

# Economic migrants and refugees: the role of foreign highlanders in revitalising mountain territories



Andrea Membretti  
University of Pavia *and* Dislivelli

# ITALIAN ALPINE POPULATION (2015)

- 52.000 sq. Km (17% of national territory, 7 regions)
- 84 inhabitants/sq. km (national average: 198)
- 1.749 local municipalities (21,6% of italian municipalities); 24% with a population of less then 500 people
- 4.364.538 residents (7,3% of the Italian population)
- After a long period of depopulation, new growth in the last 15 years in several areas (even if 42% of alpine municipalities are still losing population)

The majority of Italian Alpine territories have a negative trend in the rate of birth, but quite all are interested by immigration (inner and international one)

Where the population grows is only because of immigration, especially from foreign countries.

# FOREIGN RESIDENTS IN THE ITALIAN ALPS (2014)

(Italian municipalities inside the territory of the AlpConv)

350.000 people (53% females and 47% males), mostly from non EU countries, are officially resident in Alpine Italian municipalities

Foreigners are the 7,86 % of Italian Alpine population (national average: 7,35%)

- Higher percentages: Trentino-Alto Adige, Veneto, areas close to the Padana plain, inner areas characterised by ethnic professions (stone quarries, wood cutting, sheep-farming, ...), foot-hill territories close to metropolitan areas

There is at least one foreign resident in 98% of Italian Alpine municipalities, with generally a good level of integration.

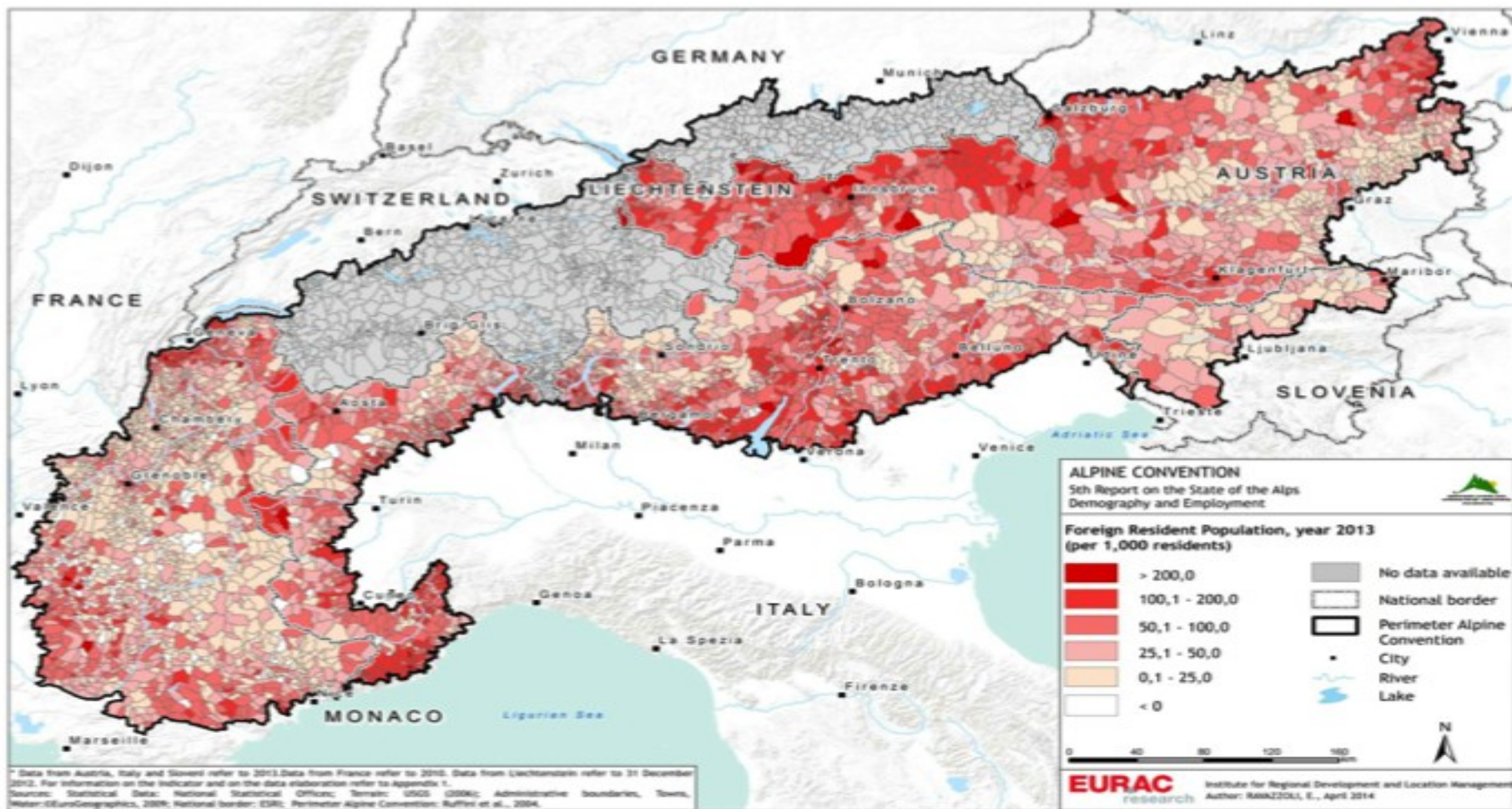




# FACTORS OF ATTRACTION OF FOREIGN IMMIGRATION IN THE ITALIAN ALPS

- ❑ Jobs offer (agriculture, wood cutting, quarries, craft sector, small industries, building sector, touristic services, health care and social services, ..)
- ❑ Housing market (abandoned/empty houses, lower rents, etc.)
- ❑ Lower cost of life
- ❑ Better quality of life (environment, community relationships, ...)
- ❑ De-population (empty territories)
- ❑ Proximity to urban areas (foothill suburbanization)





# FOREIGN RESIDENTS IN THE ALPS

(2013)

# Refugees: a new phenomenon for the Alps

Nowadays the distinction between economic migrants and refugees appears increasingly weak and mainly a political issue.

But there are substantial differences regarding their arrival in Alpine communities: refugees arrive all together in groups, as forced and temporary inhabitants, all men, without filling local voids in terms of jobs, housing, etc. and without a project of life in the mountains.

In 2015 about **300.000 migrants** arrived in Italy and **90.000 asylum applications** were received (UNHCR): 2/3 of all the migrants left Italy to other EU countries.

In 2015 immigrants for humanitarian reasons hosted in Italy were **100.138 males and 17.682 females** (excluding long term visas and not accompanied minors).

- At the end of 2016, they were over 170.000.

**Refugees hosted in Italian Alpine regions: 41.945 (North-West: 24.053; North-East: 17.892 ), 35% of total population of refugees in Italy (2015)**



# Small Alpine municipalities and foreign immigration

Small municipalities (less than 5,000 inhabitants) are those which primarily welcome foreigners (economic migrants and, recently, refugees) who move to the Italian Alps: these tend to be "fragile areas", in a recent past lands of emigration and dramatic depopulation, for a long time marginalized by the post-war industrial development, and now becoming the destination of opposing immigration flows.

In small Alpine municipalities the migration from abroad is often manifested as a "rebound effect" of foreigners from the city (first immigration destination) to rural areas, within, in many cases, a more general processes of interstitial suburbanization, affecting the foothill territory.

While the arrival (during the last 20 years) of economic migrants has been often accepted by these Alpine communities (as they contribute to the maintenance of local economy and essential services: schools, post offices, etc.), recent arrival of refugees is often perceived as a threat.



# Refugees reception and mountain revitalization

Several good practices in Alpine Italian small villages show that welcoming refugees can offer a support to local development, in terms of:

- **new resources for deprived contexts** (re-use of buildings, job opportunities for local residents, re-activation of small shops, ...)
- **care of the land** (preservation of local natural and cultural landscapes, sustainable tourism)
- **demographic contribution** (contrasting social desertification)
- **input for resilience and social innovation**
- attracting **public and political attention** to marginal and often forgotten territories





# From “highlanders by force” to “highlanders by choice”?

Which kind of policies and of actions are necessary, in order to transform at least a part of the refugees' flows towards the Alps in a resource for mountain re-population?

Is it enough to foster a welcoming culture? How to mediate conflicts?

Which kind of negotiation is it possible to develop between old and new inhabitants?

What about differences in power and access to local resources?

How can top-down policies learn from bottom-up local experiences?

There is the need of a wider vision and of a long-term strategy, in order to invest in refugees as a transforming factor for Alpine regions and, especially, for marginal areas.

