

## REGIONAL TOPICALITIES IN LATVIA: MOBILITY AND IMMOBILITY IN THE COUNTRYSIDE

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**Abstract.** Rural areas throughout Europe experience continuous transformations in their natural and residential environments. Latvia, along with other East European countries, over the past two decades has witnessed the demographic and socioeconomic decline of many rural areas. Human mobility or relative immobility is inherently geographical in nature, not only in the sense of population movements across the space but also raises important questions about the socioeconomic development of particular place. Much of the recent geographical research on human mobilities has focused on urban areas. Less attention has been given to mobilities in the context of rural places. In this paper, we argue that mobility and immobility represents important component of rural lifestyles and places. The aim of the current study is to analyse mobility behaviour of rural residents with regard to population composition in the Latvian countryside. We draw on empirical materials from a survey of a survey of 802 rural households in Vidzeme and Latgale regions to reveal the nature of mobilities and related residential composition. Research results confirm the importance of human mobility as essential force contributing to rural decline. It was found that migration selectivity is stable but the composition and behaviour of migrants vary between highly mobile working age individuals mostly in Vidzeme and overrepresentation of elderly, economically non-active immobile population in Latgale.

**Key words:** human mobility, rural population, population composition, Vidzeme, Latgale.

**JEL code:** R110, J110

### Introduction

In recent years, rural depopulation, regional marginalisation and substantial abandonment of the agricultural land draws attention of many researchers in Europe (Terres et al., 2015). The collapse of state socialism caused massive institutional and socioeconomic changes (Hann et al., 2003; Pallot and Nefedova, 2007; Owczarzak, 2009). Contemporary patterns of rural migration show an increase in diversification of population characteristics involved in migration (Wiest, 2016, Leibert, 2016; Krisjane et al., 2016, Ruskule, 2013). On the other hand, it has also been emphasized that rural places are characterised by a stability, rootedness, attachment to place and low rates of mobility (Cloke and Thrift, 1990). Thus, relative immobility of rural population helps to explain the context (Fischer et al. 2000). Different regions within a country attract specific groups of in-migrants (Stockdale, 2014) and set characteristics for immobile part of population. Milbourne and Kitchen (2014) researching rural Wales urges geographers to concentrate on rural places as meeting point of complex migration

flows in various scales and temporalities. Recent studies show that central and Eastern Europe display higher risks of negative processes in rural parts of the countries compared to Western Europe (Terres et al., 2015; Moravec and Zemeckis, 2007).

Rural regions of Latvia deal with the depopulation problems over the past two decades, however, the problems apply to the general trends in the country, but more precisely can be observed in the rural context (Puzulis and Kule, 2016). Population distribution shows that 68 % live in urban areas whilst 32 % reside in rural parts of the country. There is a decrease of rural population since 1990 by 23.3 % and currently rural areas comprise 629.2 thousand inhabitants (CSB, 2016). The settlement pattern of remote countryside and peripheral areas corresponds to low population density and lack of economic activity. Current background of the rural development is set by the post-soviet heritage.

The collapse of the Soviet Union caused changes in spatial distribution of population that previously was affected by intense migration

processes. Characteristics of past decade include major flows of internal migration 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. 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 urban residents have 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. 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 moving away from the peripheral districts of the country (Krisjane et al, 2014).

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 (Berzins, 2011).

The aim of the current study is to analyse mobility behaviour of rural residents with regard to population composition in the Latvian countryside. Our research examines population changes, composition and migration behaviour of

residents in remote countryside of Latvia. We use data from 2013 and 2014 surveys among 802 randomly selected households in eight small rural municipalities of the Vidzeme and Latgale region (Table 1). Total number of 497 respondents in Drusti, Dzerbene, Taurene and Zoseni parishes and 305 respondents in Latgale parishes – Lauderu, Pasienes, Rundenu and Zalesje. In order to compare population structure differences and mobility features in research areas descriptive statistic methods and non- parametric tests for more detailed analysis were used.

### Characteristics of rural population and settlement

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. Both research territories suffer from population decrease and in period from 1989 to 2015 it has decreased for more than 30 per cent. This is especially evident in the case of Latgale (Table 1). According to official statistics, the population change was negative in all the selected municipalities.

Table 1

#### Population change in rural municipalities

Municipalities	1989	2000	2011	2015	changes % 1989-2015
Lauderu	664	540	401	348	-47.6
Pasienes	990	832	635	563	-43.1
Rundenu	971	800	504	466	-52.0
Zalesjes	1073	945	659	614	-42.8
Drusti	1247	1205	941	850	-31.8
Dzerbenes	1161	1100	868	801	-31.0
Taurenes	1102	1096	836	804	-27.0
Zosenu	658	597	433	384	-41.6

**Source: author's calculations based on the database of Central Statistical Bureau**

The researched rural parts and specific parishes in Latvia both village centres and farmsteads suffer greatly from population decrease forming territories with low density of ageing population. Amenities, availability of road infrastructure, location, accessibility along with family connections, employment possibilities, environmental quality, landscape attraction and

property location and status comprise the complexity of residential choice.

Personal characteristics (age, gender, employment status, education, and rootedness and migration behaviour) and contextual factors (unemployment level and settlement type) are both important in shaping the composition of rural population.

Comparison of the researched territories shows both similarities revealing general trends but at the same time location specific features are found. For example, as displayed in Table 2 gender distribution both in Vidzeme and Latgale show overrepresentation of female respondents. There are more female respondents in all cases, especially evident the difference is in the case of Zalesje and Taurene parishes. This imbalance is often caused by the household size and main characterizing features. In the case of Vidzeme, 20 % of respondents live alone from those 67 % female and 33 % male and 50 % of households have two persons permanently living there. In the case of Latgale, 1-person household is common in 34 % from those 66 % female and 34 % male of cases and two person households similar in 36 % of cases. In the sample, the dominant age group with 33 % are persons over 65 years of age and second with 29 % age group from 41 – 44. Only 4 % of respondents taking part in the research were under 24 years of age (Table 2).

In terms of education, respondents mirror general trends in the country where 34 % have vocational education, 27 % secondary, 22 % primary educations and around 17 % hold university level education. Regional distribution reveals similar trends for primary and secondary education (Vidzeme 53 % and 51 %, Latgale 47 % and 49 %); however, for vocational education in Vidzeme 76 % respondents hold this level of education, while in Latgale only 24 % and only 33 % of respondents in Latgale hold university level education, while 67 % in Vidzeme.

General occupational characteristics provide explanation to age distribution and low economic activity. From all respondents in both regions 38 % are employed, 36 % are not working retired seniors, unemployed persons and persons who receive social benefits comprise 19 %, retired persons who also are employed have 4 %, only 3 % study. More detailed description of occupational variables for two most common situations in Vidzeme and Latgale show that 78 % from respondents in Vidzeme are working age, whilst in Latgale region only 22 % of respondents are employed. For more elderly respondents distribution is more equal, respectively 53 % in Vidzeme and 47 % in Latgale are retired.

### **Location specific mobility and immobility in Vidzeme and Latgale**

Demographic characteristics and profile of population residing in rural parts of Latvia display varying migration behaviour looking both at level of migration activity and actual place of residency in the rural parts of the country. The results show that there are location specific differences among respondents living in farmsteads and village centres. Sparsely populated rural areas are less attractive than rural centres to those with higher incomes and high education.

Vidzeme is the central part of the country. The results show that around 30 % of respondents are aged over 65 years of age and reside in the current place over 20 years. Stability of the rural settlement is characterised by 40 % of respondents who have lived there since birth, the same amount lives there 20 years or longer and 20 % have moved to rural parishes before 20 years or less.

Region of Latgale is situated in the eastern part of the country and some of the research territories are at the border with Russia. Dramatically around 40 % of respondents in this territory were aged over 65 years of age, 31 % aged 41 – 55 years, 19 % 56 – 64 and only 10 % of respondents up to 40 years of age. 57 % of

respondents have lived in the regions since birth, 28 % over 20 years and the rest have moved to Latgale region in period between 10 – 20 years. In contrast to the Vidzeme case, around 90 %

reside in Latgale region permanently. Seasonal residence and second home ownership is very seldom.

Table 2

**Respondent characteristics (%)**

Region of Latvia	Research area (parish)	Gender, %		Age group, %				Economic activity, %			
		Male	Female	up to 24	25-40	41-55	56-64	over 65	Employed	Inactive	Retired
<b>Vidzeme</b> N=497	Drusti	39	61	2	33	28	10	26	68.4	15.4	16.2
	Dzerbenes	37	62	4	10	27	22	38	49.2	16.9	33.8
	Taurenas	24	76	6	14	36	17	27	55.6	17.0	27.5
	Zosenu	49	51	7	12	32	16	33	46.8	19.0	34.2
<b>Latgale</b> N=305	Lauderu	31	69	0	7	36	18	38	32.7	21.8	45.5
	Pasienes	33	67	3	8	37	18	33	18.1	37.5	44.4
	Rundenu	41	59	1	6	28	13	50	17.6	35.0	57.4
	Zalesje	28	72	4	11	25	23	37	20.7	31.9	48.8

Source: author's calculations based on survey results

Despite the fact that living in countryside becomes more popular and attracts seasonal residents and second home owners to the rural parts of Latvia, still peripheral and marginal rural territories are less attractive for in-migrants from peri-urban territories elsewhere in Latvia. If to analyse the main reasons for moves to the particular rural places in Vidzeme, mostly it has been family related and purchase of the property accompanied with pleasant landscape and living environment. Among respondents, 15 % have previous international migration experience and 1/3 has family members, friends and neighbours who live outside Latvia.

The main reasons for moving to Latgale are predominantly family based reasons, employment, property purchase and more affordable living environment. The main factors of attractiveness for residential choice are location, attractive landscape and rural tranquillity in Vidzeme.

**Characteristics of rural settlement**

Patterns of traditional rural settlements in Vidzeme are displayed dividing around 70 % of

respondents living in farmsteads and other residing in blockhouses or private housing in village centres. However, in Latgale almost around 56 % of respondents reside in farmsteads, but 44 % in housing based in village centres.

The method for detecting location specific settlement differences non parametric Kruskal-Wallis test was used. Statistical significance level below 0.05 indicates that the differences are statistically significant with 95 % probability (highlighted in bold in Table 3).

Further statistical analysis of the dataset allowed discovering more detailed rural population profile taking into account their place of living in the rural territories both in Vidzeme and Latgale region (Table 3). There are statistically significant gender differences between farmstead and village inhabitants. Since in the case of Latgale age group distribution was not so well represented only in the case of Vidzeme there are location specific significant differences. Following analysis of the employment status taking into account three groups –

employed, inactive and retired in all cases show significant differences between village centres and single farmsteads. On the same line

education differences are observed only in the case of Latgale as here representation of university level respondents was poor.

Table 3

**Profiles of location specific farmstead and rural villages' respondents, (%)**

		<b>VIDZEME farmsteads</b>	<b>VIDZEME villages</b>	<b>P value / Asymp. Sig. (two-tailed)</b>	<b>LATGALE farmsteads</b>	<b>LATGALE villages</b>	<b>P value / Asymp. Sig. (two-tailed)</b>
Gender	Males	39.7	25.0	<b>0.003</b>	41.4	21.4	<b>0.000</b>
	Females	60.3	75.0		58.6	78.6	
Age group	15-24	6.2	3.7	<b>0.000</b>	2.6	1.6	0.331
	25-40	13.3	24.8		9.2	8.0	
	41-55	29.0	33.3		27.0	36.0	
	55-64	17.2	13.3		22.4	14.4	
	65<	33.8	17.9		38.8	40.0	
Migration experience	In-migrants	16.9	20.7	0.509	19.1	10.7	<b>0.031</b>
	Long-term residents	83.1	79.3		80.9	89.3	
Economic activity	Employed	42.8	63.4	<b>0.000</b>	15.8	28.8	<b>0.004</b>
	Inactive	23.8	18.7		36.2	20.8	
	Retired	33.4	17.9		48.00	50.4	
Education	Primary	17.0	16.1	0.659	32.2	25.8	<b>0.000</b>
	Secondary	22.1	21.0		39.5	29.0	
	Vocational	43.3	42.0		22.4	20.2	
	Higher	17.6	21.0		5.9	25.0	
Land ownership	Yes	79.0	38.9	<b>0.000</b>	69.1	49.6	<b>0.001</b>
	No	21.0	61.1		30.9	50.4	
Intentions to change the place of residence	Yes	2.4	8.4	<b>0.016</b>	0.7	2.4	0.479
	No	91.0	83.9		96.7	95.2	
	Do not know	6.6	7.3		2.6	2.4	
		N=335	N=163		N=174	N=133	

There were significant differences found between farmstead and village population checking for land ownership. But intentions to change current place of living proved to be with the significant result in the case of Vidzeme parishes. In this case, rural population in Latgale region can be characterised as highly immobile with less location specific but more relates to population ageing issue.

The comparison of Vidzeme and Latgale regions show significant differences between farmstead and rural centres respondents in terms of gender, employment and land ownership in these types of habitation. By contrast, in Vidzeme there are significant differences between age groups, since in farmsteads greater proportion of

population aged over 65 years reside than in rural centres, while in Latgale both in rural centres and farmsteads are represented with large proportion of elderly people. Level of education is statistically significant in the case of Latgale rural centres where relatively more people with higher education than on farms are living. Vidzeme does not display significantly different migration experience between farmsteads and rural centres. By contrast, there are significant differences in Latgale, because those living on farms have indicated that they are more likely to go abroad, while the migration intentions in this region do not differ. Rural centres in Vidzeme differ significantly in terms of

migration intensions; they have almost three times higher intention to go abroad.

### Conclusions, proposals, recommendations

- 1) Personal characteristics (age, gender, employment status, education, and rootedness and migration behaviour) are important in shaping the composition of long-time residents and in-migrants.
- 2) Migration selectivity is relatively stable in comparing with other 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 are less attractive than rural centres to those with higher incomes and high education.
- 3) Household sizes decrease while older age cohorts increase their shares of the total population.
- 4) More remote rural areas compared to suburban territories are less attractive for migration processes. Rural areas are

continuously experiencing tendency of depopulation.

- 5) Ageing and changes in population dynamics reflects in population distribution, there is increase in households of one to two persons mostly retired or close to retirement age persons.
- 6) Farmsteads are becoming more attractive as second homes and in the case of Vidzeme second home owners represent the growing group of seasonal residents.
- 7) In general, results point to relatively low migration potential especially in Latgale region as aged population is low in its mobility actions.

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