

The role of migration in the rural peripheralization in post-Soviet Latvia

In migration studies, the focus has traditionally been on out-migration from the countryside and problems associated with loss of population. Nevertheless, our study clarifies also in-migration pattern of selected rural destination.

Over the past two decades many rural areas of Latvia have faced the problem of depopulation. In addition, every year number of population in Latvia gradually decreases and this trend is also reflected in rural areas. Currently 68% of inhabitants live in urban areas while 32% in rural areas. According to official statistical data decrease of rural population between 1990 and 2013 is 19.8% and currently 657.5 thousands live in rural areas, while 1.37 million inhabits urban area. (CSB 2013) This has certainly been the case in remote countryside and peripheral areas with low population density and declining standards of living. Moreover, remote and sparsely populated rural areas have been disadvantaged during the whole period of post-Soviet transformation.

Since the second half of the 1990s, internal migration has played an essential role on the population's spatial redistribution. Internal migration between 1991 and 2009 involved an average of 2% of Latvia's residents each year (CSB, 2010). Over the past decades the major flows of internal migration were between urban and rural areas. The basic migration flows were from urban areas to countryside, while emigration from rural to urban areas constitutes almost equal numbers. The lowest level of migration is found in the rural-to-rural category – just 12% of overall internal migration, on average.

In the 1990s, there was a short period of ruralisation, which was expressed in dominating population outflows from Riga and other major cities. The main reason why have urban residents been moving to the rural areas is that during socialist period people had moved from the rural areas to the cities, i.e., from the peripheral regions to the central part of the country. In the 1990s, studies showed that the denationalisation of property in the rural areas led considerable numbers of people to move back to their ancestral homes in rural areas. Young people and people of retirement or pre-retirement age were particularly ready to make the move. During the initial years of land reform after regaining the independence in the beginning of 1990s, the number of people in more distant Latvian districts increased. Trends in the flow of domestic migration in later years showed that these were only temporary flows and motivations. Unfavourable socio-economic conditions, including a high level of unemployment and a lack of jobs, led to a different migration flow, with people once again flowing away from the peripheral districts of the country.

The collapse of communist economy and Soviet agro-industrial system resulted in extremely rapid employment decline and out-migration from rural areas. On the other hand, rural restructuring has associated not only with economic hardships.

New processes have emerged in the 2000s – urban sprawl around cities characterized by in-migration of affluent households in the suburbs. Since 1999, most recent flows are directed to the surrounding areas of large cities, especially Riga and show suburbanization processes. The migration pattern is strongly influenced by urban development. Riga is the largest and still growing centre of economic activities, thus continuing a long historical trend. Approximately 40% of internal migration flows involve the city of Riga. Riga's size and economic dominance over a wide territory have a strong influence on the development of settlements, population density, migration, and economically functional interactions, both directly and indirectly.

Main aim of our research is examine population changes, composition and migration behaviour of residents in remote rural countryside of Latvia.

The paper presents a wide breadth of original material; it examines several sparsely populated rural areas in Latvia. The research on rural out migration is based on the combination of the survey and interview data and available register data. Face-to-face survey took place in year 2013 in four research areas in Latvia – Drustu, Zosenu, Dzerbenes and Taurenes parishes. Total number of respondents is 469 representing one member of the randomly selected household in each case. Typically representing situation in rural sparsely populated areas around 30% of all respondents are over 65 years of age and most commonly have moved to these areas more than 20 years ago. 71% of all respondents live in farmstead and 28% in the rural centres. Survey results show that around 38% have lived in the current parish since birth, 40% have change the place of living more than 20 years ago and in the last 20 years 21% of the respondents have moved to the current place of living.

The main migration motives for those who have moved are family related and property purchase. The main attractiveness factors in order to move to rural parishes are attractive landscape and property. Around 15% have experience of working abroad and for 1/3 of respondents currently have somebody who is working abroad mostly in the UK, Ireland and Norway.

We show that personal characteristics (age, gender, marital status, employment status, education, rootedness and migration behaviour) and contextual factors (unemployment level and settlement type) are both important in shaping the composition of long-time residents and in-migrants. We found that migration selectivity is relatively stable in comparing with previous studies. Although the differences in migration behaviour by demographic characteristics are in line with universalistic explanations, the patterns are different for remote rural areas (farmsteads) and rural centres (villages). When the two types of countryside are compared to each other, the sparsely populated rural areas is less attractive than rural centres to those with higher incomes and high education. In addition, we found that migration pattern had an aging effect on the population in rural areas. Despite the renewed interest in rural living which has been reported in other studies, remote rural areas are less attractive to migrants than peri-urban locations in Latvia.

References

Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia (CSB) 2013. Population: Number and Change., Central Statistical Bureau in Latvia, viewed on 13.11.2013. <http://www.csb.gov.lv/en/dati/statistics-database-30501.html>

Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia (CSB) 2010. Demography 2010. Collection of statistical data. Riga