

Current Demographic Processes in the Italian Alps – Impacts on Autochthonous Linguistic Minorities

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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. This study attempts to denote the threat to ethnic diversity caused by current demographic processes.

The State Implementation Act No. 482 of 1999, which enforces the principles of minority protection enshrined in the Italian Constitution, grants the municipalities the right to define themselves in ethno-linguistic terms. Communities where minorities live thus come to benefit from state funding to preserve their cultural specificity. The general lack of knowledge about the exact distribution of the autochthonous ethnic groups in the Italian Alps made it possible for communities in which – from an objective point of view – no linguistic minorities live, to suddenly regard themselves as a minority territory. For this reason in the present study it became necessary to create two distribution maps of the linguistic minorities (*minoranze linguistiche storiche*): one according to the current language use, a second by the municipal self-assessment (Walder, Löffler and Steinicke 2010). For the first time, the two representations 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 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. Moreover, not only future policies, but also demographic developments will have an impact on the survival of the *minoranze linguistiche storiche*.

Particularly in those parts of the Italian Alps where detrimental factors had influenced nature and socio-agricultural conditions, massive depopulation took place. Lasting well into the 1970s, it can be attributed to a lack of employment opportunities in the secondary and tertiary sectors (Steinicke 1991). According to the maps provided by Bätzing (2002), depopulation in the Italian Alps has undoubtedly decreased since the 1980s. Considering the population development since the early 1990s, there are, however, still areas evident with some significant population losses. Even today the effects of unfavorable bio-demographic factors resulting from the migration period – specifically aging – can be observed in many Italian Alpine communities (Čede and Steinicke 2007). Although specifically in peripheral areas the minority languages could endure, it is obvious that – outside of South Tyrol and to a lesser extent the Aosta Valley – these days mostly the elderly are proficient in them. The high statistical proportion of upper age groups often creates the impression that the minority groups were sound, but with the progressive decimation of the older population the ethnic proportions will change rapidly.

The decline of a linguistic minority in its own settlement area is not solely due to emigration of its members. In-migration and the associated increased interaction with the majority population have similar weakening influences. While immigration until a few years ago concentrated mainly on central areas with strong economy, tourism and transportation connection, the analysis of Beismann (2009) shows that more and more peripherally located Italian Alpine communities accomplish a positive migration balance. Thus his work, created in the course of our Austrian Science Fund Project is the first to draw attention to the current demographic turnaround in the Italian high mountains.

Until 1980, when mainly the economically induced out-migration or the birth deficit contributed to minority losses, assimilation progressed only insignificantly in peripheral areas. In contrast, the minority members have more recently gone through a greater assimilation process brought on by the new immigration, which first has become apparent in the disappearance of minority languages from daily life. The newcomers originate mainly from Italian-speaking provinces. Given the new influx in the form of amenity migration, the linguistic minorities are becoming minor constituencies in their own territories. In the Italian Alps, the phenomenon of amenity migration, which typifies the transfer of residence by preference from urban to 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.