BELONGING BEYOND FORMAL DEFINITIONS

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Belgrade, 2026

Book Series SQUARE

Edited by:
Maja Pupovac

Title:
Becoming Italian in Rijeka: Minority Belonging Beyond Formal Definitions

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Publishers:
Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade
Regional Center for Advanced Studies of Humanities – RECAS
Regional Network of the Centers for Advanced Studies of Southeast Europe

Proofreader:
Lucy Stevens

Cover design:
Nikola Stevanović

Typesetting:
Sonja Nikolić, Tijana Baltić

Place and year of publication:
Belgrade, 2026

ISBN:
978-86-6190-054-9

Replicate:
Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade

Production run:
50 copies













This publication was created within the Regional Fellowship Program, implemented by the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade, in partnership with the Regional Center for Advanced Studies of Humanities – RECAS and the Regional Network of the Centers for Advanced Studies of Southeast Europe, with the support of the Open Society Foundation Western Balkans, Erste Foundation, and Rockefeller Brothers Fund.
The views expressed in the text represent the views of the authors.

Becoming Italian in Rijeka: Minority Belonging Beyond Formal Definitions

This report examines the adequacy of the current official categorization criteria for membership in the *Unione Italiana* – UI (Italian Union), the political entity representing the Italian minority in both Slovenia and Croatia. Specifically, it focuses on the city of Rijeka – Fiume in Italian – the seat of the UI in Croatia. Current UI membership criteria, as codified by its Rijeka local, the *Comunità degli Italiani di Fiume* (Italian Community of Rijeka), grant full membership to those who self-declare Italian nationality, or are of Italian mother tongue and culture (Comunità degli Italiani di Fiume 2022; Unione Italiana 2019). A supporter membership exists for those beyond this definition but bars voting within Croatian Italian minority institutions or holding eligibility for office. The report responds to recent trends across the region which, in tandem with a steady decrease of members of the formal Italian minority in Croatia (Croatian Bureau of Statistics 2022), are changing the local demographic picture of "Italianness." Specifically, there is a

steady and significant increase in majority-origin (i.e., Croatian) youth learning Italian and actively participating in local minority institutions who do not meet the mother-tongue threshold for full membership, despite high proficiency and deep cultural investment. This report asks whether reorganizing current minority membership criteria as a gradient of belonging, rather than a binary anchored in native-speaker status, would more accurately reflect the contemporary makeup of those involved in Italian minority institutions. As a next step, the report suggests broadening current formal definitions of minority status to more effectively capture the lived experience of "Italianness" in this borderland region, where membership in either the Italian or Croatian ethnonational bracket has historically been fluid and changeable.

The Context: Rijeka in the Northern Adriatic Borderland

The borderland of the Northern Adriatic, straddling the northeastern edge of contemporary Italy, littoral Slovenia, and northwestern Croatia (i.e., Istria and the Rijeka region), has been multilingual for centuries, a meeting place of Romance-, Slavic-, and Germanic-speaking worlds. Before the emergence of modern nation states and their administrative and educational institutions in the 19th century (Judson 2016; Ranger and Hobsbawm 1993), many of the inhabitants of this region were multilingual and not invested in a strong ethnic or national identity. Indeed, the way they defined themselves – as a Croat, Italian, or Slovene – was often fluid, determined by class, occupation, and access to education (D'Alessio 2008). Historical records exist of siblings from the same family identifying as Italian while others identify as Croats (Ballinger 2003; Orlić 2023), switching languages situationally and marrying across identitarian lines. Nevertheless, from the mid-19th century onwards, formalized school instruction and post-imperial nationalist projects supported the socialization of children into a single linguistic and national identity (Judson 2006; Zahra 2008).

The aftermath of WWII included the establishment of a border between Italy and Yugoslavia in 1947, dividing the borderland region. This prompted the relocation of between 250,000

and 350,000 people who identified as Italians from what became part of Yugoslavia to Italy, continuing a process of demographic displacement that had already caused thousands of Slovenes to leave the Italian side during the previous decades of fascist Italianization (Orlić 2023; Pupo 2022). Nevertheless, a sizeable minority of speakers who identified as Slovene and Italian remained on their respective sides of the border. Successive postwar bilateral agreements formalized by the Treaty of Osimo in 1975 (between Italy and Yugoslavia) ensured the establishment of minority cultural and educational institutions to serve those who remained. Today, approximately 60,000 ethnic Slovenes remain in Italy (Jagodic 2024; Vidau and Bogatec 2020), while between 16,000 and 20,000 ethnic Italians live in Slovenia and Croatia, concentrated in western coastal Istria and the city of Rijeka (Croatian Bureau of Statistics 2022; Orlić 2023).

The breakup of Yugoslavia in 1991 and the subsequent piecemeal enlargement of the EU to include both Slovenia and Croatia by 2013 made the post-WWII regional borders porous again, with a renewed exchange of people and ideas across the historical borderland. This extended to existing minority institutions; indeed, over the last few decades, many Italians have sent their children to Slovene minority schools in Italy, while Slovenes and Croats have become the majority in Italian minority schools (Bogatec 2020; D'Alessio 2017; De Battisti 2010). While the reasons for these enrollment trends are the subject of ongoing research, interim findings relate them to the de-ideologization of local borders and to the renewed economic and institutional connectivity across borders following the EU integration of Slovenia and Croatia (Bogatec 2020; Bufon 2013). This reframed the value of Slovene linguistic capital among Italians living in the border regions of Gorizia and Trieste, as well as boosted existing trends in Slovenia and Croatia toward learning Italian to access Western labor markets (De Battisti 2010). Focusing on the Croatian side, particularly the city of Rijeka, many children with no Italian ancestry and no Italian speakers in the family are educated in Italian. As they grow up, as I have shown below, some eventually work in local Italian-minority institutions and even raise their own children in Italian.

Methodological Scope and Case Selection

This report presents interview data from a pilot project conducted in May and June 2026 on how new Italian minority speakers (O'Rourke, Pujolar, and Ramallo 2015) affect ethnolinguistic boundaries in Rijeka. I include three cases of bilingual Croatian-Italian speakers, selected to suggest that in Rijeka, the lived experiences of Italianness exist on a gradient that is poorly approximated by current formal definitions of Italian minority membership. As a Croatian-Italian bilingual Croat raised by a Fiuman stepparent between Italy and Rijeka, I leveraged my embeddedness in Rijeka's Italian minority institutions to select respondents approximating a range of points on the local gradient of Italianness. My selection was informed by similar typologies of minority speakers elsewhere in Europe, such as Galicia and Brittany (Costa 2015; O'Rourke and Ramallo 2013). The new speakers interviewed include Lina, who is closest to the formal definitions of the Italian minority given her early institutional and linguistic socialization. Further down the gradient, I introduce Martina, whose relationship to Italianness is primarily mediated by attachment to Rijeka's regional multilingual identity. Finally, I introduce Lucija from Split, whom I selected to earmark the portion of the Italianness gradient that makes no minority identity claim. Despite high linguistic and cultural competence in Italian, Lucija perceives Italian as foreign, possibly because she stands outside the borderland context of Rijeka and its unique relationship to Italian identity. Given the purposive nature and small sample of respondents backing this report, the findings are best understood as agenda-setting for further research and policy assessment. Indeed, the selected interviewees might not accurately reflect the frequency or societal import of the gradient positions I have assigned them.

The Gradient of Italianness

I first introduce Lina, who, despite having primarily Croatian ancestry and Croatian as a mother tongue and family language, completed her elementary and university education in Italian. She tells me about her early experiences at local Italian minority

schools, including her position in relation to autochthonous members of Rijeka's Italian community, referred to as Fiumani (singular: Fiumano), who speak a local Venetian dialect called Fiuman.

> *Lina: In the class, there were Fiumani and people with no connection to Italian at all, but they really encouraged us, pushed us, and reprimanded us when they heard Croatian, both during breaks and during lessons... Two boys dropped out because not everyone manages to pick up the language. We also had two or three who spoke Fiuman... The teachers would correct them in class to use literary language because instruction was in the standard.*

Lina's early socialization and education at Italian minority institutions was a success, especially as not everyone manages to "pick up the language." Ironically, not speaking the local Fiuman dialect allowed her to acquire standard Italian at a higher proficiency than students from the local autochthonous Italian minority, whom the institution is designed to serve. Lina's early immersion into minority institutions not only made her bilingual but established a strong emotional connection to Italian. Indeed, Lina claims that her heart is split into two: between Croatian and Italian identities.

Lina works at a local Italian minority school, actively consumes Italian cultural products, participates in local minority cultural institutions, has had a long-term relationship with an Italian, has lived in Italy, and engages in frequent cross-border visits. And yet, while her proximity to Italianness brings her very close to acceptance into formal and symbolic frames of local Italianness, her Croatian ancestry and the fact that she does not speak Fiuman bars her from full membership; indeed, the institution not only fails to recognize Lina symbolically, but it also lacks any formal mechanism to do so. This is illustrated by her accounts of the hierarchy of Italianness that shapes employment decisions at the Italian minority school where she currently works.

> *Lina: Currently, I work in an Italian primary school, and in terms of hiring, if you're a Fiumano, and if you have*

an Italian first name and surname, you're immediately benvenuto *[welcome], more so than someone who doesn't, regardless of the fact that I have completed [an Italian] primary school. But if I had both primary and secondary school in Italian, I'd immediately be at an advantage over someone with nothing... I can see that it would be even better if I had [attended Italian] secondary school, and an even greater advantage if I had a Fiuman name or surname, or ancestry.*

Lina's experience helps outline the local gradient of Italianness. At one extreme, we have those with Fiuman first and last names, who acquired Fiuman intergenerationally as a mother tongue. These are the members who are legislatively recognized by the UI as a formal part of the Italian minority, which also recognizes recent immigrants to Croatia from Italy as part of the community, even though they are not local. Second in line, and just outside of the formal definition of Italianness, we have people like Lina, who have been socialized into the Italian language and culture from a young age through their participation in minority educational and cultural institutions. Third in line are those who, despite working at Italian minority institutions, have acquired Italian as adults, likely missing the early embodied attachment to Italian that speakers like Lina display. Nevertheless, even though they live just outside the boundaries of formal Italianness, both Lina and her sister, who shares a similar Italian socialization trajectory, plan to speak Italian to their children, recreating the intergenerational nature of cultural and linguistic transmission usually associated with formally recognized minorities. The intergenerational and emotional nature of Lina's attachment to Italianness, not dissimilar from that of many Fiumani, further brings into question her formal exclusion.

I contrast Lina's case to that of Martina, another young woman from Rijeka who, despite a strong attachment to local forms of Italianness, inhabits a different point on the Italianness gradient. Martina acquired Italian in adulthood, as part of her broader love of different cultures and their languages. She recently graduated from an international master's program abroad, and speaks Cro-

atian, English, Russian, German, and Mandarin among other languages. While she has lived transnationally since her late teens, Martina is strongly emotionally connected to Rijeka, her hometown. She is also firmly historically embedded in the region, as her home language is Chakavian, a local Slavic dialect with extensive Romanic influences, primarily due to centuries of coexistence with Fiuman. Martina tells me about how Italian, which she recognized in her own Chakavian mother tongue, helped her rediscover her connection to Rijeka.

> *Martina: Until I was about 18, I didn't feel that I belonged here, and then when I left, [learning] Italian helped me understand that I do belong here and that something ties me to this place. I think I would have made a grave mistake had I chosen any other language but Italian, because I wouldn't have reconnected in the same way and wouldn't have reintegrated into society here.*

Given the opportunity to learn Italian, Martina embraced the multilingual and multicultural heritage of her own city and ancestry. Her entry into local minority institutions was facilitated by a Fiuman colleague, who recognized her as part of the long-standing local tapestry of Rijeka's inhabitants. Despite speaking Italian at only a B2 level, Martina is actively and emotionally involved in the Italian minority world. She even joined the Italian Community of Rijeka, where, as a Chakavian speaker, she is recognized by Fiumani as one of the constituent peoples of the city's historical multilingual society. Yet, unlike Lina, Martina makes only an indirect minority identity claim, acting primarily as a cultural promoter of her regional identity, in which Italian plays a constitutive role.

Nevertheless, Martina's vision of expanding the local Italian community's membership by virtue of Rijeka's bilingual nature reaches its limits when it comes to newcomers, especially those from outside Europe with little understanding of the local context.

> *Martina: It's very hard for people who come from Southeast Asia to adapt to European languages. How close can Filipinos, Nepalese, and Indians become to Fiuman culture? I think it's almost impossible; you can*

introduce them to the culture, but with the language, it's extremely difficult. They already have to learn Croatian, and on top of that, the dialect and everything...

Martina's entry into Italianness, mediated by learning the language and consuming associated cultural products, is ultimately connected to the shared local experience of Rijeka as a historical borderland. Indeed, Martina believes outsiders to the local context would struggle to integrate into the local Italian minority culture. On the gradient of Italianness, Martina sits farther away but next to Lina: while not socialized into Italianness from an early age, she claims a tangential sense of belonging by highlighting her group's historical cohabitation with Fiumani.

In contrast to the embeddedness in the borderland experience of both Lina and Martina, my last respondent, Lucija, despite working as a translator from Italian and being passionate and well-versed in Italian cultural production, makes no identity claims associated with the language. Being from Split, far from the current and historical Italian border, Lucija is further removed from the borderland dynamics which mediate Lina and Martina's relationship to Italian. Nevertheless, Italian is a big part of Lucija's world, something she is proud to highlight when comparing herself to others who have learned it.

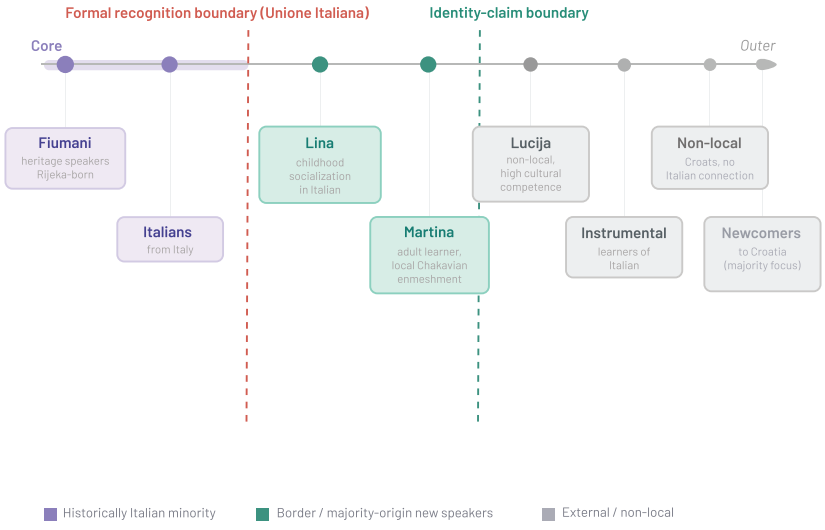
Lucija: Of course, I cannot consider myself Italian, but given how closely I follow their everyday events – watch television and everything – I am sometimes more familiar with their day-to-day happenings, crime news, politics, than with our own. At university, there was a small number [of students] who had a similar approach to mine when it comes to [learning about Italian] culture; the majority were there for the language [class], just to pass the exams and get the diploma.

Lucija learned Italian because her parents enrolled her in extracurricular Italian classes when she was a child. She continued learning the language throughout her formal schooling and, after several years of training in Italy, returned to Split to work as an Italian-to-Croatian translator. Despite displaying the highest

formal proficiency in Italian among my participants, she consistently identifies as Croatian and regards Italian as a beautiful language and culture, but ultimately as a foreign one. Despite making no identity claims, Lucija can also be placed on the gradient of Italianness, as she makes it a point to differentiate herself from other adult learners who do not display the same level of enthusiasm about Italian culture as her, placing her ahead of adult fluent speakers who learned the language for purely pragmatic purposes.

While my small data set of three interviews precludes broader generalizations, my interviewees' narratives suggest that a gradient of belonging would capture the lived reality of Italianness in Croatia more accurately than the current formal membership framework allows. In the graph below, I visually summarize this tentative gradient, along which I have placed my respondents and the groups they mention. Only the first two points, Fiumani and immigrants from Italy, are officially recognized as part of the Italian minority. Recognition of the rest of the gradient remains informal, even though its middle portion, which includes Lina and Martina from Rijeka's borderland, makes active identity claims.

The gradient of Italianness in Rijeka



Policy Recommendations

If we take the current composition of students attending Italian minority schools in Croatia as a predictor (De Battisti 2010), majority-origin new speakers are likely to numerically overtake the next generation of formally recognized Italian minority members within existing minority institutions. To ensure the sustainability of these institutions and maintain the crucial role of Italian in the region, future policy must account for this demographic trend. I propose three associated policy reform directions, followed by a review of their applicability to the local context and the potential tensions they may raise. These recommendations aim to translate the gradient tiers outlined above, especially the middle portion associated with identity claims, into policy realities.

1. Broaden membership criteria beyond Italian self-identification, mother tongue, and culture to recognize a new speaker category as an alternative entry path into Italian minority membership under UI policy. Suggested criteria which emerged from my respondents include linguistic ability, length and age of first socialization into Italian, education at Italian minority institutions, regional positioning within Croatia, cross-border activities, emotional investment in the Italian language and culture, and frequency of participation in Italian minority institutions.
2. Review existing supporter membership tiers to grant cultural participation rights, an advisory role, and decision-making power commensurate with personal involvement within Italian minority institutions.
3. Leverage existing minority institutional capacity to promote, within majority educational and cultural institutions, the role and history of local forms of Italianness in the region, with the aim of providing more spaces for people to connect with the Italian language and culture.

Given the contested and at times violent nature of the processes which led to the current rigidification of local lines delimiting Italians from majority Croats (Ballinger 2003; D'Alessio 2017; Orlić 2023), the policy suggestions above remain controversial.

They may indeed raise concerns among existing formal minority members, as they have tangible implications for voting and office-bearing rights. Nevertheless, this should not be a reason to bar a public debate on the feasibility of revising current minority policy to better align it with a post-Cold War context, one in which EU integration is reopening a regional boundary between Romance- and Slavic-speaking identities that remained fluid for centuries. Ultimately, expanding current membership criteria might provide the numbers necessary to safeguard the existing minority's legal and historical rights and the survival of its institutions.

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CIP - Каталогизација у публикацији
Народна библиотека Србије, Београд

323.15(=131.1)(497.5)
323.15(=131.1)(497.4)

BOGOVIĆ, Rene, 1984–
Becoming Italian in Rijeka: minority belonging beyond formal definitions [Elektronski izvor] / Rene Bogović. - Belgrade :
Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory : Regional Center for Advanced Studies of Humanities – RECAS ; Rijeka : Regional
Network of the Centers for Advanced Studies of Southeast Europe, 2026 (Beograd : Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory).
- 1 elektronski optički disk (CD-ROM) : tekst ; 12 cm. - (Book Series Square ; [Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory,
University of Belgrade])

Sistemski zahtevi: Nisu navedeni. - Nasl. sa naslovne strane dokumenta. - Tiraž 50. - Bibliografija.

ISBN 978-86-6190-054-9 (IPST)

а) Националне мањине -- Италијани -- Хрватска б) Националне мањне -- Италијани -- Словенија

COBISS.SR-ID 198969865