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A mixed response to mergers in Ticino

Hardly any other canton promotes the merger of communes as heavily as Ticino. The cantonal authorities sometimes even force small villages into taking this step. However, mergers cannot be carried out in some areas because the local rivalries and tax differences are still too great. By René Lenzin

Centovalli is Ticino's youngest commune. The cantonal parliament recently approved the merger of the villages of Borgnone (117 inhabitants), Intragna (890) and Palagnedra (113). The cantonal council also granted a CHF 6.4 million loan to pay off the debts of the three communes and to give the new locality a better start. This parliamentary resolution indicates two things. Firstly, the merger process initiated by the government of Ticino a good decade ago has not yet been completed. Secondly, the canton is willing to invest in mergers.

This approach is based on a political plan. As the government pointed out at the turn of the millennium in a brochure which set out its proposals for the merger of communes, virtually no other Swiss canton has as many communes as Ticino, particularly ones that are smaller than average. These mergers represent the foundations for a successful reform of the cantonal institutions, as provided for by the new constitution. Ticino had 245 communes at the time, and only Berne and Vaud had more. 55% of communes in Ticino had fewer inhabitants than the Swiss average of 1,200. 51 localities had between 100 and 150 residents, and 44 had even fewer than 100. The canton's policy is paying dividends. The number of communes fell to 181 by the end of 2008.

The Federal Supreme Court supports compulsory mergers

Not all mergers go as smoothly as the canton, and sometimes even the communal authorities themselves, would like. In the Monteceneri region, for example, four out of nine localities have rejected plans for a merger to form a single commune at the ballot box, which means only a "semi-merger" involving the other five communes can now take place. The canton has accepted this democratic decision because it regards the communes that rejected the proposal as still functional. This was not the case in other areas where government and parliament made use of the legal option of compulsory mergers.

One such example was in Valle di Muggio where one of the six communes on the left side of the valley rejected merger plans. The village concerned took its case as far as the Federal Supreme Court. But the Supreme Court recently dismissed the case, which means the merger will now go ahead. There was also bad blood in the upper Maggia valley, where the canton pushed through the merger to create the commune of Cevio against the will of the people of one tributary valley. This "diktat" from the capital city was one of the major reasons why Cevio recently withdrew from a promising national park project at the instigation of the "merger losers".

Parish-pump politics rears its ugly head again

There has been a mixed response to mergers in Ticino's urban centres. Mergers have worked well in economically prosperous

areas such as Lugano and Mendrisio. "Grande Lugano" has merged with 13 suburban communes in recent years and now has a population of 57,000. In other urban centres, mergers have been rejected in referenda (Chiasso) or have not made any headway at all (Bellinzona and Locarno). The psychological barriers are not as great as in the mountain valley communities that are dying out, but on the other hand the suburban communes fear being swallowed up by the urban centres. They are concerned they will have to pay more but have less say. In contrast to wealthy Lugano, the tax differences between other large urban centres and their surrounding areas are significant. It is generally the case that taxes are lower in the suburbs than in the urban centres.

In addition to these issues, longstanding local rivalries also come into play. Parish-pump politics, or *Campanilismo*, is especially prevalent in the Locarnese region, where the small, rich Ascona and the larger, less prosperous Locarno are unable to bring themselves to cooperate on joint projects. Various models have been proposed over the years for how the nine communes in the economically deprived Locarnese region might work more closely together, but nothing of any substance has been achieved so far.



The cantonal government of Ticino wants to reduce the number of communes from 245 to 86 for financial reasons. The government believes that a properly functioning commune in Ticino should have between at least 1,000 and 1,200 inhabitants. The government plans to merge entire valley areas with several small communes into one single entity. This would also mean the end for the commune of Corippo in Verzascatal (pictured). But it is still unclear whether this will happen as there is significant political opposition.