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# New Immigration Into the European Alps: Emerging Research Issues

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*After a long period of emigration from the rural areas in the European Alps, a trend reversal can be observed in the last quarter of the 20th century. However, this “new immigration” affects the Alpine countries unevenly in terms of both timing and intensity. Furthermore, growing spatial mobility and consequential transformation of settlements involve several population segments with diverse motives for their movements. This article sketches the temporal development and the extent of the diverse immigration and circulation patterns for the individual countries of the Alps and identifies knowledge gaps. Furthermore, opportunities and risks of the new immigration for both the “new highlanders” as well as the indigenous communities are briefly discussed. The authors conclude with an outline of further needs for basic research in this field and an appeal to leverage the new immigration for rural development.*

*The article was already discussed within the “Demography and Employment” working group of the Alpine Conference and is expected to serve as a basis for discussion in the International Scientific Committee on Research in the Alps (ISCRA) workshop “New Highlanders” taking place at the Alpweek 2012 in Poschiavo, Switzerland.*

**Keywords:** Amenity migration; counterurbanization; (Alpine) gentrification; (new) immigration; multilocality; neoruralism; second homes; European Alps.

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## Fundamental changes in demographic development

As the demographic transition cycle in highly developed countries is

nearing completion, territorial migrations represent a more variable and more significant component in population dynamics than natural population developments (Zelinsky 1971). Movements of specific age groups (immigration and emigration of people of generative age or older) have a particularly strong influence on the demographic aging of a population. For a long time, emigration of young people dominated most rural areas of the European Alps, albeit unevenly in terms of both timing and intensity. Only a few regions, such as the central Eastern Alps in Upper Bavaria, North Tyrol, and South Tyrol, experienced sustained periods of immigration (see Bätzing 2003).

A trend reversal began in the last quarter of the 20th century, which occurred at different points in time in the individual Alpine regions. The term “new immigration” seems to have been coined quite late in the Italian Alps when, after a very long phase of severe emigration (eg in Piedmont, this had lasted for more than 100 years), the turnaround here began in the 1990s. However, this does not mean that immigration exceeds (recent) emigration in all municipalities (Dematteis 2011). In retrospect, the immigration phase identified in the French and Swiss Alps as early as the 1970s could also be called “new immigration.” At that time, the increase in population in rural areas went along with a decrease in population in the conurbations, a process that was termed “counter-urbanization” (Ogden 1985).

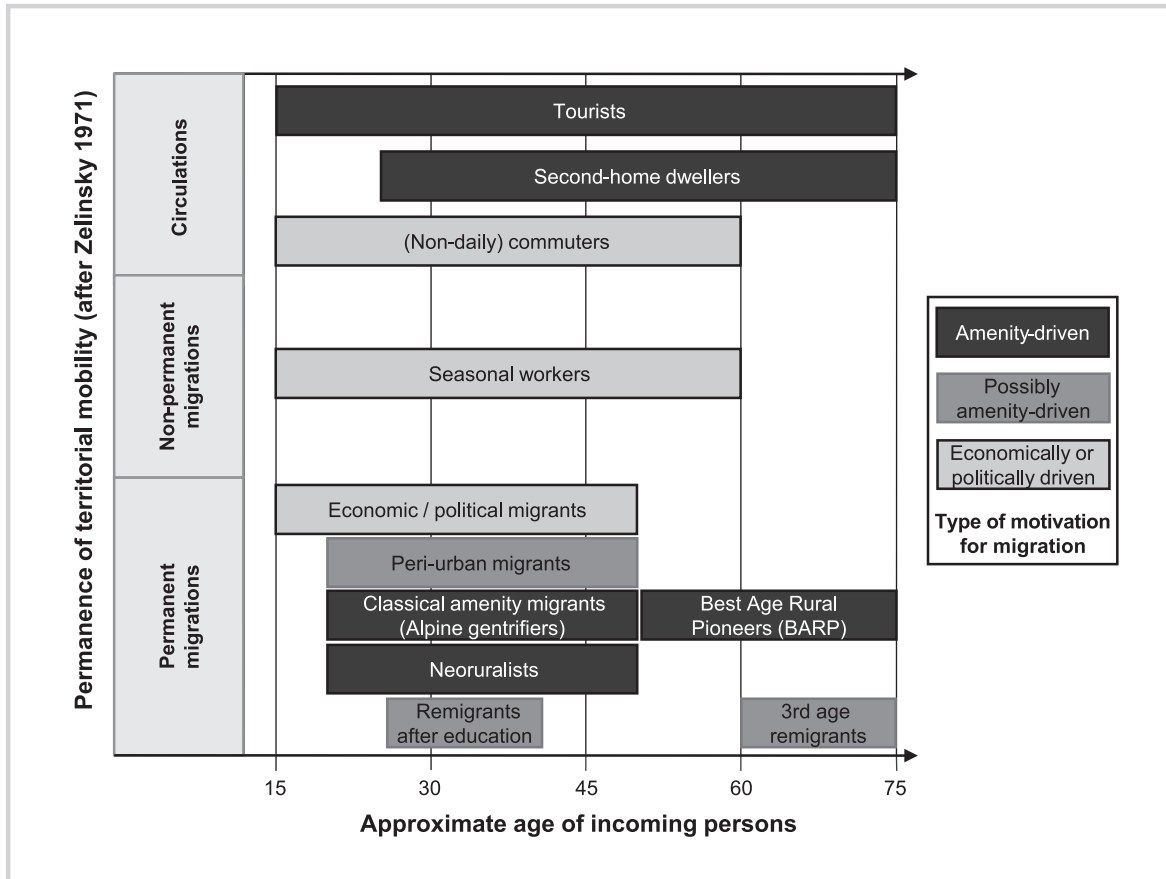
Not only did the new demographic development start at different times in the individual

Alpine countries, it also seems to have been carried by different sections of the population and reached varying proportions. Here we will sketch the temporal development and extent of the new immigration for the individual countries of the European Alps and identify knowledge gaps. This article was prepared on behalf of the “Demography and Employment” working group of the Alpine Conference, so as to promote a pan-Alpine scientific debate on the new developments outlined here as well as enable comparisons with other mountain areas in the world.

## The “new highlanders”

Immigration and growing density of settlements in the rural areas of the Alps are attributable to several population segments with diverse motives for their movements. Perlik (2006) has identified 7 “mobility types” in this context (see our proposed terminology in Figure 1). Of these mobility groups, the so-called amenity migrants have received the most attention in research (see Perlik 2006, 2011; Steinicke et al 2010). The concept of amenity migration goes back to studies conducted by Moss (1994) in North America. The main components of amenity migration were also described for the French Alps at about the same time by Fourny (1994), who did not use that term but referred in general to the *nouveaux habitants*. Amenity migration is seen as the opposite of (labor) migration for economic reasons. Amenities might be the landscape or sociocultural factors (Perlik 2006). The term, however, is not

**FIGURE 1** Proposed terminology of mobility types into the Alps after Perlik (2006: Table 15.1), adapted and complemented by other literature.



unambiguously defined and overlaps with other types of migration, for example, “neoruralism” (Mercier and Simona 1983; Corti 2007) or even tourism with second homes (Perlik 2006).

Migrations in the strict sense of the word only mean spatial movements of population groups connected with a permanent change of residence. The problem is that an increasing number of people maintain several residences that they live in alternately. This is exacerbated by the different ways in which such primary and secondary residences are statistically captured by the different Alpine countries. A person can have a primary residence in each country and may thus appear several times in pan-Alpine statistics. This problem has not been quantified for the Alpine area to

date. As a consequence, research on “amenity migration” or on “new immigration” must be seen in the wider functional context of multilocal living (see Perlik 2011). The concept of multilocality has been discussed by McIntyre (2009) and Weichhart (2009). Multilocality is cost intensive and thus dependent on a certain social position. Perlik, referring back to Phillips (1993), speaks of “Alpine gentrification” (Perlik 2011). This characteristic could be used to distinguish so-called amenity migration from neoruralism.

### France

The French Alps were the first region to experience mass emigration and also, in the postwar period, to record a turnaround, with substantial migration gains (Bätzing 2003). This

development is not limited to the Alps but rather forms part of a national “counter-urbanization” trend (Ogden 1985) and/or is encouraged by policies for mountain regions (Bätzing 2003; Perlik 2006). In the 1980s, the migration motives and employment sectors of the immigrants led to a discussion about *néo-ruralisme* (Mercier and Simona 1983). A number of case studies have been carried out, all in the Rhône-Alpes region, for example, of Val de Drôme (Couriol 1986), Beaufortain (Fourny 1994), and Diois (Cognard 2006); one recent study focused on second home owners and immigration of retirees in the whole Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur region (Davezies 2010).

Fourny’s study (1994) dates the turnaround to a positive migration balance reached in the early 1980s.

The immigrants were for the most part 30–50 years old. For more than half of them, landscape, culture, and lifestyle constituted one motive to migrate; for 28% of them, it was the only motive. This portion of the nouveaux habitants thus clearly falls into the category of amenity migrants. According to Cognard's study (2006), the immigrants seem to be getting younger on average. Migration to an old-age residence and remigration only play a minor role here. The majority of immigrants are urban people with professional qualifications and financial reserves who are moved by ecological thinking to exchange the urban milieu for country living (Cognard 2006). Employment in agriculture, however, remains largely confined to the indigenous population. The migrants often establish a business in tourism, retail, arts and crafts, or the service sector.

## Switzerland

In Switzerland, the past 30 years of the 20th century were a period of deconcentration of urbanized areas (mostly in the Swiss Plateau) and counter-urbanization of rural areas, mostly situated in Switzerland's mountain zones (Kahsai and Schaeffer 2010), with a concurrent process of neoruralization, that is, the promotion of regional awareness and the targeted marketing of local produce. Extremely peripheral municipalities (mostly in mountain areas) experienced immigration of urban people for the first time. Even more important for stabilizing the rural population was the expansion of secondary and vocational schools. It reduced the emigration of young people and initiated a trend for them to return after completing their education (Schuler et al 2004).

All types of areas experienced similar total gains in the period from 1990 to 2000. However, the proportion of long-distance migration (from another canton) to the lowland urban centers is only

slightly higher than that to rural areas, including in mountains. Since 1970, migrations over large (internal) distances, in general, have continued to fall and today are negligible for demographic development (Schuler et al 2004). In addition, Camenisch and Debarbieux (2011: 11) have identified "a 'mountain factor,' which means that most inter-communal migrations occur within the mountain zone, or within the Swiss Plateau." This also means that immigration from the urban centers of the lowlands into the mountain areas is weakening. Indeed, Swiss amenity seekers are either older people (Hornung and Röthlisberger 2005) or traditionally tend to establish second homes, even if there have been legislative attempts to limit these in recent years (see Perlik 2006; in March 2012, there was a national referendum that limited the number of second homes to 20% per municipality). Multilocal living in Switzerland is greatly facilitated by the excellent transport network, including railway tunnels (Perlik 2011). Another Swiss characteristic is the high number of wealthy immigrants from abroad, who mainly target the centers and tourist municipalities (Schuler et al 2004). Their main reason for settling in Switzerland is the low-tax policy of individual cantons. Amenities only have an influence on the decisions of such wealthy immigrants as to the location of their residences within the selected canton.

## Italy

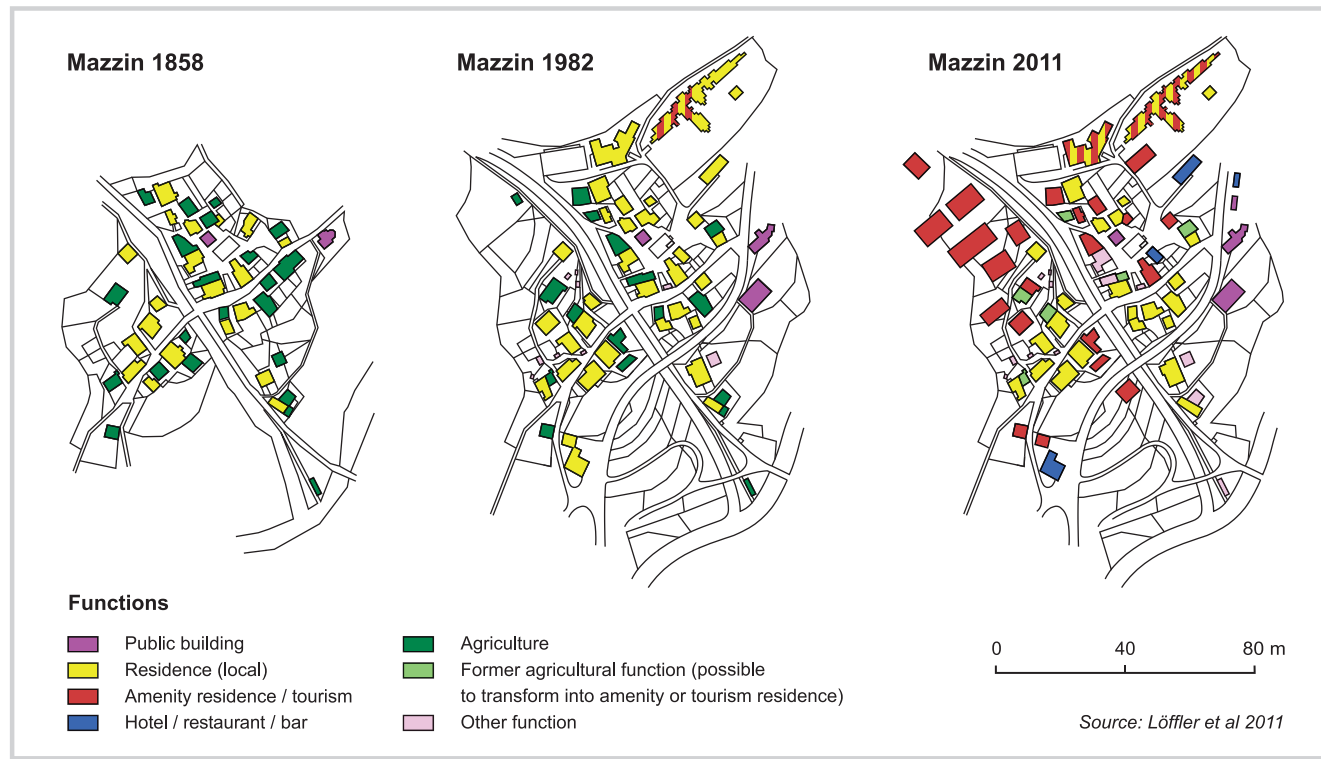
For several decades until the 1980s, almost the entire Italian Alps (except for the autonomous region of Trentino-Alto Adige/South Tyrol) were affected by emigration. The decisive factors included unfavorable agro-social structures and the scarcity of jobs. In several valleys, some villages have become completely deserted ("ghost towns").

Beginning in the 1990s, there is evidence of a trend reversal in at least parts of the region. Evaluation of official statistics shows that the proportion of Alpine municipalities affected by emigration decreased significantly, from 24% in the 1990s to 16% in the first decade of the 21st century; on the whole, these municipalities currently even experience immigration (Beismann et al 2011). Immigrants settle in the main valleys and in the Alpine foothills as well as in remote mountain areas, some of which were completely depopulated. These areas are situated far beyond a reasonable daily commuting distance from the urban centers of the region. A considerable number of regional case studies have recently been published, for example, of Val Maira (Pettenati 2010), Valle Gesso (Borgna 2010), and 3 other mountain regions in Piedmont (Dematteis 2011).

The new inhabitants of the Italian Alps can be divided into several groups: re-migrants (retiring to their villages of origin), migrants from Eastern and Southeastern Europe, and amenity migrants and neoruralists (Corti 2007; Rossetto 2008; Corrado 2010; Dematteis 2010; Dematteis 2011). Löffler et al (2011) rate amenity migration as a main driver of the new immigration process, especially in the peripheral mountain regions: holiday homes, accounting for more than half of the houses in some municipalities, are increasingly being converted into second homes or retirement residences. As a consequence, the owners spend more time there. As Löffler et al (2011) found out, several abandoned villages have been resettled both by restoring old buildings and by constructing new houses on the edge of the village (Figure 2).

In some municipalities, the eagerly awaited recent immigration compensates for the continuous emigration of past decades, which mainly left behind the older and more immobile sections of the

**FIGURE 2** Transformation of Mazzin, Val di Fassa, Province of Trento, Italy, 1858–2011. (Source: Löffler et al 2011, slightly modified)



population. In total, the Italian Alps present a spatially fragmented situation. Only some of the villages are affected by immigration, even fewer by amenity migration. Still, there are municipalities where emigration prevails, even to the point of complete abandonment. Municipalities with immigration and emigration very often lie close to each other (data from Italian National Institute for Statistics; see Beismann et al 2011).

### Austria

Within the Austrian Alps, the effects of counter-urbanization since the 1970s have been considerably weaker than in France and Switzerland (see Hanika et al 2004). Of the total migration gain for Austria of some 450,000 people for the period between the censuses of 1971 and 2001, only 24% concern the mountain areas, where the majority of municipalities recorded a negative migration balance.

It, therefore, is hardly surprising that issues related to the new highlanders and especially to amenity migration rank low among Austrian stakeholders. However, age-specific interregional migrations have already been studied in Austria in an effort to identify types of migration as well as source and destination regions. Among those aged 40–59 years and 60–74 years, there is a trend to migrate mainly to areas further away from towns (Marik-Lebeck and Wisbauer 2009). An ongoing research project undertaken by the authors examines this trend in detail by focusing on the district of East Tyrol, where the cohort of people aged 15–45 years, in particular, features a clearly negative balance, whereas the cohort of people aged 50–74 years shows a positive balance (Figure 3). Born (2007) named migrants of this latter age cohort “Best Age Rural Pioneers (BARPs),” including a subgroup of amenity migrants that differs from other groups in its needs and

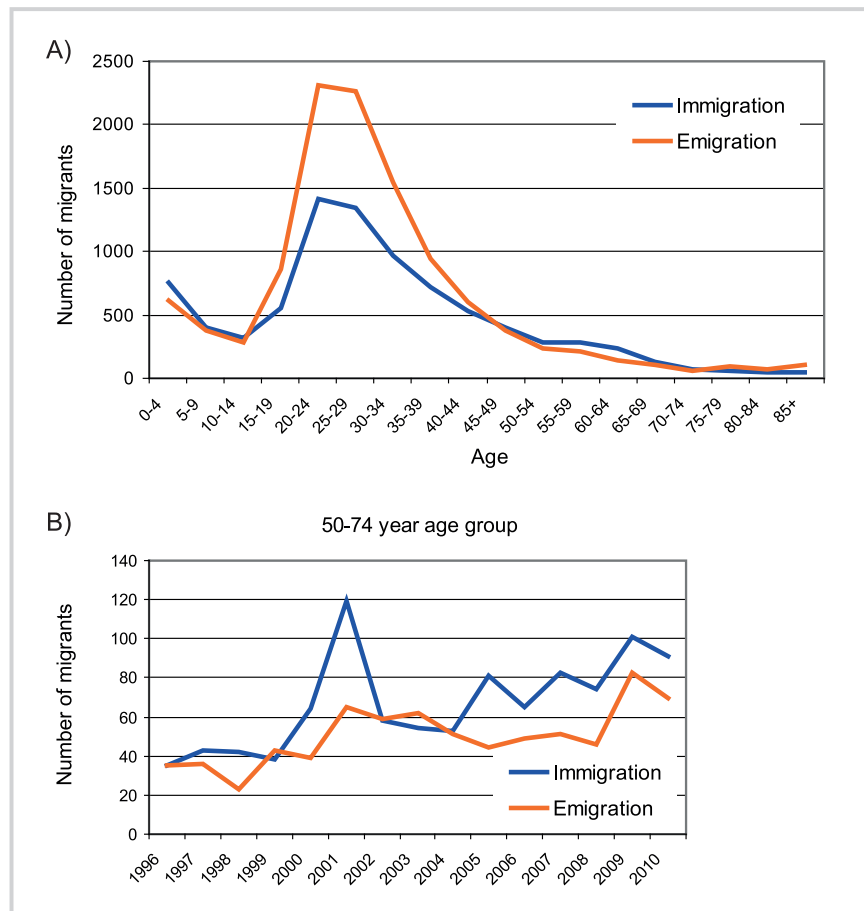
interests. The Austrian municipalities preferred by those older than 50 years old to settle in, which are very often situated in classic tourist destinations, are shown in Figure 4.

### Germany

The Bavarian Alps have not experienced any large-scale exodus or any decrease in population since industrialization (Bätzing 2003), nor have they seen the counter-urbanization phase typical for the Western Alps during the 1970s and 1980s. Both rural areas and urban centers have grown in population. The Bavarian Alps still present the highest immigration rates within Bavaria. This more recent immigration into the Bavarian Alpine rim is essentially the result of an expansion of the commuting range for the metropolitan area of Munich, plus immigration from the economically less prosperous north and east of Germany (Bätzing 2003;



**FIGURE 3** (A) Migration balance for 1996–2010, summarized for the district of East Tyrol; (B) migration balance for 1996–2010 for the age cohort 50–74 years in the district of East Tyrol. (Source: Statistics Austria; Data: Migration Statistics 1996–2010)



Perlik 2006); the proportion of foreigners does not exceed the average. Recent developments seem to continue a long-term trend that, within the Alps, mostly resembles that of Switzerland. In the 1970s, second homes attracted the interest of researchers (eg Ruhl 1977). Today, it is the improved circumstances and the increasing implications of multilocal living that draw the attention of researchers, but relevant studies are still missing.

## Slovenia

Before 1990, immigration into the Slovene Alps consisted mainly of inner-Yugoslav labor migrants, increasingly single women who found employment in the secondary sector

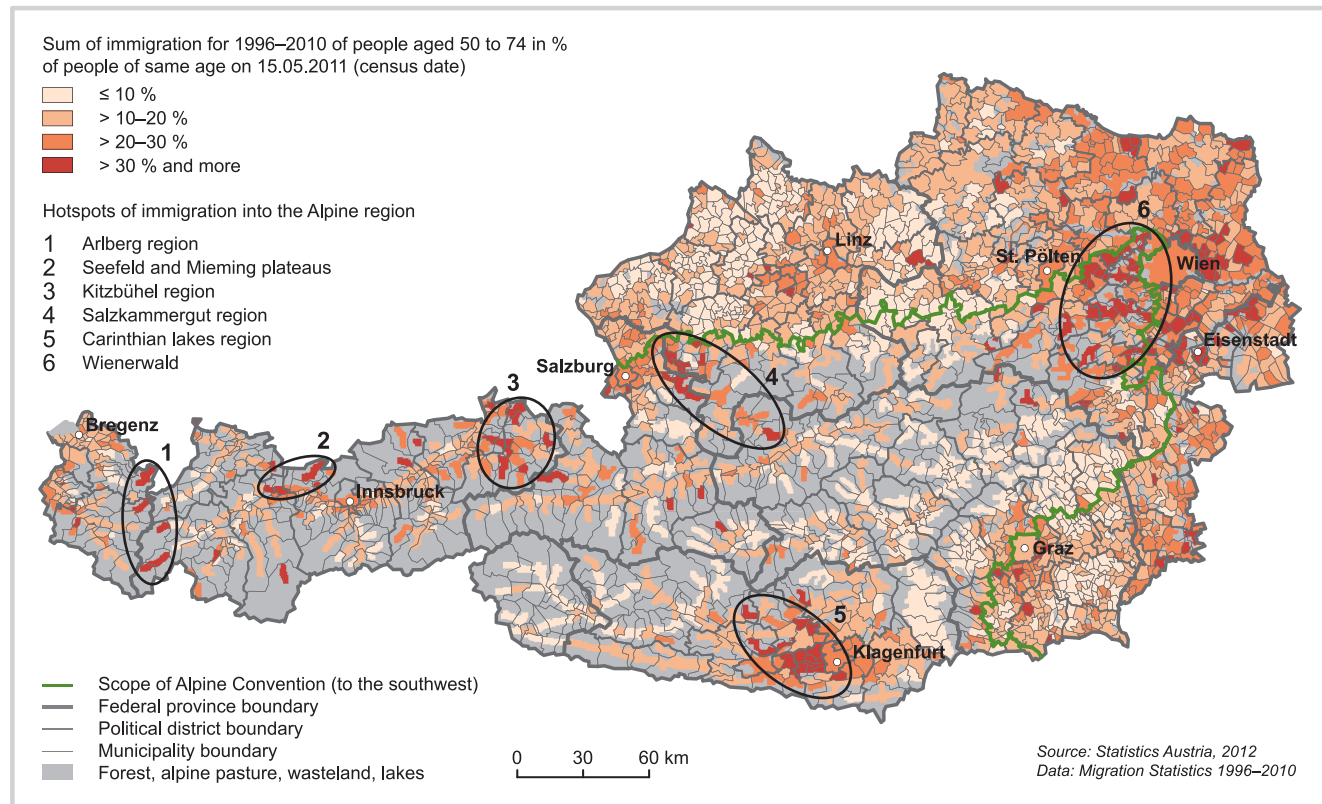
of industrial municipalities, in the health sector, and in tourism. Labor emigration often happened in stages, for example, from southern Yugoslavia, via a rural and then an urban Slovene municipality and on into another country. From the early 1980s onward, more than half of the roughly 50,000 Slovene labor migrants in Western Europe returned to Slovenia. Therefore, a large proportion of the returnees are not originally from the place where they settle, some of them do not even hail from Slovenia (Gosar 1992). At the same time, a demand for second homes developed (Gosar 1989), increasingly also from foreigners when Slovenia became a sovereign state in the early 1990s. A case study from the Pomurje region documents amenity migration as well (both

seasonal and permanent), mainly from the UK (Lampič and Mrak 2012).

## Opportunities and risks of the new immigration

“Real” immigrants differ from tourists and from multilocal dwellers in their needs and their influence on the destination municipalities. Plenty of research has been done on problems associated with second homes, such as high infrastructure costs while the added value for local communities remains relatively low (see CIPRA 2008). Because the immigrant types vary greatly across the Alps (see Figure 1 and the typology in Dematteis 2011: 76ff), in terms of migration motive and lifestyle, socioeconomic position, and demographic status (age, marital

**FIGURE 4** Austrian municipalities preferred by over-50 year olds for immigration from another Austrian district or from abroad, for 1996–2010. (Source: Statistics Austria; Data: Migration Statistics 1996–2010)



status), it is impossible to make any blanket statements here. The Alpine communities may benefit from the new residents in highly diverse ways: from an input in terms of buying power, knowledge, innovative potential, and/or civic engagement. As a rule, the new residents' dwelling, supply-side, and leisure requirements give a boost to the local economy (building sector, retail, services). At best, the immigrants younger than retirement age create jobs for the indigenous population or at least for themselves (see the studies from France and Italy, eg Cognard 2006), at worst, they compete with the indigenous population for usually scarce jobs or supersede traditional economic activities.

Amenity migrants attracted by the high quality of life in mountain regions very often show an interest in autochthonous cultural traditions (Löffler et al 2011). Admittedly, as it becomes clear from Fourny's study

(1994), they rarely take on political functions, hardly engage in traditional associations but do enroll in modern clubs. The connection of mountain agriculture with tourism links both groups: the indigenous people use it to maintain their rural identity, the migrants to find a newly invented ruralness. However, immigration may also cause new problems, especially in the sparsely populated areas. Cultural heritage, in particular regarding the ethnolinguistic minorities of the Italian Alps, is threatened by the assimilation process triggered by new inhabitants who usually come from urban milieus and may even originate from other cultures (Steinicke et al 2010).

### Conclusions and research outlook

From its emergence, the phenomenon of new immigration into rural Alpine areas was first researched in France; recently it has

been investigated mainly in Italy. Case studies from the German-speaking parts of the Alps still need to follow. There are some pan-Alpine overviews, but they are very general in empirical terms (Perlik 2006), debating advantages and disadvantages, and causes and impacts, and even trying to fit the phenomenon into spatial planning theories (Perlik 2011). The terminology changes in line with the dominant spatial development concepts of the relevant period (counter-urbanization, amenity migration, multilocal dwelling).

To describe the new immigration more precisely, explain it better, and leverage it for rural development, there is a need for

1. A pan-Alpine quantitative overview:
  - Of the regionally diverse migration flows by source and destination areas as well as of

the temporal development of migration dynamics;

- With a special focus on the age structure of the immigrants and emigrants in the relevant regions, which helps to assess the impacts on natural population development (birth and death rates);
- For differentiating the roles of the different migration types (amenity migrants, new ruralists, returnees, labor migrants, and possible others); and
- As a basis to assess existing case studies in an overall context.

## 2. Further qualitative regional/local research:

- On the impact of the new immigration on social life, on the economy, and on the natural environment in the target destinations;
- On the needs of the immigrants as well as on the needs of the autochthonous communities to integrate the new highlanders and to benefit from them;
- To identify examples of good practice.

## 3. The development of strategies that may help to:

- Integrate new immigrants into the (still) vibrant rural societies, and
- Support innovative development processes triggered by the new residents.

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