



The 'structural pessimism' of the EU periphery: Measures to establish a new revitalisation paradigm

European View
2024, Vol. 23(2) 139–148
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DOI: 10.1177/17816858241274925
journals.sagepub.com/home/euv

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Abstract

Throughout the EU's history, developed regions have consistently drawn young people, with the phenomenon of 'escaping from the province' being a significant driver of youth migration. As peripheral regions become increasingly depopulated, the 'ring of desert' effect that appears in these areas also starts to impact developed regions (because depopulated areas are more vulnerable to illegal migration, the loss of social capital in the periphery results in the reduced competitiveness of the entire EU, social and political tensions increase, etc.). Instead of increasing solidarity, the opposite is happening. For example, Croatia has subsidised Germany by investing €18 billion in the education of its emigrated citizens. In the future, however, peripheral areas might become more attractive places to live due to an increase in threats such as pandemics, climate change, pollution and terrorism. Remote work could lead to a resurgence in the population of the EU's peripheries, provided there is access to broadband Internet, public transportation, mobile healthcare services and distance education in rural areas.

Keywords

Periphery, Remote work, Youth migration, Corruption

Introduction

Current migration trends and the population distribution in the EU are exacerbating existing inequalities between Eastern and Western Europe and widening the economic

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gap between developed and poorer regions. Internal EU migration patterns, primarily involving young, educated and skilled workers, along with their families, show people moving from the periphery to the centre. This trend is creating a 'geography of discontent' (a social phenomenon where a significant portion of the population living in certain territories feels aggrieved or dissatisfied) in the sending countries, further encouraging emigration. The population decline is severe in the Baltic states, and even more so in Croatia, Bulgaria and Romania. Notably, depopulation in South-Eastern Europe (SEE) is driven mainly by massive emigration rather than natural decline, with 65% attributed to this factor (Jurić 2021). Policies that attract young workers to the EU's centre, combined with corruption and weak institutions in the countries of origin, are significant drivers of contemporary migration from the EU periphery. Additionally, countries such as Spain and France are witnessing an outflow of people from rural areas due to inadequate infrastructure and services, poor job quality and declining incomes. To address these issues, all EU member states and institutions should work to mitigate the adverse effects of freedom of movement and unfavourable demographic trends. Cooperation between sending and receiving countries and regions is essential (Jurić 2024, 14).

The centre–periphery dichotomy

The basic theoretical framework used in this article is Immanuel Wallerstein's (1974) dichotomous centre–periphery model and dependency theory. The theory focuses on the global system rather than individual nation states as the primary unit of analysis. Wallerstein claims that developed nuclei penetrate peripheral countries financially and technologically, creating an unbalanced economic structure within peripheral societies and between them and central countries. The central countries extract resources (in the past raw materials, now labour) from peripheral regions, often at low cost. Simultaneously, unequal exchange exacerbates economic disparities. Peripheral economies become dependent on core countries for investment, technology and markets, while central regions receive better infrastructure (roads, ports, communication networks), enhancing their economic growth. Central nations exert political control over peripheral regions through institutions. At the same time, cultural imperialism can erode local traditions and identity. All this, in turn, leads to the limitation of self-sustaining growth in the periphery. When peripheries take on the characteristics of corruption in addition to having a lack of resources, their position becomes even weaker in terms of retaining their population, especially the youth.

Commenting on Wallerstein's thesis, Mesić (2014, 158) claims that less-developed societies have become involved in globalisation processes under unfavourable conditions, and in this way have become even more exposed to the ruthless laws of the global market. In the short term, therefore, even if these societies make some economic progress, they will pay the price—among other things, in terms of an increase in pressure on the population to emigrate.

Human and natural resources have always been the main treasures of the periphery, treasures which the centre needed above all else, and today, due to the demographic crisis

in Europe, this covetous desire of the centre is straining the relationship between the two even more. People from the provinces are thus often treated as a ‘raw material’ of development in neoliberal doctrine. As a result, the EU is becoming the scene of a struggle for resources—human resources (Jurić 2021).

Eurostat’s analysis of NUTS-3 regions¹ (2021) shows that almost all provinces in SEE have experienced a demographic decline in the last two years. Depopulation of the periphery is a growing global issue and presents a major challenge for the EU. In 2011, 40% of rural areas in Europe faced depopulation, with Eastern Europe (EE) and SEE being the most affected regions. Currently, rural regions account for 28% of the Union’s population (but this figure is expected to decline), while accounting for 44% of its territory (European Parliament 2021).

Several factors explain the increasing trend of rural depopulation. First, the long-term shift of economies away from agriculture and traditional extraction industries, coupled with the recent globalisation of manufacturing, has led to the polarisation of economic development (Hennessy 2024). This has caused urban areas to grow while rural regions have declined. Second, the modernisation of agriculture in developed economies, through larger economies of scale, mechanisation and automation, has reduced the number of jobs in agriculture and related industries. Combined, these demographic trends have created a vicious circle of decreased demand for, and consequently supply of, essential services in rural areas, resulting in poor connectivity, inadequate infrastructure and limited access to public services. These factors collectively have made rural areas less attractive for living and working, prompting selective job-related migration from rural to urban areas, especially among younger and more educated workers. This has led to ongoing depopulation, divestment and a negative natural population balance in rural areas (ESPON 2020).

Characteristics of the periphery

According to Giddens (1990), the functioning of social institutions must be considered one of the critical indicators of the modernisation process. When it comes to the countries of EE and especially of SEE, modernisation can be understood as Europeanisation, and this process has been considerably delayed and is only half-finished (Jurić 2021, 314).

The main hallmarks of the EE and SEE peripheries are stagnation and the inability to create new opportunities for young people. The feeling of injustice in such environments is further strengthened by the presence of corruption and clientelism. In such environments, corruption is felt and seen at every step because, without acquaintances and connections, be they political or kinship, one cannot access many resources. Opportunities are distributed according to criteria that have nothing to do with ability or education. Because of these trends, structural pessimism has prevailed in EE and SEE and injustice has become an integral part of the new identity of the societies in transition (Jurić 2021, 315).

According to Lay (1998), peripheries are areas of low social density, resulting in a relatively low level of total social energy, which means that significant and rapid changes cannot take place on the periphery. The quantity and frequency of development initiatives are relatively small, and the impetus for change encounters serious organisational obstacles. The problem with local elites in EE and SEE is that they are usually too few to encourage development or are insufficiently competent to carry out a more ambitious plan. Thus, the provinces often fall into a state of anomie, a rupture of social ties, which empirically manifests itself as apathy, resignation, and the absence of social action and gathering in general. The idea that the periphery has been abandoned and forgotten by the centre is especially noticeable, and this further hinders those with local social energy who could do something. It is known from the sociological literature (Rogić 2000) that without measures to combat this sense of apathy, these characteristics become more deeply embedded in peripheral areas, further exacerbating the problem. Moreover, because of emigration, these areas are on the path to social oblivion.

In modern societies, people expect constant progress on a personal and social level, and stagnation is the most significant source of dissatisfaction. Today, many generations in SEE do not feel that there has been any progress in their lives. This ‘structural pessimism’ (Bagić 2020) is the backdrop to numerous pathological processes in the EU periphery. Images of houses without facades, and rural settlements with poor street lighting and no social infrastructure depict life in the provinces.

Thus, in addition to corruption, an important push factor for emigration is the idea of ‘escaping from the province’. As a result of emigration, large parts of the SEE region are becoming even more peripheral in the cultural and economic sense (and similar is happening in other parts of the EU too, especially in EE). As much as three-quarters of the territory of SEE forms a periphery that is dying out biologically, economically and culturally. Namely, 90% of all administrative regions are recording a higher number of deaths than live births, so there is virtually no natural increase in their populations (OECD 2019). For example, in Croatia, the depopulation rate in rural settlements is twice as high as the Croatian average.

During the past 35 years, nearly 10 million people are estimated to have left SEE (mainly young people and primarily from the peripheral parts)—about 22% of the population in the early 1990s (Jurić 2021, 150).

Free movement of workers within the EU and its negative consequences

The right to freedom of movement is one of the most positive achievements of European integration. It has created several benefits for the EU: allowing redistribution from areas with high unemployment to areas with a demand for workers, contributing to stronger European integration and promoting intercultural dialogue. However, it has also had many negative effects on less-developed regions (i.e. the periphery). Namely, freedom of

movement disrupts these regions' production and tax bases and increases the disparities between the more and less developed regions of the EU, a result which is in complete opposition to the aims of EU cohesion policy.

It is also important to note here that the narrative on how 'everyone' in the EU moves should be reconsidered. Alcidi and Gros (2019) examined the factors driving growth in intra-EU labour mobility and showed that just under 4% of EU citizens of working age (20–64) now reside in a member state which is not that of their citizenship, ranging from 1% of German nationals living and working abroad to 14% of Croatian and 20% of Romanian nationals—thus indicating a strong movement from the periphery to the centre of the EU (and an upward trend in this movement).

The European Committee of the Regions warns that the phenomenon of brain drain poses a risk to the long-term sustainability of the European project if the social and economic imbalances between the sending and receiving regions remain unaddressed (European Committee of the Regions 2018, 1). To achieve a balance between two essential principles of the EU, free movement of labour and economic and social convergence between regions, citizens and workers must be able to move freely, but only because they want to and not because they are pushed from their regions by poverty and scarce economic opportunities.

Apart from economic factors, which always stand out, the next element that explains migration from the periphery to the EU's centre is related to the quality of institutions and the political climate (Jurić 2017). Emigrants move from countries with weak institutions to those with stronger institutions. According to Atoyán et al. (2016), the quality of institutions is a critical factor for skilled migrants, while unskilled ones are more attracted to the social benefits and the salaries they will receive in the country to which they move. Alcidi and Gros (2019) suggest that inefficient public spending and difficulties in providing quality public services, that is, the results of weak institutions, increase the likelihood of emigration. Therefore, differences in structural factors and the stability of institutions will be more critical in the future than net wages for individuals when making the decision to emigrate (the more educated people are, the higher their expectations from institutions).

It appears that the main motives for emigration among the emigrants from SEE are thus not economic (Jurić 2017). There is an apparent link between a lack of political ethics, weak institutions and emigration. The immorality of political elites, legal insecurity, nepotism and corruption are at the top of the list of reasons to emigrate. A particularly worrying finding is that not only are citizens emigrating because of corruption, but due to their emigration, corruption is increasing (Jurić 2021). A study by the author (Jurić 2023) demonstrated this in the case of Croatia. Namely, by emigrating, some of the critics of the country are removed, allowing the established corrupt networks to operate unhindered. Conversely, those who have strengthened their status due to clientelism and corruption do not emigrate.

Unlike in previous waves of emigration, the individuals in the most recent wave are highly educated, employed and married. The dominant feature of this wave is the emigration of complete families. There is no doubt that this brain drain will seriously affect the social capital of EE and SEE in the future—in the last eight years, the number of students and pupils has fallen by 10% in SEE (Jurić and Hadžić 2022).

How to revitalise the periphery?

While providing the incentive for the population to stay is, on the one hand, an internal task for individual EU member states, on the other hand, it is also the task of the EU through its proclaimed solidarity and cohesion policy. It only seems fair that the member states that benefit from freedom of movement share the burden with those who bear that burden, and therefore there is an obligation to act at the European level (Goldner Lang and Lang 2019). Without this solidarity, instead of being a process of convergence, emigration from poorer to richer member states could be seen as richer EU countries being subsidised by poorer ones.

Measures at the EU level that are indirectly linked to reducing the negative consequences of workers' movements are the Cohesion Fund and the European Regional Development Fund (which focuses on economic and social cohesion by promoting the development of poorer regions). However, Goldner Lang and Lang (2019) have shown that the amounts available are insufficient to create substantial convergence.

In fact, the opposite process is actually at work. Croatia, for example, has subsidised Germany through its investment of €18 billion in the education of its emigrated citizens (Jurić 2021). Namely, for every adult citizen who leaves the country, Croatia loses the benefit of between €50,000 and €150,000 of education (depending on whether the worker is skilled or highly skilled).

There are seven actions that should be taken to revitalise the periphery, and these are outlined below.

The first would be to provide compensation to the peripheries by having EU-financed centres of excellence for deficit occupations, for example for training nurses in SEE, with the condition that they work in their home country for five years after graduation. The second option here would be to classify areas facing serious and permanent demographic challenges to ensure greater allocations of funding from cohesion policy. Special support should be provided to NUTS-3 areas with a population density of less than 12.5 inhabitants per square kilometre or with an average annual population decline of more than 1% (Jurić 2024).

Second, intergenerational solidarity is essential for creating more resilient EU societies. In the context of revitalising the periphery, it is crucial to devise models that connect young and old. The decreasing number of children in families is reducing the traditional

circle of care for the elderly, which in more traditional areas of EE and SEE has often compensated for the lack of infrastructure. Therefore, we propose the introduction of vouchers with a value of €300 per month, tied to each elderly person. These individuals could give these vouchers to those who assist them with basic needs such as shopping, transportation and similar activities, allowing them to stay in their own homes, rather than move to a retirement home. For young people, providing such assistance could be recognised as an alternative to civil/military service or as extra credit at high school or university (Jurić 2024).

Third, combating corruption and clientelism as factors driving emigration is a key measure to retain young people in the country, as well as to encourage the return of emigrants. To this end, SEE countries should launch websites where the results of all public tenders are transparently listed, including who applied and who won the tender. Transparency has proven to be the best weapon against corruption and clientelism.

The fundamental way to integrate the periphery into wider EU society is through the process of cultural and social exchange. If people from the periphery do not travel to the centres, and those from the centres to the peripheries, there is no social integration. Therefore, the fourth action is to improve (or subsidise) the transport infrastructure, for instance by connecting the periphery with the cities via fast trains or the reconstruction of bus routes within and between provinces and cities.

Fifth, tax relief should be provided to those establishing businesses in the periphery, as well as for all citizens living in such areas.

The sixth action relates to the author's main thesis, that the disparities between EU regions and the revitalisation of the EU periphery can be improved most quickly by remote work. The key idea is to allow relocation for workers who want to move to the periphery and work remotely (with the obligation to come into the office once every two weeks). Initially, this option could be offered in the public sector. The effect that this measure would have (among others) is to send a message to families who are thinking about leaving the periphery that trends are changing. The great advantage of this approach is that this demographic measure, unlike others, does not require the investment of large financial resources. There are two main societal advantages of remote work (working from home). First, it would slow down the brain drain from the periphery of the EU, as well as within individual member states. Second, remote work would reduce the need for young people to live in large urban centres to increase their chances of career advancement (it would also reduce CO₂ emissions and relieve traffic congestion, and may enable the return of some emigrants from the West). This measure would require the introduction of broadband Internet throughout the EU. It would also be necessary to introduce mobile health teams (as there is a lack of adequate health care in many provinces) and to provide distance education opportunities. Furthermore, this measure could also introduce the

idea of the decentralisation of state institutions, which in SEE are predominantly located in the capitals.

Seventh and finally, it is therefore necessary to establish an office at the EU level that will coordinate the work of all relevant state bodies for the revitalisation of the peripheries and the implementation of the demographic policies of EU member states (Jurić 2024).

Conclusion and recommendations

Although a gloomy picture of the EU periphery is presented, in the next decade, due to the increasing tensions caused by the constant growth of material production and other threats such as pandemics and terrorism (and even war), the periphery could appear an attractive place to live. Furthermore, increasing numbers of people are appreciating the peaceful and humane rhythm of life, clean air, nature and traditional ways that exist in rural areas.

If for no other reason than because populated areas are one of the main guarantors of the security of external borders, the EU should be keen to avoid peripheral areas becoming depopulated. If the EU wants a strong external border, it should pay much more attention to the depopulation of its periphery and to migration from the periphery to the centre of the EU.

Regarding measures for the revitalisation of the periphery, it would of course be easy to repeat the key political idea that has been rehashed for the last three decades in SEE and EE: ‘we will open factories’. Instead of a wish list, we highlight a number of recommendations that have withstood scientific criticism:

- provide opportunities for remote work: this could repopulate and revitalise rural areas, reduce brain drain and encourage people (the diaspora) to return;
- improve infrastructure: broadband Internet, public transportation, mobile health-care teams and distance education;
- introduce a classification system for areas with serious and persistent demographic challenges to enable the increased allocation of funds from cohesion policies; and
- combat corruption and clientelism as push factors for emigration (through transparency).

Note

1. The Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics (NUTS) classification is a hierarchical system used to divide the economic territory of the EU for statistical purposes. It has three levels: NUTS 1, NUTS 2 and NUTS 3. NUTS-3 regions are the smallest units in this classification and are designed for specific diagnoses and detailed regional analyses. These regions typically have populations of between 150,000 and 800,000 inhabitants.

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