

The impact of current demographic transformation on ethno-linguistic minorities in the Alps

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Abstract

This contribution seeks to analyse the impact of globalisation on the demographic and ethno-cultural processes in the Alps. It builds on various theses about processes of depopulation and re-settlement of peripheral Alpine regions, forming the core focus of a current research project. The study refers to the fact that mountain depopulation, which seriously threatens the existence of smaller ethno-cultural minorities, is largely based on bio-demographic trends. Indeed, first research results show a clear downturn of the minority population, e.g. some valleys with Slovene and Friulian settlements are losing their last residents at the very present. Subsequently, most of the numerous abandoned Alpine valleys offer themselves as areas for re-settlement. Pull factors for this new process will be amenity driven migration benefiting from the big and favourable real estate market. Simultaneously, the abandoned valleys offer themselves as new potential settlement sites for immigrants from poorer countries. This would ensure that the Alps remain a multi-cultural space.

Keywords: Alps, amenity migration, depopulation, ethnic minorities

The goal of this paper is to highlight the impact of globalisation on the demographic and ethno-cultural processes in the Alps, specifically in the Eastern Alps. The contribution presented here builds on own research results (among other methods partly structured interviews, mapping, and analyses of official statistics), as well as on two theses forming the core focus of a current research project at University of Innsbruck's Department of Geography. The chapters below seek to provide basic information about this project and first results.

Before presenting the theses, it seems to be advantageous to offer an insight into the ethnic structure of the Alps (Salvi 1975, Steinicke 1991b, 1998b, 2002b, 2007). Nowhere else in Western Europe is there a greater ethno-cultural diversity than in the Alps – especially in the region of the Eastern Alps, with its small ethnic cultural patterns. In this area, Europe's three most important language families meet – the Slavics, Romans and Germanics. Within the Alpine region no fewer than nine distinct ethnic groups, majorities and minorities, have settled next to each other and sometimes mixed in an overlapping pattern. It appears, however, hopeless to offer a map representing the whole autochthonous ethnic structure in a satisfying way: Apart from technical presentation problems (tiny language pockets vs. relatively wide minority regions), there are different perceptions of ethnicities (e.g. in the Ladin-Venetian-Italian and in the Piedmontese-Provençal-Italian linguistic contact zones), as well as “diffuse ethnicities” (Steinicke 1991a).

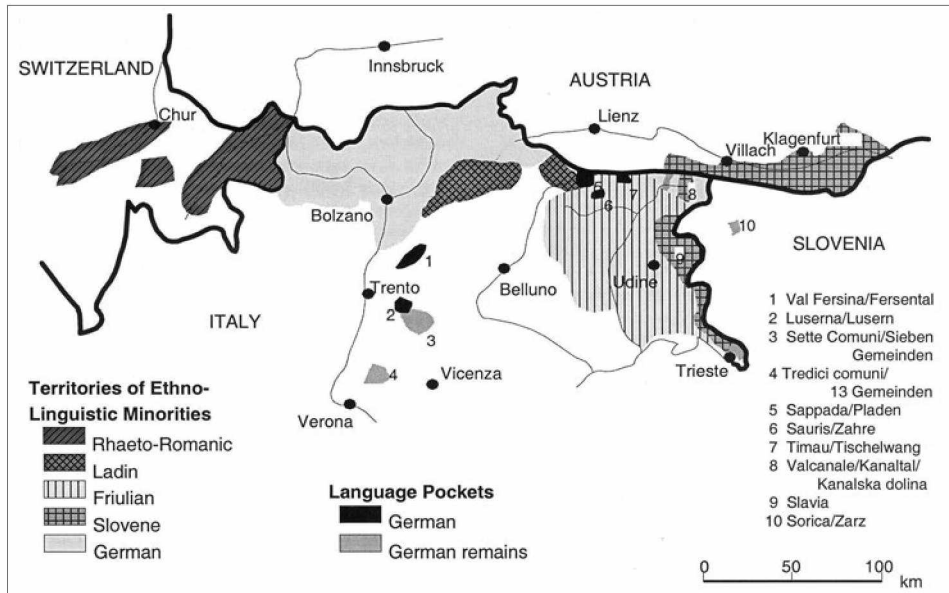


Figure 1: Ethno-linguistic minorities in the Eastern Alps (Steinicke 2002b).

Moreover, it is impossible to find a generally accepted definition for what constitutes an “ethnic minority” (Veiter 1984, Steinicke 2002a, 2005). The definition may differ from country to country. For example, in the Alpine region ethnic minorities are described as special groups within a state, which differ from the majority population in terms of objective (cultural) and subjective (sense of group-awareness) factors. This definition includes a common determination to retain its special status, as well as a certain status as an autochthonous (historic) group which is legally recognised, provided such a group has existed for at least three generations (holding citizenship) at a given place. Guest workers and immigrants from Turkey or South-eastern Europe do form ethnic groups in the countries of the Alps, but they are not designated “ethnic minorities.” Countries like The Netherlands, the U.S., Great Britain, and Canada take a quite different view. In these countries immigrants may be readily grouped into the category “ethnic minorities.” In the Alps the various ethnic groups may be distinguished from each through linguistic characteristics. Thus, in order to be more precise the term “ethno-linguistic group” should be preferred over the less specific term “ethnic group.” Only few states and regions have managed to come up with satisfactory rules and regulations based on legal-democratic principles, which govern the rights of minorities. This does not only represent a permanent potential for conflict. The lack of such a regulatory system has also led to a situation whereby small ethnic groups are facing outright extinction.

Apart from Italians, French, Germans, and Slovenes representing the majority population in the various states, in the Alpine region we find numerous ethno-linguistic minorities, which may be grouped as follows:

- National minorities: These are groups whose main area of settlement lies in the neighbouring countries, which is where the centre of their culture and language is located. They find themselves in an other country as a result of arbitrary borders or of border changes. South Tyrol, the Valcanale, and Venetian Slovenia (Slavia) are national minority areas in the Italian part of the Eastern Alps; the Slovenes in the southern part of Carinthia, however, constitute a national minority in Austria.
- German language pockets: Because of distinct, subjective factors of ethnicity ("diffuse ethnicity"), the population of the various German-language pockets in the Alps may only conditionally be regarded as national minorities (Steinicke & Piok 2003), although the core area of their language lies in an other country. All of them are a result of the expansive settlement policies of the High Middle Ages – when Allemannic (from the Valais Valley) and Bavarian (from Tyrol and Carinthia) colonists were settled to the south of the homogeneous German-speaking lands.
- Indigenous (domestic) territorial minority groups: An indigenous territorial minority group is an individualistic ethnic group within a given state whose area of settlement forms the core of a distinct language and culture in this world. Contrary to national minorities and language pockets, such a group is generally self-reliant, with few or no prospects for assistance from any other country or region. In the Alps the representatives of such minority groups are the Occitans (Provençals) and Valdotains (Franco-Provençals) in the Western, the Friulians in the Eastern parts, the Ladins in the Dolomites, and the Rhaeto-Romanic speakers in Switzerland.

This typology is applied to understand the process of assimilation, which is more intensive within German language pockets and domestic territory minority groups. The three categories, however, are not characterised by demographic differences - as this study shows.

Apart from the South Tyroleans (and the Trieste-Slovenes), none of the minorities mentioned above have ever been counted by the state since WW II. Based on the estimation of Salvi (1975) and on own assessments (Steinicke 1991b, Steinicke & Piok 2003), the sum total of the ethno-linguistic minorities in the Alps (without the French part) may amount to a population of 550,000, whereby the Germans (350,000 people), Friulians (65,000), and the Franco-Provençals (60,000) constitute the largest groups.

Nowhere in the Alps can we find an ethnic minority group whose territory is expanding (Steinicke 2007). Territorial constancy can be found with the German- and Ladin-speaking groups in South Tyrol. However, all other groups are suffering from territorial regression, with a simultaneous shrinking of the minority population. Up to the present, the minority groups in France and Italy (i.e. except the Germans and Ladins of South Tyrol, as well as the Franco-Provençal and German-speaking population of the Aosta Valley) enjoy but few cultural privileges. As a result, we witness a marked numerical decline of the various minorities. As shown above, there are distinct framework conditions, which hamper the preservation of minorities, such as,

for example, of the Ladins outside South Tyrol, the Friulians, the Slovenes, and of the German-speakers in the language pockets of northern Italy. Apart from both the process of assimilation to the majority population, and the condition of diffuse ethnicity analysed and presented sufficiently already in other studies of the author (e.g. Steinicke 1991a, 2007), the decrease of the minority population is closely related to the demographic development in the Alps after WWII.

This leads us to the theses:

Thesis 1: Increasing globalisation causes and intensifies concentration tendencies not only in the field of economy, but also with regard to demography: The only Alpine areas experiencing significant population growth are selected major valleys, as well as those high-altitude valleys specialised in tourism. At the same time, however, peripheral areas are becoming less important. Nevertheless, in Alpine areas with population losses the negative migratory balance will no longer be decisive; instead, bio-demographic factors (e.g. high proportion of older people and related birth deficits) will become more relevant. Mountain depopulation, which is largely based on bio-demographic trends, seriously threatens the existence of smaller ethno-cultural minorities. A core area typifying this development are the Friulian Alps.

Bätzing (2002) summarised the population development in the Alps based on the community level for the period 1951 to 2000. Figures 2 and 3 seek to illustrate the development of the demographic problem regions in the Alps.

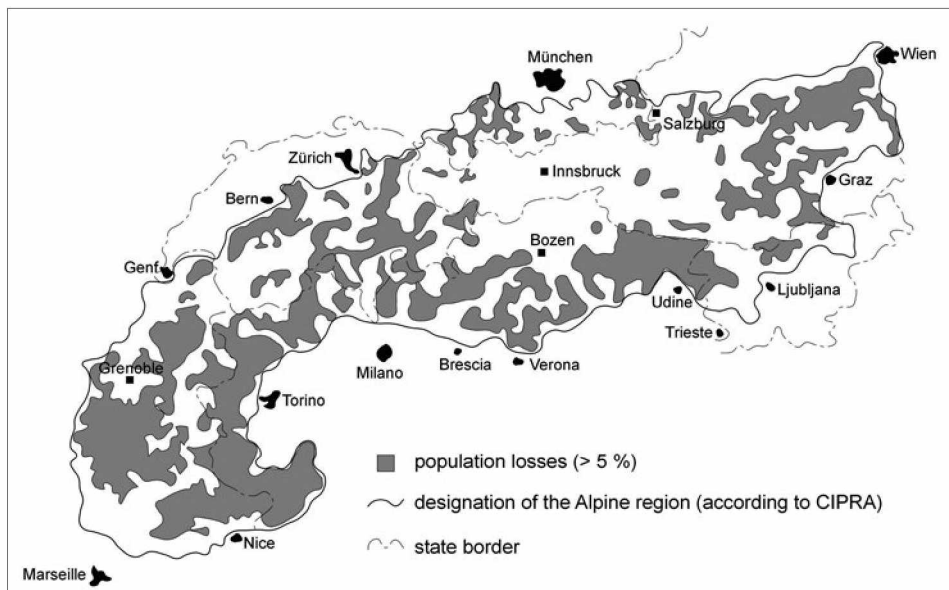


Figure 2: Alpine areas with depopulation 1951 and 1981 (Source: Steinicke & Löffler 2007).

Between 1951 and 1981, great parts of the Alps were affected by population losses, especially the French and Italian Alps. Substantial areas of the Swiss and Slovenian Alps and the eastern part of the Austrian Alps, too, are characterised by a significant population decrease. In the 1960s, the emergence of mass tourism and steadily improving infrastructure were the initial factors that stopped the emigration process in various rural high mountain zones, specifically in most parts of Tyrol, Vorarlberg, South Tyrol and Bavaria, as well as in some Swiss Alpine regions. In this period numerous tourism-oriented second homes and apartments were established (Comité National Français de Géographie 1984, Bätzing et al. 1993, Bartaletti 2004, Borsdorf 2005).

- Between 1981 and 2000, positive migration balances stopped the population decline in various regions of the Alps: primarily in the south and in the west of the French Alps, as well as in most parts of Switzerland and Bavaria. The situation in Tyrol and South Tyrol, however, did not change: most communities still reported considerable population increase. Nevertheless, in Styria, Carinthia, in the Slovenian Alps, but specifically in the Italian Alps, the majority of communities are still affected by population decrease, although many of them have become in-migration areas (cf. below). This phenomenon does not appear in our map (figure 3) because the large waves of emigration have left behind unfavourable bio-demographic structures causing further population losses.

The Venetian mountain region is an appropriate example to demonstrate these demographic changes (Steinicke 1991b, Čede & Steinicke 2007). It has not shared in the economic upswing that the foothills and the southern plains have experienced

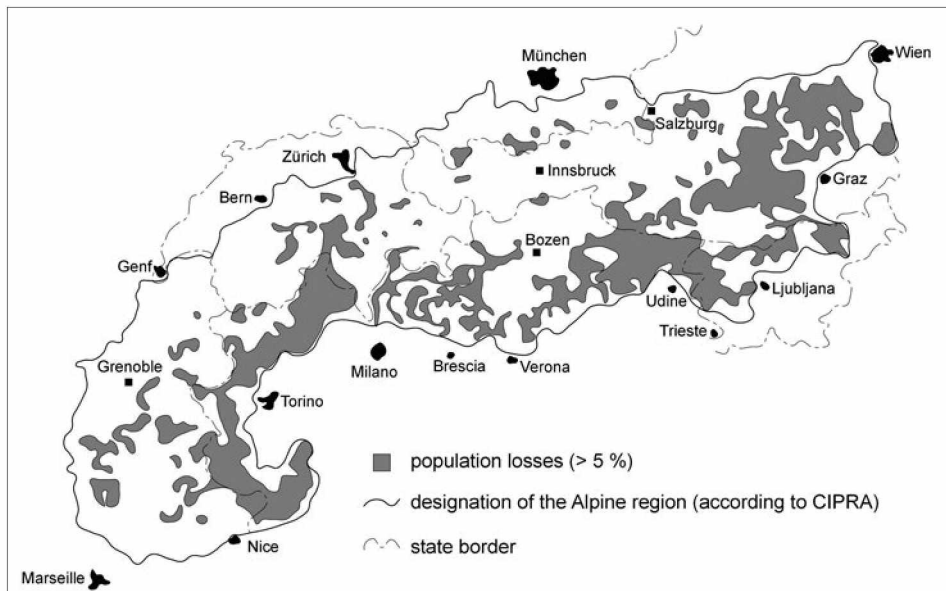


Figure 3: Alpine areas with depopulation 1981 and 2000 (Source: Steinicke & Löffler 2007).

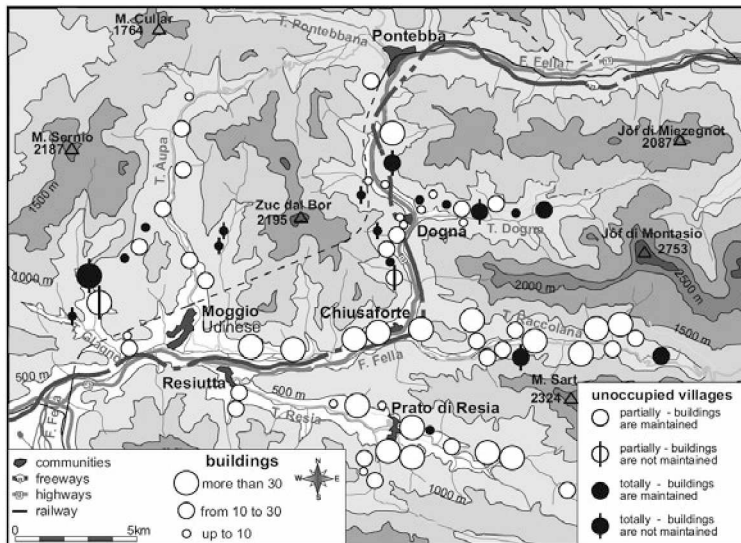


Figure 4: Ghost towns in Northern Friuli 2006. Source: Cede and Steinicke (2007); modified.

since 1970. In 1990, most of its subregions, in particular the Friulian Alps, belonged to those Italian areas that suffered the heaviest population losses in Italy since the Second World War. While lately it has been possible to expand job opportunities considerably, demographic figures still show a downturn in the mountain regions' population. In some parts of the Friulian Alps there is even a mass of completely abandoned villages ("ghost towns"; figure 4). Although the large waves of emigration already tapered off, they have left behind a skewed ratio of older people to the population as a whole. This, in turn, has been accompanied by rising death and falling birth rates. The population losses in the Friulian Alps, however, have become less (table 1; cf. also figure 5).

In fact, the depopulation of the Italian Alps promises negative effects not only for the smaller minorities such as Germans and Slovenes. The local population as a whole is diminishing. This further enhanced population losses to such a degree that

Table 1: Depopulation in the Friulian Alps (1951–2006).

Periode	Population losses p.a. (%)
1951–06	1.18
1951–61	1.05
1961–71	2.29
1971–81	1.09
1981–91	0.97
1991–01	0.72
2001–06	0.28

Source: ISTAT 1964; <http://www.demo.istat.it>; calculations by the author.

in some valleys of Friuli the local population has vanished altogether. There are parallel structures in the Italian Western Alps (Bätzing et al. 1996) that affect particularly the valleys populated by Occitans. Thus, smaller ethnic groups such as the German-speaking language pockets have been halved since WW II. Some valleys with Slovene and Friulian settlements are losing their last residents at the very present (Steinicke & Piok 2003, Čede & Steinicke 2007; cf. figure 4).

In the next phase of this research project we will also seek to map the distribution of all the autochthonous ethno-linguistic minorities and to present them on a map. As mentioned already, this cartographic activity has not yet been done in a satisfying way. This project attempts to close this gap. Moreover, as one result of our research we seek to provide an estimation of those minorities whose population size is still unknown (Occitans, German language pockets, Ladins of the Bellunese, Slovenes in the Friulian Resia-, Torre-, and Natisone Valleys).

Thesis 2: Subsequently, most of the numerous, abandoned Alpine valleys offer themselves as areas for re-settlement. Pull factors for this new process will be amenity migration benefiting from the big and favourable real estate market. This process will change the autochthonous ethnic structure.

At the beginning of the investigations we cannot yet address this issue sufficiently. Nevertheless, first analyses show that from the mid 1990s onwards, a new demographic trend has developed in the Italian Alps: Since that time the re-settling of peripheral high mountain regions can be seen as a completely new process. In the French parts of the Western Alps it has already resulted in population growth (Coy & Steinicke 2007; figures 2 and 3). This current tendency of reverse migration to remote areas in the entire Alpine region, which of course does not occur in all high-altitude zones, shows marked similarities with the ongoing process of amenity migration in the Californian Sierra Nevada (Löffler & Steinicke 2006, 2007). An essential point of our research project is to analyse the impact of amenity migration on the ethnic cultural processes in the Alps.

The phenomenon of “amenity migration” constitutes a relatively new area of research. By this term Moss refers to “people moving into the mountains to reside year-round or intermittently, principally because of their actual and perceived greater environmental quality and cultural differentiation” (Moss 2003). Following him, amenity migrants typically come from highly urbanised centres, are motivated by a desire to escape from negative metropolitan conditions, and they became acquainted with their new place of residence by past leisure based experiences. Tourism, however, is not seen as a part of amenity migration. Tourists typically visit without the intention to reside or earn a living in their destinations, while amenity migrants intend to settle in their destinations permanently, seasonally (one or more periods in a year), or intermittently (moving among their residences more frequently). Nevertheless, tourism plays an important role because it could be seen as a first step to amenity migration (Price et al. 1997, Moss 2003, 2006).

In the Alps, three patterns of amenity settlement exist: First, in some areas amenity migration has already led to population growth and settlement expansion. Second, due to persistent unfavourable bio-demographic conditions in many Alpine regions, this immigration has not yet resulted in any population gains. Finally, there are other peripheral areas maintaining the unfavourable demographic structures with low or no net-immigration and high natural losses. As a result, population will decrease there. Thus, in some valleys of the Friulian Alps, “ghost towns” will not disappear in the future. Nevertheless, we explored that even in these peripheral areas a demographic countertrend has begun: analyses of the population statistics showed that there is no more migration deficit. Since the end of the 1990s Northern Friuli has been confronted with more in-migrants than emigrants (migration balance 2000 – 2006: +0.23%). Figure 5 seeks to visualise this transformation: Most of the symbols representing the population balance of the various valleys of Friuli since 1972 are shifting to the right and upper side of the graph – towards the sectors of growing population development.

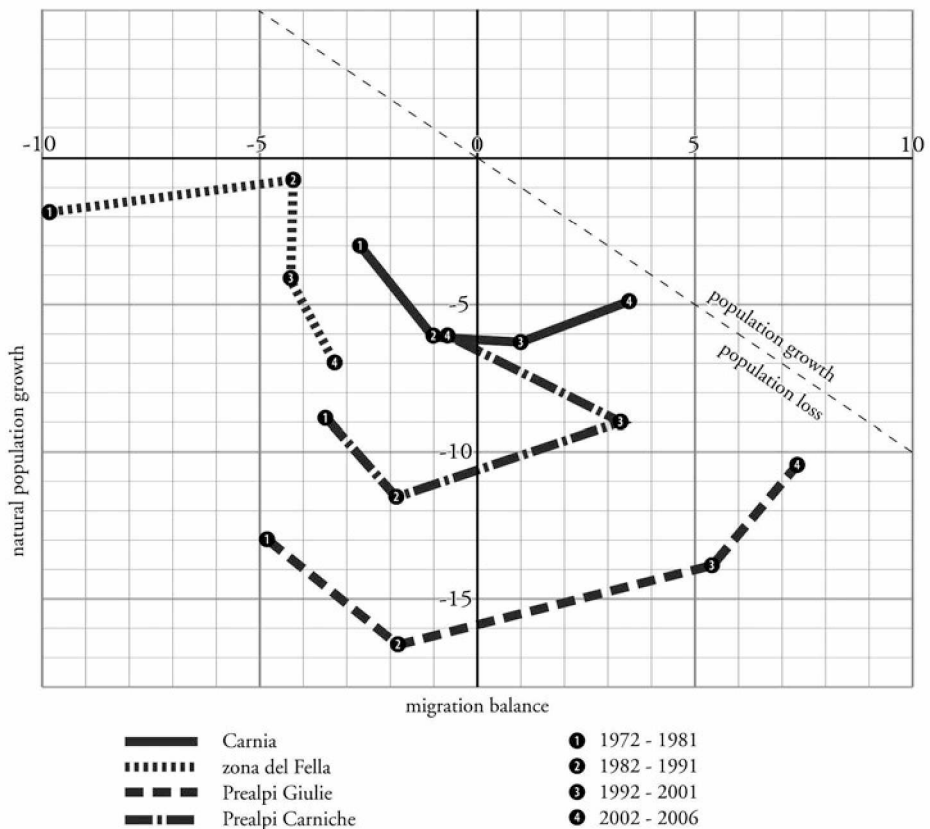


Figure 5: Migration balances in the Northern Friulian subregions (Friulian Alps) since 1972 (‰). Source: ISTAT – Popolazione e movimento anagrafico dei comuni / Statistiche demografiche 1972ff.; <http://www.demo.istat.it>; calculation and presentation by the author.

In our project we will emphasise that processes of depopulation and re-settlement of peripheral regions carry potential for considerable ethno-cultural conflicts. Amenity migration leads urban refugees to the various Alpine valleys, where they enhance the change of the ethnic structure. This process includes the scenario whereby smaller autochthonous ethnic minorities may gradually disappear altogether. The French parts of the Alps will represent an appropriate test region. There, after long periods of emigration and subsequent bio-demographic based population losses, amenity driven migration has led to a (small) population growth in the last two decades (figures 2 and 3).

Furthermore, we will have to analyse how additional risks may arise from possible re-settlement of allochthonous ethno-cultural groups and, consequently, to conceptualise strategies for minimising them. Since in the depopulated and partly abandoned peripheral mountain villages the real estate market is big and favourable, i.e. housing costs are low, the probability of immigrating Eastern Europeans, Asians, or Africans is real. Without any doubt, such a process could mitigate depopulation. On the other hand, the maintenance of the autochthonous minorities would be in jeopardy, too, although the Alpine space would become even more “multicultural.”

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