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New Legislation – New Identifications – New Demographic Processes

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Autochthonous Linguistic Minorities in the Italian Alps:

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Problem definition, objective, and theses

- 1 Besides religion, language constitutes the most important form of expression of a culture. In many parts of the world this objective factor is used to distinguish autochthonous ethnicities from each other. In this sense a language distribution map reflects the ethnic – or more precisely: the ethno-linguistic – structure in a certain area.
- 2 It is impossible to find generally accepted definitions of the political term “ethno-linguistic minority” and of the cultural term “ethnic group.” They may differ from country to country: in some parts of Europe ethnic or ethno-linguistic minorities are described as special groups within a state that differ from the majority population in terms of objective (cultural) and subjective (in the sense of group-awareness) factors. This definition includes a common determination to maintain the particular, historical status of an autochthonous linguistic community that is recognized in most European countries when a group has existed for about three generations in a given area (Veiter, 1984). In contrast, immigrants do form ethno-linguistic groups, but they are not counted as “ethno-linguistic minorities” in the Alpine region (therefore also in Italy) – as opposed to countries like the Netherlands, the U.S.A., Great Britain and Canada. For the Italian concept of linguistic minorities and the relationship between language and regional variety, as well as between dialect and minority, details are provided by Toso (2008).
- 3 More than any other area in Western Europe, the Italian Alps are home to great ethno-cultural diversity: there, apart from the Roma and Sinti and from the Jewish, no less than seven autochthonous linguistic minorities coexist side by side with the official majority – sometimes in close vicinity and mixed in an overlapping pattern: the Friulians, Slovenes, Germans, Ladins, French, Franco-Provençals, and Occitans. Therefore, this Alpine region

presents a good model to analyze ethno-linguistic identifications and multicultural problems (for instance through migration processes).

- 4 Given its cultural as well as socio-political relevance, in present-day Europe the preservation of ethno-linguistic minorities is no longer seriously in question. Even France, whose constitution does not allow the existence of such special groups within its territory, discovered in recent decades several legal and constitutional open options in order to maintain the so-called regional languages within Metropolitan France (Sanguin, 1993). Any ethno-linguistic development closely depends on the legal instruments available for the protection of a minority and – correspondingly – on the respective group organization. The spectrum of protective options in the Italian Alps ranges from cultural concessions, to democratic participation, up to economic and cultural autonomy.
- 5 With the Implementation Act No. 482 (Gazzetta Ufficiale n. 297, 20.12.1999) Italy now protects all its twelve autochthonous linguistic minorities (*minoranze linguistiche storiche*). Thus, it fulfills the provisions expressed in Articles 3 and 6 of the Italian Constitution (Salvi, 1975: p. 9), albeit with a 50-year delay. Orioles (2003: pp. 20-28) provides a deeper, critical insight into this new regulation.
- 6 In the context of the referenced law, municipal measures are being promoted that serve the preservation of the ethno-linguistic diversity. However, for decades special minority ordinances within the scope of international agreements, or from autonomy statutes, have existed for the German- and Ladin-speaking population of South Tyrol, the Slovenian speaking of the provinces Trieste and Gorizia and the French (Franco-provençal) speaking of the Aosta Valley.
- 7 The problems arising from the linguistic diversity in the Italian Alps have already been the subject of numerous scientific investigations. Therefore it could be presumed that the autochthonous ethno-linguistic minorities in the Italian Alps have been captured for some time in cartographic representations as detailed as the municipal level. Even though various scientific branches, specifically linguistics, have supplied numerous contributions to individual minority groups and their settlement areas, a comprehensive overview over their actual distribution is still outstanding. Such a mapping activity does not solely serve academic interests; it is indispensable for protective measures in the preservation of the linguistic mosaic. A major objective of the present project research is therefore to close this gap. Beyond that, the study seeks to highlight “diffuse ethnicity” as well as examine the current demographic reversals in the region of the Italian Alps in relation to their ethno-geographical dimension.
- 8 The contribution presented here builds on own research results as well as on two theses forming the core focus of a current research project at University of Innsbruck’s Department of Geography:¹

Thesis 1: In the Italian Alps, ambiguity still exists over the exact distribution of the autochthonous linguistic minorities. This extends even to the point where the ethno-linguistic self-assessment of individual communities agrees no longer with the objective (linguistic) findings. Regulations for the protection of minorities could thereby be taken to the point of absurdity, specifically if no one speaks the minority language any longer.

Thesis 2: The preservation of the linguistic minorities in the Italian Alps has been complicated by “diffuse ethnicity” and by decades of depopulation of mountainous areas. Furthermore, the present demographic shift also threatens the ethnic diversity. New

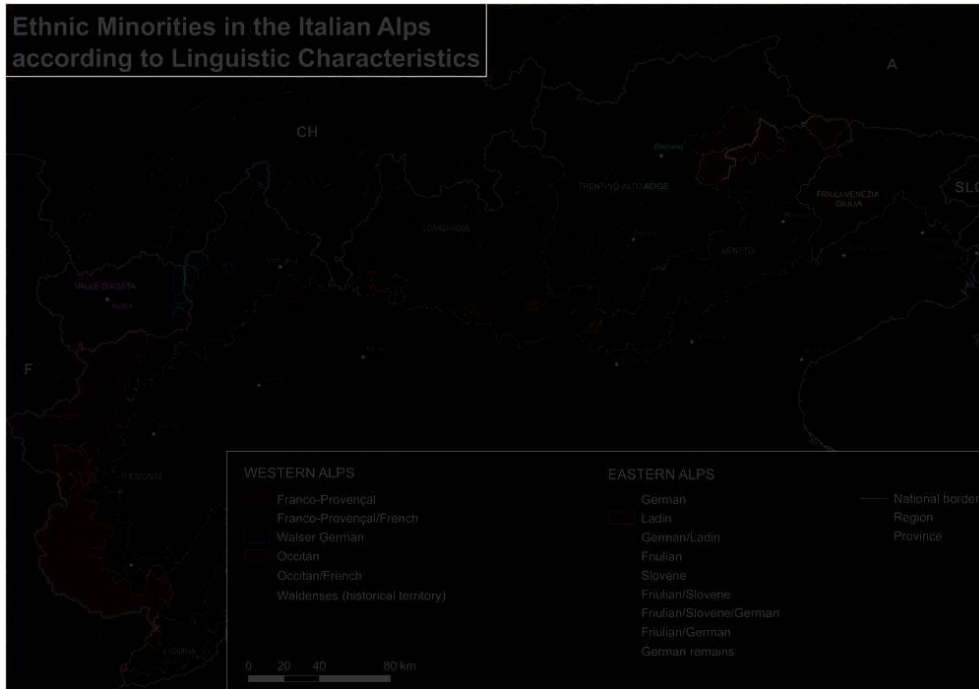
immigration in form of amenity(-led) migration now adds to the minorization of the smaller linguistic groups (cf. UNESCO, 2009) in their own territories.

- 9 This study follows the concept of relativized constructivism (Heller, 2004), i.e. it argues that ethnic framing cannot be seen solely in terms of constructivism but also from a primordial or objective point of view. Thus, language affiliation plays a decisive role. The contribution is based on the one hand on analysis of the current state of the art, specifically on results to this issue presented by University of Innsbruck geographers in the last decade (e.g. Steinicke, 2007), as well as on own analysis of official statistical data. It is on the other hand derived from own surveys in the course of investigative visits among all ethno-linguistic minorities of the Italian Alpine arch (2009/10). In the minority areas, experts were questioned about the ethnic boundaries with the neighboring room. Generally these experts were persons in responsible positions in the communities, as well as representatives of different cultural associations. In addition, written surveys were conducted with different communities and villages. The chapters below aim to provide first results.

Spatial distribution, minority affiliation, and size

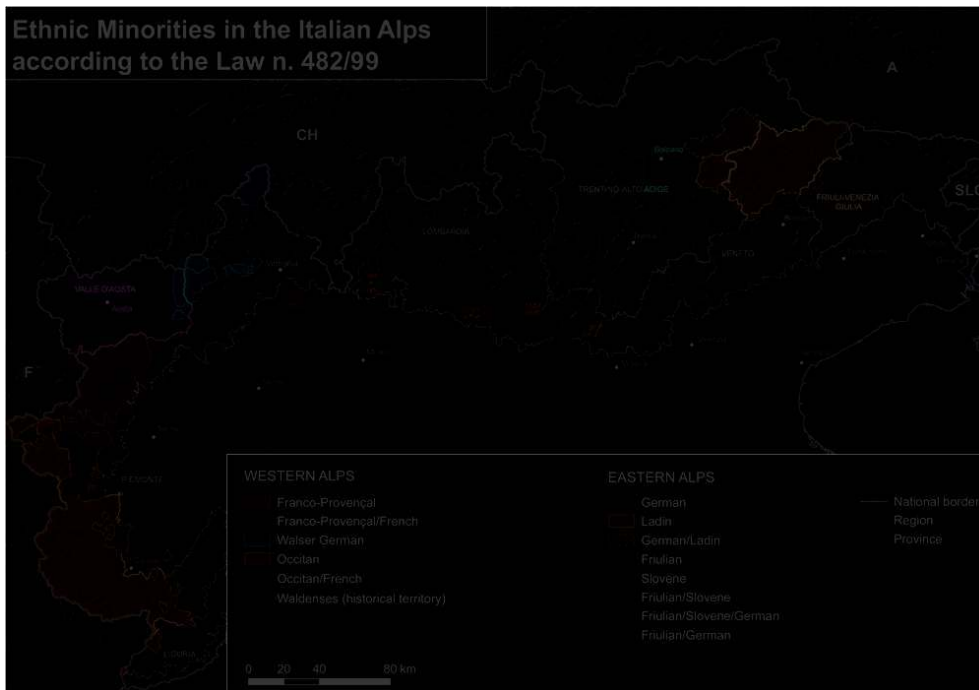
- 10 The current state of research on status and ethno-politics of the autochthonous linguistic minorities in Italy is discussed in Walder, Löffler and Steinicke (2010). Attempts at relevant cartographic implementations can be found among others in Salvi (1975), Pellegrini (1977), Telmon (1992), Orioles (2003), as well as in Toso (2008). However, due to the selected level of scale – the Alpine region and/or Italy and adjacent areas – they are usually limited to a schematic representation. Small language groups and islands are sometimes characterized only symbolically and are thereby spatially difficult to assign, in part due to cartographic generalization. Further complications in accurate distinction of the various ethnic groups arise from overlapping linguistic structures, as in the Ladin-Venetian-Italian or in the Provençal-Piedmontese-Italian language contact zones. Moreover, subjective ethno-linguistic allocations are present in these areas that deviate from the objective linguistic findings. Finally, minority areas are further defined by official ordinances, which largely ignore objective and subjective criteria for ethnicity.
- 11 This study offers a current map of the distribution of the language minorities in the Italian Alps on a municipal basis (fig. 1). It appeared reasonable to first and foremost work with a foundation of objective characteristics, i.e. actual linguistic usage.
- 12 As already addressed, in Italy a demarcation can also be made on the basis of juridical conditions, which is to be viewed in the context of State Law No. 482/99 and the associated financial incentives. For this reason it was necessary to create a second map (fig. 2) in which the minority areas were to be defined according to legal criteria, i.e. municipal self-assessment.

Fig. 1: “Minoranze linguistiche storiche” in the Italian Alps (according to the objective characteristic: use of language in everyday life)



Source: Walder, Löffler and Steinicke (2010; modified by the authors)

Fig. 2: “Minoranze linguistiche storiche” in the Italian Alps (according to municipal self-assessment 2007 in the context of State Law No. 482/99)



Source: Walder, Löffler and Steinicke (2010; modified by the authors)

- 13 Thus far the municipalities have actively taken advantage of this opportunity² – an expression of the desire for protection of ethno-linguistic identity or an ethnically

privileged position. Our research showed, however, that many Italian municipalities regard the new legal situation from a purely political-pragmatic perspective. For example, a certain ethno-linguistic self-assessment can be beneficial in gaining federal financial allowances. An examination of the eligibility for funding is often barely possible due to missing or unclear demarcations of minority areas.

- 14 It appears therefore reasonable to contrast the map of the various language groups by objective criteria with that of all the communities that declare themselves, according to Law No. 482/99, minority communities (cf. fig. 1 and 2). Thus, the spatial differences between local self-attribution and actual usage of minority languages become clear. For these reasons it is not surprising that the minority areas are to be represented more sparsely in fig. 2 – even though public financial support for *minoranze linguistiche storiche* based on Law No. 482 was significantly reduced some years ago.
- 15 Next to the large minority territories – in the Western Alps, in Friuli or South Tyrol – the minorities live scattered in small linguistic islands. In the “territorial expansions” highlighted in fig. 2, especially the German group stands out. Thus, in areas of former, long disappeared German language pockets these ethnic origins are now remembered, specifically in the so-called “Zimbern area” (north of Verona and Vicenza). In the Alpego (at the border to Friuli) municipalities suddenly declare themselves German-speaking because Bavarian colonists had also been in this region in the high Middle Ages. In the Walser areas of the Western Alps we can find parallel structures: even though in some of them the local population does not speak the German dialect anymore, the municipalities’ assessment argues that they are still linguistic minorities.
- 16 It is further understandable that the communities in the Agordino and Cadore, where the Ladin language towards the south gradually merges into the Venetian dialect (cf. Pellegrini, 1977), also want to benefit from the advantages of the new law and declare themselves accordingly a Ladin minority area. Therefore, in fig. 2 “Ladinia” is no longer restricted to the Dolomite territory of the “old Tyrol” and the Comelico area.
- 17 In the Piedmont region, in the fringe area of the Alps, there are many “gray areas” in which minority languages mix with Italian and where the Piedmontese dialect tends to supersede the Occitan. Although better preserved in the posterior and higher locations of the valleys, where the influence of Italian and Piedmontese is not as strong, in the larger settlements and centers of the various valleys the minority languages are comparatively little used, or no longer at all (Allasino et al., 2007).
- 18 In the regions of the Aosta Valley and South Tyrol-Trentino, the linguistic minorities enjoy generous protection as a result of the autonomy statutes, while all the outlying language groups, especially the smaller ones, progressively lose native speakers. Table 1 indicates the linguistic proportion, although exact figures are available only for South Tyrol, where the number of speakers of each language is determined by census. The other figures are based on well-founded estimations.

Table 1: Numerical size of the individual linguistic minorities in the Italian Alps 2009

Linguistic Minorities	Region	No. of Speakers (approx.)
Franco-Provençal/French	Aosta Valley	70.000
Franco-Provençal/French	Piedmont	20.000
Occitan/Provençal	Piedmont	40.000
Walser German	Aosta Valley	600
Walser German	Piedmont	400
German	South Tyrol	300.000
German language pockets and Valcanale	Friuli and Venetia	3.400
Friulian	Friuli (alpine region)	60.000
Ladin	Sella	33.000
Ladin	Comelico	6.000
Slovene	Valcanale, Resia, Slavia	10.000

Source: Walder, Löffler and Steinicke (2010: p. 183)

Problems of ethno-linguistic identification

- 19 The close symbiosis between the various linguistic groups in the Alps (fig. 1) has enhanced ethnic self-estrangement. Furthermore, the condition of “diffuse ethnicity” presents a significant obstacle to the preservation of linguistic minorities. Some examples may illustrate this phenomenon.
- 20 Because of distinct, subjective factors of ethnicity, the population of the various German language pockets in the Alps (fig. 1 and 2) may only conditionally be regarded as national minorities, even though the core area of their language lies in another country. The examples Gressoney in the Aosta Valley and Timau in Northern Friuli appropriately demonstrate their general situation in the Western Alps as well as in the Eastern Alps (Steinicke and Piok, 2003). The major task of the respective cultural organization in both communities is to prevent factors which impact unfavorably on the maintenance of these minorities. While the stakeholders of the Walser Association of Gressoney support contacts with other German-speaking areas (cf. Petite, 2009) and the teaching of standard German, those of the Cultural Circle of Timau focus on their own village and only promote the local German dialect, which is considered a proper language. Both organizations have been able to strengthen the ethno-linguistic identity among the local population. Nevertheless, there are fundamental differences between Timau and Gressoney: similar to the situation in other language pockets of the Eastern Alps, the people of Timau, while being conscious about their historical and linguistic origins, do not accept being considered a part of the German civilization. In Gressoney, however,

local people as well as newcomers claim to be members of the Walser community, irrespective of whether or not they speak the Walser German dialect. It is true that these “diffuse ethnicities” may not be very helpful for the preservation of the German dialects, but we are witnessing the emergence of a new awareness, whereby standard language and language competency no longer constitute the most important elements for identifying ethnic groups. Instead, ethnic identity is increasingly expressed through subjective factors (ethnic self-assessment), as well as in the relationship to the respective village.

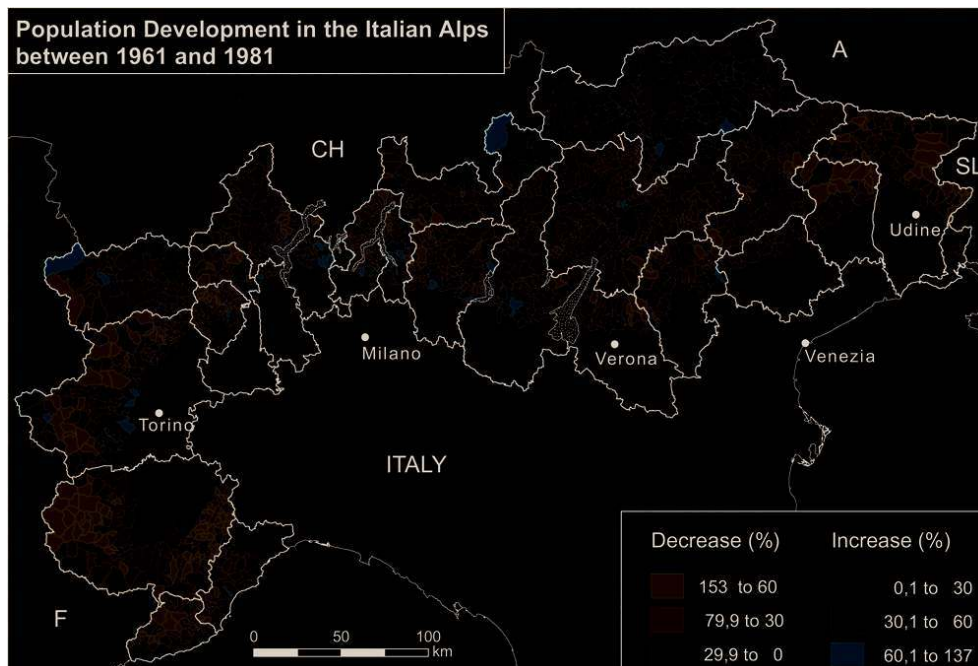
- 21 In terms of linguistic diversity, the quadrilingual Valcanale (Slovene, German, Friulian, and Italian) and the trilingual Val Resia (Slovene, Friulian, Italian) in the extreme northeastern part of Italy represent the core area of the Alps.
- 22 Like South Tyrol, the Valcanale/Kanalska dolina/Valcjanâl/Kanaltal is the region Italy claimed from Austria in 1919 (Vavti and Steinicke, 2005). At present, approximately 20 percent of the total population of about 6,000 in the Valcanale are Slovenes and Germans. Both ethnic groups gradually decline in numbers. The reasons for this are assimilation (intermarriage and problems of ethno-linguistic identification) and to a certain extent also out-migration and birth deficits. Research results show that elderly people in the Valcanale choose local and regional identifications to avoid conflicts with the majority population, the so-called “others.” Nevertheless, they still use their autochthonous languages in every day communication, whereas the younger generations more or less only speak Italian. A school system where the Slovene language did not exist for decades is one of the reasons for the lack of knowledge of Slovene. Education and schooling outside of the Valcanale, e.g. in Tolmezzo, Udine, Gorizia, Trieste, or in Carinthia, in Villach and Klagenfurt, push young people from their homes. Later many of them find work in these areas.
- 23 As a consequence, ethno-linguistic segregation in the Valcanale has largely disappeared; young people do not have problems with the so-called “others” anymore. Thus, one can observe multilingualism (mixed or multiple identities) or simply an Italian national identity. Within the younger generation the Slovene and German languages will likely be lost within the next twenty years. Most of the autochthonous inhabitants have chosen the way of assimilation because they do not want to come into conflict with the Italian or Friulian majority population. Nevertheless, among parts of the younger generation a kind of “symbolic ethnicity” can be seen: they still like and cultivate heritage and the old local customs (Christmas and wedding rituals or architectural styles), but as mentioned, they often are no longer able to speak the autochthonous languages. Consequently, in everyday communication Italian is the predominant language.
- 24 Unlike the Valcanale, in the past centuries the Resia Valley was cut off from linguistic developments (Steinicke, 1991). It has thus kept outdated linguistic and cultural features that have been preserved until today. Already in the 18th and 19th century, Polish, Russian and Ukrainian academics came to this valley to study its archaic Slavic dialect and to compose dictionaries. All agreed that the Resian dialect was not based on the Slovene language. Although antiquated, this assessment – still supported by local actors in a Resian cultural association – has largely influenced the ethnic identity of the local people. These stakeholders even developed a proper codification for their idiom. Consequently a good portion of the autochthonous Slovene Resians does not want to be counted as Slovenes and does not identify the archaic village dialects as part of the Slovene language. They tend to express local identification through their relationship to

their respective villages rather than through any self-perception that ties them to the Slovene culture. Furthermore, in his expert interviews Steinicke (1991) discovered that some of the Resian residents – in terms of ethnicity – even feel as Russians! There is no doubt that this distinct self-perception is not in the least helpful to preserve this small minority in times of globalization.

Demographic transformation

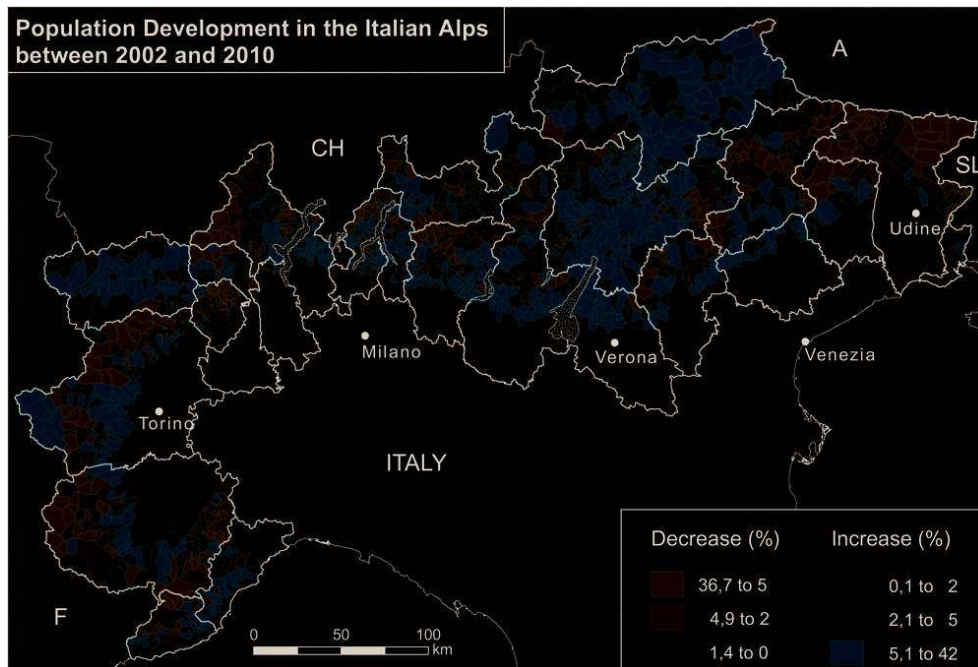
- 25 After WWII in the Italian Alps, except in South Tyrol, adverse natural and socio-agrarian factors as well as a lack of non-agricultural job opportunities led to a massive depopulation that lasted well into the 1970s. Fig. 3 illustrates this out-migration period. Depopulation in the Italian Alps has undoubtedly decreased since the 1980s, and from 1990 onwards the majority of the Alpine communities has been growing (fig. 4).

Fig. 3: Italian Alps: Population Development 1951 - 1980



Source: <http://www.comuni-italiani.it> (calculations and cartography by the authors)

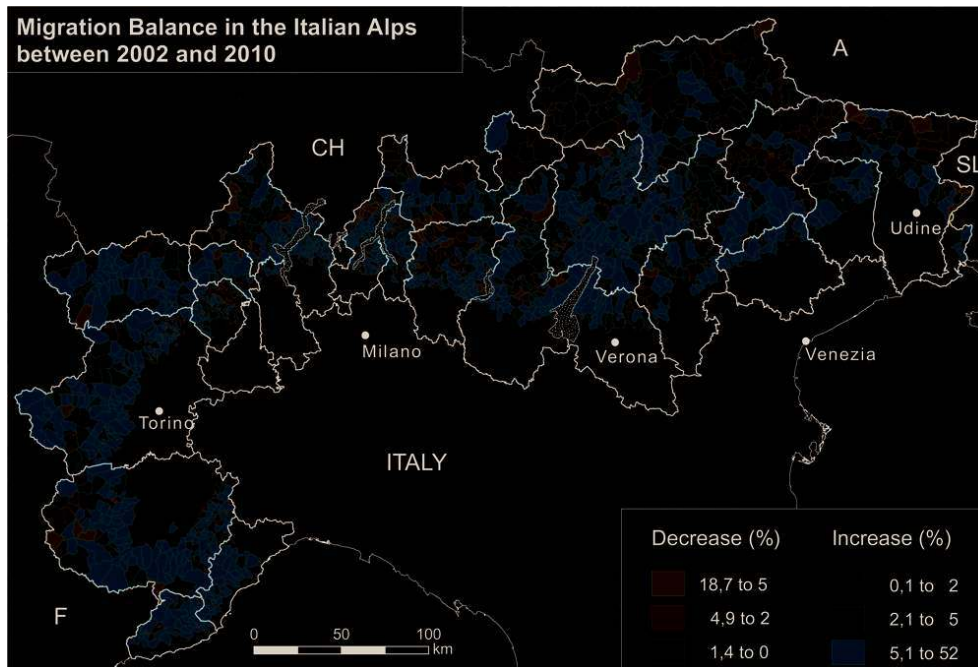
Fig. 4: Italian Alps: Population Development 2002 - 2010



Source: ISTAT - <http://www.demo.istat.it> (calculations and cartography by the authors)

- 26 While immigration until a few years ago concentrated mainly around central Alpine areas with strong economic, tourism and transportation connections, our analyses show that peripherally located Italian Alpine communities progressively accomplish a positive migration balance (fig. 5). Regardless of the population development since the early 1990s, there are still areas evident with some significant population losses. Even today the effects of unfavorable bio-demographic factors resulting from the migration period can be observed in many Italian Alpine communities.

Fig. 5: Italian Alps: Migration Balance 2002 - 2010



Source: ISTAT - <http://www.demo.istat.it> (calculations and cartography by the authors)

- 27 With this study we could identify for the first time that more and more municipalities in the Italian Alpine region that were characterized by population losses in the last decades now show in part remarkable influx and thereby population gains. Overall, the newcomers originate mainly from Italian-speaking areas or from abroad. The results of our interviews, however, indicated a distinction between the foothills and the interior of the Alps. The population gains in the foothills can be explained through interaction with the Padanian cities and constitute therefore a process of suburbanization or exurbanization (with daily commuting). On the other hand, the newcomers in the interior of the Alps are:
- remigrants who want to retire in their villages (and homes) of origin;
 - migrants mostly from eastern and southeastern Europe and Turkey;
 - amenity-led migrants (urban refugees).
- 28 In the context of the indicated current demographic trend reversal in the Italian Alps, amenity(-led) migration plays a significant role. This phenomenon represents a shift in preference of residential location from the urban space to remote, but attractive rural (mountainous) regions. It is the driving force behind the present settlement expansion and the current population growth in numerous Italian Alpine communities. Weekend and leisure homes become increasingly additional or retirement residences, which means that the time spent in the target area expands significantly. As more and more people are no longer confined to their places of work, the motivation to also transfer work-related aspects to the “new” residence is high. These characteristics – greater length and frequency of stay and paid occupation at the destination – are the key differences between amenity migrants and tourists.

Synthesis

- 29 In our project we emphasize that problems of the distinct ethno-linguistic identification as well as processes of depopulation and re-settlement of peripheral regions carry potential for considerable ethno-cultural changes.
- 30 From 1990 onwards the re-settling of peripheral high mountain regions can be seen as a completely new process. Amenity migration leads urban refugees to the various Alpine valleys, where they influence the ethno-linguistic structure. This process affects smaller autochthonous linguistic minorities, which may gradually disappear altogether.
- 31 Figures 1 and 2 offer not only a community-specific overview of the ethno-linguistic situation in the Italian Alps, but demonstrate at the same time that a current minority area, as defined through the use of the minority language in everyday life, is not always consistent with the ethnic self-assessment of the municipalities. This reflects the political dilemma of establishing appropriate strategies for effective protection of minorities and confirms the supposition that measures for their protection can fall short of the actual objective. Although nothing can be argued against a wide promotion of linguistic revitalization outside the minority areas that are still intact, too little financial support is available for their preservation. The best example provides the "neo Ladinisme" in the region of Veneto.
- 32 Not only future policies, but also "diffuse ethnicity" and demographic developments will have an impact on the survival of the autochthonous linguistic minorities, as articulated in Thesis 2. In this respect, this study seeks to make aware of the current demographic trend in the Italian high mountains: from approximately 1990 on, ever more municipalities with former population deficits accomplish a positive migratory balance. Earlier, when mainly the economically induced migration or the birth deficit contributed to the depletion of linguistic minorities, assimilation progressed only insignificantly in peripheral areas. In contrast, the minority members are presently subjected to a greater assimilation process, which first becomes apparent in the disappearance of minority languages from daily life. This also confirms the second thesis – that, brought on by the new influx in form of amenity migration, the linguistic minorities are becoming minor constituents in their inherent territories.

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NOTES

1. Austrian Science Fund/FWF Project (P20954-G03) “The Impact of Current Demographic Transformation on Ethno-Linguistic Minorities in the Italian Alps.”
2. Of course these activities of the municipalities represent a corresponding set of individual actions of various stakeholders in the communities. Regarding the moot question whether groups, besides individuals, can also in fact act, the connection of “complexity and contingency”

discussed by Luhmann (1984) should be pointed out. According to this, it is entirely possible to speak of *acting groups* as well as of *collective actions*. The emergence of actions of a municipality is indeed so complex that contingency simply remains acceptable.

ABSTRACTS

More than any other area in Western Europe, the Alps, especially the Italian Alps, are home to great ethno-cultural diversity: there, no less than seven autochthonous linguistic minorities coexist side by side with the respective official majority. Now being considered an important cultural heritage by the state as well as by the regions, new legislation offers protection to all 'linguistic-historic minorities' in Italy. Our study shows, however, that it is quite difficult to maintain such groups, since it is largely unknown where exactly the minority areas are situated. Based on that, local actor groups in various communities take advantage of this lack of knowledge and declare themselves minority territories although they show no linguistic varieties. An important objective of this project is therefore to present a cartographic representation of this linguistic diversity. Subsequently, the contribution discusses case studies of distinct ethno-linguistic self-awareness. Even though with Law No. 482 a first important step was taken to preserve the linguistic minorities, their progressive decline by territorial and numerical criteria cannot be denied. Today, besides unfavorable bio-demographic factors and "diffuse ethnicity," other causes are current demographic processes. In this framework the amenity migrants, those new immigrants who have discovered the mountains as a new, desirable settlement space, play a decisive role by reinforcing the assimilation process.

Les Alpes, plus précisément les Alpes italiennes, plus que toute autre région d'Europe Occidentale, sont un lieu de grande diversité ethnoculturelle : pas moins de sept minorités linguistiques autochtones y coexistent, côte à côte avec la majorité officielle correspondante. Maintenant considérées comme un héritage culturel important par les états ainsi que par les régions, une nouvelle législation offre une protection à toutes les « minorités linguistiques historiques » en Italie. Notre étude montre, cependant, qu'il est très difficile de maintenir de tels groupes, car on ne sait pas vraiment où se situent exactement les zones de ces minorités. Partant de là, des groupes d'acteurs locaux, dans de nombreuses communautés, tirent partie de ce manque de connaissance et se déclarent territoires de minorité bien qu'ils ne présentent aucune variante linguistique. Un des objectifs importants de ce projet est, donc, d'établir une représentation cartographique de cette diversité linguistique. Ce document, par conséquent, traite d'études de cas de conscience ethnolinguistique distincte. Même si la Loi n° 482 a été un premier pas important pour la préservation des minorités linguistiques, leur déclin progressif, selon les critères territoriaux et numériques, ne peut pas être nié. Aujourd'hui, outre des facteurs biodémographiques défavorables et une « ethnicité diffuse », les processus démographiques en cours constituent d'autres causes. Dans ce cadre, les migrants d'agrément, ces nouveaux immigrants qui ont découvert les montagnes comme un nouvel espace d'installation recherché, jouent un rôle décisif en renforçant le processus d'assimilation.

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Keywords: amenity migration, demographic change, ethnic identity, Italian Alps, minorities

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