

The Alps – Periurbanisation in a Rural Macro-Region in Europe

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The Alps – a Peripheral Region with a Low Proportion of Urban Centres

Although the Alps as a European macro-region are located in the heart of Europe, they have long been a peripheral area from an economic, social and political perspective. There are three causes for this situation:

1. As Hans Bobek showed as early as 1928 using the specific example of Innsbruck, the topography of this geologically recent high-mountain range and its vast expanses of wastelands have long presented an obstacle to cities and their catchment areas. This is why, in comparison with the rest of Europe since the Middle Ages, the Alps have been a region with few urban centres.

2. From the early modern period onward, Europe saw the rise of ever larger territorial structures which resulted in national states with fast-growing capital cities. This development put the Alps at a disadvantage as new borders were drawn along the Alps' highest ridges. This political portioning-up of the Alps turned each segment into the peripheral area of a territory whose centre lay far beyond the Alps — **the only exception being Switzerland**, which retained a pre-modern political structure.

3. Explosive urban growth accompanied Europe's industrial revolution, which put the Alps at a further economic and social disadvantage: firstly, industrialism was slow to reach the Alps (in around 1880), and in a relatively weakened form. None of the towns and cities in the Alps experienced the kind of growth of industrialised cities. Even though alpine cities grew faster than other alpine communities, their growth was fairly modest and below the European average. Secondly, from 1880 and along with the rise of tourism, which would

have been unthinkable without the industrial revolution, a distorted picture of the Alps as a rural idyll emerged all over industrialised Europe, which resulted in a mental block towards and social marginalisation of the Alps.

These are the three reasons why the Alps are a European macro-region with comparatively few, and — **in the European context** — **relatively small** cities. Nevertheless, these alpine cities are much more important than is usually assumed because the false cliché of the Alps tends to overlook urban centres, pretending that the Alps are a region without them.

Current Situation of Cities in the Alpine Region

In the current situation of highly globalised service-based societies, the Alps are at a clear disadvantage. It is the received opinion that in a competitive economy connections are very close between the productive and service industries; that innovation relies upon research and development to a high degree; that a creative environment relies upon unplanned and frequent face-to-face encounters; and that highly motivated staff lead urban lives requiring a range of leisure and cultural activities only available in large cities. All of these prerequisites can only be found in very large cities with a lively cultural scene. This is why it is assumed that only "metropolitan regions of European significance" have a competitive, innovative economy.

The Alps are essentially at a disadvantage from these new spatial requirements for service-based societies that began to establish themselves from the 1980s onwards because none of the towns and cities located in the Alps is sufficiently large and active to qualify as a "metropolitan region of Euro-

pean significance". It is therefore no coincidence that the spatial analysis carried out in the Alps in the context of the EU ESPON programme has not identified a single metropolis. In the Alps there are only six "transnational/national functional urban areas", which is the second type of "European Functional Urban Areas (FUAs)", while they occur very frequently elsewhere in Europe (ESPON 2009, p. 4). This means that the Alps are very clearly to be considered a functionally disadvantaged macro-region in Europe.

Due to their high locational value at the heart of Europe, in particular as part of the so-called "Blue Banana", the Alps nevertheless benefit from Europe's current development: being sandwiched between dynamic metropolitan regions, the Alps can be accessed relatively quickly by relevant portions of the European population via transalpine transport routes (see maps in the Raumordnungsbericht 2005 (2005 Spatial Planning Report) of the German Bundesamt für Bauwesen und Raumordnung/Bonn (Federal Office for Building and Regional Planning/Bonn) and ESPON maps). Also, large metropolises along the alpine rim are currently growing at a disproportionate rate (except Turin and Geneva), with growth predicted to continue until 2025.

The spatial location of the Alps has led to strong urbanisation processes in the Alps. Four different types can be distinguished:

1. Strong growth in alpine cities: Easily accessible alpine cities, often located along international transit routes, are currently showing strong population and economic growth. However, this is due to displacement effects, with national and international businesses pushing out local and regional ones, resulting in a weakening of the alpine cities' trans-regional and regional controlling and management functions. In the context of globalisation these locations are under increasing pressure. At the same time, branch offices and affiliations of international companies are moving in. Cities such as Thun, Interlaken or Bad Tölz, which are located along the alpine rim and in the catchment area of extra-alpine metropolises, are already undergoing massive restructuring or "suburbanisation"; important residential, leisure and nature conservation functions are being transferred here from the agglomerations. Cities such as Innsbruck, Bolzano or Trient, located in the Alps, however, are as yet less strongly affected by this shift. Alpine cities are nevertheless facing a serious problem in this structural change because, in comparison to extra-alpine cities, their economic structure already showed some weaknesses in 1990, in that there was a disproportionate overrepresentation of construction, industry and tourism, while research & development and

specialised services were significantly underrepresented (Perlik 2001, pp. 95 ff.). Moreover, the topography leads to high real-estate prices due to the scarcity of land suitable for building.

2. Belts of urbanisation along transit routes: For the past twenty years or more, along transit routes (motorways), increasing numbers of industrial estates have been built on wide valley floors in the vicinity of motorway exits. These estates tend to produce a continuous housing belt (easily identifiable on Corine Landcover maps). Companies that settle in these locations are so-called "ubiquitous" businesses (often in international transport and logistics), which primarily depend on being within very easy reach of important European metropolises and, secondarily, on the availability of large tracts of cheap land. Resources and potentials specific to the Alps, e.g. commodities, labour, attractive scenery and a high quality of leisure activities, however, play a very marginal role (Wenzel 2011). Such companies are therefore much more closely associated with the European and global economy than with the alpine space as such; they are located "along" rather than "in" the Alps.

3. Creation of commuter towns along the alpine rim: From approximately 1980 onwards, commuter towns (living in the Alps, working in the extra-alpine metropolis or its suburban belt) have grown up in regions along the alpine rim, in the vicinity of large extra-alpine metropolises, because the latter have been expanding and encroaching on the alpine rim, and because of the high quality of the environment and leisure activities that renders regions along the alpine rim highly attractive to residents. The outskirts of Nice, Geneva, Zurich, Munich, Vienna and Graz have already expanded to a significant degree, with the alpine hinterland of Nice being most strongly affected (see map 3 in Perlik 2001). In the past, population growth in these regions has been particularly high (see map 26 in Bätzing 2003). Associated far-reaching functional and structural changes weaken these areas' alpine connections, while their metropolitan association is strengthened.

4. Touristic urbanisation: Successful touristic development leads to a gradual urbanisation of tourist locations. As they initially tend to be small farming communities, it takes some time for them to reach the threshold number of residents (population 10,000) to qualify as a "city" (Chamonix and Davos are probably the best-known examples). In 1990 there were only eighteen tourist centres in the Alps that could be classified as "cities" (Perlik 2001, p. 120), and they had a comparatively low number of residents (in 1990 a mere 2.9 % of the total alpine population). Hence, this form of urbanisation is the weakest of the four types of alpine urbanisation. Again, these alpine connections of these areas

become increasingly fragile, while their association to visitors' source regions, including the adoption of rapidly-changing, post-modern leisure trends is intensified.

These four types of urbanisation have turned the Alps into an urbanised macro-region in terms of population and economy, but not in terms of surface area. According to Manfred Perlik's analyses based on 1990/91 census data (more recent data is not currently available), just under 62 % of the total alpine population lived in "urbanised zones"; more than 66 % of all workplaces occupied 27 % of the Alps' surface area (Perlik 2001, p. 80 and p. 122). By 2010 an estimated 66 to 68 % of the alpine population are likely to live in urbanised alpine regions.

The disproportionately high growth in terms of population and economy since 1980 is due to the urbanisation of the centrally located and extremely accessible Alps. However, the development must be considered positive only to a very limited degree: in all four instances, it has been dependent on and induced by outside influences that have weakened the Alps' autonomy, and is intrinsically linked to extreme spatial contrasts between urbanised valley floors — plus a few tourist resorts in actual high-mountain areas — and the depopulated mountains where urbanisation is not possible.

This "peripheral" form of urbanisation is likely to be typical of many rural, peripheral areas in Europe. Among the planet's high mountain ranges, however, the Alps are (still?) a singular case. Due to their location, no other high mountain ranges have been undergoing this kind of urbanisation alongside the development of their endogenous potentials.

References

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