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Small towns in peripheral regions of Germany

Abstract

The paper summarizes the main findings of a study on small towns in peripheral locations in Germany. In its first part, the results of the data analysis are presented and the spatial distribution of shrinking and growing small towns in Germany is described. The majority of them in peripheral areas are currently shrinking, which includes an assemblage of demographic, economic, infrastructural and fiscal problems, leading to a danger of a negative downward spiral. The second part deals with specific challenges and problems of the shrinking towns. In qualitative case studies, main disadvantages of peripheral location and peripheralisation processes of four selected towns are outlined, which narrow the scope of action for local politics. Part 3 provides a short analysis of the main strategies of those four towns coping with peripheralisation. In the last part, an outlook is given in a more general matter, which shows possibilities to turn the ascribed deficits of peripherality into strengths.

Key words: Germany; local politics; peripheral location; peripheralisation; small towns

Small towns in peripheral regions represent a specific type of cities in Germany, which face an assemblage of common problems. The peripheral location has a clear impact on these cities development dynamics: the more peripherally the town is located, the more its population shrinks. Even with regard to the employment development, the peripheral small towns are prevalently disadvantaged in comparison to those more centrally located (BBSR 2012: 65). Coming to terms with these complex problems and the consequences of shrinking is a huge challenge for urban policies in many peripheral small towns. The decrease of population and employment, structurally weak economies, social impoverishment and low tax revenues are the first aspects that constrain the scope of action in most such municipalities. Furthermore, functional loss of centres, teardown of social and technical infrastructures, and communal financial cutbacks reduce space for decision-making. The downward spirals can result from this development leading to a further peripheralisation of such small towns.

Research approach, methodology and questions

The paper is basing on a pre-study “Potentials of Rural Small Towns in Peripheral Areas”, which has been undertaken in 2014 for the Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development (BBSR), within the Experimental Housing and Urban Development Programme (ExWoSt). The Contractor of the pre-study was the IRS – Leibniz-Institute for Regional Development and Structural Planning e.V., Erkner, in association with B.B.S.M – Brandenburg Consulting Firm for Urban Regeneration and Modernisation mhH, Potsdam. This pre-study has served as a basis for the conception of a new ExWoSt-research field. Its main goals have been: 1. to give insights in main demographic, economic, social and infrastructural problems of small towns in peripheral areas in Germany, 2. to analyse local administrative and political challenges and responses in selected cases, 3. to analyse manifold potentials of small towns as well as the diverse capabilities for the perception of their stabilising function in rural regions. Last but not least, the study served to identify the requirements and recommendations for a new ExWoSt-research field, as well as the needs for action in the national subsidies policy.

On the basis of a classification of small cities in Germany by a quantitative data analysis, four small towns, which are particularly affected by demographic and economic structural changes, have been selected for qualitative case studies. On the basis of guided telephone interviews with significant local actors and document analysis, a differentiated qualitative overview could be obtained, which includes the evaluation of crucial challenges and problems for the cases and approaches to cope with it. The findings have been discussed within an expert workshop, which took place in the town of Havelberg in January 2014. This workshop included a discussion with 20 researchers, local mayors and heads of administration as well as representatives of federal states and national state ministries.

This paper summarises the main results of the pre-study. The guiding questions are:

- Which types of small towns in peripheral locations in Germany can be identified with consideration to their demographic and economic shrinkage or growth? (part 1)
- What are the specific challenges and problems that small towns in peripheral areas in Germany face? (part 2)
- Which approaches do local policies in selected small towns apply in dealing with peripheralisation? (part 3)

It is necessary to explain the difference between the terms “peripheral” and “peripheralisation”. According to a spatial planning perspective, a “peripheral” location is defined by its position in a sparsely populated area, remote from great cities and outside of metropolitan areas (BBSR, 2012). As a consequence, a peripheral location refers to far-off rural spaces. Such a definition of accessibility also implies that cities over a certain size cannot be regarded as peripheral. By contrast, “peripheralisation” is seen as a socio-spatial process and thus renders this term applicable to both urban and rural spaces. Accordingly, this term is used to describe relational processes of decline of spaces in comparison with other spaces (Kuehn, 2015). Such understanding of “peripheralisation” is very close to the geographical notion of “marginalization” (Jones et al., 2007). Peripheralisation therefore embraces processes like

an outflow of residents, an abandonment of infrastructures, the dependency on decision headquarters, and stigmatization in the media.

Shrinkage and growth of peripheral small towns in Germany

Out of an aggregate of quantitative indicators, a classification raster was created on the data basis of the BBSR-municipality classification. With the help of a classification, groups of small towns particularly affected by the demographic and economic change were identified. The main indicators are: population at the end of 2011 between 5,000 to 20,000 inhabitants, the BBSR-type 2010 "location" on the basis of the maximum daytime population on the level of municipalities defining peripheral and very peripheral location, the population development index and that of the employment development both for the 2006–2011 period.

According to this classification, there are 1,303 small towns in peripheral location. Of them, 62%, or 830, are "little small towns" with 5,000 and 10,000 inhabitants, 38% (473) are "big small towns" between 10,000 and 20,000 inhabitants. Approximately 81% (1,050 small towns) are characterised as "peripheral", 19% (253) are seen as "very peripheral". But there are also explicit differences between peripheral and very peripheral small towns in rural regions with regard to their development dynamics. The majority of the peripheral and in particular the very peripheral small towns are coined by shrinking of the population.

Tab. 1. Population and employment development in peripheral towns

Employment development in 2006–2011, in %	Population development in 2006–2011, in %				
	under – 5%	– 5% to under – 1.5%	– 1.5% to 1.5%	over 1.5%	Total
under – 10%	2.4	0.8	0.5	0.0	3.7
- 10% to under – 1.5%	5.7	4.8	1.2	0.1	11.7
- 1.5% to under 1.5%	3.9	4.6	1.3	0.2	10.1
over 1.5%	18.2	32.9	19.5	3.9	74.5
Total	30.2%	43.1%	22.5%	4.2%	100.0%

Source: own calculation on BBSR data 2014

The major part of the discussed towns combines moderate population shrinkage with a positive employment development (according to a general trend in Germany since 2005). It becomes obvious that with approximately 14% (or 178 towns), only a minor part of them included in the whole sample shows both a negative population and a negative employment development.

The distribution of peripheral small towns varies greatly between the federal states – Fig. 1. Bavaria is characterised by the highest share, with 27% of all peripheral small towns in Germany (353). Lower Saxony follows, with about 13% (173) next to Thuringia (8.6% and 112). Saarland and North Rhine-Westphalia are underrepresented. This distribution shows that the towns showing an extreme shrinkage of the population and a negative employment development are mostly located within

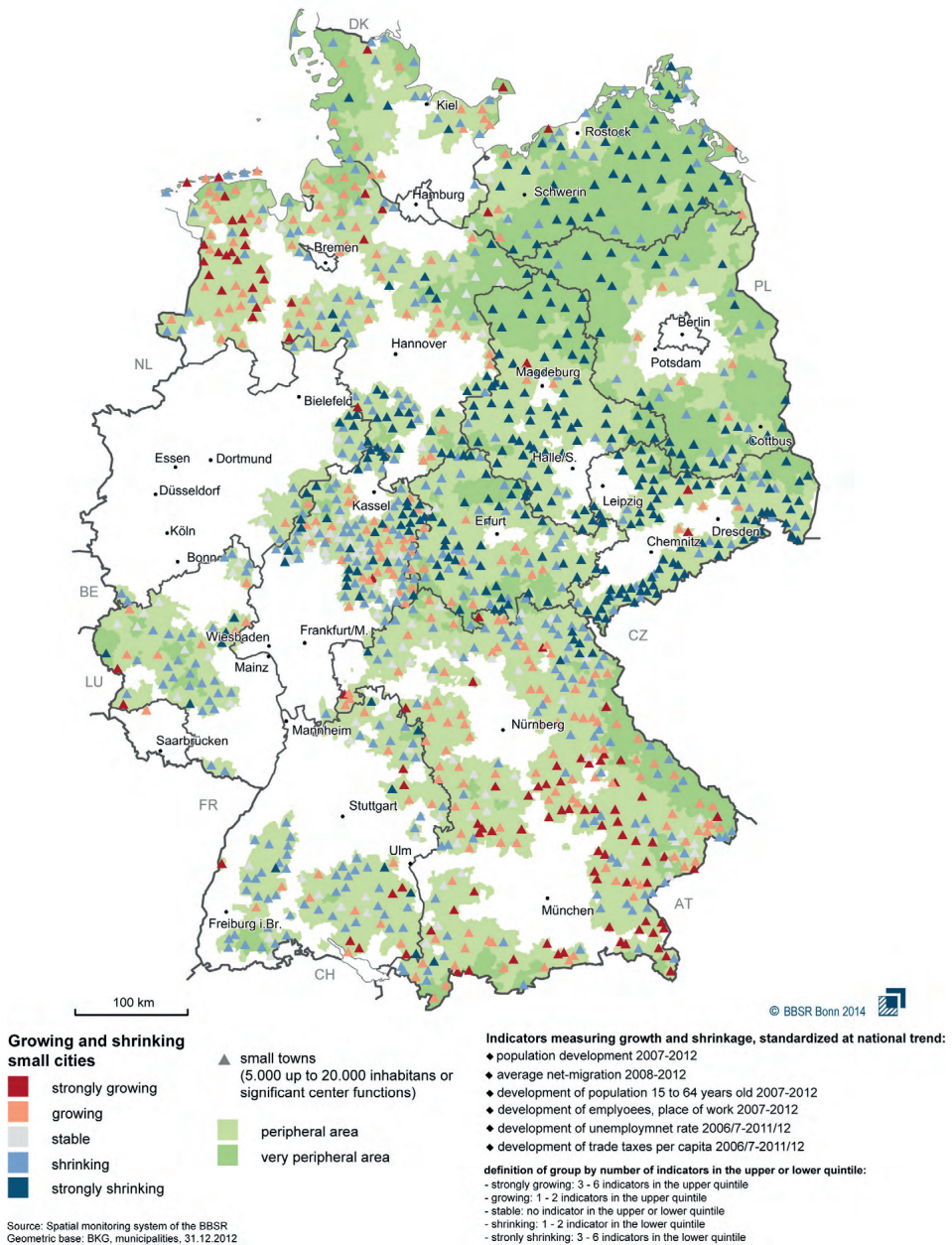


Fig. 1. Growing and shrinking small towns in peripheral areas of Germany

Source: spatial monitoring system of the BBSR Geometric base: BKG, municipalities, 31.12.2012

the states of Thuringia, Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt, Mecklenburg Western-Pomerania, Brandenburg, and Bavaria. The highest share of growing cities can be found in Bavaria and Lower Saxony. Nevertheless, of the peripheral and very peripheral small towns only 4% (51) grow.

The geographical distribution of growth and shrinkage of small towns in peripheral areas of Germany is shown in Fig. 1. Divergent to the classification above, in this map demographic and economic indicators are combined. The classes of growth and shrinkage show development patterns in relation to the national trends. Most strongly shrinking towns are located in the federal states of Eastern Germany and also in Northern Hesse. a number of strongly growing small towns are located in a few regions of Western Germany. In peripheral areas, a number of growing small towns are visible, i.e. in the rural areas of Bavaria, in the Lake Constance/Upper Swabia region, in the Black Forest, the Emsland and in Northern Frisia, too.

Both classifications show that the majority of small towns is affected by negative trends of demographic shrinkage, but a small number is able to grow – in spite of its peripheral location. Small towns in peripheral areas do not form a homogeneous group of cities with generally negative developments and perspectives. Alongside structural factors of peripherality – as distances to urban centres and population densities – which are difficult to influence by local actors, urban policy may have an impact on these different urban trajectories.

Challenges and problems of shrinking small towns in peripheral areas

Out of a pre-selection, four peripheral small towns have been chosen for additional qualitative analysis in case studies. The criteria for selection have been:

- negative development of population (shrinking towns)
- negative development of employment (economic weak towns)
- low level of local tax income (poor towns)
- distribution over different federal states in Western and Eastern Germany.

Main demographic and socio-economic indicators of these cases are shown in Tab. 2.

Tab. 2. Demographic and socio-economic indicators of the case studies

Small towns	Braunlage	Havelberg	Ueckermünde	Waldmünchen
Federal states	Lower Saxony	Saxony-Anhalt	Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania	Bavaria
Inhabitants 2011	6,280	6,793	9,872	6,958
Population development in %	-11.3	-9.2	-5.1	-2.8
Employment development 2006–2011 in %	-12.8	-9.5	-3.7	-2.9
Unemployment rate 2011	12.4	14.6	22.5	5.0
Local tax income 2011 (€ per inhab.)	639	357	349	602
Local business tax (€ per inhab.)	115	100	116	181

Source: BBSR 2014

Disadvantages due to the peripheral location as well as to peripheralisation processes of the four selected towns are as follows:

- Braunlage (Lower Saxony, West Germany) is characterized by its peripheral location at the former German-German-Border in the Harz Mts. The loss of state support for the former border area has led to economic disadvantages after German reunification. Tourism as a main income source of the town is also decreasing.
- The Hanseatic town of Havelberg (Saxony-Anhalt, East Germany) is characterized by its peripheral location in a thinly populated rural region and with large distances to the German motorway net. This town is weakened by the lowest level of local businesses taxes. One of the greatest employers is military.
- Ueckermünde (Mecklenburg Western-Pomerania, East Germany) is characterized by its peripheral location in the Northeast of Germany near the Polish border at the Szczecin lagoon. The town is a centre of an economically weak region with one of the highest unemployment rates in Germany. In 1994, the town has lost its former function as a seat of the county.
- Waldmünchen (Bavaria, West Germany) is characterized by its peripheral location at the German-Czech-border within the Bavarian Forest. a bad accessibility to the next motorway and railway station weakens the attractiveness of the town for the settling of firms and investors.

The following qualitative results of the case studies and the expert workshop can be summarized (without being able to generalize):

- 1) Small towns in peripheral locations are marginalized in scientific research and federal policies, because they are situated in between the classic fields of “urban” and “rural” and therefore are missing a political lobby.
- 2) In many peripheral small towns, a double disadvantage is visible: first, the small size exacerbates the supra-regional visibility; second, the peripheral location outside of respectively metropolitan city regions restricts the economic development chances in the knowledge society. The insufficient visibility as well as the peripheral location of such small towns can lead to a negative downward spiral.
- 3) In many small towns in peripheral areas, shrinkage and ageing are shaping the reality and will continue in the future in a greater extent than in urban agglomerations.
- 4) In many small towns the weak economy leads to an outflow of higher educated and skilled groups, resulting in a dequalification of human labour.
- 5) The demographic shrinkage and economic weakness leads to a closure of public infrastructures, e.g. schools, railway stations and private shops.
- 6) Many small towns in peripheral regions are faced with physical vacancies of houses, flats, shops and former industrial estates.
- 7) Some small towns are suffering under a stigmatisation in media, which create negative images (e.g. as a “dying”, “provincial” or “backward” town).
- 8) As a consequence, small towns in peripheral areas only have limited financial resources at their disposal. Restricted scopes leads to a less frequently or render voluntary services and to a restrain to the fulfilment of communal obligations.

9) In peripheral rural regions many small towns take in the function of a central place, even though they do not necessarily have this status in state and regional planning.

To summarize: small towns in peripheral regions are faced with many problems and the danger of a downward spiral due to a trend towards public and private dis-investments. At the same time, the local policy and administration have not enough resources to cope with these problems. Constraints, which limit the scope for local actors are: a) declining municipal finances (due to the decreasing number of inhabitants), b) a shortage of qualified staff in administration, and c) a shortage of private firms and entrepreneurs, which engage themselves in local development.

Local politics dealing with peripheralisation

Local studies in Central-Eastern Europe show that small towns are steered in a strong degree by public governmental actors. Therefore it is concluded, that „leadership“ plays a more important role than governance-coalitions between public and private actors in local policies (Kriszan, 2013: 101). Our preliminary study confirms the importance of the factor „leadership“ in local politics. In many cases, the mayors, in their dual role as political and administrative heads, are key actors, who have a strong influence on the activities of small towns in dealing with problems of peripheralisation. Differences between more active and more passive towns can be observed in particular in the acquisition of state funding for urban development, the involvement of private actors into local strategies, or inter-municipal co-operations at the regional scale. In addition to the high relevance of „leadership“ in local politics, small towns in peripheral regions are marked also by a high level of civic engagement of citizens in social associations. These associations secure the cultural and social life in small towns. But because most peripheral regions are poor, private actors do not have many resources to build powerful governance-coalitions for the development of small towns.

What are main local approaches to cope with peripheralisation in the four towns?

A local approach in Braunlage is to strengthen the main economic base of the town: tourism, especially the winter one. Therefore the town is engaged in a public-private tourism company, which has invested in the infrastructure of a ski resort. This approach implies high financial risks and a climatic dependency on snowfall.

A main local approach of Havelberg is to realize the Federal Garden Exhibition of Germany in 2015. Based on an inter-communal cooperation with the three cities Brandenburg/Havel, Premnitz and Rathenow, parks and cycle paths along the Havel river will be improved to develop the Havel region. Local actors in Havelberg expect to strengthen the image of the town and its importance for tourism and recreation.

A main local approach of Ueckermünde is also to develop tourism. Main attractions of the town are a zoo and a seaside resort. The local politics plan to found a municipal tourism company and to enhance the marketing of the town. Former local

plans to build thermal baths failed, because of a lack of investors. Ueckermünde also tries to intensify the relationships with the Polish city of Szczecin.

A main approach to cope with peripheralisation in Waldmünchen is the cross-border action alliance Cerchov. This alliance of Bavarian and Bohemian communities was founded within an InterREG-Project and tries to develop a cross-border region of renewable energy. a main focus of the alliance is to develop the rural branches of agriculture and forestry as producers of bio-energies. Some villages also have developed to self-sufficient bio-energy villages.

This little study on local politics is far from being representative for small towns in Germany and going in-depth. Nevertheless, it indicates that all four towns try to use the surrounding rural landscapes as a potential for future development. Tourism is seen in most cases as a chance for the regrowth of local economy. By that, local politics orientate on a highly competitive branch. a second insight is that because of a lack of private investors in peripheral regions, some of the towns are forced to engage themselves as public entrepreneurs.

Outlook: turning peripherality from disadvantages to advantages

To overcome the disadvantages of a peripheral location and peripheralisation processes of small towns, it is a particular challenge to turn ascribed deficits of peripherality into strengths. This means to change the role of a periphery within the socio-spatial system. For example: the disadvantage of long distances to the motorway net is at the same time an advantage for calm and unfragmented landscapes; the disadvantage of a weak economy is at the same time an advantage for lower costs of living, better possibilities for housing and house ownership; the disadvantage of a small size is at the same time an advantage for close social contacts, spatial proximity, a high quality of living and for slower lifestyles. Indeed, for turning the ascribed deficits into strengths it seems necessary to emphasize the specific qualities of peripherality as a contrast to urbanity. This requires the intensification of urban-rural-relationships. For such a re-interpretation of peripherality the following ideas may provide as a first guide for further research:

- Connecting towns and rural landscapes

Small towns and their surrounding landscapes are often perceived as a spatial entity. The case studies have shown that the natural environment and landscape qualities of the hinterland present an important development potential for small towns. Development potentials of landscapes for small towns in peripheral regions thus lie in the fields of tourism, recreation, leisure and sports, agriculture and forestry. This requires the attraction of urban tourists, recreation seekers, bike riders, skiers, horsemen, sportsmen, climbers, dragon risers and mushroom searchers into rural regions.

- Bypassing the region through connections to higher centres

The peripheral location of small towns is defined within a socio-spatial system in relation to a regional centre. To leave the role of a periphery, small towns may “bypass” the next regional centre in connecting with those on a higher hierarchical level. Such a “scale jumping” of connections may be possible to a national

scale (e.g. through national-wide events) or the international one (e.g. through European-wide events).

– Cross-border regions

A peripheral location is in many cases defined as a border of a political territory, that of the federal state, the State or a supra-national association as the EU. To overcome the peripherality within a territorial context, it is possible to build cross-border regions between two or more peripheries. An example for this is the Cerchov action alliance at the German-Czech-border.

– International networks of small towns

Another opportunity to enhance the political voice and weight of small towns is to create international networks between them. The Cittaslow-movement is a prominent example for this. 170 small towns across the world have joined this movement and are now organised within one international network. Unused potentials of personnel qualification in small towns lie particularly in the exchange of experience with small towns within international networks.

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