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Immigration Studies

Place attachment, (im)mobility decisions and rural well-being in Southeast Europe: a multi-sited ethnographic approach

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Dr. Arjola ARAPI-GJINI is a Research Associate at the Leibniz Institute for Agricultural Development in Transition Economies (IAMO) in Halle (Saale), Germany. Her research interests include impact evaluation methods, labor migration and analysis of wellbeing. She is currently involved in a Leibniz Association-funded project, 'Rural Well-Being in Transition: Multidimensional Drivers and Effects on Immobility' (RuWell), where, as a key research investigator, she looks at drivers of rural outmigration and community well-being in selected depopulated areas in South Eastern Europe (SEE).

Europe's rural areas are threatened by a 'vicious cycle' of depopulation and under-development: as the population decreases, the quality of life of those left behind declines, fueling more rural out-migration. Place attachment, that is, the bond forged between people and localities, holds great potential in deconstructing this 'vicious cycle.' Yet, its role in rural residents' (im)mobility decisions and the related consequences of such decisions on their well-being remain under-researched.

This contribution aims to fill this gap using a multi-sited ethnographic research approach. It provides a comparative, in-depth analysis of the interlinkages between place attachment, rural (im)mobility, and well-being in depopulated regions of Southeast Europe.

Our preliminary findings highlight sociocultural factors as important determinants of place attachment. Age, gender, education, economic situation, home and business investments, as well as family and community ties, play a significant role in the development and maintenance of links to rural localities. Furthermore, the strength of such links differs across regions. In traditional settings, for example, place attachment is reinforced or weakened through behavioral and gendered norms, which prevent women from leaving and encourage men to migrate. Consequently, the nature of the attachment to a place has adverse consequences for people's well-being. Those forced to stay because of certain traditions and norms experience lower levels of well-being than those who choose to stay in rural areas because of certain attributes that make them particularly attractive to people. From a policy standpoint, identifying factors that foster positive attachment to localities is pivotal in preventing depopulation and improving rural well-being.

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