On the brink of leaving and gone for good? Causes and consequences of the out-migration of young women from rural Eastern Germany

Rural regions in the postsocialist states of Central and Eastern Europe have been the "losers" of the transformation. Eastern Germany is no exception to this rule. The planned economy had created and/or protected economic structures which have become increasingly obsolete in a globalised economy. The deindustrialisation and the restructuring of agriculture over the last two decades have resulted in large-scale job losses. Since entrepreneurial activity is low and direct investments are concentrated in a few – mostly urban – regions, many rural regions are characterised by very high unemployment rates and a high level of long-term unemployment. Significant parts of the population are dependent on transfer payments and low paid precarious jobs on fixed-term contracts as means of subsistence.

Another feature is the negative population development caused by low birth- and high death rates in combination with strong out-migration. Out-migration from rural Eastern Germany is very selective. Young women are the most likely to leave and the least likely to return which results in highly skewed sex ratios the age-group 18-35 in almost all rural districts of the new federal states. It has also been argued that the most entrepreneurial leave, while those lacking initiative stay behind. The German media paints a dark picture of the rural East, portraying this part of the country as a "male periphery" inhabited by "passive losers" doomed to impoverishment, unemployment and alcoholism.

The socio-economic problems and the declining population lead to cuts in services of general interest. Railways and schools are closed; public services, health care facilities, shops and employment opportunities are increasingly concentrated in urban areas and medium-sized towns. These developments have resulted in a drop in the quality of life of rural and suburban residents and undermined their attachment to their home region. As a consequence of the increasing peripherisation and the dissolution of rural communities a "stagnating regionalism" (Keim 2006)[1] that blocks innovation and creates isolated milieus emerges. In connection with the negative public image of rural Eastern Germany the "stagnating regionalism" obstructs in- and re-migration and encourages young people to leave. The "friction" between economic geography and the geographies of lifestyles seems to be weak.

In our paper, we discuss three research questions:

(1) Why are young women more prone to leave and how do they perceive and assess living in rural Eastern Germany?

(2) How do in- and re-migrants perceive and assess these regions? Can they verify the notion of a "stagnating regionalism" that makes the local population hostile towards newcomers and new ideas?

(3) What conclusions can be drawn for the formulation of regional development policies, especially against the backdrop that fostering in-migration is the only promising way to stabilise the population development of rural Eastern Germany? Should the primary addressee of 'welcoming policies' be the resident population?

Our contribution is based empirically on an online-survey with pupils in 18 schools in 6 rural districts of the federal state of Sachsen-Anhalt, expert interviews and in-depth interviews with women aged 20 to 34 living in or originating from rural Sachsen-Anhalt. We use a biographical approach and consider social networks, lifestyle preferences and cultural aspects like norms and values governing gender roles to explain gender-related migration patterns. The data has been collected for the ESPON project "SEMIGRA" (www.semigra.eu).

Dr. Karin Wiest and Tim Leibert
Leibniz-Institute for Regional Geography
Schongauerstraße 9
04328 Leipzig
k_wiest@ifl-leipzig.de
t_leibert@ifl-leipzig.de

---

[1] Keim, K.-D. (2006): Peripherisierung ländlicher Räume. In: Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte 37/2006, 3-7