

Strategy Development for Mountain Areas in Switzerland: Toward a New “Mountain Pact”

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Source: Mountain Research and Development, 35(4) : 410-413

Published By: International Mountain Society

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1659/MRD-JOURNAL-D-15-00099.1>

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Strategy Development for Mountain Areas in Switzerland: Toward a New “Mountain Pact”



Swiss Academies
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ICAS
Interacademic Commission for Alpine

The more national and European policies focus on metropolitan regions, the more the question arises what will be the outlook for rural and mountain areas. Several strategies addressing development in rural and mountain areas in Switzerland, created at different policy levels (cantonal, national, and European/macoregional), were published in 2014 and 2015. What are the reasons for these parallel efforts, and what are their aims and opportunities? And how are mountains defined in relation to other areas? The Swiss Interacademic Commission for Alpine Studies aims to take up relevant scientific questions that emerge from these strategies.

New strategies for mountain areas in Switzerland

In 2014 and 2015, efforts to foster the development of mountain areas in Switzerland gained momentum, triggered by different political and

administrative initiatives from the Swiss federal and canton (state) governments as well as the European Union (EU). As a result, 3 key strategies were published with the intention of promoting the inclusion of mountain areas in Switzerland's overall development aims (Table 1).

Currently mountain areas in Switzerland face important development challenges (SECO 2014; ARE 2015), such as structural change (especially in the fields of agriculture, industry, and tourism), global competition, low competitiveness, conflicting land use claims, diverging demographic processes (population increase and decrease), decreasing attractiveness for urbanization, unsustainable use of natural resources, consequences of climate change, and loss of cohesion and solidarity both within rural and mountain areas and between them and other areas.

With its policy for rural and mountain areas (Swiss Federal Council 2015), the Swiss government

aims to address these challenges by implementing a number of policy measures with the following objectives:

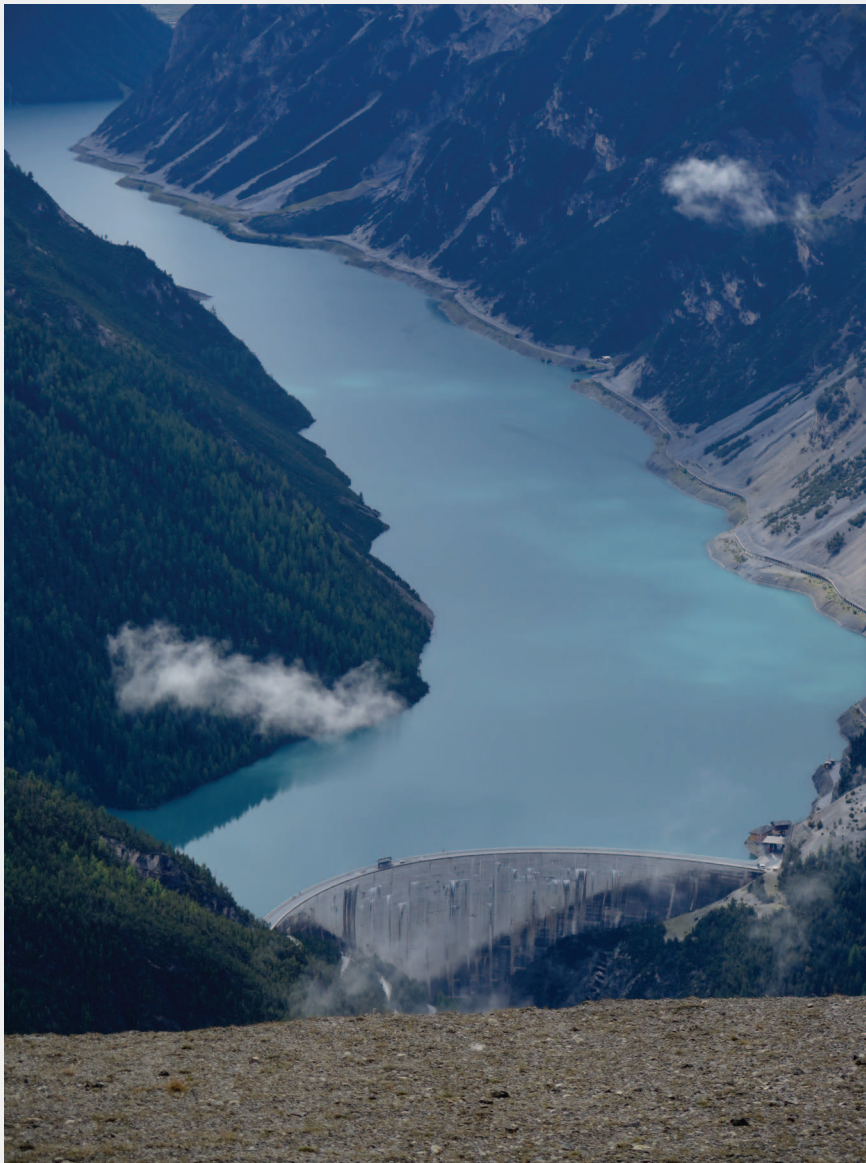
1. Highlight the relevance and benefits of rural and mountain areas for sustainable development in Switzerland.
2. Enable a more efficient and effective implementation of existing national sectoral policies in rural and mountain areas (defining aims, improving coordination and conflict resolution, and including regional and local players to better respect the interests of rural and mountain areas).

The territorial strategy of the Governmental Conference of the Swiss Mountain Cantons (RKGK 2014) aims to promote sustainable use of natural resources, reinforcement of urban centers in the Alps, improvement of traffic and telecommunication networks, and

TABLE 1 Recent strategic reports concerning mountain areas in Switzerland and the European Alpine region.

Strategy document	Reference document	Lead agency
1) Policy of the Swiss government for rural and mountain areas (2015), based on:	The following 2 reports (SECO 2014 and ARE 2015)	Swiss Federal Council
Expert report on the Swiss government's strategy for mountain and rural areas (SECO 2014)	Parliamentary initiative (“Motion Maissen”), accepted by the Swiss Parliament in 2011	Swiss State Secretariat for Economic Affairs (SECO)
Report on developing a comprehensive policy for rural and mountain areas (ARE 2015)	Swiss national planning legislation period, goal 17 (2011–2015)	Swiss Federal Office for Spatial Development (ARE)
2) Territorial strategy for Alpine areas in Switzerland (RKGK 2014)	Swiss national concept for territorial development (2012)	Governmental Conference of the Swiss Mountain Cantons (states)
3) EU Strategy for the Alpine Region (EUSALP, 2013–2015) (EC 2015)	Initiative by areas within the Alpine region (larger than the Alpine Convention) Existing EU macroregions (Baltic Sea, Danube, etc.)	European Commission

FIGURE 1 Hydropower: a driver of the regional economy or just a source of clean electricity for export? (Photo by Thomas Scheurer)



the better use of hydropower for the production of cleaner energy (Figure 1).

The macroregional strategy for the Alpine region of the EU (EC 2015b) seeks to strengthen cooperation and coordination among regions (including in non-EU states), between metropolitan and rural areas, and between existing sectoral policies to promote sustainable growth and innovation, well-balanced territorial development based on

environmentally friendly infrastructure, and wise management of natural and cultural resources.

The Swiss Interacademic Commission for Alpine Studies: promoting the new strategies

In January 2015, the Interacademic Commission for Alpine Studies (ICAS) organized a colloquium to present these 3 strategies to a broader public interested in mountain

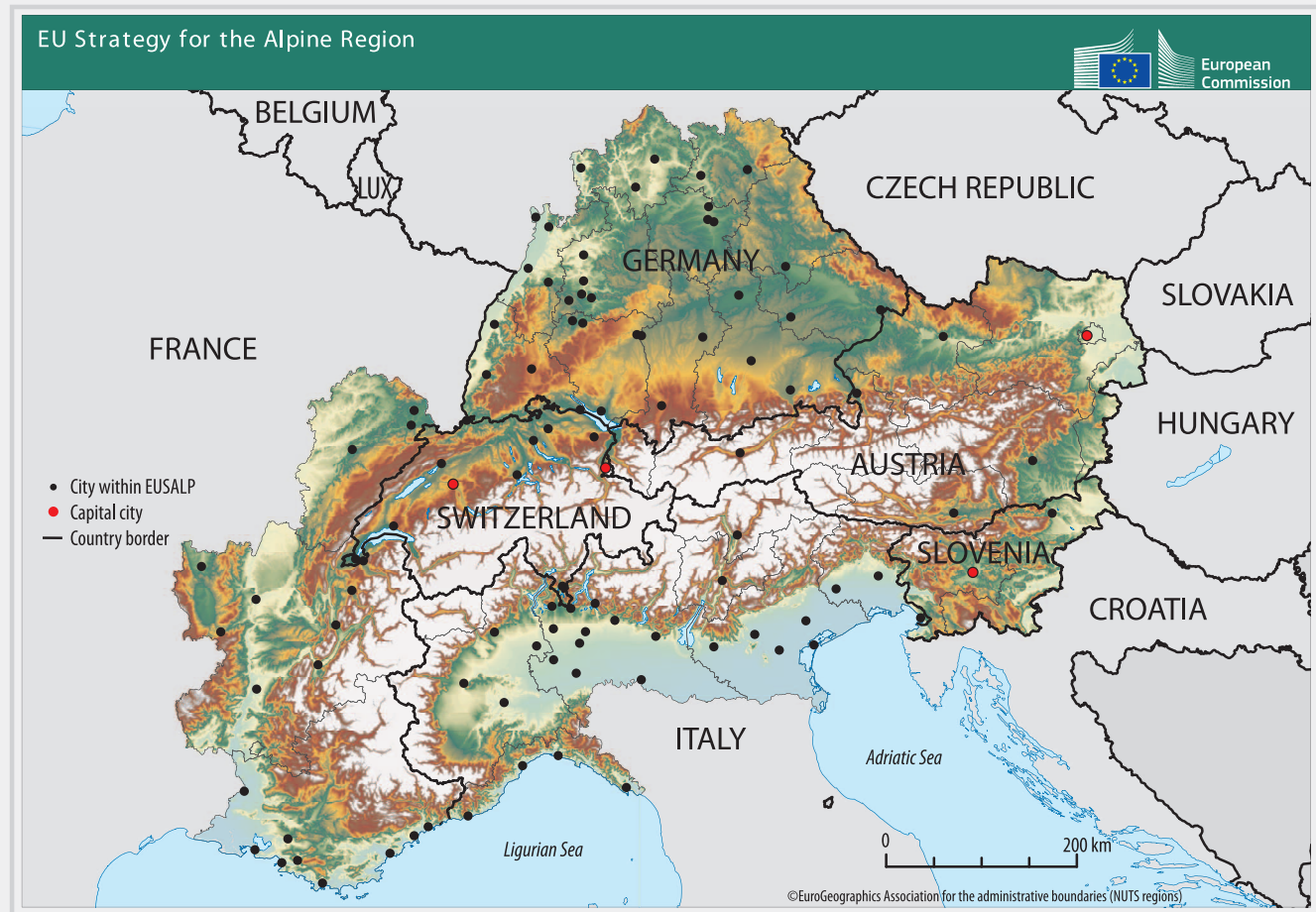
development and to discuss the way forward (ICAS 2015). Even though these strategies were developed at different governance levels, they have important goals in common: better valorization and use of endogenous resources, further development of traffic and communication infrastructures and existing urban centers in the Alps, and promotion of cohesion and cooperation between metropolitan/urban and rural/mountain areas.

Toward a new “mountain pact”

Why were these strategies developed and published in parallel at the cantonal, national, and macroregional levels? In Switzerland, mountain areas had, for a long time, an exceptional position, based on a national “mountain pact” (*pacte montagnard*), as shown by Debarbieux and Rudaz (2013, 2014). Since around 1990 this consensus has been gradually lost. The recent strategies of the Swiss government and the Governmental Conference of Swiss Mountain Cantons can be seen as a reaction to this loss of “mountain affinity” in Swiss policies. While from a national point of view mountain areas are seen as falling within the category of rural areas, the cantons call for a framework for mountain-specific development. The strategies mainly address well-known challenges of mountain areas, but they lack precise goals. For the implementation of the national and cantonal strategies, goals and instruments have to be specified at the cantonal and regional levels. This will be a chance to bring together national, cantonal, and regional agents to improve cooperation and mountain-specific governance.

Regarding the European Alps, in a similar process led by the EU in 1991, 6 Alpine states, 2 principalities, and the EU signed the Alpine Convention (<http://www.alpconv.org>). However, the EU hardly supported the implementation of this convention but instead recently

FIGURE 2 The Alpine macro-region as defined by EUSALP. (Source: http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/cooperate/alpine/eusalp_map.pdf; simplified version, reproduced courtesy of EUSALP)



developed a macroregional strategy for the Alpine region (Figure 2). The latter can be interpreted as indicating that the EU is willing to handle mountain specificities in a larger political context, where it has identified “mutual solidarity between mountain and peri-Alpine territories” (EC 2015a:2).

Switzerland and the Alpine Convention seem to have reached a turning point concerning the social and political significance of mountain issues: The Alps and other mountain areas are seen as integral parts of a national and macroregional territory. Considering mountain-specific developments, a new balance of shared interests—a new “mountain pact”—has to be established in Switzerland and in the Alpine region as a whole. Such a pact would no

longer build on the image of disfavored mountain regions, the segregation of mountain territories, and the reduction of disparities. Instead, as shown in the recent strategies, its main elements would be as follows:

- Acknowledging the common heritage of mountains and their uniqueness as the basis of solidarity
- Fostering action and cooperation within and between functional spaces, and overcoming segregation by integrating urban, rural, and mountain areas
- Promoting cohesion and cooperation between metropolitan/urban and rural/mountain areas
- Acknowledging the heterogeneity of regions linked with regionally differentiated strategies (strengthening excellence and cultural identity)

ening excellence and cultural identity)

- Creating mutual benefits based on complementarity (also between regions within the Alps)
- Prioritizing development projects based on mountain-specific resources and competences
- Focusing on the vulnerability of Alpine ecosystems and settlements related to climate change
- Better using and coordinating existing sectoral policies and instruments for conflict management
- Developing new models for transboundary cooperation based on democratic legitimation (for example, in spatial planning).

The implementation of the 3 strategies, in Switzerland as well as in the Alpine region as a whole, is an opportunity to consider mountain

issues in a larger, national or macroregional context and to develop a new “mountain pact,” with all stakeholders from policy-making bodies and civil society and at the local, national, and European levels. To involve these diverse partners, appropriate instruments for promoting dialogue and multilevel cooperation will be needed. ICAS intends to be an active partner in this process, contributing scientific inputs to the dialogue.

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