



The role of Alpine development regimes in the development of second homes: Preliminary lessons from Switzerland

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ABSTRACT

In a majority of the tourist municipalities of the Swiss Alps, more than 50% of residences are second homes. However, the growing awareness that second homes contribute to the shortage of available land and to the standardization of landscapes in sensitive alpine environments has had little effect on the pace of development. Following the adoption of the popular initiative “Stop the endless construction of second homes”, which aimed to limit the share of second homes in a municipality to 20% of homes in the area, a new law came into force on 1 January 2016, taking a clear stand against further uncontrolled development of second homes.

Although it is too early to measure the impact of this new legislation, many observers proclaimed the beginning of a new development era in alpine regions. However, this optimism did not consider the strong position of the developers in these regions and their strong ties to local decision makers. This article appraises the impact of the new legislation on the long-term development model of Alpine tourist destinations, which is still largely based on strategies of land rent capture. Relying on urban regime theory, we maintain that the impact of the new regulation will depend on its ability to weaken Alpine development regimes. Urban regime theory allows us to capture the complexity of the changing context of the tourism industry and highlight five main factors that potentially impact the status of the development of second homes as a central issue of local governance. Based on empirical evidence from the Upper Engadin region, we discuss the measures implemented to regulate the growth of second homes and formulate preliminary remarks on the effectiveness of the new regulations in curbing development of second homes.

1. Introduction

Many Alpine municipalities have experienced strong development in the tourist sector in recent decades. This has led to rapid building of tourism infrastructures and a booming expansion of second homes. In Switzerland, the inventory of second homes tripled between 1970 and 2000 (SFSO, 2004). Today, in several of the tourist municipalities in Wallis, Grisons and the Bernese Oberland, more than 50% of the residences are second homes.

There is growing awareness that the development of second homes has negative effects not only on the environment but also on the social and political conditions of alpine villages. However, the fact that second homes contribute to the shortage of available land, to rising land and housing prices, to infrequently occupied housing units (so-called ‘cold’ beds), to additional maintenance costs for municipalities, and to the standardization of landscapes in sensitive alpine regions, has had little effect on the pace of development. In the long run, these side effects are detrimental to the development of tourism regions, as attractiveness

depends on the quality of their landscapes. In the context of tourism, landscape quality is the primary form of capital in many Alpine regions (Müller, 2008, p. 135). Although the theoretical and empirical definition of second homes is debated (Hall, 2014), in 2010 approximately 13% of Switzerland’s housing stock was allotted to second homes (ARE, 2010, p. 37).

The specific features of the Swiss direct-democracy political system allow interest groups and political parties to launch initiatives to prompt political debates on social issues that are otherwise not directly addressed in political circles. Such a proceeding has led to the popular initiative “Stop the endless construction of second homes” (beginning of signature collection: 20.06.2006), which aimed to stop landscape and environmental degradation by limiting the share of second homes in a municipality to 20%. In a historic citizen decision, the Swiss population voted in favor of the proposed new constitutional article (on 11.03.2012), sending a clear message against further uncontrolled development of second homes. Initial investigations of the vote show a clear – and until now quite unique – divide between urban areas, which

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were in favor of the tougher regulation, and the nearly unanimous rejection of the initiative in peripheral and alpine areas (Schuler and Dessemontet, 2013). Many observers proclaimed the emergence of a new development era in alpine regions (Clivaz, 2013). However, as we will see, these overly optimistic comments did not consider the strong position of the developers in these regions and their strong connections to local decision makers.

This article aims to put into perspective the potential effects of the new constitutional article on the development model of Alpine tourist destinations, which still largely adhere to the strategies of regional economic actors who encourage capturing the lucrative land rents generated by the development of second homes. Relying on urban regime theory (Stone, 1989), we postulate that the impact of the new regulation on municipal land policy will depend on its ability to weaken Alpine development regimes. Our research question is: do the conditions exist for the new legal context to initiate a regime change away from the existing development regime (e.g., toward a progressive regime)?

Because the Federal legislation on second homes is still in the process of being implemented, the analysis presented in this article cannot evaluate the impacts of the new regulation on second homes. However the broader context in which this change of regulation is taking place is assessed. We highlight five main factors, including regulation, that potentially impact the development of second homes. Such homes are not only a challenge for municipal land policy, but they are above all a central issue of local governance. We present our empirical evidence from the Upper Engadin region and discuss the changing context of second-home development. This leads us to some preliminary remarks on the effectiveness of the new regulations to curb second-home development, as well as to considerations concerning the effectiveness, legitimacy and environmental justice of the new regulation model.

2. Theory and methods

2.1. Urban regime theory

Our study of power relations in Alpine tourist destinations is conceptually informed by urban regime theory (Stone, 1989). At the core of this approach is the question of how local communities are governed (Stone, 2005).

Urban regimes have been used to analyze urban politics (Stoker, 1996), where power is fragmented between market and state. Regime analysis understands regimes as the informal yet relatively stable arrangements through which local governments and private actors combine the institutional resources that enable them to govern (Stone, 1989). The local government, for instance, is equipped with resources such as political legitimacy and policy-making authority; business can provide capital that generates tax revenues, job opportunities, or financing power. Cooperation does not imply complete agreement on beliefs and values, but rather the ability to realize “small opportunities” (Stone, 1993, p. 11) through consensus about land policy. Land policy refers to all public decisions and actions that aim to implement politically defined spatial development goals through changes in the use, distribution, and value of land (Hartmann and Spit, 2015; Hengstermann and Gerber, 2015; Krabben and Jacobs, 2013).

Stone (1989) identifies four types of urban regimes: (1) a maintenance regime, which focuses on routine service delivery and low taxes; (2) a development regime characterized by a clear focus of public and private actors on changing land use to increase land rents; (3) a middle-class progressive regime where issues such as sustainability, sprawl control or affordable housing are also emphasized; and (4) a regime devoted to lower class opportunity expansion and to promoting both human investment policy and widened access to employment and ownership. It should be noted that the 4th regime type is purely hypothetical, as Stone did not find any city where such a regime was in force. Since Stone’s original conceptualization, different authors have

also highlighted the possibility that no regime might exist: DeLeon (1992) for San Francisco; Orr and Stoker (1994) for Detroit; or Burns and Thomas (2006) for New Orleans.

In the United States, where urban regime theory was developed, development regimes have often strongly influenced local political agendas (Levine, 1989). These development regimes emerge when a convergence of interests exists among political elites, landowners (and speculators), developers, building contractors, manufacturers, and all business owners who take advantage of urban growth (Mossberger and Stoker, 2001). A development regime is characterized by a collective belief system, shared by the political and economic elite of a city, that the spatial locations of social and economic activities, and their corresponding infrastructures, are the central issues at stake in urban development because they allow a substantial increase of *land rents*, they lead to an increase in *tax revenue* for public actors, and they *boost the economy* of the city. Because the actors of the development regime control real assets, they can tap directly into the benefits generated by land rents. Their strong position as landowners also allows them to resist regulatory efforts that might obstruct their rent-seeking strategies. However, as power structures that consolidate land-based interests, development regimes generate internal and external tensions. Despite their shared ideology, constant renegotiations among members are needed to counter centrifugal forces resulting from conflicting interests (Stone, 1989).

2.2. Urban regime theory and tourist destinations

Both international (Wolfe, 1951, 1965; Coppock, 1977) and alpine tourism research (Kaspar, 1975) have studied the second-home boom since its beginning. This development is often described as both a blessing and a curse, which makes it difficult to address it in a balanced manner, especially in the context of Alpine regions (Krippendorf, 1986; Kaspar, 1991; Bieger, 1995; Hall and Müller, 2004). An intensified debate can primarily be observed in the 1980s but has also occurred more recently (Boyer, 1980; Berenyi, 1986; Barke and France, 1988; Czarnecki, 2014; Pitkanen et al., 2014).

Even though American authors dominate the debate (Grant and Wall, 1979; Stedman, 2006), contributions of British authors (Gallent, 1997; Gee, 2002), Nordic researchers (Flognfeldt, 2006; Hiltunen and Rehunen, 2014; Honkanen et al., 2016) and Central European researchers (Kowalczyk and Grzeszczak, 1992; Müller and Zegg, 1999; Bieger et al., 2007) have discussed the significance and relevance of this subject in their regions as well. New contributions from Malaysia (Abdul-Aziz et al., 2014), Iran (Anabestani, 2014), South Africa (Goble et al., 2014) and East Asia (Webster et al., 2014) also hint at the geographical expansion of the issue. Until 2000, touristic and geographic academic work dominated the debate (Monheim, 1988; Halseth, 1998; Meyer-Arendt, 2001; Müller, 2002). Recently, there have also been contributions from the field of urban and regional planning (Norris and Winston, 2009; Norris et al., 2010; Müller, 2011; Persson, 2015).

While many studies examine the economic impact (e.g., Guisan and Aguayo, 2010; Hadsell and Colarusso, 2009) of second homes on regional development, few have linked the discussion with governance structures within local economies (Clivaz and Nahrath, 2010; Conti and Perelli, 2007). Some North-American literature focuses on the role of large investors in shaping the development of resort communities (Gill, 2000), but the literature on the development of urban regimes in tourist-destinations is scarce (but see Sauthier and Clivaz, 2012, 2016). In the context of tourist destinations, two types of regimes are most relevant (Gill and Williams, 2011): in the development (growth) regime, public and private actors focus on changing land uses to increase land rents, whereas in the progressive regime, issues such as sustainability, sprawl control, and affordable housing are also emphasized. A maintenance regime appears less relevant to a tourist destination that is confronted with many challenges and constantly needs to adapt (Gill, 2007).

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