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Contested Spatialities of Lifestyle Migration Public policies, local democracy and global market forces

Roland Löffler

Universität Innsbruck

E-Mail: roland.loeffler[at]uibk.ac.at

ABSTRACT

Mountainous regions as rediscovered living space

The Italian Alps have long been characterized by strong depopulation as a result of outmigration in search of work. This development lasted well into the 1980s and left behind unfavorable bio-demographic structures in most mountain communities. From 1990 onwards a demographic turnaround has occurred, and subsequently more and more alpine villages have shown a positive net-migration.

Population gains in the foothills are mainly the consequence of sub- or exurbanisation processes (where daily commuting is possible), whereas in the interior of the Alps the newcomers are:

- remigrants, who left in search for work and now return to either work or enjoy their retirement in their home town
- migrants, mostly from South-eastern Europe in search for better jobs and better quality of life
- amenity-led migrants (“urban refugees”)

Amenity (lifestyle) migrants welcome living in mountainous rural areas which offer a higher quality of life and less stressful living conditions. They are not only attracted by more recreational opportunities but also by the favorable real estate prices. Given well developed transportation- and telecommunication infrastructure, they are independent regarding their workplace.

Newcomers restore and repopulate abandoned buildings and villages and thereby contribute to the prevention or revitalization of “ghost towns”. Renovation and expansion of old houses as well as the construction of new ones create labour for the resident industry with an increase in demand for local supplies and services. With the influx of younger people (especially families with children) demographic aging can be mitigated and the decline in the birth rate reduced.

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*Centre of Human and Social Sciences, Spanish National Research Council
Department of Political Science & International Relations, Autonomous University of Madrid*



On the other hand, the great demand for houses and properties leads to an increase of real estate prices, and segments of the local population can feel obligated to move away because they are no longer able to afford the elevated rates. Some houses are not used for most of the year; nevertheless they need infrastructure facilities and installations. Therefore, massive costs for the community arise. Furthermore, rural sprawl, excessive land use and environmental damage are arguments against a massive influx of newcomers.

One should not forget that there is another influence of these newcomers: In the Italian Alps amenity migrants additionally exert a negative effect on the survival of the autochthonous minority languages.