

## **Between the identity-based and the global option: Which future mountain strategies for a cohesive European development?**

### **1. The ambiguity of mountain specific development strategies in uncertain times**

The most highlighted effects of post-Fordist societies are their economic specialization, the general acceptance of cultural differences and the awareness of ecological diversity. Especially for mountain regions, these characteristics are seen as new opportunities. It is well known in the academic discourse, that desired diversity is linked closely with undesired disparities; however such repercussions occur on the spatial level only with a considerable time lag. This hysteresis effect became visible in Switzerland with the growth of metropolitan areas in the years 2000 (Schuler, Perlik, Pasche, 2004). In the 2010 years, we became aware of the ugly face of the new differentiation: the renaissance of regionalist and separatist movements, which claimed a higher share on value adding and decision-making (devolution) or even independence with nationalist arguments (Davezies, 2015), fuelled by extreme right wing and pseudo-left political parties. In many case it concerns the rich parts of territories, like Northern Italy or Catalonia. In the case of United Kingdom's BREXIT it touched especially those regions with a previous territorial degradation (in favour of the financial place in London), followed by a social decline. It concerned mainly those social classes, which failed to maintain the social advancement, once promised to them (Nachtwey, 2016).

The objective of the paper is it, to show that the current development strategies for European mountain areas have their shortcomings there, where they try to increase regional differences in order to valorise their new landscape commodities with the promise of prosperity for the peripheries. Mainstream policies, like the EUSALP macroregional approach, reinforce the advantages of the metropolitan areas while the identity-based movements are open to regional egoism. Therefore, in my opinion, both approaches neither do correspond to the sustainability goal, nor do fit to the long-term interests of a cohesive Europe.

For a long time, sustainable development in mountain areas has been interpreted as a concept to mitigate existing regional disadvantages due to topography and historical development path. In that way, regional mountain population should

- stress on their identities to be able to stay in the mountain area,
- make their regional specificities visible in order to be appreciated and valorised by a broader public and
- express their requests against conflicting interests with the demographic majority in the lowlands.

Arguing with criteria of spatial justice it was justified that mountain populations did not want to sacrifice their valley bottoms for dams to store water for hydropower or for a thirsty intensive agriculture in the plains. It was a critique on the ecologically destructive Fordist model of value adding and repartition and at the same time it was the claim that its welfare state should also be applied to the mountain peripheries.

The paradigm of a regional development with equal standards (the Fordist model) has become outdated, among others because of its technocratic character. The shift to the liberal-productivist (post-Fordist) model liberates mountain regions from state paternalism. But the new freedom is a double one: free in the sense of entrepreneurial action (mainly for small trade, real estate and extraction industries) but also free from national state's support and

solidarity. This new model demands from mountain regions to valorise actively their different resources as regional assets on global markets – the same storage of water, but now better accepted by the local population. In tourism, this means to adapt to the global competition, changed consumer preferences and climate change on intensifying land use and exploitation of those local resources, which are linked with nature, landscape and intangible symbolic values. In that way, the self-responsible regional specific development accelerates the grabbing of new niches in the commodification of natural and cultural resources. The relevant socio-economic processes have accelerated and run according the processes in the lowlands:

- High mobility of individuals, workforce, manufactured goods and capital;
- Urbanized social relations in mountains (commodification of landscape and space)
- Value adding, private and public management based on economic innovation and increasing returns.

In my 2001 works, still based on 1990 data (Perlik, 2001), the global influence due to the attracting forces of the perialpine metropolitan areas was already visible. But one could assume that an urban development in the Alps might generate an Alpine specific spatial and economic alternative beyond the specificities of a typical outdoor tourism. This interpretation – if it ever was – is not valid anymore, mainly because the decisive shared commercial services have been centralised at global places and the business knowledge has become standardised. Therefore, the conditions in the accessible parts of the Alps have adapted to lowland conditions, which insinuates a participation on certain lowland chances (for example the import of cheap Asian products) but also the necessity on taking the charges of globalisation (hosting unknown foreign people like seasonal workers or refugees). It means to apply the paradigm of innovation by developing or early adopting of new business ideas, which are spreading globally (best practices). The current paradigm of mountain-specific development therefore does not differ from the mechanisms of lowlands: creating new products for a global market. As mountain areas have less usable space, less human resources and less investment capacities, one can expect a larger crisis when the current business model of leisure and residence will become outdated: There will be hardly new alternatives. Mountain development should target an equivalent livelihood for its population as well as the goal of cohesive societies. Mountain specific development therefore should take into account these structural limits. Sustainable mountain strategies therefore might be – this is the hypotheses - expected rather in a more solidary economy or - in other words and paradoxically - in a less “mountain-specific” development strategy. We will deepen this with a look on the current EUSALP macroregional strategy and the critiques on it.

Résumé: Mountain areas in Europe are not in general lacking prosperity. Especially in the Alps we do not find pockets of poverty on a regional level. However, the specialisation on leisure and residences means a structural disadvantage as these consumer oriented sectors deliver a lower specific value adding which might increase spatial cleavages in the future. Claiming a specific development for mountain areas is ambiguous: It is necessary as mountains underlie specific conditions. At the same time, it is counterproductive as the European crisis needs cohesion policies, which do not deepen existing cleavage lines.

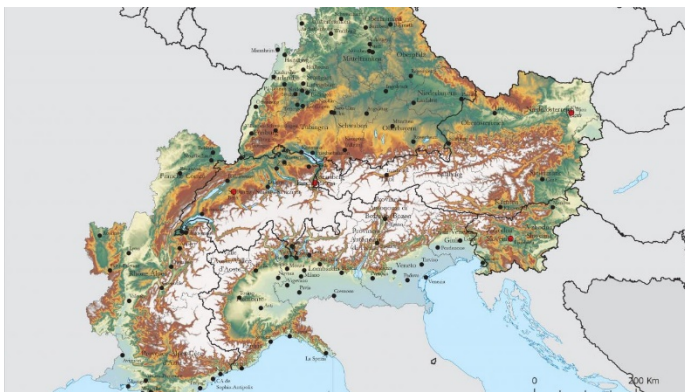
## **2. The current options for mountain policies**

Currently, we see two positions in the European debate about the development of the Alps.

*A The lowland interest: Mountains as a unique selling proposition for metropolitan areas*

The Alps have natural resources, which predestine them for leisure and residence and increase the potential of the surrounding lowlands. These assets make them attractive for the perialpine metropolitan areas, as they are able to attract high-ranked economic functions

(headquarters) and cultural activities (events of global visibility). The nearby mountains will function as a supplementary economic cluster and will induce economic growth, performance and prosperity. The “landscape cluster” allows the consumption of a high attractive landscape in a 3-hour distance. It delivers the unique selling proposition for European metropolitan areas (which are comparatively small and globally ranked only as second tier metropolitan areas). An example for this approach is the EUSALP macroregional strategy of the European Union<sup>1</sup>, which expresses the interests of the economically strong perialpine regions on NUTS2 level: Bavaria, Baden-Württemberg, Lombardy, South Tyrol, Rhône-Alpes and Switzerland (which often sees itself as one polycentric metropolitan area). The EUSALP macroregional strategy is in fact a false label as the covered territory is rather the southern part of Roger Brunet’s Blue Banana from 1989, where the Alpine arc forms a huge Central Park. And it is probably not the Alpine arc which will win most but the powerful regions and *Länder*, which gain influence in their national federalist debates (while they are – especially Bavaria – highly centralised in their own institutional body).



Map 1: The EUSALP perimeter. Source: <https://www.alpine-region.eu/>.

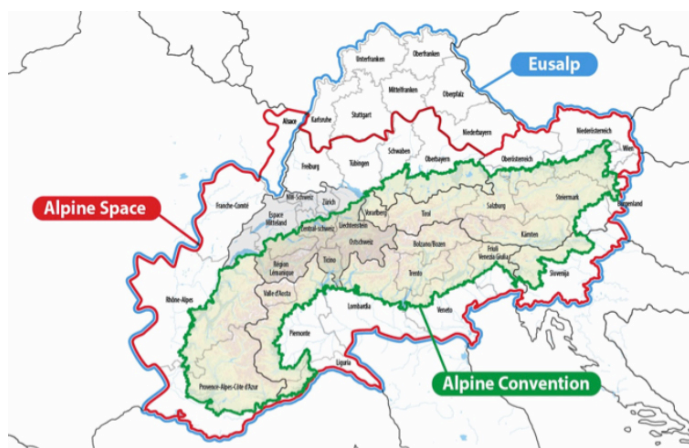
### *B The regionalist counterposition*

EUSALP has been largely criticised, because it does not concentrate on the development of the “real Alps”. The strategy follows rather the growth and competitiveness goals of European Union’s Lisbon Agenda of 2000. The counter-position claims an Alpine-specific strategy, which keeps restricted to the topographically elevated areas and the valleys within that perimeter; by pragmatic reasons according the existing demarcation of the Alpine Convention (Bätzing, 2013). This position criticises not only the involvement of the far agglomerations like Nuremberg, Stuttgart and Venice but also the inclusion of Munich, Turin and Geneva as part of the Alpine area. The argumentation is that the metropolitan dominance increases the weight of the lowland population and economy on expense of the interests of the Alpine regions and its economy. In a yet more consequent statement, Italy proposed occasionally to exclude cities above 40’000 inhabitants at the Alpine fringe from Alpine policies, which would have excluded cities like Biella in the Piedmont. This position accepts towns only for the exchange of local or domestic products.

Restriction on the “real Alps” means to claim distinctive policies to sustain the traditional value chains in the mountains and to assert a claimed traditional autonomy of land use against the demographic majority in the lowlands. It claims a homogeneous Alpine interest, which comprehends especially the agricultural and agro-tourist sector which is assumed – not having been scrutinized – as the only way of sustainable development in the Alps. Finally, this is an isolationistic position. This position is thinkable only in two alternatives: Within the actual states and with the current productivity it means to bet on permanent perequations given by the national states without allowing the lowland population to use mountain areas according their

<sup>1</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/en/policy/cooperation/macro-regional-strategies/alpine/](http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/policy/cooperation/macro-regional-strategies/alpine/)

consumption interests. This will probably not function in the medium run. The alternative would be a separatist Alpine state. This would need to create a strong export based economy within the Alpine territory including the necessary infrastructure. It would mean to develop the Alps with a similar structure like their neighbour states. Somehow or other, thinking the Alpine arc as a common economic space would make necessary to increase the goods and passenger exchange between East and West with the construction of new railway corridors and daily flight connections between the Alpine airport cities. Actually, there is certainly no economic demand and nobody wants it seriously. We can conclude that there is no common homogeneous Alpine interest – neither in this question nor in many other questions, too. The idea of a common Alpine culture, however, introduces an approach of an exaggerated identity. It shows its ugly drawbacks of a distinctive regional development according an artificial specificity. In this way, it creates a territorial cleavage where mountains and lowland see themselves as the victim of each other.



Map 2: The different perimeters of Alpine Convention, Interreg Alpine Space programme and EUSALP. Source: [www.regiosuisse.ch](http://www.regiosuisse.ch).

### 3. Which consequences should we draw from?

Mountain areas concentrate the structurally weak value chains. They cannot resist as autonomous regional entities. If they play the role of strong specialized suppliers for the lowlands they tend to overexploit their resources (Perlik, 2015) or to create problematic trade-offs (Naitthani/Kanthola, 2015; Rousselot, 2015). In a connected world, strong disparities in wealth generate migration flows. Mountain population aiming to maintain their livelihood has to enlarge their perimeter of activities on global markets and has to achieve similar productivities compared to the population in the densified metropolitan areas. As this will not be possible, mountain areas will depend on financial transfers from the lowlands. Therefore, the strategy of “entrepreneurial mountains” (new products, higher prices for quality labelled food, lean management structures etc.) is supposed to be a dead-end as there is not enough stable demand for all in the long-term. Considerable struggles on distribution of resources and income may even increase.

These days, we see on a European level the processes of deindustrialisation and regional decline with its consequences of social deprivation and its regionalist and nationalist answer. It will not help Europe nor for the turnaround of the poor regions. Neither it is appropriate for the Alpine regions, which are in its majority well off.

The search for alternative regimes has to consider former findings and theories as:

- There is evidence that multiple cross-cutting cleavages in a society diminish social conflicts in contrary of societies with single but deep cleavage lines (Rokkan/Urwin, 1983).

- Highly sociated communities (i.e. cities) attract new inhabitants as they offer many risks but – up to now – they offer also the tools to resolve them (theory of transaction costs and economies of agglomeration). In the long-run this is an enormous advantage<sup>2</sup>.
- Alternative movements in society start there where young people meet and exchange their ideas. To be sustainable, mountain areas must be part of those dynamic processes – by strong connections to the urban areas or by own urban agglomerations. The theoretical basis derives from the economies of scope, observed by Jane Jacobs as *urban diversity* in the 1960s, today vulgarized with the notion of Richard Florida's *creative class*.

Considering this and taking into account the nationalist macrotendencies we are permitted to put into doubt the formerly high-ranked solution of regional specific development which, in its last consequences promotes the invention of more and distinguishable consuming goods (landscapes, symbolic capital, otherness) according Krugman's New Trade Theory for avoiding direct competition. Its ambiguous character: Innovation is a source for a better societal wellbeing as well it is a replication of the model of eternal growth with all its problems. Finally, it is not a solution for all. Raising false hopes on regional self-responsibility may not be the right answer in the crisis of confidence in the European integration process.

The aggravation of existing regional cleavage lines between mountains and lowlands will not bring more autonomy for the mountain regions and it does not solve their problem with metropolitan dominance. A solution should rather try to renegotiate the political relation between the perialpine metropolitan areas and their mountain hinterlands to avoid urban colonialism as well as regionalist isolationism. This alternative would make necessary to reduce an overemphasized identity-driven mountain policy in favour of more supra-regional and supra-national cooperation and systems of territorial equalization. There are two obstacles:

- Firstly, such a cooperation must counteract the asymmetries of the current lowland – mountain relation with productive jobs in the lowland cities and landscape commodities in the mountains. These asymmetries favour the lowland agglomerations and tend to environmental damage and overexploitation in the mountains.
- Secondly, for the moment such a strategy is not very realistic as economic and political forces run in the inverse direction. Although, efforts in this direction should be started now. An important key factor could become local initiatives of civil society to form a counterbalance against dominance and overexploitation. They can create social innovations, but only when they master to avoid regionalist egoisms and to deliver good practices fruitful also for the lowlands.

A concrete example where this relation between city and its hinterlands is renegotiated, could become the recent initiatives of hosting refugees from the countries of the global South. While, at first sight it seems obvious that refugees are better off in large cities (because of the agglomeration economies for helping institutions as well as for the social networks of the migrants), it might be better in the long view to spread the new arrivals over the territory. This may mitigate the burden for all, it may better use the potential of the volunteers of the civil society and it may make obvious that hosting in situation of crisis needs a collective action. It generates similar experiences in different regions and may mitigate the risks, which are inherent to these large migration flows. There exist examples from Northern Italy as well as from the rural areas of Bavaria, which confirm this approach (Membretti, 2015; Membretti/Dematteis, 2016; Weidinger/Kordel, 2016). It could also be an example for efforts to promote social innovation in rural and mountain areas, which has become a major topic in the last years in research and on the European agenda (Moulaert, 2013; SIMRA, 2017). These

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<sup>2</sup> We take into account that diseconomies of agglomeration always existed and that security issues have increased in the last two years in European cities, too. But – under conditions of prosperity - cities have the critical mass to resolve their problems better than peripheral regions.

are topics which are up to now neither covered by EUSALP nor by the Alpine-specific approach.

It is not the intention to say that topographic questions do not play a role anymore and that certain mountain areas are not disadvantaged. In contrary. Regions on decline exist also in the Alps and they have of course the legitimation to demand being supported. And of course it is necessary to fight against a minority position in the relation to the large agglomerations. However, this argumentation aims to rethink an exaggerated application of mountain-specificity in the Alpine debate. We have to avoid an approach, which recently becomes more and more overloaded with regionalist and nationalist thinking because of the emphasis on the identity question and the stressing on differences to other regions in economic competition, also with an overestimation of the potential of (expensive) regional products. In this sense, the approaches on regional identities have contributed to a negative influence on a broader societal solidarity and should be rectified.

#### **4. Conclusions**

We can compare the territorial disparities on European level with the development of social polarization under the liberalist productivist model. We see the consequences in the ascent of the extreme right adherence of deprived population and in regionalist, separatist and identity-related movements from Lombardy to the United Kingdom and from the United States to Hungary/Poland. Identity based movements are not in general false. To claim own interests, to maintain peculiarities and cultural differences, to react better to territorial specificities and to open up new potentials of development they might be justified. But the limits are crossed where it becomes exclusionary. Identity building is not in general false but today it leads us in a wrong direction. Place- and identity based development strategies have to be balanced in the sense of minimizing territorial disparities and with the aim of social and territorial cohesion.

#### **Core messages**

1. The shift from Fordist to post-Fordist accumulation produces new territorial disparities. Regional policies promise for each region an economic function, based on self-responsibility. But it is not possible for all and therefore often a zero-sum game; it increases the territorial cleavages between mountains and lowlands and it tends to overexploit mountain resources.
2. EUSALP is a false labelling. It reinforces the strongest European regions under the label of the "Alps". Furthermore, it gives a regionalist signal in a situation where Europe needs more integration than less.
3. Mountains may be financially successful but their functional peripherality aggravates. Consequently, they try to claim an ambiguous identity: They struggle against structural disadvantages but also develop exclusionary regionalist egoism.
4. To overcome the European crisis we need to reduce the thinking in exaggerated self-responsibility and regions seen as business units. This means to reduce the approach of specificity in mountain policies, at least in the wealthy parts of European mountains like the Alps. This offers the chance that mountains do not remain reduced on their residential and leisure qualities.
5. We need more European integration than less. Alpine development strategies should be part of it, but should remain subordinated.

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