

Peripheral regions : living at a geographic disadvantage

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Living at a geographic disad

The disappearance of state monopolies in the public services sector is making life difficult for remote regions. A closer look at our linguistic regions documents anxiety and concern among the population but also throws light on the innovative measures being taken to combat the threatened end of full-service coverage.



People with features carved in Wood.

The cable car: a lifeline

BY PABLO CRIVELLI

“BRAGGIO CONSISTS of five parts,” explains the village’s 47-year-old mayor Gabriele Minotti, tracing a blood-red circle in felt-tip round the avalanche-prone zones on a map of the village. Since 1986, when an avalanche hit the village and swept away several houses, no more such disasters have occurred. But as a safety precaution, new protective facilities have been built.

For centuries the residents of Braggio built their modest homes in relatively protected zones. Now, however, the age-old knowledge based on centuries of experience and passed on from one generation to the next is at risk of dying out. The survival of this small hamlet of 69 souls, situated at

1320 meters above sea level, 25 minutes by car from Bellinzona and 90 minutes from Chur, hangs not so much by a thread as by a cable. Thanks to the aerial cable car built in 1962, Braggio is now less isolated than in older times. The cable-car trip from Arvigo to Braggio lasts six minutes and covers an altitude difference of 500 meters. Although asphalt-covered, the old mule track up to the village is unpassable for most of the year.

Uncertain future

But a cable car which connects villagers with the outer world is not enough on its own to make their lives easier: “Without financial assistance from Berne and Chur we would close down,” says Mayor Minotti, who works for the cable-car company and has lived in

Braggio with his wife and two sons for some time.

Acclimatisation was never a problem for him: “I love the mountains, and my wife is originally from Braggio.” Asked about the future of his village, he replies, “Everything depends on the children and what they will do when they leave school.” Of the 69 residents, 15 are under the age of 16. “It’s still too early to make any predictions, but the oldest of the boys will have to rent a room in order to do his apprenticeship in the Ticino. He’ll hardly want to travel down and back every day!”

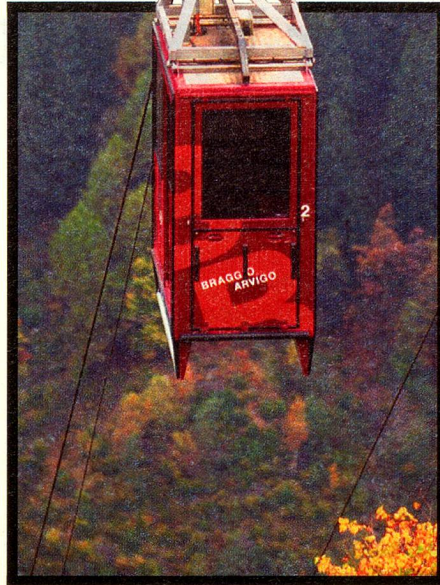
The threat of a declining population is real. Whether Braggio will become a tourist village which is only occupied in the summer, depends very much on the six families

vantage

who make their living from agriculture. The international liberalisation of the agrarian market is creating some uncertainty. As Minotti explains, everything these families produce is sold on the local market. But how long can this continue? "If they give up too, the situation here will quickly become precarious."

Like many other communities in the Calanca Valley, Braggio is severely strapped for cash: Tax revenues do not cover costs. Were it not for the cantonal subsidies, "I don't know what would happen..." sighs the mayor. The majority of revenue from taxes is invested in the school. "The children are away all day, and we have to bear the cost of their meals. And now there's even talk of a tax on garbage bags."

Many residents of the Calanca Valley turn up their noses at the mention of merging their separate communities. But something has already been done in this direction: One secretary handles the correspondence for four communities, including Braggio. The privatisation of public services threatens to weaken even further the already delicate balance on which the village's existence is based. For several years there has also been



Without the cable car, Braggio would be even more cut off from civilisation.

talk of doing away with the post office. If it were up to Berne, the local branch would already be closed. "The post office is extremely important for our elderly inhabitants, just like the grocery store my wife runs," says Gabriele Minotti emphatically.

The school is now a youth hostel

There is no shortage of recipes for stemming the flow of emigration from peripheral re-

gions, but they often prove unrealistic. The panacea of tourism appears to offer no solution. The area lacks the requisite infrastructure, "and it would cost a great deal to build," says the mayor. Only a few tourists stay overnight in the youth hostel which until 1973 housed the school. "Most guests are merely passing through." The first tentative step towards making the village more attractive for tourists could be to automate the cable car. At the moment it is impossible to get up to the village after eight o'clock in the evening.

Despite these day-to-day problems, Braggio's situation is not as dramatic as in other areas: "Landarenca, a small village of 10 residents on the opposite slope of the valley, is worse off than us," says Minotti. And although Braggio's geographic situation appears to damn it to a bleak existence, there are always people who eschew the city life for life in the mountains, despite all its negative aspects – like the man who delivered a wheelchair in Braggio a few years ago and was so stunned by the beauty of the place that he decided to move there with his wife and children.



In these fast-moving times it is important to have a point of reference: In Braggio, the Church also endeavours to support the population.

Open policy for Val de Travers

BY PIERRE-ANDRÉ TSCHANZ

LES VERRIÈRES, the last Swiss community on the Neuchâtel–Dijon–Paris route, owes its fame to the arrival of General Bourbaki's French troops in 1871, seeking refuge. This event was reproduced in the famous Bourbaki Panorama, now on display in Lucerne.

Les Verrières is situated at the western end of the Val de Travers. The only valley to cut through the Jura mountain range, Val de Travers covers 166 km², comprising 73 km² of productive forestry as well as eleven communities including La Côte aux Fées ("The Fairy Coast"), whose poetic name is reminiscent of absinthe – a spirit also known as "the green fairy" and much sought-after since it was expressly banned by a federal referendum in 1910. The valley is also home to Môtiers, where Jean-Jacques Rousseau sought temporary refuge, and the industrial centres of Fleurier and Couvet.

As a peripheral region, the valley has to struggle to promote its interests. Crisis, restructuring, privatisation and fusion as a consequence of globalisation are causing economic, social and cultural problems and threatening public services and jobs. Over the past 30 years one quarter of jobs in the

region has vanished. Now there are only 4720 jobs for a population of 12,500.

Economic change

But enough of the doom and gloom. Members of the Association for the Val de Travers Region, a private organisation which represents the local public services, are focusing on modernising and improving the quality of the infrastructure (schools, sports complexes, public transport, roads). "We want to create jobs in the valley and reduce the number of commuters, because we don't want to be seen as a dormitory region," says Christelle Melly, regional secretary of the association. "For us it is essential that residents put down roots in the community."


The economic structures of Val de Travers have undergone enormous change over the past twenty years. The main industrial sector of watch-making/mechanics has declined and been overtaken by the service industry (45%). But the sector continues to play a key role. "What we have lost in quantity, we have gained in quality and diversification," explains Eric-André Klausner, President of the Association for the Val de Travers Region, citing the new high-tech enterprises who have settled in the region (for example

the engine manufacturer Etel) and luxury watch manufacturers such as Parmigiani Fleurier SA.

Cross-border co-operation

The Association for the Val de Travers Region has set up a regional development programme whose main aims are to lend more political weight to the region by reforming local political institutions (preparations are under way to merge all eleven communities) and enhance the dynamism of regional resources. The programme also aims to open up the region to neighbouring regions, be they in Neuchâtel, the Canton of Vaud or France.

This open policy supported by neighbouring peripheral regions is reflected in the foundation of the Jura Work Community. In the tourism sector this consortium has led to the creation of a museum pass valid for Franche-Comté as well as the alpine regions of Neuchâtel and Vaud, renovations to hiking trails and the restoration of the Salt Road linking the royal salt mines of Arc-et-Senans with Switzerland via the Val de Travers. The valley is rich in tourist sights (museums, stained glass church windows, art and sculpture, asphalt mines, natural attractions, hiking and mountain bike trails) which could be better exploited. "But to do this we must make improvements in the hotel and hospitality sectors," emphasises Philippe Tisserand, Director of the La Presta asphalt mines in Môtiers Travers.

Inter-regional co-operation also extends to energy, transport, garbage disposal and healthcare. Val de Travers, which receives federal and cantonal subsidies in the order of CHF 17 million for the promotion of investment in alpine regions, firmly believes in its future. The dynamism of the Association for the Val de Travers Region and "especially the regional conscience and the population's enormous flexibility", adds Christelle Melly, will overcome any political indifference and rigidity. 

View of the elongated Val de Travers, with Fleurier in the foreground.



Last post for Juf

BY MARKUS ROHNER

"JUF WITHOUT A POST OFFICE? Our village would not be the same," says Josef Hasler. The host of the "Edelweiss" boarding house appreciates the advantages of having this small post office located right behind his house. Even if he can get in touch with the rest of world easily via Internet and fax, the 48-year-old values the personal touch of this mini post office run by the Menn family. Many of the village's residents are convinced that the Juf stamp, much sought after by tourists, would be sorely missed were the post office to close down.

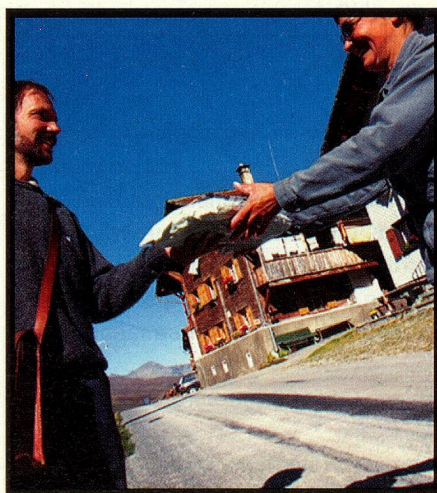
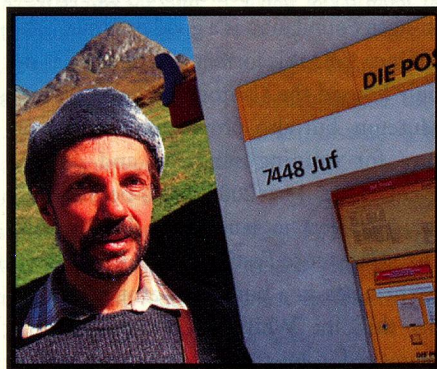
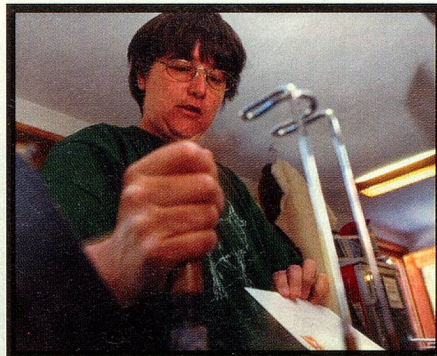
After all, the small alpine village in the Grisons is unique. Not many people in Europe breathe such thin air all year round, living as they do at 2000 meters above sea level. While many a lowlander has struggled with the low oxygen level, it presents no problems to residents of the Avers valley, many of whom cannot imagine living anywhere else. "Walsers," as they are called, have lived in this 15-kilometer long alpine valley for over 700 years. Their forefathers migrated there from the Valais, arriving over the mountains at the south end of the valley. Nowadays Avers is home to around 190 nature-loving individualists scattered around various small settlements. With a shop, bank, school for 10 students, municipal administration and church, Cresta is the valley capital.

The post office – a meeting place

At the very end of the valley lies Juf – at 2126 meters altitude the highest settlement in Europe with year-round occupants. Thirty people live in this secluded spot. The birth of a child, as occurred in October 1999, constitutes a rare occasion for celebration in which the entire village takes part.

Corina and Markus Menn have been running the post office in Juf for eleven years. Measuring just four square meters, the tiny post office (postal code "7448 Juf") sits in a

Markus Rohner is a free-lance journalist resident in Altstätten/SG.



small corner of the couple's grocery store. In the same room as customers can purchase local soups, soaps and socks, they can also make cash deposits, buy postage stamps and hand in their letters and parcels. Officially Markus Menn is employed by Swiss Post for 90 minutes a day, during which time he keeps the post office open for business, handles paperwork and processes letters and parcels.

"We're staying put"

The multi-purpose post/kiosk/shop in Juf is in a constant state of change. A few years ago the Menns lost their agency contract with the Cantonal Bank of Grisons and the Raiffeisenkasse bank, and now the future of the mini post office is threatened. There are repeated rumours of a mobile office or even the post office's definitive closure. The consequences for the village shop are unclear.

The Menns have learned to live with this uncertainty. The residents of Juf have long been aware of the important role their little post office plays in the village's identity. "But will such arguments cut any ice with Swiss Post HQ in far-off Berne?," asks a long-term resident of Juf, expressing regret at the potential loss of the local post office.

Whatever Swiss Post (which is currently on a cost-cutting drive) decides to do with its branch in remote Juf, the family of four (two adults, two small children) who run the post office have no immediate plans to leave the village. "We all have our roots firmly in Juf," says a defiant Corinna Menn, "we're staying put."

Post offices in small villages are fighting for their existence: Juf seeks sustainable solutions.