

From out-migration to in-migration. Impacts on autochthonous Linguistic Minorities in the Italian Alps

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Abstract

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 official majority. 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. Therefore, an important objective of this project is to present a cartographic representation of this ethnic diversity. 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, the causes are also 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.

Introduction and Study Concept

Nowhere in Western Europe is the ethno-linguistic structure more diverse than in the Italian Alps. In addition to the state majority, no less than seven linguistic minorities coexist here side by side, sometimes in close vicinity. It is a major objective of the present study to identify their exact distribution – which so far has not received adequate focus in the academic literature. Beyond that, the authors examine the current demographic change in the region of the Italian Alps in relation to its ethno-geographical dimension. Thus, this contribution attempts to denote the threat to ethnic diversity caused by current demographic processes.

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The study 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 Geography¹. The chapters below seek to provide first results.

The project 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. This study is based on the one hand on analysis of the current state of research, specifically on results to this issue presented by Innsbruck geographers in the last decade (e.g. Löffler and Steinicke, 2007; Steinicke *et al.*, 2007), as well as on own analysis of official statistical data, on the other hand on own surveys in the course of investigative visits among all ethnic minorities of the Italian Alpine arch (2009/10). In the minority areas, experts were questioned about the ethnic boundaries with the neighboring regions. 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 groups and communities. For the ethno-demographic analysis, data of the official Italian registration statistics (ISTAT, 1971f) were evaluated.

- Thesis 1: In the Italian Alps, ambiguity still exists over the exact distribution of the autochthonous linguistic minorities (*minoranze linguistiche storiche*). This extends even to the point where the ethnic self-assessment of individual communities agrees no longer with the objective linguistic findings. Regulations for the protection of minorities are thereby taken to the point of absurdity.
- Thesis 2: The preservation of the ethnic minorities in the Italian Alps has been complicated by decades of depopulation of mountainous areas. Furthermore, the present demographic shift threatens the ethnic diversity. New immigration in form of amenity(-led) migration now adds to the minorization of the smaller linguistic groups in their own territories.

Demographic transformation

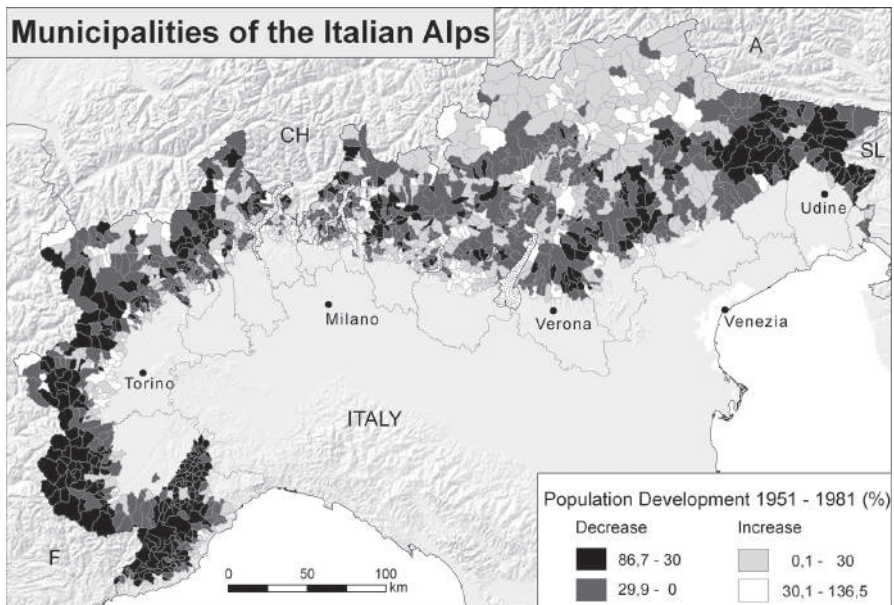
The enormous population loss in the Italian mountain regions persuaded the *Comitato per la geografia del Consiglio nazionale per le ricerche* and the *Istituto nazionale di economia agraria* already in the period between WWI and WWII to the publication of the monumental eleven-volume work *Lo spopolamento montano in Italia*. The study of Vito (1966) and also the large-scale work *Le Regione d'Italia* from the 1960s show that mountain depopulation continues even after the Second World War, so for example Barbieri (1972) on Tuscany or Valussi (1971) on Friuli. The latter author

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published also a conference volume in 1978, containing extremely valuable contributions to the topic of migration.

As previously discussed, 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 (Steinicke, 1991). Figure 1 seeks to illustrate this out-migration period. According to the map provided by Bätzing (2002), 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. 2 and 3).

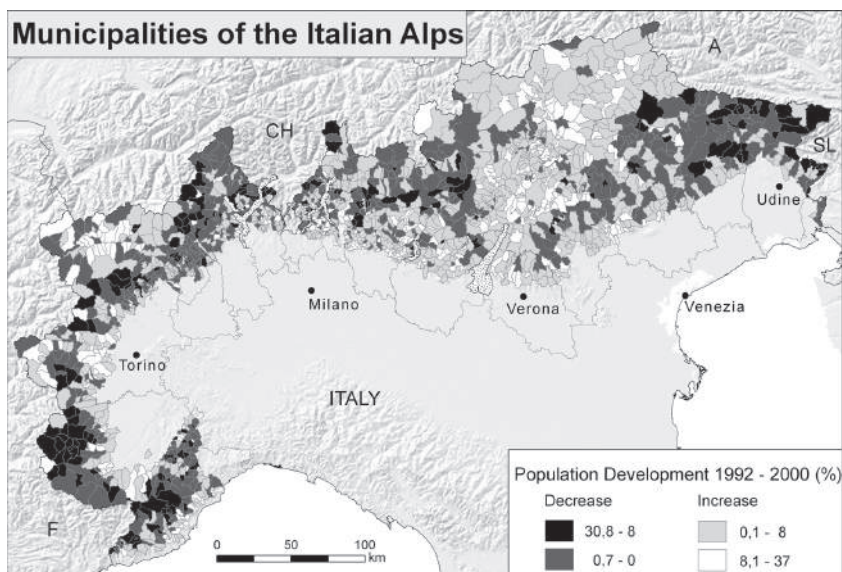
Fig. 1 - Italian Alps: Population Development (1951-1980)



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

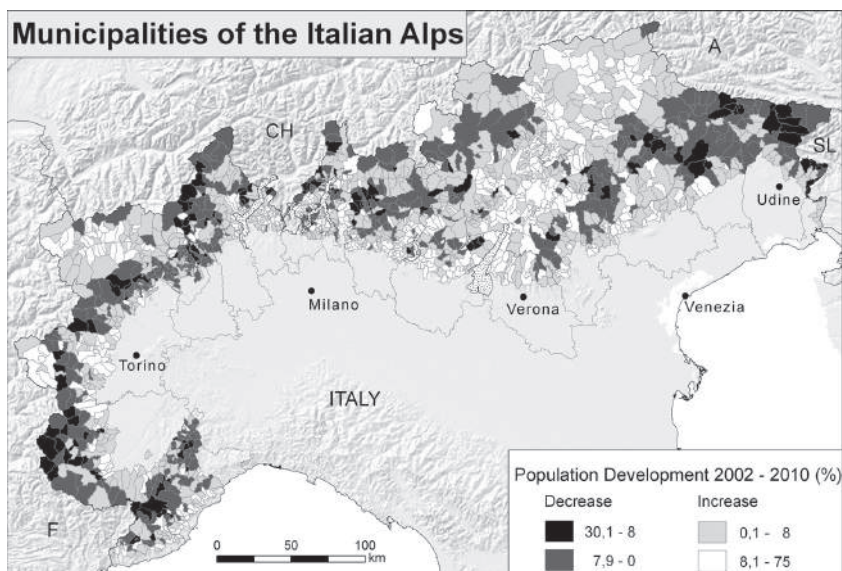
While immigration until a few years ago concentrated mainly around central Alpine areas with strong economic, tourism and transportation connections, our analyses (Beismann, 2009; Walder *et al.*, 2010; Steinicke, 2010) show that peripherally located Italian Alpine communities progressively accomplish a positive migration balance (cf. fig. 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 (fig. 6) resulting from the migration period can be observed in many Italian Alpine communities.

Fig. 2 - Italian Alps: Population Development 1992-2000



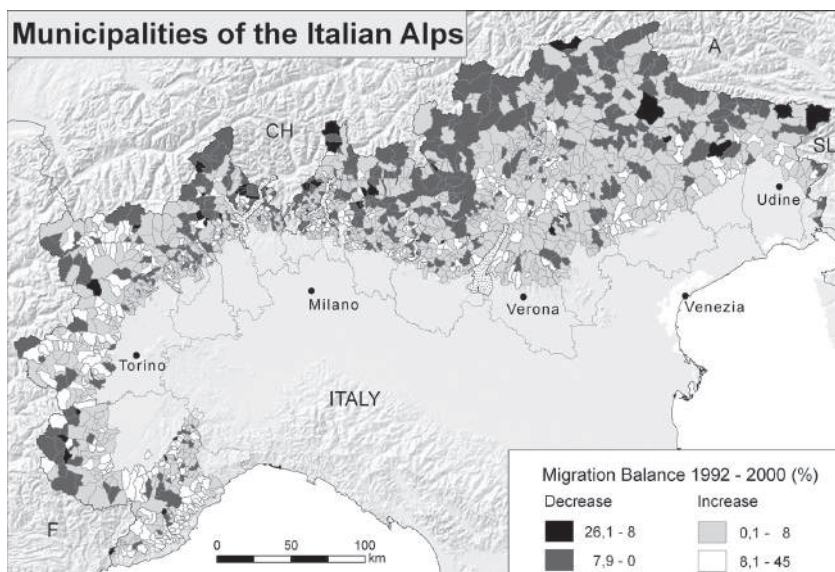
Source: ISTAT - www.demo.istat.it (calculations and cartography by the authors)

Fig. 3 - Italian Alps: Population Development 2002-2010



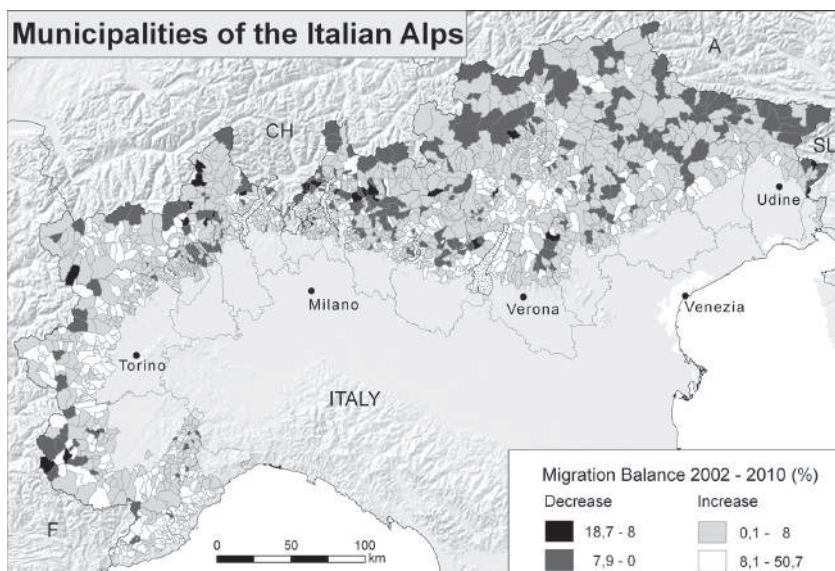
Source: ISTAT - www.demo.istat.it (calculations and cartography by the authors)

Fig. 4 - Italian Alps: Migration Balance 1992-2000



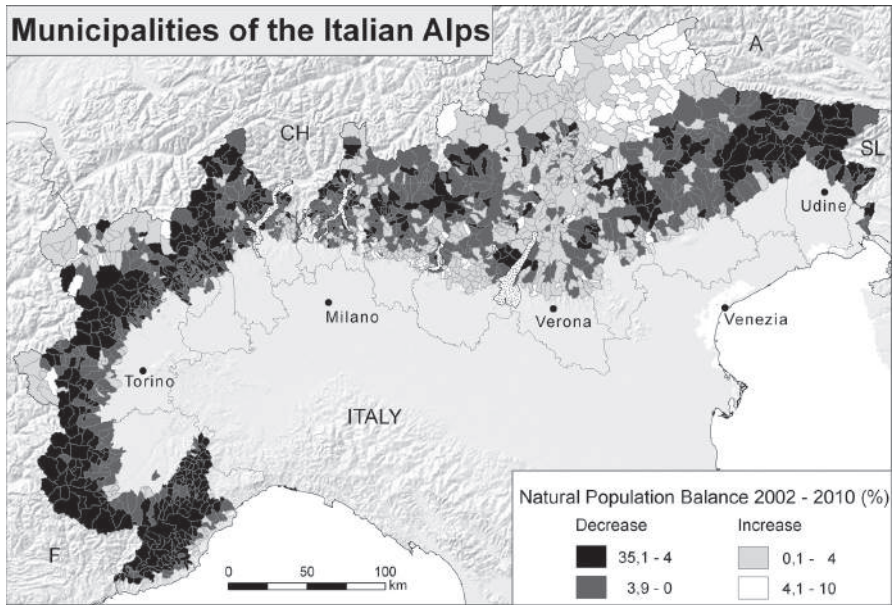
Source: ISTAT - www.demo.istat.it (calculations and cartography by the authors)

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



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

Fig. 6 - Italian Alps: Natural Balance 2002-2010



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

Nevertheless, we could identify for the first time that more and more municipalities in the Italian Alpine region, which 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. According to the results of our interviews, however, we had to distinguish 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:

- 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).

Amenity Migration

In the context of the indicated current demographic trend reversal in the Italian Alps, amenity (-led) migration plays a significant role. This phenomenon of amenity migration constitutes a relatively new field of regional mobility

research. Moss (2006), Löffler and Steinicke (2007), Gosnell and Abrams (2009) as well as McIntyre (2009) extensively describe 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 (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 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. These two characteristics – greater length of stay and paid occupation 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 part of the phenomenon known as amenity migration.

In the years 2006 and 2009 Moss published two fundamental anthologies on the subject of amenity migration. In them, 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 Italian Alps became a target of urban immigrants who reinforce the assimilation process in those areas.

Amenity migrants bring both positive and negative effects to their new destination. According to Williams and Gill (2004) positive effects include the infusion of new economic, institutional, and physical infrastructure capacity into the host region. Negative impacts include unanticipated growth-related stresses on the capacity of local social and health delivery systems, environmental resources, cultural and recreational facilities, retailing services, and residential housing supply.

Amenity settlements in the Alps are situated clearly outside a daily commuting distance and, therefore, do not include the expansion of urban areas (“suburbanization”) and the growth of settlements just outside the suburban belt (“exurbanization”; Sectorsky, 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).

Distribution of the minoranze linguistiche storiche

The current state of research on status and ethno-politics of the autochthonous linguistic minorities in Italy is discussed in Walder *et al.*

(2010). Attempts at relevant cartographic implementations can be found among others in Salvi (1975), Bellinello (1996), Orioles (2003), as well as in Toso (2008) or in Rother and Tichy (2008). However, due to the selected level of scale – the Alps region and/or Italy and adjacent areas – they are usually limited to a schematic representation. Small linguistic groups and pockets are sometimes characterized only symbolically and are thereby spatially difficult to assign, in part due to generalization. This applies also to the map of Pellegrini (1977), which depicts the languages and dialects spoken in Italy on a scale of 1:1 million. Further complications in accurate distinction of the various ethnic groups arise from overlapping ethnic structures, as in the Ladin-Venetian-Italian or in the Provençal-Piedmontese-Italian language contact zones.

Even though various scientific branches supply numerous contributions to individual minority groups and their settlement areas (references in Walder *et al.*, 2010), 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 ethnic mosaic. It is therefore the first goal of the present project to close this research gap.

Figure 2 offers the result of our first project-related research activity: it shows the distribution of the autochthonous ethnic minorities in the Italian Alps on a municipal basis. It appeared rational to first and foremost work with a foundation of objective-linguistic characteristics, i.e. actual linguistic usage.

Given its cultural as well as socio-political relevance, in Europe of today the preservation of ethno-linguistic minorities is no longer seriously in question. With the Implementation Act No. 482 (Gazzetta Ufficiale n. 297, 20.12.1999) Italy now protects all its autochthonous linguistic minorities (*minoranze linguistiche storiche*). Thus the Apennine State fulfills the provisions expressed in Articles 3 and 6 of the Italian Constitution, albeit with a 50-year delay (Salvi, 1975, p. 9). In the context of the referenced law, municipal measures are being promoted that serve the preservation of the ethnic diversity. However, for decades special minority regulations 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.

Thus, outside the autonomous provinces a demarcation can be made on the basis of juridical conditions, which is to be viewed in the context of this law and the associated financial incentives. For this reason it was necessary to create a second map (fig. 3) in which the minority areas were to be defined according to the respective municipal self-assessment.

Thus far, the municipalities have actively taken advantage of this opportunity – an expression of the desire for protection of ethnic 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 ethnic 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.

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. 2 and 3). 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 figure 3 – even though public financial support for *minoranze linguistiche storiche* based on Law No. 482 was significantly reduced some years ago.

Next to the large minority territories – in the Western Alps, in Friuli or South Tyrol – the minorities live scattered in small linguistic pockets. In the “territorial expansions” highlighted in figure 3, 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 (Becker, 1974). 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.

Tab. 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 *et al.* (2010, p. 183)

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 figure 3 “Ladinia” is no longer restricted to the Dolomite territory of the “old Tyrol” and the Comelico area.

In the Piedmont region, in the fringe area of the Alps, there are many “gray areas” in which minority languages mix with Italian and also with the Piedmontese dialect. 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).

In the regions of the Aosta Valley and South Tyrol-Trentino, the ethno-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 ethnic 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.

Synthesis: The Impact of Current Demographic Transformation on these Minorities

In our project we seek to emphasize that processes of depopulation and re-settlement of peripheral regions carry potential for considerable ethno-cultural changes.

From 1990 onwards 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 and Steinicke, 2007). 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 and Steinicke, 2007). 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 general lack of knowledge about the exact distribution of ethnic groups in the Italian Alps, as defined in thesis 1, made it possible for communities in which – from an objective point of view – no linguistic minorities live, regardless of this fact, but supported by law, declare themselves a minority territory.

Figures 2 and 3 offer not only a community-specific overall view of the ethno-linguistic situation in the Italian Alps, but demonstrate at the same

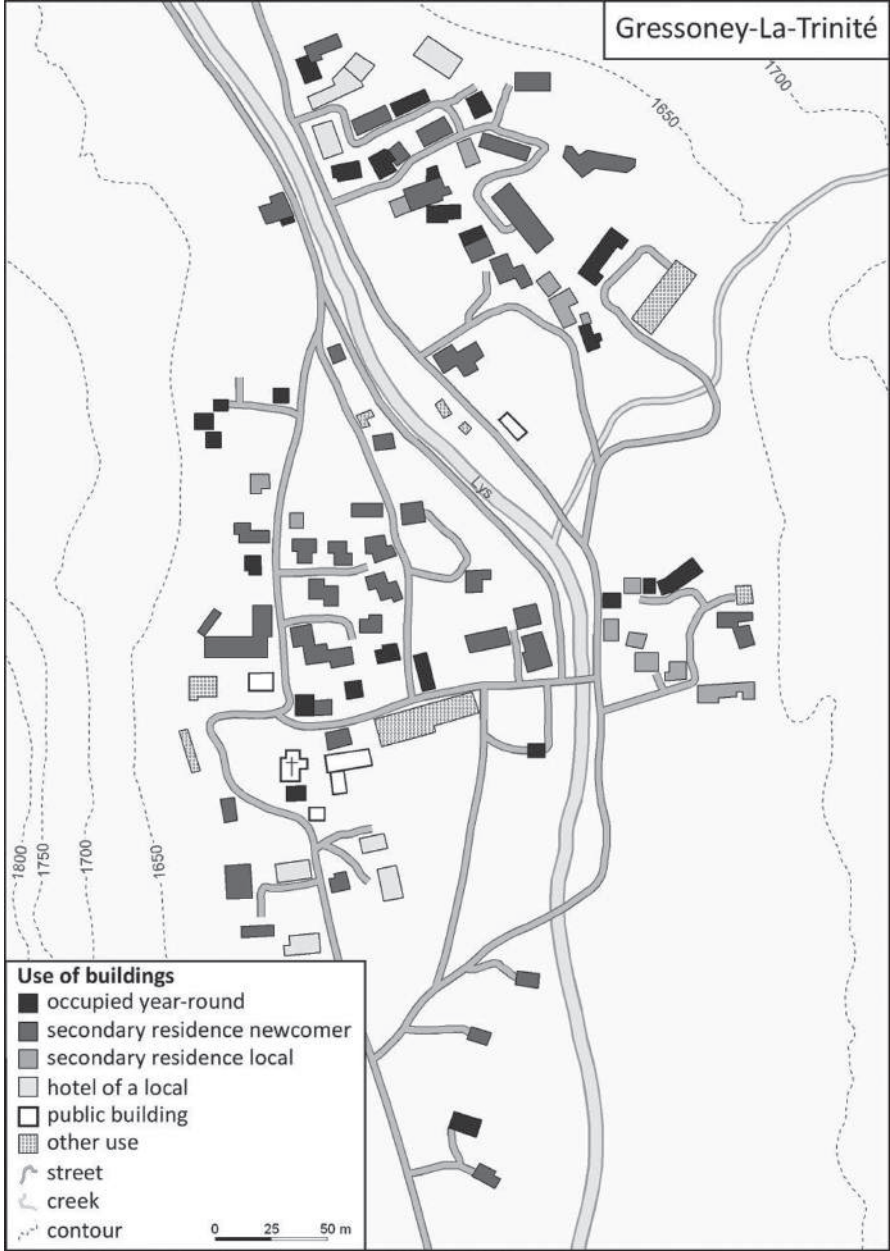
time that the true language boundaries do not always agree with the ethnic self-assessments of the municipalities. This reflects the political dilemma of establishing appropriate measures for effective protection of minorities and confirms the supposition that regulations for the protection of minorities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

Not only future policies, but also demographic developments will have an impact on the survival of the autochthonous linguistic minorities, as articulated in thesis 2. In this respect, this study is the first 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.

In the Italian Alps, the phenomenon of amenity migration, which typifies the transfer of residence by preference from urban to generally attractive rural areas, is limited only to certain alpine 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” on the other – can be expected to continue.

It would exceed the scope of the present contribution to introduce the numerous special studies focused on newcomers in the minority areas that were carried out in the framework of this project. Representative of that and in conclusion, a case study on the Walser-German settlement areas of the Aosta Valley shall be summarized. 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 (fig. 2). 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.” In contrast to most other in-migration areas, the newcomers in the Lys Valley have generally integrated into the local population. 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.

Fig. 7 - Newcomers in the Walser Settlement Gressoney-La-Trinité (2010)



Source: mapping and cartography by the authors

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