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## POTENTIAL FOR CONFLICTS IN AREAS OF ETHNO-LINGUISTIC MINORITIES OF THE EASTERN ALPS

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### ABSTRACT

*In the Eastern Alps the German-speaking area does not directly merge with the Italian-speaking region. In between there is a zone populated by ethno-linguistic minorities which can be grouped as follows: national minorities (Slovenes and Germans), German language pockets, and indigenous/domestic territorial minority groups (Friulians, Ladins, Rhaeto-Romanics).*

*Except for South Tyrol, all other minority regions in the Eastern Alps are characterized by territorial regression and a progressively decreasing minority population. In fact, various smaller communities are even threatened by extinction, such as some German-speaking language pockets in northern Italy, or individual Friulian- and Slovene-speaking mountain villages. It is mainly assimilation and depopulation that are the driving forces behind the change of ethnic boundaries in the Eastern Alps. In South-Tyrol, where respective protection mechanisms are largely responsible for the maintenance of the German- and Ladin-speaking groups, it is the Italian-speaking population that feels discriminated. This has already had an impact on local election results. It is essential that their migration behavior and numerical shrinkage be studied in close detail.*

**Key words:** Eastern Alps, national minorities, Italians, Germans, Slovenes, national boundaries, ethnic boundaries

## POSSIBILITÀ DI CONFLITTO NELLE AREE DELLE ALPI ORIENTALI CON MINORANZE ETNO-LINGUISTICHE

### SINTESI

*All'interno delle Alpi Orientali, l'area di lingua tedesca non si fonde direttamente con la vicina regione di lingua italiana. Esiste infatti fra di esse una zona popolata da minoranze etno-linguistiche, che si suddividono in minoranze nazionali (sloveni e tedeschi), isole linguistiche tedesca e gruppi territoriali nativi/nazionali minori (friulani, ladini, reto-romanici).*

*Tutte le regioni minori delle Alpi Orientali, ad eccezione del Sud Tirolo, sono caratterizzate da una regressione territoriale e da una diminuzione progressiva della popolazione minoritaria. Infatti molte piccole comunità, quali ad esempio i ceppi di lingua tedesca dell'Italia settentrionale o alcuni villaggi montanari di lingua friulana e slovena, sono addirittura in pericolo di estinzione. Le cause principali alla base del cambiamento dei confini etnici nelle Alpi orientali, sono rappresentate dall'assimilazione e dallo spopolamento. Prova ne è il fatto che nel Sud Tirolo, dove meccanismi di protezione garantiscono il mantenimento dei gruppi di lingua tedesca e ladina, sia invece la popolazione di lingua italiana a sentirsi discriminata. Fatto questo, che ha già portato risultati nelle elezioni amministrative. Pertanto è essenziale che la tendenza migratoria e il calo numerico vengano analizzati attentamente.*

**Parole chiave:** Alpi Orientali, minoranze nazionali, italiani, tedeschi, sloveni, confini statali, confini etnici

INTRODUCTION

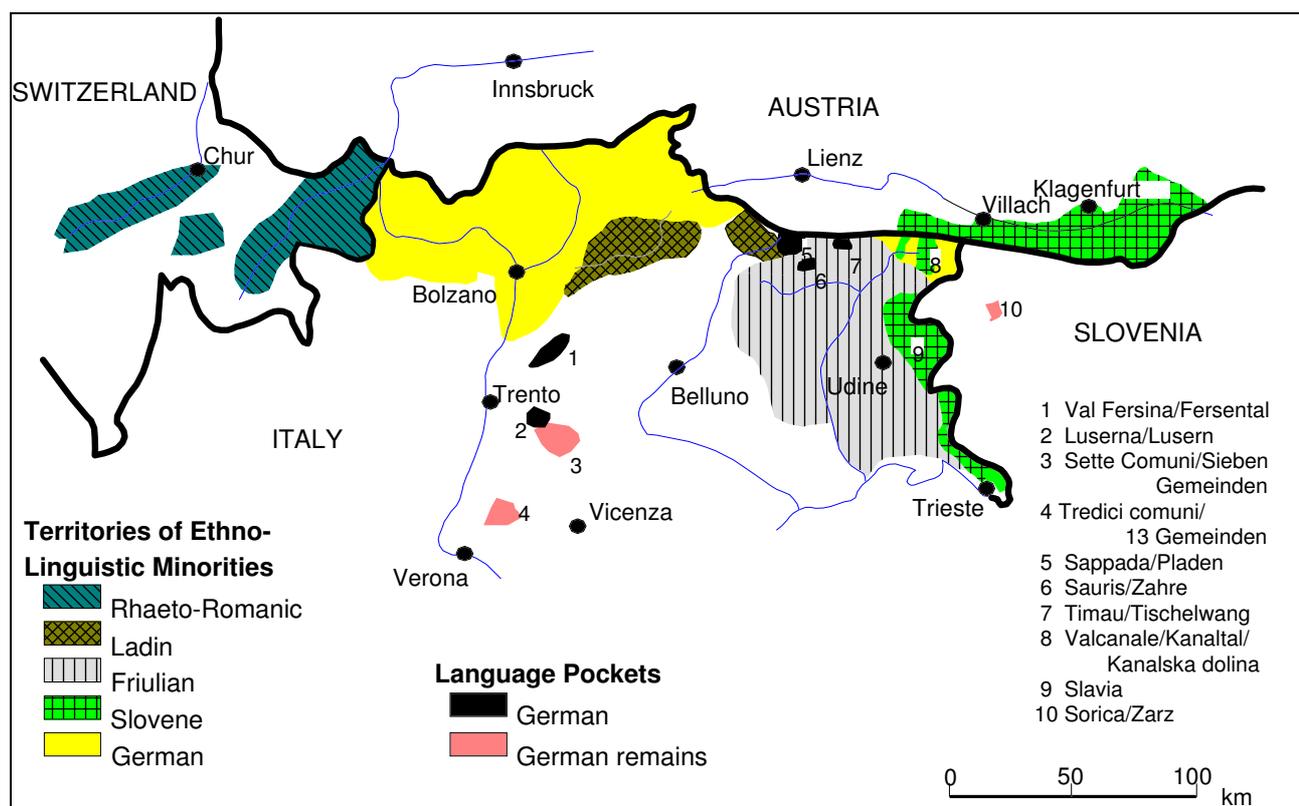
The main goal of this paper is to highlight the potential for ethnic conflict in the Eastern Alps as well as to point to likely solutions. The potential for conflict comprises those problems of ethnic minorities, which may lead to confrontations with the majority or other groups of the society. This includes all problem areas which promote assimilation and contribute to the disappearance of ethno-diversity. The insights presented here form the core focus of a current research project at Innsbruck's Department of Geography.

Only few states and regions have managed to come up with satisfactory rules and regulations based on legal-democratic principles which govern the rights of minorities. This does not only represent a permanent potential for conflict - after all, since World War II almost all conflicts in this world were caused - or at least intensified - by ethnic-cultural tensions (Rhodie, 1993). The lack of such a regulatory system has also led to a situation whereby small ethnic groups are facing outright extinction.

It is impossible to find a generally accepted definition

for what constitutes an "ethnic minority." The definition may differ from country to country. For example, in the Alpine region ethnic minorities are described as special groups within a state which differ from the majority population in terms of objective (cultural) and subjective (sense of group-awareness) factors. This definition includes a common determination to retain its special status, as well as a certain status as an autochthonous (historic) group which is legally recognized, provided such a group has existed for at least three generations (holding citizenship) at a given place (Veiter, 1984). Guest workers and immigrants from Turkey or South-eastern Europe do form ethnic groups in the countries of the Alps, but they are not designated "ethnic minorities." Countries like The Netherlands, the U.S., Great Britain, and Canada take a quite different view. In these countries immigrants may be readily grouped into the category "ethnic minorities."

In the Alps, the various ethnic groups may be distinguished from each other through linguistic characteristics. In order to be more precise, the term "ethno-linguistic group" should be preferred over the less specific term "ethnic group".



Map 1: Ethno-Linguistic Minorities in the Eastern Alps.  
Zemljevid 1: Etno-lingvistične manjšine v vzhodnih Alpah.

Nowhere else in Western Europe is there a greater ethno-cultural diversity than in the Alps – especially in the region of the Eastern Alps, with its small ethnic cultural patterns. As can be seen from Map 1, south of the Austrian-Italian border the German-speaking area does not directly merge with the Italian-speaking region. Within the designated research area, i.e. the Alpine region to the east of the Swiss-Austrian and the Swiss-Italian borders, the ethno-linguistic minorities may be grouped as follows (Steinicke, 1998a; 1998c):

**National minorities:** These are groups whose main area of settlement lies in the neighboring countries, which is where the center of their culture and language is located. They find themselves in an other country as a result of arbitrary borders or of border changes. South Tyrol, the Valcanale, and Venetic Slovenia (Slavia) are national minority areas in the Italian part of the Eastern Alps; the Slovenes in the southern part of Carinthia, however, constitute a national minority in Austria (Leidlmair, 1987; Valussi 1974; Autonome Provinz Bozen-Südtirol, 1997a; 1997b; Zupančič, 1993; Steinicke, 1995; 1996; 1998b; Steinicke, Zupančič, 1995; Österreichisches Volksgruppenzentrum, 1998).

**German language pockets:** Because of distinct, subjective factors of ethnicity, the population of the various German-language pockets in the Eastern Alps may only conditionally be regarded as national minorities, although the core area of their language lies in some other country. All of them are a result of the expansive settlement policies of the High Middle Ages - when Tyrolean and Carinthian colonists were settled to the south of the homogeneous German-speaking lands (Hornung, Hornung, 1986; Steinicke, 1986).

**Indigenous (domestic) territorial minority groups:** An indigenous territorial minority group is an individualistic ethnic group within a given state whose area of settlement forms the core of a distinct language and culture in this world. Contrary to national minorities and language pockets, such a group is generally self-reliant, with few or no prospects for assistance from any other country or region. In the Eastern Alps the representatives of such minority groups are the Friulians, the Ladins in the Dolomites, and the Rhaeto-Romanic speakers in Switzerland (Lutz, 1966; Becker, 1974; Prost, 1980; Leidlmair, 1985; Palla, 1986; Craffonara, 1990; Steinicke, 1991a; Kraas, 1992).

#### **EASTERN ALPS' ETHNO-LINGUISTIC MINORITIES BETWEEN PERSISTENCE AND EVANESCENCE**

Nowhere in the Eastern Alps can we find an ethnic minority group whose territory is expanding. Territorial constancy can be found with the German- and Ladin-speaking groups in South Tyrol. However, all other groups are suffering from territorial regression, with a simultaneous shrinking of the minority population.

Any development of ethnic territory closely depends on the legal instruments available for the protection of a minority and, correspondingly, on the respective group organization. The spectrum of protective options in the areas studied here ranges from cultural concessions to democratic participation to economic and cultural autonomy. What is striking is the fact that a minority is best preserved where autonomy is chosen as the strategy for solving minority problems. Not surprisingly, the potential for ethnic conflict under such circumstances is rather low.

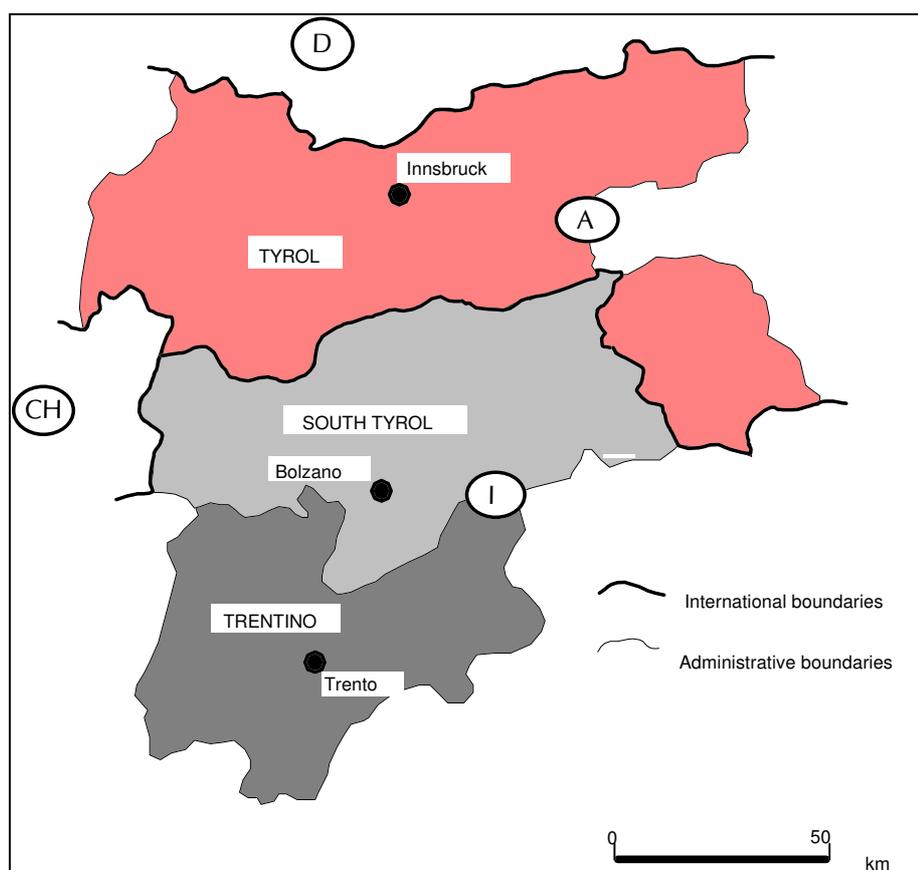
Based on the current status of research regarding ethno-linguistic minorities in the Eastern Alps, the following spatial potential for conflict can be identified:

#### **South Tyrol**

The German- and Ladin-speaking South Tyroleans enjoy the most comprehensive minority protection rights. These rights extend to all levels of public life - from pre-schools, schools, to the use of one's preferred language with public authorities, including the courts. Today the preservation of the German-speaking portion of the population is no longer in jeopardy. The Ladin-speaking South Tyroleans, however, are tri-lingual. They profit in particular from economic and cultural autonomy. Most importantly, however, their ethnic self-confidence has been reinforced - a fact which is reflected in a considerable growth of this small group from 11.275 to 16.291 persons during the period 1961 and 1991 (Steinicke, in print).

The formation of the "Euro-Region Tyrol" in the early 1990s constitutes the latest ethno-political development in South Tyrol (Pernthaler, Ortini, 1997). The "Euro-Region" is a "confederation" between the Austrian province of Tyrol on the one hand and South Tyrol and the Trentino (i.e. the Italian-speaking Tyrol) on the other hand (Map 2), with a common parliament, and even with its own representational structures in Brussels. This "All-Tyrolean Region", which was established 1993/94, aims at greater cross-border co-operation in business, traffic infrastructure, and in the cultural field. Expectations are that it will lead to a further strengthening of the two mentioned ethnic minorities in Italy.

Although the political conflicts between Austria as the protective power and Italy have officially been eliminated and old hostilities largely overcome, problems still emerge in the day-to-day co-existence between the German- and Italian-speaking populations (Atz, Busson, 1992; Zappe, 1996; CENSIS, 1997; Bauer et al., 1998). As has been noted by Leidlmair in 1989, ethnic segregation is intensifying; this means that areas of settlement of German-speakers and of Italians are becoming increasingly concentrated (Leidlmair, 1989) – both in the rural area as well as in the cities (formation of "ethnic neighborhoods"). What is also striking - apart



**Map 2: The Euro-Region Tyrol.**  
**Zemljevid 2: Evroregija Tirolska.**

from this spatial separation – is the decrease in the numbers of Italians. To date it is not fully clear whether we are witnessing demographic processes (emigration or low fertility) or whether the official language statistics are simply inadequate.

The questions relating to Italian migration in South Tyrol remain topical issues to this very day. Migration developments are still determined by political constraints. A majority of South Tyrol's Italian-speaking residents feel discriminated by the privileged treatment of German-speaking South Tyroleans – particularly with regard to public authorities and by public housing policies (Giovannetti, 1998). This has already had an impact on local election results. Given the low number of South Tyrol's Italian-speaking population in predominantly rural areas and because of certain historical determinants, some local municipalities tend to allow toponymical designations in Italian language (e.g. town signs, field names etc.) to gradually disappear – despite an official mandate for bilingualism.

As regards the small Ladin-speaking population in South Tyrol, the potential for conflict is low. However, a serious problem exists with regard to the neighboring Ladin population outside South Tyrol (cf. next chapter).

Here, the different political treatment and, consequently, the dissimilar socio-economic development have already led to a broadly-based debate on administrative-territorial changes (Goebel, 1997).

#### **Other minority areas in the Italian part of the Eastern Alps**

Although the Italian constitution provides for the protection of linguistic minorities (Articles 2, 3 and 6), the respective implementation ordinances for the region under discussion have not yet been put in place. But by the end of the year 2000 the individual municipalities are free to decide on their own which protective measures they want to take in this respect (Gazzetta Ufficiale, 1999; Palermo, 1999).

Up to the present the various groups (i.e. Italy's ethno-linguistic minorities except the Germans and Ladins of South Tyrol, as well as the French- and German-speaking population of the Aosta Valley) enjoy but few cultural privileges. As a result we witness a marked numerical decline of the various minorities. As shown above there are distinct framework conditions which hamper the preservation of minorities, such as, for ex-

ample, of the Ladins outside South Tyrol, the Friulians (in the Alps), the Slovenes, and of the German-speakers in the language pockets of northern Italy. These conditions include (Steinicke, 1991a; 1991b; in print):

- depopulation of mountain regions
- small cultural distance between the individual ethnic groups
- high number of mixed-language marriages
- low ethnic self-confidence.

The first parameter listed here indicates a certain demographic development, the following three refer to the process of assimilation to the majority population.

The Venetic mountain region has not shared in the economic upswing that the foothills and the southern plains has experienced since 1970. While lately it has been possible to expand job opportunities considerably – in Friuli especially after the earthquake catastrophe of 1976 – demographic figures show a sharp downturn in the Alpine region's population. In fact, the mountain valleys of Friuli count among those areas in Italy which have registered the strongest population losses since the Second World War. Thus, smaller ethnic groups such as the German-speaking language pockets have been halved. Some valleys with Slovene and Friulian settlements are losing their last residents at the very present (Steinicke, 1991a). There is still the question of how the population losses affecting especially the Slovene minority in Friuli can be contained.

Furthermore, the condition of "diffuse ethnicity" presents a significant obstacle to the preservation of language minorities. The close symbiosis between the individual ethnic groups has enhanced ethnic self-estrangement. Consequently, the population of northern Italy's German language pockets and of the Slovene-speaking Resia area tend to express their ethnic identity through their relationship to their respective villages rather than through the self-perception that they belong to the Austrian or Slovene culture. Considerable problems relating to ethnic identification further exist among the Slovene-speakers in the Valcanale as well as among the Friulian-speaking population. When objective factors of ethnicity (i.e. language) do not correspond to subjective factors (i.e. identification with a minority), these groups may be claimed both by the majority as well as by the minority.

Unfavorable demographic factors and "diffuse ethnicity" constitute obstacles for cultural assistance and tend to thwart the emergence of an organized movement. Such conditions contain a high potential for conflict.

### Southern Carinthia

The Slovene-speaking minority in Carinthia enjoys international protection from respective guarantees enshrined in Austria's State Treaty of 1955. It was elaborated further in the Ethnic Groups Act of 1976. However,

it is mainly the numerical relationship between minority and majority in the respective communities of Carinthia's mixed-language area that determines the degree to which those special rights may be granted before public authorities (including the establishment of bilingual town signs), in pre-schools and mandatory educational institutions, and in access to the media. Slovene interest groups do not agree with this official interpretation of respective legislation. They argue that in their view the census does not assess the actual number of Slovene language speakers (Zupančič, 1993; Österreichisches Volksgruppenzentrum, 1998).

The major reason for the permanent minorization of the Slovenes in this century is linked to problems of their ethnic identification (cf. "diffuse ethnicity" as mentioned above). The number of Carinthians using Slovene as their mother tongue (about 50.000) should not be underestimated, but more than two thirds of them do not identify with the Slovene minority. On the other hand, the Slovenes of Carinthia are apparently experiencing an ethnic renaissance (Steinicke, 1995). This is mainly attributed to the emergence of a large, well-educated Slovene-speaking social elite whose cultural and political demands are increasingly being accepted (Zupančič, 1993; 1999). Granted, the minority lost additional members between 1981 and 1991; but out of 38 bilingual communities in southern Carinthia, no fewer than 12 registered an increase in the Slovene-speaking population. The growth of Slovene-speaking residents in the lower Gail Valley as well as in the eastern Jaun Valley is most likely rooted in changes of the ethnic identity. In fact, more and more "language Slovenes," i.e. those who so far identified with the German-speaking majority, are finding their "way back" to the Slovene identity. It is to be expected that the upcoming EU membership of the Republic of Slovenia will enhance this ethnic renaissance in southern Carinthia.

Once again, several questions need to be addressed in this context. Thus, our current project will seek to analyze some of the likely conflicts which may come as a result of a continued trend toward ethnic self-awareness in Southern Carinthia.

### CONSEQUENCES

In the various provinces of the Eastern Alps the risk of instability because of confrontations between ethnic minorities and the majority is relatively low. But there are some problems that could be driving forces for social conflicts, especially if connected to political changes. As demonstrated above, an analysis of the current state of research indicates that except for South Tyrol we are witnessing territorial regression and demographic weakening of the minorities in all minority areas of the Eastern Alps. As regards South Tyrol, a substantial potential for conflict may arise from special migration patterns and

numerical decrease of the Italian-speaking residents.

The preservation of ethnic diversity in the area studied here would help minimize the potential for ethnic conflicts. As a result, it would be wise to apply some key elements of the South Tyrolean model of minority protection to other groups in the Eastern Alps. Two major strategies will have to be considered:

In order to reinforce the ethnic self confidence of the different minorities, it is paramount to adopt the under-

lying concept of South Tyrolean autonomy: the knowledge of a minority language should bring decisive economic advantages!

In a parallel move the installation of cross-border Euro-regions would constitute an important move toward strengthening the ethnic self-perception of the national minorities as well as of the German language islands.

## MOŽNOSTI ZA NAVZKRIŽJA V OBMOČJIH ETNO-LINGVISTIČNIH MANJŠIN VZHODNIH ALP

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### POVZETEK

*V vzhodnih Alpah se nemško govoreče območje ne spaja neposredno z italijansko govorečim območjem. Med njima se namreč razteza pas etno-lingvističnih manjšin, ki jih lahko razvrstimo v naslednje skupine: narodne manjšine (Slovenci in Nemci), žepi nemškega jezika in avtohtone/domače ozemeljske manjšine (Furlani, Ladini, Retoromani).*

*Za vsa druga manjšinska območja v vzhodnih Alpah, z izjemo južne Tirolske, sta značilna ozemeljska regresija in progresivno krčenje manjšinskega prebivalstva. Nekaterim manjšim skupnostim pravzaprav že grozi izumrtje, na primer v nekaterih nemško govorečih žepih v severni Italiji ali v posameznih furlanskih in slovensko govorečih gorskih vaseh. Seveda sta predvsem asimilacija in depopulacija tisti gonilni sili, ki spreminjata etnične meje v vzhodnih Alpah. Na južnem Tirolskem, kjer se nemško in ladinsko govoreče skupine ohranjajo predvsem po zaslugi različnih zaščitnih mehanizmov, se čuti diskriminirano italijansko govoreče prebivalstvo, in posledica tega se je že pokazala v rezultatih lokalnih volitev. Zatorej je nujno, da njihovo migracijsko vedenje in številčno zmanjševanje preučujemo karseda podrobno.*

*Tako imenovana "razpršena etnija", značilna za nekatere jezikovne skupine v vzhodnih Alpah, pomeni nadaljnjo možnost za navzkrižja v regiji. To še posebno velja za žepe nemško govorečih populacij, za naselja v Kanalski dolini in za slovensko govoreče manjšine na avstrijskem Koroškem. V primerih, kjer se objektivni kriteriji etnije (t.j. jezika) ne ujemajo s subjektivnimi dejavniki (t.j. identificiranjem s skupino), si te skupine pogosto "prisvojijo" tako večine kot manjšine. Na Koroškem, na primer, kakih 50.000 ljudi doma govori slovensko, vendar pa je štetje leta 1991 razkrilo, da se je s slovensko manjšino identificiralo samo 15.000 prebivalcev.*

*Naš glavni namen je ugotoviti te možnosti za etnične konflikte v vzhodnih Alpah ter predstaviti ukrepe in strategije za reševanje problemov v teh območjih na socialno uravnotežen način.*

**Ključne besede:** V Alpe, narodne manjšine, Italijani, Nemci, Slovenci, državne meje, etnične meje

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