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New demographic developments and their cultural impact on the Italian Alps

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Abstract

After WWI the Italian Alps were characterized by a massive depopulation that lasted well into the 1970s. While in-migration concentrated mainly around central Alpine areas until a few years ago, now more and more municipalities in the Italian Alpine region show in part remarkable influx and thereby population gains. These newcomers – mostly amenity migrants representing "urban refugees" from outside the Alpine region – influence the local culture, not least with regard to the seven linguistic minorities that are settled in the area. This results first and foremost in the disappearance of the minority languages in everyday life, and the maintenance of the ethnic diversity is seriously threatened.

Keywords: amenity migration, ethno-linguistic minorities, Italian Alps, demographic change

1 Introduction

In the framework of a current project supported by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF: P20954-G03) we will emphasize that processes of depopulation and re-settlement of peripheral Alpine regions carry potential for considerable ethno-cultural changes.

The 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, 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 (2009–2011). 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 amenity migrants in various communities. The chapters below aim to provide first results.

2 Demographic transformation

The enormous population loss in the Italian mountain regions persuaded the "Comitato per la geografia del Consiglio Nazionale delle ricerche" and the "Istituto Nazi-

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onale di Economia Agraria" (1932–1938) already in the period between WWI and WWII to the publication of the monumental eleven-volume work "Lo spopolamento montano in Italia". The study of Vito (1966) and also the large-scale work "Le Regioni d'Italia" from the 1960s show that mountain depopulation continues even after the Second World War; see for example Barbieri (1972) on Tuscany or Valussi (1971) on Friuli. The latter author also published a conference volume in 1978, containing extremely valuable contributions to the topic of migration.

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 (Steinicke 1991). Figure 1 seeks to illustrate this out-migration period. According to the maps provided by Bätzing (2002), depopulation in the Italian Alps has undoubtedly decreased since the 1980s. Our research team of the University of Innsbruck can furnish evidence that from 1990 onwards the population in the majority of the Alpine communities has been growing (Figures 2 and 3).

While in-migration until a few years ago concentrated mainly around central Alpine areas with strong economic, tourism and transportation connections, our analyses (Beismann 2009; Walder et al. 2010; Steinicke 2010) show that peripherally located Italian Alpine communities progressively accomplish a positive migration balance (cf. Figures 4 and 5). Considering the population development since the early 1990s, there are nonetheless still areas evident with some significant population losses. Even today the effects of unfavorable bio-demographic factors (Figure 6) resulting from the out-migration period can be observed in many Italian Alpine communities.

Nevertheless, we could identify for the first time that more and more municipalities in the Italian Alpine region, characterized by population losses in the last decades now show in part remarkable in-migration and thereby population gains. According to the results of our interviews, however, we had to distinguish between

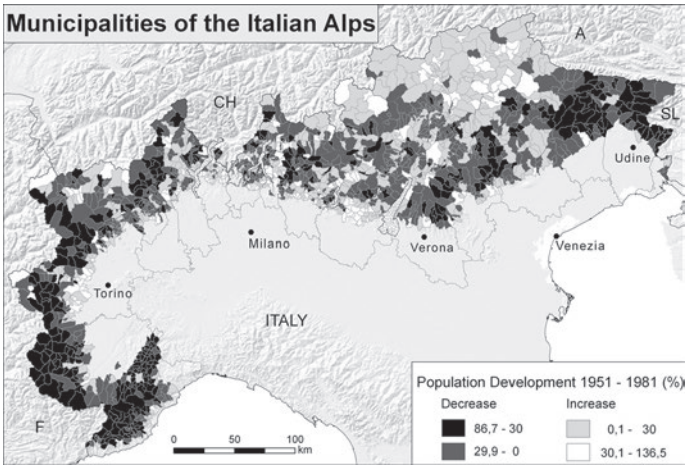

Figure 1: Italian Alps: population development 1951–1981; Source: http://www.comuni-italiani.it (calculations and cartography by the authors; accessed 09/2010).

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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 basically:

- re-migrants who want to retire in their villages (and homes) of origin;
- migrants mostly from eastern and south-eastern Europe or from Turkey;
- amenity-led migrants (urban refugees).

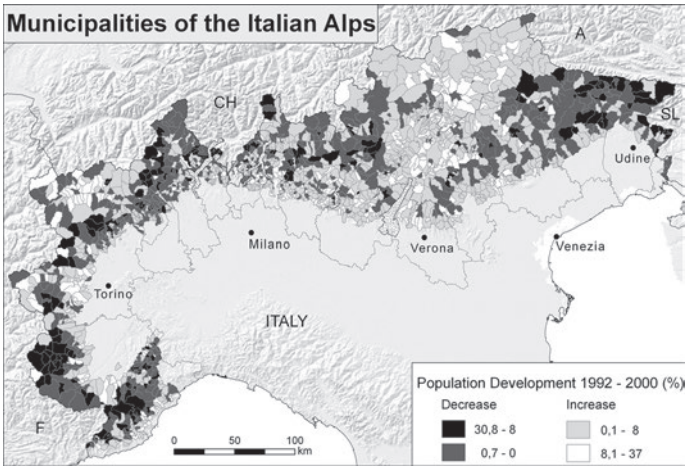

Figure 2: Italian Alps: population development 1992–2000; Source: ISTAT – http://www.demo.istat.it (calculations and cartography by the authors; accessed: 01/2011).

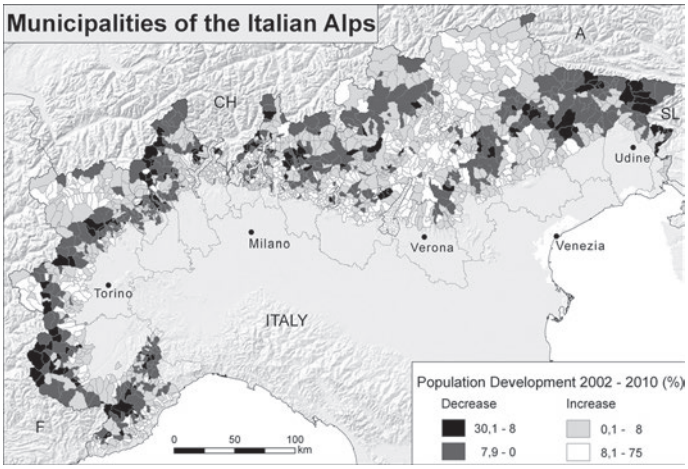

Figure 3: Italian Alps: population development 2002–2010; Source: ISTAT – http://www.demo.istat.it (calculations and cartography by the authors; accessed: 01/2011).

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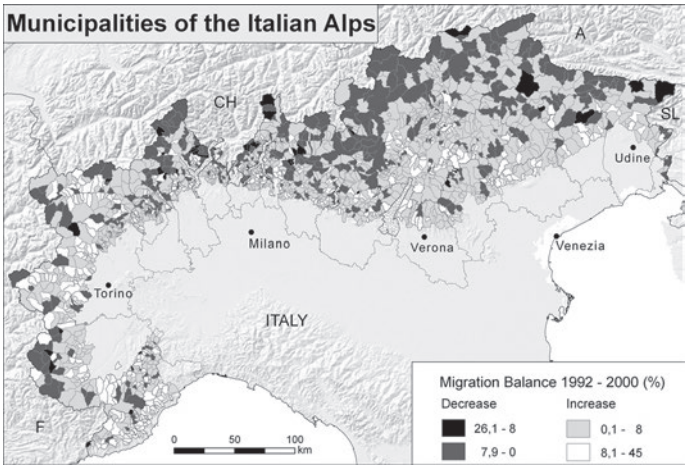

Figure 4: Italian Alps: migration balance 1992–2000; Source: ISTAT – http://www.demo.istat.it (calculations and cartography by the authors; accessed: 01/2011).

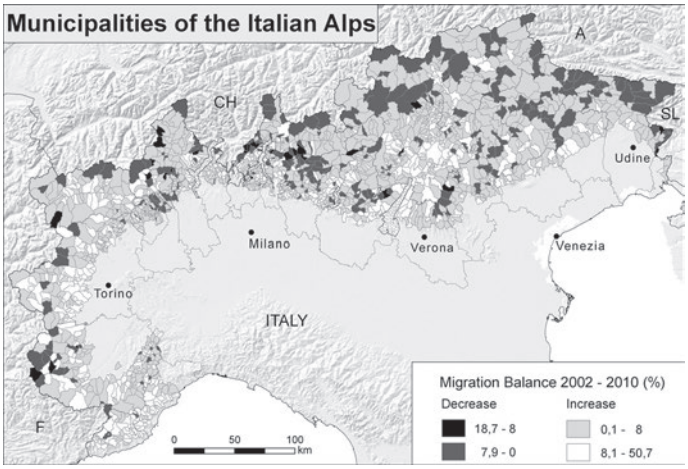

Figure 5: Italian Alps: migration balance 2002–2010; Source: ISTAT – http://www.demo.istat.it (calculations and cartography by the authors; accessed: 01/2011).

3 Amenity migration

In the context of the indicated current demographic trend reversal in the Italian Alps, amenity (-led) migration plays a significant role. The phenomenon of amenity migration constitutes a relatively new field of regional mobility research. Moss (2006), Löffler & Steinicke (2007), Gosnell & Abrams (2009) as well as McIntyre (2009) extensively analyse existent conceptualizations and socio-economic dimensions of amenity migration. This phenomenon represents a shift in preference of residential location from the urban space to remote, but attractive rural (mountain-

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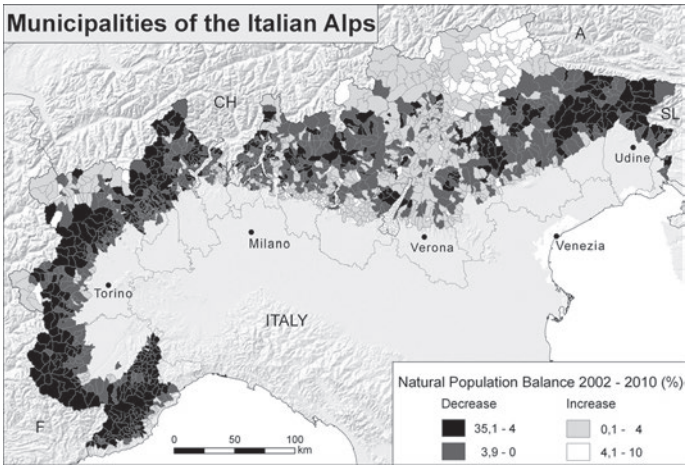

Figure 6: Italian Alps: natural demographic balance 2002–2010; Source: ISTAT – http://www.demo.istat.it (calculations and cartography by the authors; accessed: 01/2011).

ous) regions. It is the driving force behind the present settlement expansion and the current population growth in numerous Italian Alpine communities. Weekend and leisure residences become increasingly second 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. Further reasons for this turnaround are improved infrastructures in terms of telecommunication, traffic and supply as well as affordable real estate and intensive leisure activities. The two characteristics – greater length of stay and paid occupation (apart from retirees) at the destination – are the key differences between amenity migrants and tourists. Yet tourism plays an important role because it can be viewed as a first step to amenity migration.

Both seasonal/intermittent as well as permanent residents contribute to community expansion in high mountain regions. Therefore, counterurbanization – the re-discovery and re-evaluation of rural areas as permanent residential and commercial space (cf. Berry 1976; Mitchell 2004) – should be considered as part of the phenomenon known as amenity migration. In the Italian Alps, the affected settlements are situated clearly outside a daily commuting distance and, therefore, do not affect an expansion of urban areas ("suburbanization") and the growth of settlements just outside the suburban belt ("exurbanization"; Spectorsky 1955). Exurbanization or peri-urbanization processes are typical for settlement expansions in the foothills of the Alps around/next to the major cities (e.g. Verona, Trento, Bolzano, Marseille, Munich, Innsbruck, Salzburg, Graz, or Ljubljana).

In the years 2006 and 2009 Moss published two fundamental anthologies on the subject of amenity migration, whereby Perlik (2006, 2009) and Steinicke (2009) discuss its effects in the Alps. The ethno-geographic relevance of this "lifestyle migration" is to be seen in the fact that peripheral spaces and thus minority areas in the

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Italian Alps became a target of urban immigrants who reinforce the assimilation process in those areas.

Positive aspects of this amenity migration are the revitalization of abandoned buildings (or even whole villages) and associated with that the prevention of the accruement of "ghost towns." In the short term the building industry and the small trade profit the most from the renewal and renovation of old houses; local supply and service structures are also able to continue to exist. Due to the high emigration numbers of the past decades and – as a consequence – the unfavorable bio-demographic structures, amenity migration can mitigate the excess of age and the decline in the birth rate.

On the other hand, the great demand for houses and properties can lead to an increase in real estate prices, and subsequently segments of the local population have to leave their home communities because they are no longer able to afford the elevated rates. Rural sprawl, excessive land use, and environmental damage are further arguments against a massive in-migration.

As in many Italian Alpine regions the official statistics indicate a turnaround from former emigration areas to immigration areas, more than 200 peripheral communities have been visited for this study, and about 90 long-time residents and newcomers were interviewed to examine these data. Our results show that besides pensioners, (retired) re-migrants, some new immigrants through marriage, guest workers from South-eastern Europe and amenity migrants, also owners of second homes are responsible for the population increase.

The spectrum of these second-home owners ranges from families who are already part of the village community and thus are also considered amenity migrants, to those who are regarded as traditional tourists. In between there are various nuances whose quantification will require additional research. It can nevertheless be concluded that some of the real second-home owners in the mountain communities are in fact listed in the population registers as first-home owners. For this, above all, tax reasons are given.

This would indicate that a portion of the population gains is only statistically reflected. Nevertheless, usually these second-home owners spend enough time in the community to have some positive impact on local structures.

In the minority areas of the Aosta Valley and in Piedmont these immigrants are either working in the gastronomy, the service sector respectively the tourism industry, or they started something completely new such as an agri-tourism business, a camp ground, or a dairy farm. In the majority these newcomers are innovative, and they contribute substantially to the revitalization of the partly abandoned villages.

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

In our project we seek to emphasize that processes of depopulation and re-settlement of peripheral regions have considerable potential for ethno-cultural changes. In the 1970s, when mainly the economically induced migration or the birth deficit

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contributed to the depletion of linguistic minorities, assimilation progressed only insignificantly in peripheral areas.

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 shape the change of the ethnic diversity. The minority members are therefore presently subject to a more intensive assimilation process which becomes apparent in the gradual disappearance of minority languages from daily life, as well as in the disappearance of smaller autochthonous ethnic groups.

With the Implementation Act No. 482 (Gazzetta Ufficiale n. 297, 20.12.1999) Italy protects all its ethno-linguistic minorities (*minoranze linguistiche storiche*) now. Thus, outside the autonomous provinces a demarcation can be made on the basis of juridical conditions that is to be viewed in the context of this law and the associated financial incentives. Our research showed, however, that due to the general lack of knowledge about the exact distribution of ethnic groups in the Italian Alps many Italian municipalities regard the new legal situation from a purely political-pragmatic perspective. For example, a certain ethnic self-assessment can be beneficial in gaining federal financial allowances.

Therefore the true language boundaries do not always agree with the ethnic self-assessments of the municipalities. This reflects the political dilemma of establishing appropriate measures for effective protection of minorities and confirms the supposition that regulations for the protection of minorities can be taken to the point of absurdity.

Not only future policies, but also the demographic developments mentioned before will have an impact on the survival of the autochthonous linguistic minorities.

In the Italian Alps, the phenomenon of amenity migration is limited only to certain communities. Therefore a fragmented development – population growth and settlement expansions on the one hand, and increasing depopulation up to the point of abandoned "ghost towns" (Steinicke et al. 2007) on the other – can be expected to continue.

In conclusion we present three case studies focused on newcomers in the minority areas. Of the 15 historical Walser settlements that identify themselves as minority groups, German is now spoken only in four communities of Piedmont (Alagna Valsesia, Rimella, Formazza and Macugnaga) and in three communities in the Aosta Valley: Gressoney-Saint-Jean, Gressoney-La-Trinité and Issime. The region of Aosta Valley has promoted the teaching of German since 1993, whereupon the Walser communities of the Valle del Lys codified their own German dialects, and thus today pupils in Gressoney-Saint-Jean and Gressoney-La-Trinité can learn "titsch," and those in Issime "töitschu;" but it is just language instruction and does not result in a working language. In contrast to most other in-migration areas, the newcomers in the Lys Valley have generally integrated into the local population (Figure 7). An important role in this plays tourism advertising, which – as in the Ladin Dolomite areas – specifically highlights the special ethnic status. This has been one of the reasons that numerous Italian immigrants declare themselves members of the Walser ethnic group, often without understanding so much as the basics of the language.

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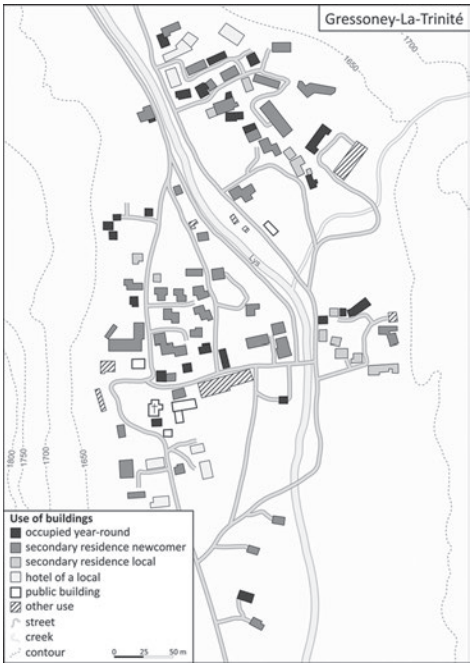

Figure 7: Newcomers in the Walser Settlement Gressoney-La-Trinité; Source: mapping and cartography by the authors (2010).

Another example studied in Mazzin (Fassa Valley) in the Eastern Alps shows the transformation of a former agricultural village to one that is now dominated by amenity and tourism residences (Figure 8). The positive effect here is that the population is growing again: from 465 in the year 1921 down to a low of 355 in 1971, and from then on increasing to about 500 currently.

The final case study concerns the extreme Western part of the Friulian Alps. It documents that amenity migration can also be found in areas without tourism. In a devastating catastrophe in October 1963 a 3 km long landslide fell into the Vajont reservoir, causing a flood wave and killing around 2,000 people. Most survivors of Casso (and Erto) were moved to the newly built village of Vajont about 45 km southeast (Figure 9). In the following years more and more people moved back and started renovating their houses (Steinicke 1991). The affordable living space also attracted some amenity-led migrants who began to settle in the area.

5 Concluding remarks

Our current research project is the first to make aware of the current demographic changes in the Italian high mountains and their impact on the ethnic minorities. Apart from South Tyrol the minority languages are threatened in all parts of the Italian Alps because of assimilation, inter-marriage, media influence, a lack of educa-

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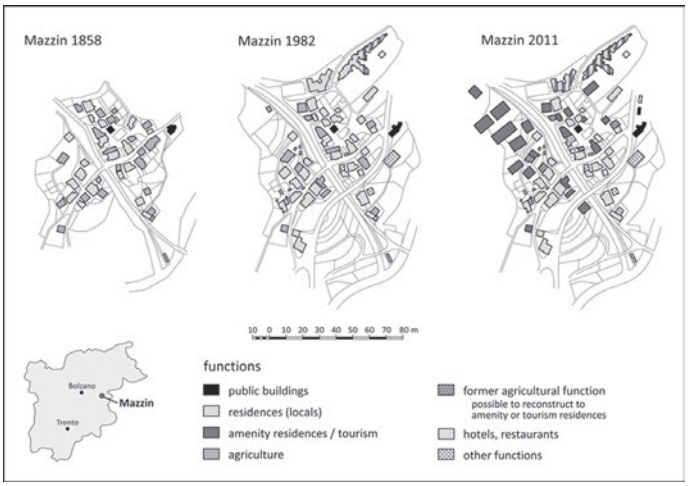

Figure 8: Transformation of Mazzin 1858–2011; Source: mapping and cartography by the authors (2011).

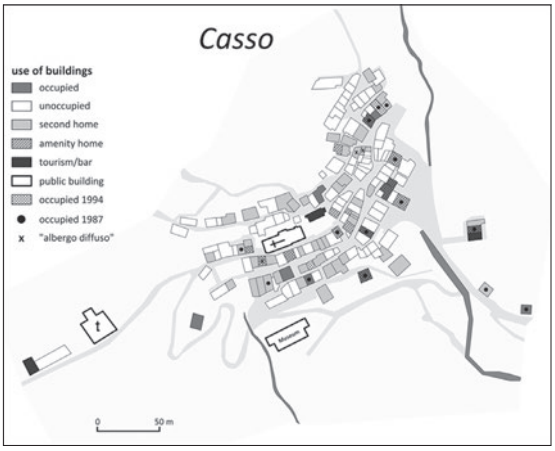

Figure 9: Casso – revitalization of a former ghost town; Source: mapping and cartography by the authors (2011).

tion in schools, out-migration and in-migration, and the fact that in most cases only the older generation uses the autochthonous language. Nonetheless, in many minority communities we could observe a strong awareness for the minority culture. Especially newcomers to the Alpine communities in Piedmont, mostly amenity migrants, bear a strong relationship to the Occitan culture – even without being able to speak the minority language. This becomes particularly apparent in the Occitan music and cuisine and in the appearance of the Occitan flag on town halls, private homes, official squares, mosaics on the street and many other places. There is no doubt that in-migration will enhance linguistic assimilation into the Italian language; on the other hand the urban refugees frequently support a kind of "symbolic ethnicity" (Gans 1979): 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

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able to speak the autochthonous languages. Consequently, in everyday communication Italian is the predominant language.

In the context of in-migration the dispersed patterns of secondary residences, as well as amenity residences in the Alps, represent a planning problem, too. Regional development in sensitive high mountain regions has to lead to sustainability and must therefore operate with attention to environmental, cultural, demographic, and socio-economic consequences. Due to the increasing demand for land and concerns regarding the village character, regulations and guidelines are needed to curb rural sprawl and prevent the formation of villages of exclusively secondary homes.

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Zeitschrift/Journal: IGF-Forschungsberichte (Instituts für Interdisziplinäre Gebirgsforschung [IGF]) (Institute of Mountain Research)

Jahr/Year: 2011

Band/Volume: 4

Autor(en)/Author(s): Löffler Roland

Artikel/Article: New demographic developments and their cultural impact on the Italian Alps 383-393