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### The perception of foreigners in northeast Italy

*Original*

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*Publisher:*

*Published*

DOI:

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## THE PERCEPTION OF FOREIGNERS IN NORTHEAST ITALY

Nidia Batic

### 1. Introduction

Friuli Venezia Giulia is an Italian border region (Austria and Slovenia), and is also a highly attractive immigration territory: on 31 December 2015, 8.6% of the regional population was foreign, compared to 8.3% on the national level ([www.tuttitalia.it](http://www.tuttitalia.it)). But the area also has a tourist vocation: in 2015 there were 1,104,118 arrivals of foreigners, accounting for 50.6% of total arrivals, with an increase of 5.2% over the previous year (Bolzonello, 2016). The presence of foreigners in numerous research facilities and in educational institutions, representing important poles of attraction on an international level, is also significant<sup>1</sup>.

This context has given rise to the need to understand the perception that people have of who is considered "foreign."

### 2. Objectives, instrument and method

The goal of this research was to build an outline of the foreigner, as it appears in the perceptions and experiences of the people of Friuli Venezia Giulia, a land in which we are accustomed to meeting foreigners, sharing with them work or study experiences<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup>For example: the ICTP (The Abdus Salam International Centre for Theoretical Physics), the Institute of Crystallography of the CNR, the ISM (Institute of Structure of Matter CNR), the Consortium for the AREA of scientific and technological research Trieste, the Elettra Synchrotron Trieste-SCpA, ICGEB - International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology, the INAF-Osservatorio Astronomico di Trieste, SISSA - International School for Advanced Studies. Just to name a few. The list is completed by the Base aera NATO present in the town of Aviano (PN) and the CARA (reception center for asylum seekers) of Gradisca (GO).

<sup>2</sup> In 2014 the pupils and foreign students enrolled in schools in the region were 11.7% (Medeossi, 2014).

For this purpose a questionnaire with 12 items was designed, divided into four sections: 1) identification of the foreigner; 2) personal data; 3) a semantic differential on 22 bipolar scales; 4) a battery of 19 statements about foreigners, where people expressed their level of agreement.

The working hypothesis guiding the structure of the questionnaire was to verify whether there are generational and gender differences, in the way the "foreigner" is perceived, with particular reference to the definition of "foreigner", including provenance, distinctive features and emotional reactions to them.

The questionnaire was administered<sup>3</sup> to a sample of people, contacted<sup>4</sup> in public places and with a rational criterion for stratification by gender and age group, with the following constraints: 1) persons of at least 19 years in age in 2015; 2) 15 males and 15 females per interviewer; 3) five subjects per ten-year age group, from 19-28 years, the eldest group being from 69 years up.

The validated questionnaires total 1,854.

Despite the known limitations of a non probabilistic survey, it is believed that the results obtained provide interesting insights into the phenomenon studied.

### 3. Data analysis and hypothesis testing

The sample was 49.9% male and 50.1% female, with an average age of 48.6 at the end of 2015. The geographic distribution of the sample essentially reflects that of the resident population in the region on 31 December 2015.

#### 3.1. Definition of "foreign"

From an initial analysis (Fig. 1) (up to three responses were possible) the results showed that a foreigner is one who "comes from another country" (70.1%) and "has a culture different from mine" (49, 5%). Linguistic diversity counts for 36.5%. Interestingly, the 21.0% defines as "foreign" all people who respondents do not know; this means that for one-fifth of the respondents "the other" is a foreigner simply because they do not know him, regardless of other elements of a personal or cultural nature. Less than 10% believe that a foreigner is a person who lives at the expense of the state (8.4%), is involved in criminal behavior (7.3%) or brings knowledge and innovation (6.3%). A few people, when asked to define a

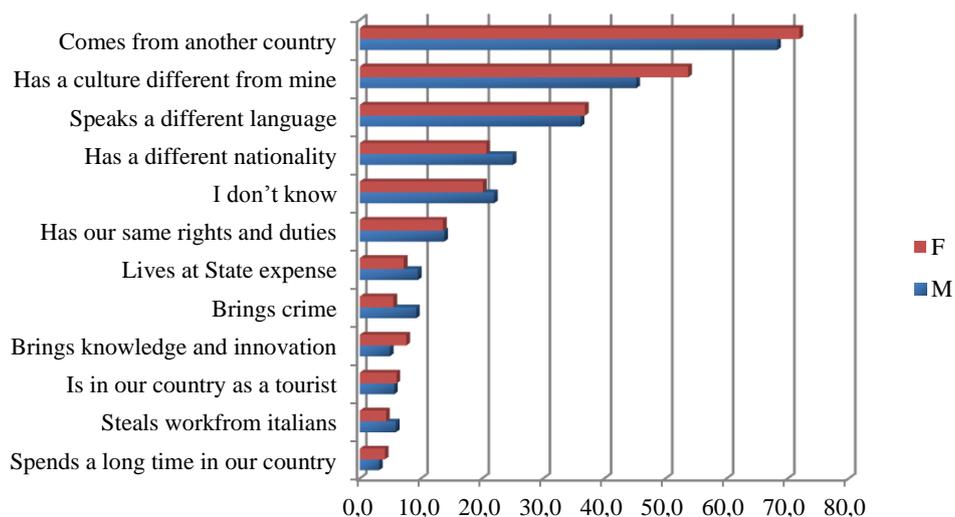
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<sup>3</sup>The questionnaire was completed in the presence of the interviewer, who read the questions out loud.

<sup>4</sup>The interviews were carried out by students of the School of Primary Education, University of Udine during the month of December 2015.

"foreigner", think of him or her as a tourist (5.8%), or as one who steals Italians jobs (5.1%).

**Figure 1** - Definition of foreigner by gender



An analysis of the responses by gender reveals a substantial convergence of views between males and females, with two exceptions: more females than males believe that a distinctive feature of the foreigner is represented by the diversity of culture ( $\chi^2 = 13.31$ ) while more males than females associate the spread of crime with the presence of foreigners ( $\chi^2 = 9.41$ )<sup>5</sup>.

How else can a foreigner be described? There are many other, equally interesting descriptions. A foreigner is one who: is stateless; is enriched by his or her diversity; does not fit and does not respect the host country; must accept the laws and customs of the host country. Additionally, the description of the foreigner depends on the place of origin and it depends on the situation, whether bringing crime and / or knowledge. It is a person who comes from outside of the western world, someone fleeing war, or bringing experiences and culture. But above all a foreigner "is a normal person".

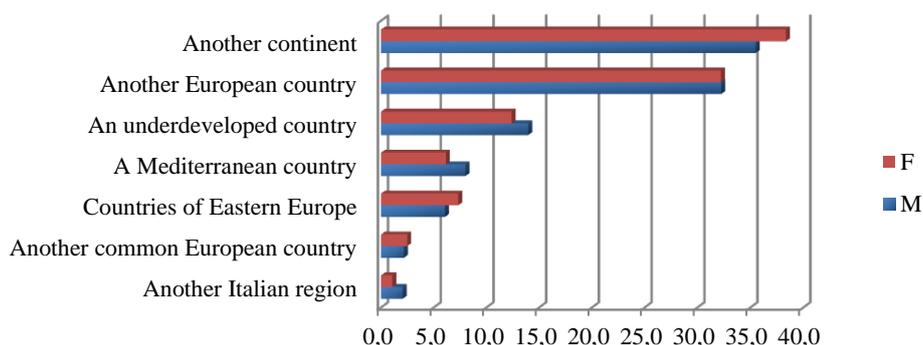
<sup>5</sup>To test the gender and age differences in response to the various items, the chi-squared test was applied, using a significance level for all of 0.05. Unless otherwise indicated, for each item of the multiple choice questions a 2x2 matrix was built with the answers "yes" and "no" for the gender (critical value of  $\chi^2$  with df = 1 is equal to 3.84) and one for the 6 age groups (critical value of  $\chi^2$  with df = 5 is equal to 11.07). In the text the values of the calculated test are written in the brackets.

When considering respondent age, the connotations used to describe foreign people are consistent across groups. The only statistically significant differences relate to two opinions of people aged 69 years or more. Fewer of them respond that a foreigner "comes from another country" (62.9% against an average of 70.1%) ( $\chi^2 = 18,03$ ), while most of the others are convinced that foreigners live on the back of the host country (14.3% on an average of 8.4%) ( $\chi^2 = 20.24$ ).

### 3.2. Origin of the "foreigner"

The hypothesis that the distance of the source country is a key element in the definition of foreigner status is confirmed, but, as can be seen (Fig. 2), this perception can be represented by a kind of cumulative scale of distances, where higher levels are also inclusive of the lower levels overall, 69.1% believe that foreigners are those who were born in a European country or beyond. But there is also a minority (3.9%) that considers as "foreigner" anyone who comes from another municipality or Italian region.

**Figure 2** – Distance of the source country



A gender analysis does not show a statistically significant<sup>6</sup> difference of opinions, but it is noted that the same views are not shared among the different generations responding<sup>7</sup>. In particular, young people aged 19 to 38 indicate, with a higher percentage than the other age groups, that foreigners come from another European country (36.0%), while only 27.3% of 69 year olds (and older) provide such information. By contrast, 11.2% of people between 19 and 38 indicate that a foreigner comes from underdeveloped countries, while the percentage rises to 23.1% among those 69 years and over.

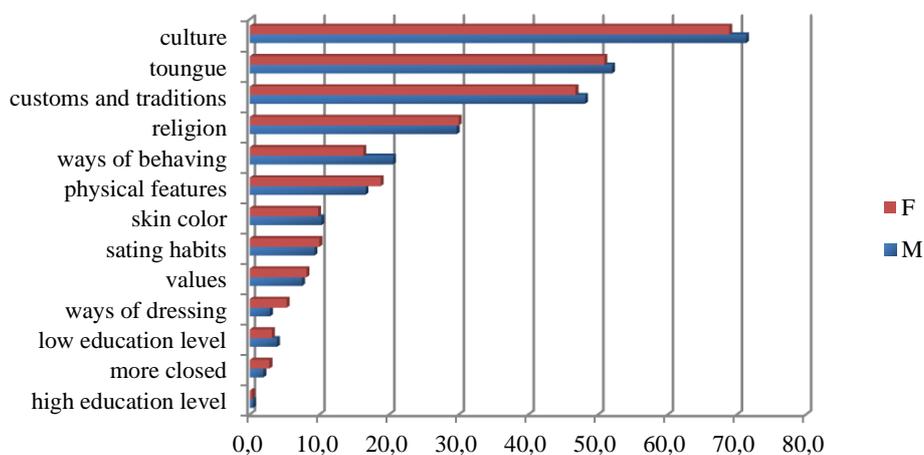
<sup>6</sup>Chi-square test, with d.f. = 6,  $\alpha = 0.05$ , critical value = 12.59, calculated value = 8.31.

<sup>7</sup>Chi-square test, with d.f. = 30,  $\alpha = 0.05$ , critical value = 43.77, calculated value = 67.66.

### 3.3. Differences compared to a foreigner

65.5% of respondents agree that a foreigner is "different", with no gender differences in the distribution of responses ( $\chi^2 = 0.51$ ). There are also no differences of opinion across the different age groups ( $\chi^2 = 10.75$ ), with the clearly emerging opinion that more than anything else it is cultural factors that define these differences (70.1%). Figure 3 shows how language (51.5%) and customs and traditions (47.4%) characterize the peculiarities of a foreigner, while little importance is given to the educational level (high or low). Less than a third (29.8%) associate with the idea of a foreigner a person of a different religion. Men and women feel the same way, with the only exception for women, who look at the style of dress in a more significant way (5.3%) than men (2.9%). However, in absolute terms, these cases are few (18 males and 32 females). Considering the age distribution, there are significant differences. As age decreases, so does the idea that culture represents an element of diversity of the foreigners (78.2% of the youngest versus 55.8% of 69+) ( $\chi^2 = 42,77$ ) as well as the belief that customs and traditions are elements of diversity (50.8% of the youngest versus 38.5 % of 69+) ( $\chi^2 = 11.82$ ).

**Figure 3** – Elements of foreigner diversity



In other cases, with increasing age there is an increase in the perception of diversity in foreigners with reference to skin color ( $\chi^2 = 22.34$ ), modes of dress ( $\chi^2 = 15,89$ ), eating habits ( $\chi^2 = 12, 66$ ) and low education ( $\chi^2 = 12.07$ ).

### 3.4. Emotional relationship with the "foreigner"

Before exploring the emotional dimension evoked by the concept of "foreigner", it is important to point out that 59.1% have at least one foreign friend (with an average of 4 per capita), while people who, for work or study, know at least one foreigner are 73.4% (an average of 9 each).

The use of semantic differential technique (Osgood et al, 1957) made it possible to bring out the emotional dimension of the relationship of the inhabitants of Friuli Venezia Giulia toward "foreigners", through 22 bipolar adjectival scales at seven positions. A first analysis of the average profiles show that responses are contained within a narrow average range (from 3.2 to 4.6), but with different variabilities. The average higher variability describes them as men rather than women and, at the other extreme, "little", useful, warm, and dark (Tab. 1).

**Table 1** – Average profiles of bipolar scales on the concept of foreigner"

Bipolar scales	mean	Bipolar scales	mean	Bipolar scales	mean
woman - man	4,6	weak - strong	4,0	educated - rude	3,8
white - black	4,5	cultured- ignorant	3,9	dirty - clean	3,7
trust - distrust	4,5	open - close	3,9	too many - little	3,7
security - insecurity	4,4	resident - tourist	3,9	host - rejection	3,6
tranquility - fear	4,3	activ - lazy	3,8	useful - useless	3,5
unsympathetic-sympathetic	4,1	good - bad	3,8	hot - cold	3,5
beautiful - ugly	4,1	honest-dishonest	3,8	dark - light	3,2
integrated- marginalized	4,0				

The scales were subjected to factor analysis. After eliminating those with double saturation, it was re-applied to the 18 remaining scales and a total of three factors were extracted, explaining 48.4% of the observed variability<sup>8</sup> (Tab. 2). The first factor suggests a representation of foreigners absolutely positive and reassuring, identified with the first adjectives, *honesty and goodness*. The foreigner is honest, good, educated, inspires trust and security, is to be welcomed and integrated. He or she is cultured, beautiful and useful and, contrary to what emerges from the analysis of the declared opinions, the foreigner is not lazy. The second factor is represented by a few adjectives that describe the *personality* of the foreigner: light, white, woman, and cold. The third factor is correlated with the *presence* of too many foreigners who are residents, not tourists. By the application of factor analysis by gender there is no difference between male and female responses (with an almost perfect overlap of the factorial profiles). On the other

<sup>8</sup>The analysis of main components was applied and the factor matrix was rotated with the Varimax method in order to make the axis perpendicular to the factors. The factors with eigenvalue greater than or equal to 1 were extracted.

side, the factor analysis applied to the different age groups shows, first, the presence of four factors. For all classes of age the first factor contains all the scales present in the global factorial analysis, but at each age group the first adjectives change order, so we have, in order of age, the distribution presented in table 3.

**Table 2** - Factor analysis of the perception of “foreigner”

	Fattori		
	Honesty and goodness	personality	presence
honest - dishonest	<b>,759</b>	,012	,057
good - bad	<b>,746</b>	-,014	,028
educated - rude	<b>,742</b>	,034	,013
trust - distrust	<b>,735</b>	,143	-,021
host - rejection	<b>,719</b>	,079	-,018
security - insecurity	<b>,702</b>	,124	-,062
tranquility - fear	<b>,700</b>	,187	-,042
activ - lazy	<b>,657</b>	,070	,044
cultured - ignorant	<b>,655</b>	,139	,180
useful - useless	<b>,651</b>	-,020	-,013
beautiful - ugly	<b>,597</b>	,151	,066
integrated - marginalized	<b>,440</b>	,147	,258
dark - light	-,135	<b>-,766</b>	-,039
white - black	,347	<b>,681</b>	,059
woman - man	,275	<b>,477</b>	-,159
hot - cold	,299	<b>-,464</b>	,076
too many - little	-,098	,087	<b>,850</b>
resident - tourist	,131	-,255	<b>,487</b>

**Table 3** – Factors for age groups

Age group	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
19 – 28	goodness/honesty	personality	presence	residence
29 – 38	confidence	personality	heat	presence
39 – 48	honesty	personality	residence	presence
49 – 58	education	personality	presence	residence
59 – 68	hospitality	personality	presence	residence
69 and up	safety	personality	integration	presence

As shown above, the second factor for all groups identifies with the *personality*, and for all the binomial light and white is present. As per *presence* there is a widespread perception that foreigners are too numerous, with only one turnaround for people between 59 and 68 years, for whom foreigners are few. In the factor

*residence* as well as in the overall analysis, the scale resident / tourist is always present and the foreigner is considered a resident, not a tourist.

### 3.5. *Opinions and attitudes towards foreigners*

There were 19 statements proposed about foreigners and their relationship with the society that welcomes them. On a scale of 6 positions respondents indicated the degree of agreement or disagreement with the item. For the purposes of data analysis the dichotomy of answers was used, by combining the steps of agreement and those of disagreement. Opinions are basically grouped into five thematic areas: behaviors, culture, integration, rights, and work. The percentages indicate responses to the statements, unless otherwise indicated.

*Behaviors.* From a behavioral perspective the problem most heard (just under two thirds of respondents) is that foreigners are often intrusive (64.6%) and aggravate the problems of public policy (62.5%). The sample is divided almost in half on the opinion that foreigners introduce into our country dangerous ideologies (56.2% agreement), and also on the opinion that foreigners bring and spread disease (43.5% agreement). 59.8% think that foreigners do not introduce new fashions.

*Culture.* It is believed that foreigners bond with their traditions too strongly (76.9%), and that this could put the Italian cultural identity at risk (56.5%). At the same time, they should be free to maintain their cultural characteristics (61.5%), considering the fact that their full integration would bring cultural richness to our society (72.0%) as well as new stimuli<sup>9</sup>.

*Integration.* There is a very clear position for the statement that "immigrants should live in separate quarters", where there is a clear disagreement (85.0%), showing the propensity for integration of foreigners, starting with the opportunity to not live in separate residential areas. Less marked is the difference between how many agree (45.5%) and disagree (54.5%) with the need to close the borders to prevent the immigration of other foreigners.

*Rights.* There is an overwhelming majority of respondents (albeit with varying degrees of agreement) who consider it necessary to check on foreigners, both in regard to their respect for the laws governing the social life of Italians (worthy of expulsion, 87.6%) and in regard to the economic activities that take place in our country (81.7%). There is also agreement with the need to afford foreign immigrants the same rights to Italian jobs (73.9% ), yet in general, to afford foreigners the same rights only if they fit our way of life (59.6% agreement).

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<sup>9</sup>The two very similar statements ("They bring new cultural stimuli" and "The full integration of foreign immigrants bring cultural enrichment to society") were positioned at distant points of the questionnaire for a feedback control. In fact the percentages of agreement are very similar.

*Work.* The stereotype of a foreigner who takes away the job of an Italian is not confirmed, as 45.8% think in such way, while 54.2% reject this idea (keeping in mind that the different degrees of agreement and disagreement were grouped together in just two response types). The same goes for the idea that foreigners have little desire to work (44.1% agree and 55.9% do not). Instead, the contribution they can make to the economic development of our country is recognized (55.4%).

From the point of view of gender, among all the areas considered, the differences of opinions between males and females who are within 3 points of difference between the mean values emerge. More differentiated opinions are age-related: in general, there are variations with a stable trend as you move from group to group. The more adult / elderly people demonstrate a higher degree of agreement than younger participants that: foreigners often display behavior that is too attached to their traditions and could jeopardize the cultural integrity of the country; steal work from Italians; introduce dangerous ideologies into our country; aggravate problems of public order; spread diseases; have little desire to work; should be subjected to greater controls on their economic activity in Italy; should be afforded the same rights as Italian citizens only if they fit with our way of life; should live in separate neighborhoods; should be expelled if they do not respect our laws; and that the borders should be closed to prevent the immigration of other foreigners. On the other hand, more older people than younger ones disagree that foreigners bring new cultural stimuli, contribute to the economic development of our country, introduce new fashions, and have the right to maintain their own cultural characteristics .

#### **4. Conclusions**

The opinions of respondents are undoubtedly affected by their individual experiences, but it is reasonable to think that, beyond those, there are feelings and attitudes that are common ways to relate to foreigners by the regional population.

Interestingly, the perceived distance, of where to place the foreigner, does not correspond to a correct geographical distance. In fact, few report Eastern European countries (6.7%) or those in the Mediterranean (7.1%) as “no longer foreigners”, while Europeans are reported as “no longer foreigners” (32.2%). It may highlight that the younger generations seem more oriented towards recognizing as a “foreigner” anyone from another European country, with increasing ages, a lower proportion of people provide such a response. We do not have elements to explain these percentages (it was not among the aims of the research) but they definitely stimulate interesting considerations about the sense of belonging to the European

Community of the respondents, and the relationships that might connect the natives of the different Community countries.

A third of respondents say that there are no particular aspects that make a foreigner "different", neither language nor religion, nor facial features or culture, showing an attitude of openness towards all people, regardless of their origins and habits - a welcoming attitude criss-crossing gender and generations.

Less than a third (29.8%) associated the foreigner to a different religion and this element is in accordance with the hypothesis that the foreigner is different from us, especially in language, culture and religion.

The attitude towards foreigners often appears contradictory. The respondents do not want to isolate them but, at the same time, they partially agree on a choice of closing the borders to curb immigration. There are fears of cultural influences, yet at the same time it is hoped that foreigners do not lose their cultural identity. It is feared as too strong a link with the traditions of the country of origin, but at the same time it is recognized that their integration would bring cultural enrichment to our society (in line with the investigation of the 2006 about immigrants, Brandi). In fact an explanation in strictly personal factors might be found. Older adults and / the elderly reflect the stereotypes of those who view a certain mistrust and closure towards foreigners, while in the younger generation, although such views are also present, they are less definite, and more - in favor of greater openness (Bonifazi, Cerbara, 1999). What has been found here also confirms the fact that the public perception of foreigners is influenced by the presence of prejudice: where present the foreigner is seen as a threat, if absent the foreigner is seen as the bearer of social change (Liguori, Cattani 2007).

The "explicit" statements do not seem to be reconciled with those latent dimensions explored by the factor analysis, which bring out very positive profiles, the best qualities of "foreigners." For all groups, regardless of gender or generation, they are correlated firstly with the factors of honesty, kindness, trust, acceptance and security (for example) and "personality" factor identify all foreigners with "light" and "white". Yet for all categories there are "too many" foreigners present (in accordance with the opinion of 64.2% of respondents in a survey about immigrants, Brandi, 2006), but when they think of a foreigner they do not think of a tourist, but of a person who resides in their country. These results confirm what has already appeared in a study in the municipality of Prata di Pordenone, in which foreigners were described through education factors, friendliness, diligence, openness (Batic, 2011).

Finally, we might conclude that those interviewed represent a population raised and educated with values such as respect for others, whoever they are and whatever diversity they bring. A foreigner may be the neighbor unknown to us, or whoever comes from another continent. Each must be given space, rights and protections. A

foreigner can bring wealth to the country, but also crime. He or she should not be ghettoized, but must respect the host country, or be expelled and returned to the native country.

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## SUMMARY

### **The perception of foreigner in northeast Italy**

The Friuli Venezia Giulia region is highly attractive for immigration, but the region is also a tourist destination: in 2015 there were 1,104,118 foreign arrivals (+ 5.2% over the previous year) and in the region they are present in research facilities and internationally renowned training institutions.

The goal of this research was to explore the perception that people have of "foreigners", which traits characterize them, what feelings they evoke. To this end, a brief questionnaire was administered to a purposive sample and the valid questionnaires total are 1.854. Despite the known limitations of a non probabilistic survey, it is believed that the results obtained can provide interesting insights into the phenomenon studied.

The foreigner is mostly one who "comes from another continent" but many persons, especially young people, indicate as "foreigners" the natives of other European countries, and this stimulates interesting considerations about the sense of belonging to the European Community of the respondents and the relationship that should tie the natives of the different Community countries.

A third of respondents believe that there are no elements that make a foreigner "different", while for the others the differences are mainly due to the culture, language, customs, and religion.

The "declared" attitude reveals a generational difference (but not gender) against those who are foreigners: adults and elderly are more related to the stereotypes that guide the views to a certain mistrust and closure to foreigners. The new generations, however, also hold some of those views, but they seem to be in favor of greater openness. Across the latent attitudes which emerge from the factor analysis, very positive profiles: the best qualities of "foreigner" are brought out. For all, regardless of gender or age, the first factor of honesty, kindness, trust, acceptance and security (to name a few) and the "personality traits" "clear" and "white" are all correlated to the idea of the "foreigner". Foreigners are considered to be "too present", and are less thought of as tourists than as people who reside in the country.