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Mountains Move Up the European Agenda

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MountainPlatform

Mountains Move Up the European Agenda

University of the Highlands and Islands Perth College | Centre for Mountain Studies

Mountain areas cover a significant proportion of the European continent. Within the European Union (EU), many of the newest Member States have particularly high proportions of mountainous land. Ongoing debates in the EU relate to perceptions of mountains as being "handicapped" or marginalized versus having specific development opportunities, and to the challenges of climate change and other global changes. In 2015 and 2016, these issues have been highlighted by the European Parliament and through the publication of a strategic research agenda by the Swiss–Austrian Alliance.

The importance of mountains to Europe

Mountains cover 35% of the land area of Europe (including Turkey) and 30% of the EU; their residents number 112 million (17%) in Europe and 64 million (13%) in the EU (EEA 2010) (Figures 1 and 2). For the EU, these numbers and proportions changed considerably with the accession of new Member States in central and eastern Europe in 2004, 2007, and 2013. Many of these have significant mountain areas and populations, notably Slovenia (76 and 51%, respectively), Slovakia (60 and 39%), Bulgaria (49 and 36%), Croatia (40 and 13%), and Romania (38 and 12%).

Although mountains account for a significant proportion of both the area and population of the EU, relatively little specific attention has been paid to them in EU policies or even at the wider European scale (Debarbieux and Rudaz 2015). Mountains are identified in Article 174 of the 2007 Treaty for the Functioning of the European Union among the regions with "severe and permanent natural or demographic handicaps" (this category also includes sparsely populated areas, islands, and border areas, many of which are also mountainous [University of Geneva et al 2012]). Article 174 refers to the goal of economic, social, and territorial cohesion, which aims to reduce disparities in levels of development across the EU; this is generally known as "cohesion policy." Apart from this important mention, mountains are given specific attention in EU policy only with regard to agriculture and rural development, identified since 1975 as "less favoured areas" and since 2013 as "areas with natural or other specific constraints."

The terrain and climate of Europe's mountain areas certainly bring challenges for sustainable development, as in other parts of the world. However, these characteristics—and others, such as attractive landscapes, long-established cultural heritage, high-quality products, and high levels of biodiversity—also provide opportunities for development. This more holistic perception has been promoted for the past 2 decades, particularly by Euromontana (the European Association for Mountain Areas), most notably in a report that outlined how mountains can contribute to the EU's objectives for 2020 (Euromontana 2013).

Political agenda

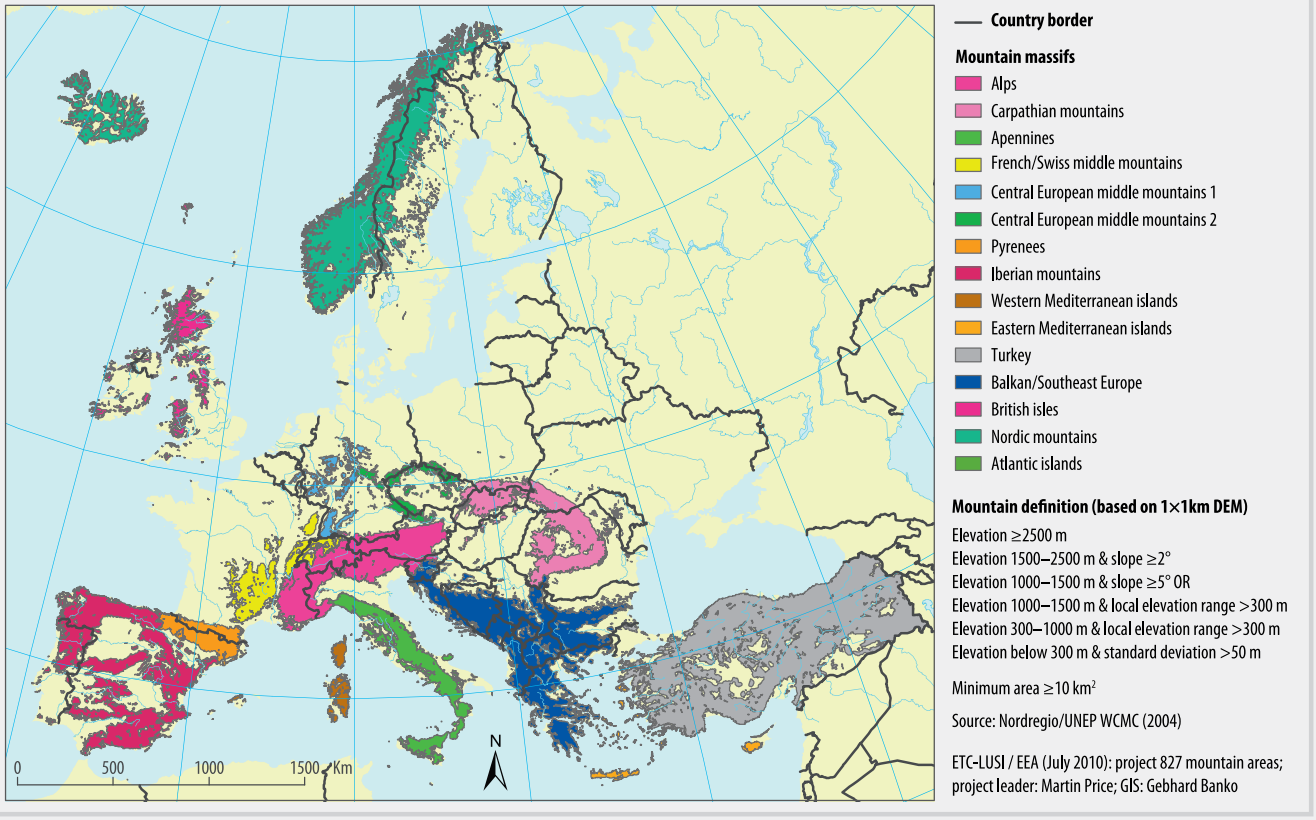
The eastward expansion of the EU has not only increased its mountain area and population, it has also brought new Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) with a strong interest in cohesion policy. One of these is Iliana Iotova, from Bulgaria, a country that has experienced a strong decline in its mountain population despite various policies focusing on mountain areas (Koulov et al 2016; Mladenov 2016). In 2015 Iotova decided to prepare an "own initiative report" on cohesion policy in the EU's mountains for the Parliament's Committee on Regional Development. Such reports explore topics of interest to MEPs, and—if the Parliament adopts them by resolution—they become expressions of its interest in a particular topic. They are therefore important tools in the early phase of the legislative cycle, particularly because the European Commission must respond in writing within 3 months on actions taken in response to specific requests expressed in resolutions that are addressed to it.

To provide evidence to support this initiative, the Parliament's Directorate-General for Internal Policies commissioned a study. The resulting report was published in March 2016 (Gløersen et al 2016) and presents an up-to-date analysis building on previous studies (eg EEA 2010; University of Geneva et al 2012). It notes that, while the EU's mountain areas are too diverse for one integrated European strategy, a framework for development strategies in mountain areas could be developed, and that this should particularly consider the challenges and importance of mountain farming, natural resources, biodiversity, and climate change. Such a framework could be used in cohesion policy, but more flexible multilevel governance arrangements are also needed.

The Committee on Regional Development voted in favor of the own-initiative report (with many amendments) in April 2016; it was also supported by the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development. In May 2016, the report was debated by the Parliament in plenary session and adopted by a large majority (553 votes out of 665—European Parliament 2016). The resulting resolution called, inter alia, for a working definition of mountainous regions in the context of cohesion policy, an *Agenda for EU Mountainous*

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FIGURE 1 Mountains constitute 35% of Europe's area. (Map courtesy of the European Environment Agency, published in EEA 2010, p 32)



Regions to form the basis of an EU strategy, and regular assessment of the condition of the EU's mountain areas and of the implementation of cohesion policy programs, to inform future policy development. In this context, the resolution recognized the need for statistical data at a suitable level of disaggregation. Although the resolution is not binding, it is an important step in getting the mountain agenda recognized at the EU level.

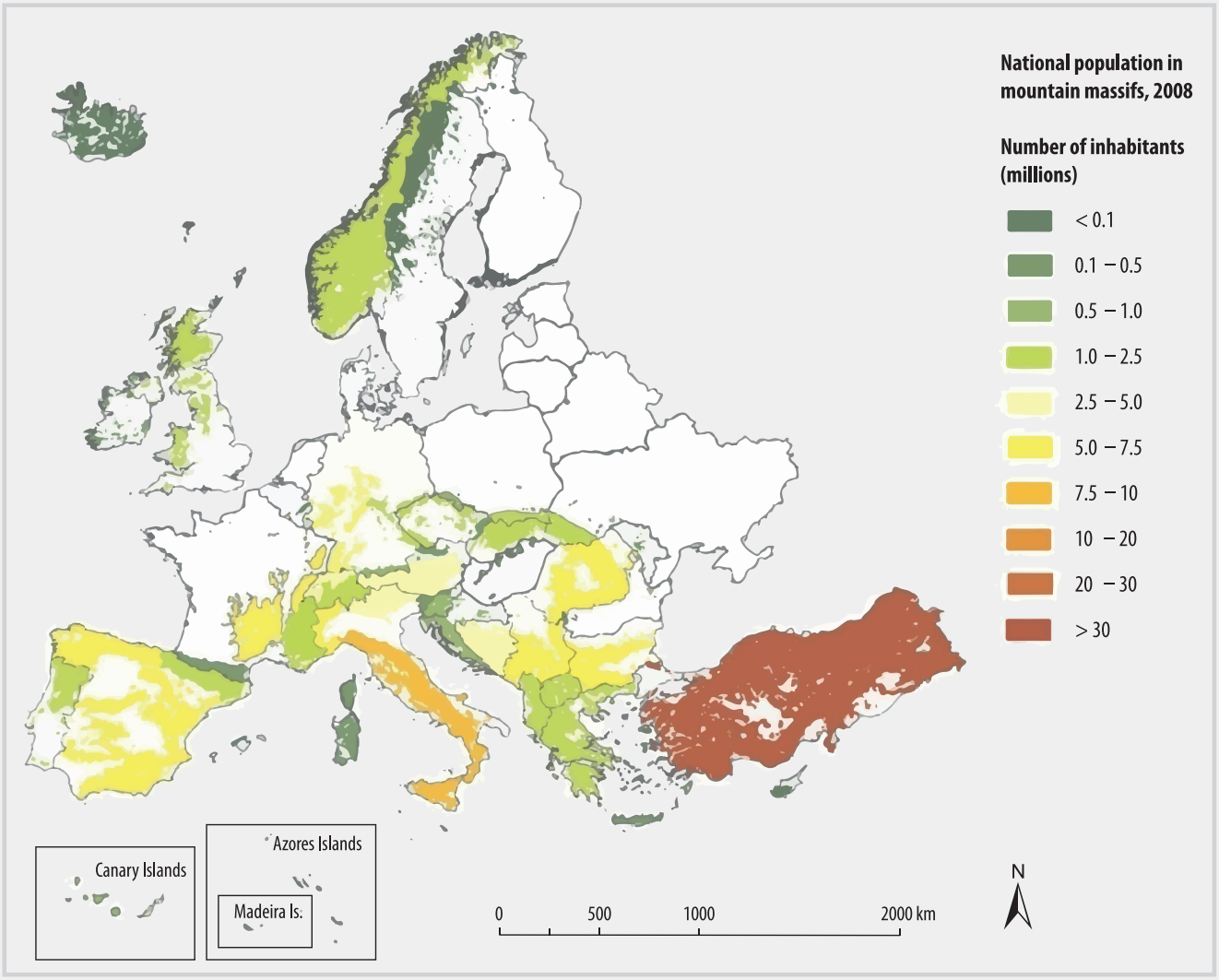
Scientific agenda

During 2015 and 2016, a strategic research agenda for Europe's mountains was developed by a multinational interdisciplinary team, coordinated by the Swiss-Austrian Alliance (CH-AT; www.chat-mountainalliance.eu/en/). There were 2 particular starting points for this. First was the finding of the project Mountain Sustainability: Transforming Research into Practice (www.mountaintrip.eu), funded by the EU's 7th Framework Programme (FP7), of a strong regional imbalance in research projects funded by the EU in mountain areas, with the most in the Alps, smaller numbers in the Iberian and Nordic mountains, and very few in the mountains of central and southeast Europe. Second was the recognition that, although the EU has funded research in mountain areas though the FP programs and their successor, the Horizon 2020 program, there has been little specific emphasis in Horizon 2020 calls for research proposals on mountains—in contrast, for example, to the Arctic. This is despite the many values of mountain areas to Europe's citizens, particularly with regard to the provision of ecosystem services, and the importance of mountains in providing insights and solutions to many of Europe's pressing challenges.

The strategic research agenda *Mountains for Europe's Future* (Drexler et al 2016) was developed through a series of workshops and online discussions and launched in April 2016. It outlines why mountains are important at the European scale, provides recommendations for activities on mountain topics within Horizon 2020, and presents 6 sets of proposals for interdisciplinary research on mountains to be included in future Horizon 2020 calls for research proposals. The proposed research areas were structured according to the 6 "Societal Challenges" identified by the program: health, demographic change, and wellbeing; food security, sustainable agriculture, and forestry; secure, clean, and efficient energy; smart, green, and integrated transport; climate action, environment, resources efficiency, and raw materials; and "Europe in a changing world."

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FIGURE 2 As of 2008, 17% of Europe's population lived in mountain areas. (Map courtesy of the European Environment Agency, published in EEA 2010, p 37)



Convergence

These converging political and scientific initiatives focus on the considerable challenges, opportunities, and needs of mountain areas and populations across Europe. Policy-makers have clear agendas, and scientists have many opportunities to provide evidence that can inform these agendas, stimulate the development of new policies, and be used to assess the implementation of policies. Officers of the European Commission are showing interest in the mountain agendas described above, which may be a sign that they are open to their proposals; this could result in new legislation or funding for research. At the same time, a real challenge is to develop strong scientific expertise across all of Europe's mountains; EU-funded programs have real potential to help meet this challenge.

There will be many opportunities for further discussion and development of these synergies in the coming months, including the Forum Carpaticum in September (http://carpathianscience.org/forum/forum-carpaticum-2016/) and the Mountains 2016 events (http://cimo.esa.ipb.pt/mountains2016/) and Alpweek (http://alpweek.org/2016/) in October.

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Mountain Sustainability: Transforming Research into Practice: www.mountaintrip.eu

Swiss-Austrian Alliance: www.chat-mountainalliance.eu/en/

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