

Submitted Abstract

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Abstract

The far north-eastern mountainous region of Italy, the Valcanale[1] in Friuli, belonged to Habsburg until the end of WWI. From the early Middle Ages onwards, the relatively small border area developed into a melting pot of the major European language families – Germanic, Slavic and Romance – due to the influx of Slovenian, German-speaking, Friulian and Italian groups. After WWI, the peace treaties of St. Germain-en-Laye (1919) and Rapallo (1920) sealed the valley's annexation by Italy: The inhabitants were made Italian citizens and faced fascist Italianization measures. Although affected by the same fundamental changes as the South Tyrolean population, no minority protection was implemented for the Valcanale population until 1999. Lacking linguistic socialization, emigration, generational change, and assimilation to the Italian majority have contributed to the fact that only about 400 descendants can still actively use their autochthonous language(s).

During the presentation, the author will argue that, even though the Italian influence has been strong, special socio-agrarian structures could be maintained. These, in turn, have mitigated cultural assimilation and initiate new perspectives for enhanced sociocultural and -economic resilience. In this respect, the remaining farmers, and the active members of the “Nachbarschaften”[2] are of great importance. For a thorough analysis, data has been collected on an ongoing basis since March 2020 using a mixed methods approach: observations, photo documentation, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions on the one hand, a digital questionnaire, and well-founded estimates by experts – in addition to official data – on the other.

The voluntary, active collaboration within the “Nachbarschaften”, which has preserved and cultivated long-established commons based on property-linked servitude rights, is not only characterized by tight relations to Austria or Slovenia. It also testifies to the awareness of both the cultural landscape's and the village communities' vulnerability. Furthermore, there is an emerging appreciation of the idle potential “their commons” could provide for social cohesion, cultural preservation, and a more sustainable economic development. As in other alpine areas, however, sectoral change has also left traces on the Valcanale. Only few (full-time) farmers still contribute with their work to the preservation of old traditions and the mountainous cultural landscape.

[1] Kanaltal in German, Kanalska dolina in Slovenian and Valcjanâl in Friulian

[2] Consorzi Vicinali = Weide-/Wald-/Agrargemeinschaft