

Slovenian Identity and Language: Kaj je pravi Slovenec?

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Abstract

This article is a discussion of the results of a survey among Slovenians, which partially follows A 2017 Pew Research Center study. The respondents were asked to indicate the importance, in order to be considered a true Slovenian, of having Slovenian origins or nationality, speaking the language well, having been born in Slovenia, sharing Slovenian customs and traditions, and being Catholic. The survey also included open-ended questions on elements of Slovenian identity and the Slovenian character. The results are compared with those from countries included in the Pew Research Center study.

Key words: Slovenian identity, language, customs, national identity, language policy

Introduction

In February of 2017, shortly after the peak of the recent European migration crisis, the Pew Research Center published a study, “What It Takes to Truly Be ‘One of Us.’” In an attempt to establish some of the fundamental elements of national identity, respondents from the U.S., Canada, Europe, Australia, and Japan were asked to judge the importance of several factors, including language, in order to be considered a true “American,” “Canadian,” etc.¹ The study focused on the importance of speaking the national language, having been born in the country, sharing customs and traditions, and of being Christian. Slovenia, although on the border of the European Union and at the gateway of the migrant land route into Europe, was not included in the Pew study. Additional information on components of Slovenian² identity would be particularly interesting based on the country’s location and history as well as the widespread belief that language is the key component of Slovenian identity. Slovenia, like many of its neighbors, has experienced a period of growth of right-leaning populist and anti-immigration movements. It would be valuable to compare elements of Slovenian national identity with that of other European countries.

¹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2017/02/01/what-it-takes-to-truly-be-one-of-us/>

² For the purposes of this article, I use “Slovenian” as a general term to refer to the nationality, culture, and identity of Slovenia. I use “Slovene” to refer to the language and dialects of the country.

Background

Language is an important factor in the formation of identity (Anderson 1991: 6, Späti 2016: 11). It seems to be particularly important for Slovenians, who have not long had a unified territory or other typical elements of a common national identity (Nečak 1997: 19, Stabej 2006: 697). Although myths about the ancient origin of the Slovene language and literacy are a part of Slovenian national identity, regional identities were dominant among Slovene speakers until the end of the nineteenth century (Repe 2008: 256–57). Maintaining their national language under pressure from smaller regional identities within Slovenia and from bigger regional identities like the Austro-Hungarian Empire or multinational Yugoslavia, and from larger more-dominant languages has long been a concern among Slovenians. This situation continues in the form of pressure from global English and Europeanization (Kraus 2016: 39, 53). It is noteworthy that the Slovenian constitution defines Slovene as the official language of the nation. There are laws and approved national policies on public usage of the language and resolutions and action plans to encourage implementation of language policy.³

Even now, after Slovenians have ultimately established an independent nation as well as a national language, the role of Slovene in society and especially in education continues to be a subject of intense debate in Slovenia. Many were and are concerned that the language is in danger (Lundberg 2017: 365) and about political and financial decisions that might reduce the range, depth, and diversity of Slovene as well as measures that could lead to poor quality of instruction or that might lead to Slovene no longer holding its place as the preferred medium of communication within the Republic of Slovenia (Jesenšek 2016: 17, Šabec 2016: 76). This concern extends to the worry that Slovene could be weakened in its function as a language for scholarly communication (Jesenšek 2016: 46).⁴

In June of 2019 a conference was held at the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts entitled “Linguistic Self-Confidence: The Survival and Development of Our Mother Tongue Depends on Us.” The result of the conference was a document containing concerns about recent failures to properly protect the status of the Slovene language, including the concern that Apple’s operating system does not support Slovene and that there is very little enforcement of policies against the flood of English signage. Another prominent concern expressed in the document is renewed pressure from some university administrators and scholars to allow English as the language of

³ <https://www.gov.si/podrocja/kultura/slovenski-jezik/>

⁴ One of the anonymous reviewers of this paper reminded me that the point scale for evaluating the publications of university faculty gives higher scores for articles published abroad than in domestic Slovenian journals, thus encouraging Slovenian scholars to write in English or other languages rather than in Slovene.

instruction in Slovenian universities.⁵ The document, as well as a petition,⁶ was sent to the government of the Republic of Slovenia, the parliament, the constitutional court, and Slovenian media. This renewed effort to change national policies on the language of instruction was resisted in 2019, but the role of Slovene in society and its status as a marker of Slovenian identity continues to be a topic of debate and anxiety.

Survey

What follows is a discussion of the results of a survey conducted during the summer of 2018 among the general public of Slovenia, which partially follows the Pew survey mentioned earlier. The respondents were asked to indicate the importance, in order to be considered a true Slovenian, of having Slovenian origins or nationality, speaking Slovene, having been born in Slovenia, sharing Slovenian customs and traditions, and being Catholic. The survey also includes open-ended questions on elements of Slovenian identity and the Slovenian character. The results are compared with those from countries included in the Pew Research Center study.

The following discussion is based on 372 responses to an online Qualtrics survey published on Slovenskenovice.si. Respondents came from every region of Slovenia, although, nearly 30% were from Ljubljana or the surrounding area of Central Slovenia.

⁵ It seems that such a change is intended to open Slovenian universities to foreign scholars and to European and non-European students. This could have a positive influence on the quality of scholarship and teaching, but it could also detract from the development and maintenance of the Slovene language. It should be noted that some academics believe that these concerns are exaggerated. See Zavrtanik (2019). It is also true that not all Slovenians worry that the language is in danger. See Lundberg (2017).

⁶ https://www.peticija.online/kako_je_mogoce

Table 1: Region of Residence⁷

Region	%	Count
osrednja Slovenija (Ljubljana and surroundings)	28.93%	105
Gorenjska	17.36%	63
Dolenjska	8.54%	31
Zasavje	2.20%	8
Podravje	10.47%	38
Savinjska dolina	10.19%	37
Posavje	3.03%	11
Koroška	3.03%	11
Pomurje	2.48%	9
Goriška	3.31%	12
Notranjska	3.03%	11
Obalno-kraška	5.79%	21
severna Primorska	1.65%	6
Total	100%	363

The respondents were also from all age groups, with 65% between the ages of 31 and 65.

Table 2: Age

Age	%	Count
Under 18	7.36%	27
Between 18 and 30	11.17%	41
Between 31 and 50	31.61%	116
Between 51 and 65	34.33%	126
Older than 65	15.53%	57
Total	100%	367

The respondents were 53% male and 47% female. All levels of formal education were represented, with over 30% having some form of

⁷ This is largely based on the statistical regions of Slovenia, which are administrative entities created in 2000 for legal and statistical purposes. They correspond to the NUTS statistical regions of Europe.

postgraduate education. Just over 50% had only secondary or college-preparatory education.

Table 3: Education Level

Level	%	Count
Primary or Vocational ⁸	17.31%	63
Secondary or College-Preparatory ⁹	50.27%	183
College or University ¹⁰	23.9%	87
Postgraduate ¹¹	8.52%	31
Total	100%	364

As mentioned above, the survey asked how important the following things were in order to be considered a true Slovenian.¹² Tables 4–8 correspond to the five primary questions of the survey.

Table 4: to have Slovenian origins or nationality

Answer	%	Count
Very important ¹³	55.92%	203
Important ¹⁴	25.90%	94
Not very important ¹⁵	13.22%	48
Unimportant ¹⁶	4.96%	18
Total	100%	363

Nearly 82% of respondents indicated that Slovenian origins or nationality was important or very important to national identity.¹⁷ This matches well with the demographics of Slovenia. 83% of the population is of Slovenian nationality. There are around 100,000 non-EU citizens in the

⁸ osnovna ali poklicna šola

⁹ srednja ali višja šola

¹⁰ visoka šola, univerza

¹¹ podiplomski študij

¹² Kako pomembno je za to, da je nekdo pravi Slovenec/Slovenka,...

¹³ zelo pomembno

¹⁴ pomembno

¹⁵ manj pomembno

¹⁶ nepomembno

¹⁷ ... da je slovenskega porekla oz. narodnosti.

country (5% of the population), most of which are from the former Yugoslav republics.¹⁸

Table 5: to have been born in Slovenia

Answer	%	Count
Very important	47.81%	175
Important	22.95%	84
Not very important	19.95%	73
Unimportant	9.29%	34
Total	100%	366

Over 70% indicated that it was important or very important to have been born in the country to be considered a true Slovenian. Nearly 50% (47.81%) said it was very important. This is relatively high compared to the results from the Pew survey mentioned above, although, perhaps reflective of the fact that nearly 90% of the population of Slovenia was born in the country (see footnote 14.). Only 8% of Swedes and 13% of Germans said it was very important to be born in the country. A median of 33% of Europeans believed it was very important. In the U.S. 33% of respondents said it was very important that someone be born in America to be a real American. This is particularly interesting because of birth-right citizenship in the U.S.¹⁹ The numbers were higher and more similar to Slovenia in some parts of Europe. Over 50% of Hungarians and 50% of Greeks said that place of birth was very important. It is worth noting that Hungary and Greece are also on the periphery of the E.U. and have dealt with significant migration issues. This includes Hungarians and Greeks leaving as well as non-Europeans entering Hungary and Greece.

Table 6: to have command of the Slovene language

Answer	%	Count
Very important	67.12%	245
Important	27.95%	102
Not very important	4.11%	15
Unimportant	0.82%	3
Total	100%	365

¹⁸ <http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/slovenia/>

¹⁹ In the U.S., being born in the country grants citizenship. Under Slovenian law, being born in the country does not automatically grant citizenship.

If we combine those who said it was important or very important to have command of the Slovene language in order to be considered a true Slovenian, we have over 95% of respondents. 67% indicated that this is very important. According to this survey, command of the Slovene language is the most important single factor in national identity. Slovene is the official language of the country, along with Italian and Hungarian in several border regions. 92% of Slovenians speak Slovene. Italian and Hungarian are spoken as native languages in the country by .2% and .4%, respectively (see footnote 14 for more details.). It is not surprising that the language plays a key role in national identity. It is interesting that the numbers from Slovenia are somewhat lower than the European median of 77% for “very important” as reported in the Pew survey. The Slovenian results are similar to the U.S. result of 70%.²⁰ Only 59% of Canadians said language was very important, but 81% of Hungarians and 84% of the Dutch said command of the national language was very important to be a true member of the nation. There is broad agreement in the Pew survey and in my own work that the national language is at the heart of national identity.

Table 7: to follow Slovenian customs and traditions

Answer	%	Count
Very important	67.67%	247
Important	20.82%	76
Not very important	9.32%	34
Unimportant	2.19%	8
Total	100%	365

Almost 90% of Slovenians surveyed indicated that it was important or very important to follow Slovenian customs and traditions in order to be considered Slovenian. Nearly 70% said that customs and traditions were very important. This “very-important” response for customs and traditions is almost identical to the response to the question on language, and it is significantly higher than the European median of 48% as reported in the Pew survey. There were significant differences in the responses to this question across Europe. Only 26% of Swedes and 29% of Germans said shared customs and traditions were very important. 45% of respondents in the U.S. and France and 68% of Hungarians said customs and traditions were very important. Slovenians value shared customs and traditions almost as highly

²⁰ The Pew survey asked the importance of being able to speak the language. My survey asked the importance of being able to speak the language well. That difference should be kept in mind when viewing the Slovenian responses.

as language as a marker of national identity and value them much more than most Europeans.

Table 8: to be Catholic²¹

Answer	%	Count
Very important	15.38%	56
Important	18.96%	69
Not very important	25.27%	92
Unimportant	40.38%	147
Total	100%	364

34% of respondents indicated that being Catholic was important or very important to Slovenian national identity. Only 15% said that being Catholic was very important to be considered a true Slovenian. In the Pew survey a median of 13% of all countries surveyed said that being Christian was very important. Only 7% of Swedes, 8% of the Dutch and 11% of Germans said being Christian was very important. 32% of Americans and 54% of Greeks said that being Christian was very important for national identity. Of all the elements investigated, religion was clearly the least important factor in national identity across all countries surveyed, and Slovenia, unlike the U.S., was similar to the rest of Europe in this area.

Cross Tabulating

In the following section we examine the main questions in the survey based on gender, education, and political leanings. In each of these categories we focus on the percentages of people who indicated that a particular trait was very important as a marker of national identity. Table 9–11 illustrate these findings.

There are some interesting differences that appear when we break these responses down by gender. For each question except the one about command of the Slovene language, men were more likely than women to say that it was very important to be considered a true Slovenian. This is especially clear for the role of Catholicism in national identity.

²¹ In the Pew survey, Catholic was used in Italy, Poland and Spain. For other countries, the term Christian was used. I used Catholic because it is the religion of over 70% of the population. The article (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_in_Slovenia#cite_note-EB2018-1) contains a link to a Eurobarometer study from 2018 giving Catholic as the religion of 73.4% of the entire population.

Table 9: Very Important by Gender

Answer	m	f
Slovenian Nationality	58.42%	53.22%
Born in Slovenia	53.13%	41.86%
Command of Slovene	67.54%	66.28%
Traditions and Customs	70.16%	65.12%
Catholic	20.53%	9.88%

When we examine responses based on education, it appears that lower levels of education corresponded with respondents' belief that having Slovenian nationality, being born in Slovenia as well as being Catholic were very important in order to be considered a real Slovenian. Under 7% of those with some form of postgraduate education said it was very important to be Catholic.

Table 10: Very Important by Education

Answer	Primary or Vocational	Secondary or College-Preparatory	College or University	Postgraduate
Slovenian Nationality	57.14%	60%	52.33%	38.71%
Born in Slovenia	52.38%	53.30%	36.78%	32.26%
Command of Slovene	60.32%	71.98%	62.79%	61.29%
Traditions and Customs	68.25%	69.78%	64.37%	66.67%
Catholic	19.35%	15.38%	16.09%	6.67%

In the June 2018 survey informants were not asked about specific political parties. They were asked to indicate left or right political leanings.²²

²² Katera politična usmerjitev vam je bližje, leva ali desna? In general, the left in Slovenia tends to focus on jobs, social security, robust pension and national healthcare systems and progressive social policies. The right is often pro-

When asked about the importance in order to be considered a true Slovenian of having Slovenian origins, having been born in Slovenia, command of Slovene, keeping common customs and traditions and being Catholic, respondents with political leanings to the right were much more likely to indicate that these factors were very important.

Table 11: Very Important by Political Leanings

Question	left	right
Slovenian Nationality	39.74%	70.39%
Born in Slovenia	40.13%	53.25%
Command of Slovene	59.87%	74.51%
Traditions and Customs	56.58%	78.43%
Catholic	3.97%	27.45%

People were also asked an open-ended question about what they thought it meant to be a Slovenian. There were various answers, including having Slovenian citizenship and a number of common Slovenian character traits, most of which will not be listed here. The top four responses follow the main ideas of the survey questions. They are found in Table 12. For both those on the right and the left of the political spectrum, the top response was love and respect for Slovenian culture and traditions. The Slovene language was noted as important, but it was not the most important factor.

Table 12: Kaj po vašem mnenju pomeni biti Slovenec/Slovenka?

Top Responses	left	right
Love and Respect Culture and Traditions	27%	43%
Born in Slovenia/Slovenian Nationality	14%	10%
Speak Slovene	12%	10%
Have Slovenian Citizenship	5%	2%

Conclusions

If we combine the responses of those who indicated that a particular trait was either important or very important to be a real Slovenian, we get an interesting picture of some elements of Slovenian national identity. According to this

austerity, pro-business, pro-regionalism anti-immigration and favors conservative social policies.

survey, language is the most important feature of national identity. 95% of respondents indicated that command of Slovene was important or very important in order to be considered a true Slovenian. 90% said that keeping common traditions and customs was important or very important. 82% valued Slovenian nationality, and 70% said it was important or very important to have been born in Slovenia. Only 34% said that being Catholic was important or very important. This supports the oft-stated assertion that language is the foundation of Slovenian national identity, but it does not make Slovenia unusual. This is true for most countries in Europe and for the U.S. Slovenia stands out among surrounding European countries and the U.S. in valuing more highly the place of birth and common customs and traditions. This final trait is likely one shared by Slovenians who have emigrated. For Slovenians, the three-legged stool of national identity is language, shared customs and traditions, and place of birth.

It is interesting to note the higher value placed on each of these markers of national identity by those with political leanings to the right. As in most of Europe and the U.S., Slovenia has seen growth in right-leaning and populist parties. In June 2018 Janez Janša's right leaning and somewhat anti-immigration Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) finished first in the national election with 25% of the vote. Janša was unable to form a governing coalition, so Marjan Šarec and his center-left party formed a short-lived minority government (Gec 2019). Šarec and his government resigned in January 2020, and Janša formed a new right-leaning government. After the 2018 election, Janša made a comment with a familiar ring to it, "Those who cast their votes for us have elected a party that will put Slovenia first" (Surk 2018). It is obviously not true that you have to be a populist or even lean right politically to value traditional markers of national identity. This is especially true of many of the academics working to enact and enforce language policies to strengthen the role of Slovene within the Republic of Slovenia. They may have little in common with populist or right-leaning political movements. Still, this survey shows that those who lean right politically are more likely to value these markers of national identity highly. This is especially interesting in light of the role of English in education. In many ways the national education policy, especially in primary and secondary education, is strongly multilingual, requiring the study of at least two foreign languages from an early age. Yet universities have so far successfully resisted attempts to include English as one of the primary languages of instruction. It will be interesting to see if the growth of right-leaning political movements in Slovenia might have an influence on language policy and its enforcement.

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POVZETEK**SLOVENSKA IDENTITETA IN JEZIK:
KAJ JE PRAVI SLOVENEK?**

Ta članek je razprava o rezultatih ankete med Slovenci, ki delno sledi raziskavi Pew Research Center iz leta 2017. Anketirance so vprašali, kako pomembno je, da bi nekoga šteli za pravega Slovenca, da je ta slovenskega porekla oziroma narodnosti, da dobro govori slovensko, da je rojen v Sloveniji, da spoštuje slovenske običaje in tradicijo ter da je katoličan. Raziskava je vključevala tudi odprta vprašanja o značilnostih slovenske identitete in slovenskega značaja. Rezultati so primerljivi z rezultati držav, vključenih v raziskavo Pew Research Center.