

The border provinces

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The Italian side of the border is prosperous and industrial. The province of Varese, which reaches from Lake Maggiore to the western shore of Lake Lugano, is one of the most industrialized areas of Italy, with aerospace, mechanical engineering, textiles, chemicals and household appliances. Malpensa airport lies on its southern edge. The province of Como combines the silk and textile industry that made the town famous with furniture, mechanical engineering, tourism on the lake and a dense network of small and medium-sized enterprises. Verbano-Cusio-Ossola, the northernmost province of Piedmont, borders on the Locarnese and the Valais and lives from tourism, stone quarrying and small industry. Lecco, on the eastern arm of Lake Como, is a centre of metalworking.¹

The labour markets of these provinces are tight. In 2024 the unemployment rate measured according to the definitions of the International Labour Organization stood at 3.6 per cent in the province of Varese, 5.4 per cent in the province of Como and 2.8 per cent in Verbano-Cusio-Ossola. The comparable figure for Ticino was 6.6 per cent.² The comparison shows that the flow of commuters into Ticino is driven mainly by the difference in wages and, until 2023, by the tax treatment of cross-border income, since unemployment on the Italian side is low. A worker from Varese or Como who commutes to Mendrisio or Lugano usually gives up a job in Italy for a better-paid job in Switzerland. The Ticinese labour market, in turn, has a higher measured unemployment rate than its Italian neighbours, which is one of the facts behind the political debate described below.

The Italian provinces also have their own relationship with Milan. For the inhabitants of Como and Varese, Milan is the regional capital, the seat of the courts of appeal, the universities, the large hospitals and the corporate headquarters, all reachable by train in less than an hour. For Ticino, Milan is the nearest metropolis, about an hour from Lugano by train since the

opening of the Ceneri base tunnel in 2020. The Insubric region is therefore a region with two centres of gravity: Milan as the economic metropolis and Lugano as the Swiss financial and service centre on the northern edge.

1 Regio Insubrica

The institutional expression of the cross-border region is the *Comunità di lavoro Regio Insubrica* (Regio Insubrica working community). Its founding pact was signed on 19 January 1995. Ten years later the Ticinese Department of the Environment still presented the Canton of Ticino and the provinces of Varese, Como and Verbano-Cusio-Ossola as the core of the community, with Lecco and Novara as further participants.³ The membership was later enlarged. Today the members are the Canton of Ticino, the Regions of Lombardy and Piedmont and the provinces of Como, Lecco, Novara, Varese and Verbano-Cusio-Ossola. The secretariat has its seat at Villa P. Chiesa in Mezzana, in the municipality of Coldrerio in the Mendrisiotto. The organs are a General Assembly, a presidential office and a steering committee, with a presidency that rotates among the members. In September 2026 it passed to the Region of Piedmont.⁴

The working community has no legal personality. In a speech given at Varese on the tenth anniversary in September 2005, a member of the Ticino government described this as its main limitation: lacking "riconoscimento giuridico", the Regio could not itself take part in European funding programmes such as Interreg, so that its projects had to be carried by the member authorities.⁵ Its legal basis lies in the general framework for cross-border cooperation between territorial authorities. On the Swiss side, the Federal Constitution allows the cantons to conclude treaties with foreign states within the scope of their powers and to deal directly with subordinate foreign authorities (Art. 56 Cst.). On the European level, the Council of Europe's Outline Convention on Transfrontier Co-operation between Territorial Communities or Authorities of 21 May 1980, in force for Switzerland since 4 June 1982 and also ratified by Italy, provides the general frame.⁶

The Regio works through thematic tables on territory, environment and mobility, on local institutions, on economy, labour and training, and on tourism, culture and sport.⁷ Its achievements are mainly those of a forum. It prepared and accompanied projects that the member authorities then financed, the most visible being the railway between Mendrisio and Varese, which the 2005 speech already presented as a central project of cross-border cooperation, with its seven-kilometre section between Stabio and Arcisate, and which opened in 2018. It organizes the regular contacts

between the cantonal government and the Italian regions and provinces. It has also commissioned studies on cross-border identity and the labour market. Its limits became visible in every serious conflict of the last two decades, from the freezing of tax refunds in 2011 to the dispute over the Italian health levy in 2026. In these conflicts the decisions were taken in Bellinzona, Rome and Bern, while the working community could at most offer a place for dialogue.

2 Notes

1. Profile of the provincial economies (aerospace in the province of Varese around Samarate and Vergiate, household appliances at Cassinetta di Biandronno, silk in Como, metalworking in Lecco). ↩
2. USTAT, Notiziario statistico 2025-42 (Giubiasco, 24 November 2025), https://www3.ti.ch/DFE/DR/USTAT/allegati/news/256341ns_2025-42.pdf (regional comparison for 2024). ↩
3. Repubblica e Cantone Ticino, Dipartimento del territorio, speech "Regio Insubrica si presenta al territorio della Provincia di Varese", Varese, Ville Ponti, 26 September 2005, https://www3.ti.ch/DT/discorsi/2005/260905_Regio_Insubrica_si_presenta_al_territorio_della_Provincia_di_Varese.pdf (pact of 19 January 1995; "Varese, Como, il Verbano-Cusio-Ossola e il Cantone Ticino (Lecco e Novara)"). ↩
4. Comunità di lavoro Regio Insubrica, website, <https://www.regioinsubrica.org/> (members, seat, organs, transfer of the presidency to Piedmont in September 2026). ↩
5. Speech of 26 September 2005 (above). ↩
6. Federal Constitution of the Swiss Confederation of 18 April 1999, SR 101, Art. 56 paras. 1–3, English and Italian text at <https://www.droit-bilingue.ch/en-it/1/10/101-56-64.html>; European Outline Convention on Transfrontier Co-operation between Territorial Communities or Authorities of 21 May 1980 (ETS No. 106), SR 0.131.1, <https://www.droit-bilingue.ch/de-it/0.1/0.13/0.131.1-preface-1.html> (approved by the Federal Assembly on 3 December 1981, Swiss instrument of ratification deposited on 3 March 1982, in force for Switzerland since 4 June 1982). ↩

7. Regio Insubrica website (above). ↩

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