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## MANAGING RURAL DECAY. STRATEGIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES FOR DECLINING REGIONS IN AUSTRIA.

Paper presented at the AESOP Annual Conference 2015 “Definite space – fuzzy responsibility” in Prague.

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*The Austrian population is growing, but not every region is profiting from a positive migration balance, which is the main driver for population change. Especially peripheries are suffering from constant population loss followed by cuts in infrastructure and service provision when the critical mass is not reached anymore. A decline of investments is already taking place according services and infrastructures – from the private side, as well as from the public side: schools, post offices, police stations, public transport lines, retail stores and other services of general interest have been stepwise reduced in many peripheral areas. In a response to the ongoing depletion of mainly rural or formerly industrial areas the - foremost local - political side keeps on introducing growth strategies in order to force a turnaround. Given the bunch of available instruments, program logics and chains of habit it is understandably but for some regions a catching up process will most likely not be successful unless the budgets will be constantly overspent. In the following paper we would therefore like to discuss how strategies on 'advancing backwards' could possibly work out in Austria and who would be public and private stakeholders of which level to get motivated for such ideas? Which planning and development instruments are suitable to accompany 'sustainable decline processes'? The paper will take empirical findings of Gruber et al. (2015) as a starting point. New planning document analyses and stakeholder interviews will further back this paper.*

### 1. Introduction

In total the population of Austria is growing due to a positive migration balance. Still there are areas across the country losing population. Peripheral mountainous regions, border areas or former industrial centres have been experiencing a shrinking population followed by a decline of services and infrastructures, which leads to perpetual loss of attractiveness for new inhabitants and economic stakeholders. A lot of topographically unfavoured regions have been attractive for setting up an intense tourism industry for winter sports having the effect that a lot of former agricultural regions found a different economic path. Nevertheless, there are also areas in Austria characterized by outmigration, population loss and economic `downturn.

The ongoing urbanization process and simultaneous decay of rural areas has led to the idea that withdrawal from certain areas might have to be conceived, but even though this was politically wanted – which it is not at the very moment – which strategies would actually be able to manage a sustainable decline? On the example of Austria this paper tries to bring up some ideas, as well as the perception of politics and planners, on how strategies on advancing backwards could possibly look like and work out.

## 2. Theoretical Background

Before we start to discuss on how to manage decline, we will first approach the question of what actually shrinking means in urban and regional literature. We will further discuss on a theoretical basis what planning theory may offer to address spatial shrinking by means of spatial planning. Strategic spatial planning and soft planning are offered as more appropriate means to tackle a complex socio-spatial phenomenon like regional decline; compared to the means of traditional statutory spatial planning instruments.

The discussion on urban and regional shrinkage is a comparably young problematic in planning literature. Sousa and Pinho (2015) have made an important contribution by reviewing directly and indirectly relevant literature on this special phenomenon of spatial development. They locate the most relevant discourses since the mid 1990ies within North American urban development. In European context, the problematic is best reflected in the UK and Germany. “In a broad and common sense, a shrinking city is a city that is losing population (Sousa and Pinho, 2015, 14). While Wiechmann and Bontje (2015) confirm demographic development as the key or initial driver for spatial shrinkage, they see urban and regional economic development as a complementary prime driver for potential shrinking tendencies, in case regional economics face financial shortcuts or structural changes. Demography and economy in combination are potential drivers of shrinking. Spatial consequences of shrinkage then are expressed not necessarily proportionally to demographic and economic shrinkage. It is rather a separated, or further, step if or how settlement structures, housing stocks, social and technical infrastructures shrink as well (see Ahrens, 2005). Demographic and economic decline might as well first result in lower densities, lower frequencies or fragmentation of spatial functions. A first concern is therefore, what is actually shrinking in spatial terms and how does it change spatial structures? Wiechmann (2003) identifies four types of regions within Europe that face shrinking tendencies. These are: industrial areas in economic decline (foremost in Western Europe), peripheral, depopulating areas (foremost in Northern Europe), regions in or after political transformation (foremost in Eastern Europe), and structurally weak rural regions with falling fertility rates (foremost in Southern Europe). Common consequences are overcapacities in housing and infrastructure, leading to higher costs per capita and inefficient structures. Especially heavy technical network infrastructures do have a certain spatial time lag within. Once established networks of e.g. railways, roads or canalisation cannot flexibly be adjusted to new realities. Social services of education and health care are comparably more volatile (Gruber et al., 2015). Nevertheless, individual standards of accessibility to social services may decrease due to fewer or less frequented locations.

Wiechmann and Bontje (2015, 2) argue very critically how spatial planning systems deal with shrinkage. They identify two major concerns. First, common statutory planning administrative systems and instruments are designated to the principle of spatial development as spatial growth. The supreme aim of growth in spatial development is close to a doctrine in spatial planning systems. And secondly, planning practise has so far not managed to proactively handle shrinking tendencies but the prime goal of intervention is always to counteract shrinkage and return to a growth path. So both, the statutory planning system as well as its practical interpretation follow blind a solely growth oriented path. Much of this derives from the roll out of modern planning principles that happened simultaneously with demographic and economic growth in Western Europe. These diagnosis can be seen in a wider view of unsatisfactory structures and means of recent planning systems and practices across Europe. Albrechts and Balducci (2013) are among the scholars who promote a stronger revisiting of the potentials of strategic spatial planning that is observable in many European countries since the last ca. 20 years. For them, statutory spatial planning as administrative-legal practice is no longer – or never fully has been – able to tackle

complex socio-spatial phenomena and processes. Urban and regional shrinkage can be well counted as one of these complex processes.

Statutory spatial planning in terms of local zoning and building plans however remains a decisive part of spatial planning. It secures legitimacy over land and property rights and delivers certainty. Therefore in planning practice, informal strategic planning can only be a complementary set of instruments (Mäntysalo, 2013; Mäntysalo et al., 2014). The strengths of strategic spatial planning approaches lie, according to Albrechts and Balducci (2013), in the ability of addressing spatial phenomena in a more future oriented, pro-active way that allows for integrating a wider actors sphere besides the formal authorities and for the opening up of new directions or deeper changes in spatial development. Collaborative and communicative planning practices (Healey, 2013) are in this context more appropriate than a rather rigid procedure of statutory planning. What comes together with planning complex socio-spatial phenomena, such as regional shrinking, is the fuzzy situation of their scalar manifestation. Mostly, explicit territories of local or regional administrative units do not represent the spatial expansion correctly. This is true for expanding city regions as well as for shrinking regions. Functional and fuzzy spaces are closer to the problematic of complex socio-spatial phenomena and therefore, planning practice needs to deal with, as Allmendinger and Haughton (2009) call it ‘soft spaces’ (see also Olesen, 2012). Soft spaces represent a flexible, also temporary spatial expansion in which a multitude of actors, interests and concrete problems are addressed in a comparably pragmatic way of planning. It is not the prime target to follow the statutory rules on different scalar levels but what counts more is that issues get solved. For this sake, soft spaces emerge as arena in between public authority competences, different stakeholders’ interests and statutory levels of government as a new planning level.

While soft spaces and soft planning have been mostly analysed in growth contexts, we find it worth analysing in more detail in how far strategic spatial planning in soft spaces opens up an arena for spatial planning that is also able to break with the pure quantitative growth oriented spatial development as well as to break with the refusal of traditional planning approaches in managing shrinkage. We will do so on the example of Austria, explaining the contextual background for regional shrinking, the general attitude of the Austrian spatial planning culture regarding shrinking and new approaches in soft spatial planning, exemplified at the instrument of ‘Regionale Leitplanung’ in the State of Lower Austria. The guiding research questions are: How strategies on ‘advancing backwards’ could possibly work out in Austria and who would be public and private stakeholders of which level to get motivated for such ideas? Which planning and development instruments are suitable to accompany ‘sustainable decline processes’?

### **3. Shrinking regions in Austria**

#### *3.1. The context of politics and planning*

The Austrian political system is based on a highly federal structure. The state is divided in nine ‘Bundesländer’ (Federal States), which are responsible for certain political fields, as for example the organization of spatial planning. Initially installed as a democracy securing system, the decentralized, counter-checking structure of the federal system today means a tremendous apparatus of administration and concurrence between the federal states. Especially for the spatial organization there are difficulties occurring concerning cooperation across internal borders or introducing national-wide goals or policies.

Besides the ‘Bundesländer’, where the general framework of spatial planning is set in the form of the federal spatial planning laws, the municipalities enjoy a lot of power concerning spatial planning in

Austria. The municipalities are responsible to decide on zoning plans and thus new settlements and growth. This might not be unique in the European context, since also other countries give a strong power to the municipalities in planning agendas (which is also reasonable, since plans can be developed close to the population), but Austria shows a very small-patterned structure of municipalities (Fassmann and Humer, 2013). In total Austria counts 2,102 municipality (2015) on a total area of around 83,879 square kilometres. On average this makes around 4000 inhabitants per municipality (and around 3,200 when the city of Vienna is excluded of the calculation). The smallest municipalities show population sizes lower than 100 inhabitants. Until 2014 Austria counted even 2,354 municipalities. The Federal State of Styria decided in a long lasting process to merge the municipal structure, triggering resistance of local politicians and inhabitants. Although further consolidations seem to be inevitable in the long run, the protest of local population and stakeholders makes further steps of territorial reforms very unlikely to happen in the rest of Austria in the near future.

The municipalities are competing with each other, since for the redistribution of public budgets the size of population is decisive. A growth in population is thus rewarded with a higher allocation of tax money. Additionally the municipalities are competitors concerning the location of industry and businesses, since the according tax in Austria has to be paid at the municipal location of the headquarters.

The highly federal organized structure, the small-patterned municipal landscape and the missing national level of spatial planning make regionally shrinking population a particular challenge. So far regional development policies have received high attention on policy agendas across Austria; not only since the European structural funds have been introduced in Austria, with the accession to the European Union in 1995. Since the 1970s regional development has been performed in the Austrian regions on different levels, with different instruments and paradigms; from heavy infrastructure investments via alpine farming funding to endogenous regional development settings. From a political point of view it seems unlikely that regional development can once be replaced by a withdrawal of the public hand from certain regions, but the constant overspending of budgets makes it extremely difficult to further invest in regions that show a continuous economic downturn and outmigration. Although not strategically coordinated there has been cuts in investments for example in traffic infrastructure, police stations, schools and child care and so on. The decisions for these changes was under responsibility of different actors like the ministry of education, the national railway and so forth. To a serious extent, these measures were rolled-out during a conservative-right government and in a phase of (EU-driven) liberalisation efforts in several public sector domains around the year 2000. In order to have a more integrative and general policy on where investments should go to and where to make cuts, it seems that there has to be a more cooperative structure to be able to take these decisions.

Cooperation in planning has gained more attention in the last years. Especially for regions with declining population, solutions with municipalities working together in order to save costs, have been introduced in rural areas in the last years. Also initiatives to organize planning on a comprehensive level are of course existing in Austria. On a national level the Austrian Conference on Spatial Planning ('ÖROK') is responsible for coordination and developing strategies for spatial development. On a regional basis different initiatives try to collaborate on common topics of spatial planning, which is very important for a thematic basis, not only concerning shrinking, but also other topics in fields of society, economy and ecology.

### *3.2. The spatial dimension*

As already stated in the introduction the population of Austria shows a population growth in total. Between 2004 and 2014 the Austrian population grew by 365,213 people – 92% of the growth can be explained by in-migration (Statistik Austria 2015, 18). Especially urban areas, primarily the capital city region, Vienna, shows a fast population expansion due to international migration, but also a positive internal migration balance. Between 2002 and 2013 the population in Vienna has been growing on average by around 16,300 people each year – 14,700 of it by in-migration (see Statistik Austria). The attractive urban and suburban areas are having consequences for rural and peripheral regions. Not only the missing opportunities for labour and education are leading to an ongoing outmigration mainly of young inhabitants, also lifestyle decisions and educational and labour market preferences are leading to the disregard of some regions. Although shrinking regions in Austria are showing a rather moderate decline compared to peripheries in Eastern European countries, it is still a challenge for example when it comes to the provision with services and infrastructures (Gruber et al., 2015; Machold, 2010). Regional development have not been showing a sustainable effect everywhere and with a continuous low fertility and selective migration patterns population decline to some areas is becoming a permanent status.

In line with the four types of shrinking regions in Europe shown by Wiechmann and Bontje (2003) for the Austrian case there are several types applicable. Comparable to the typology, the following types of shrinking regions can be identified in Austria:

- rural emigration areas with (rapid) decrease of births;
- industrial agglomerations in economic decline.

The most common type in Austria can be described as rural emigration area with decrease of births. Still, in the case of Austria two sub-types can be described, which can be characterised as causes for the population loss. On the one hand inner peripheries and mountainous areas with difficult accessibility and without major tourism industry are suffering most from population decline. On the other hand border areas along the former Iron Curtain still show a declining population, as for example the South of the Burgenland or the North and East of Lower Austria. Although Austria doesn't have a big industrial history (within the today's territory) there is still a small agglomeration of heavy industry found in the Federal State of Styria. The area has lost a major part of its population – in case of the municipality of Eisenerz more than half of the population since the 1950s (from 12,948 inhabitants in 1951 to 4,520 in 2014, a loss of 65% (Statistik Austria) and the decline still continues.

## **4. Managing urban and rural decline in Austria**

After having described the dimension of shrinking regions in Austria, as well as the political context of spatial planning we will finally discuss how to manage urban and rural decline in Austria. The content of this chapter is mainly based on interviews conducted during April and May 2015 with stakeholders from politics and planning from different administrative levels on which spatial planning is performed. Additionally a review of planning documents and instruments was conducted in order to reflect on ways to possibly manage population decline. In the second sub-chapter we will bring forward a new planning instrument that has been introduced in one of the Austrian federal states in the last year of which we believe it holds potential for managing rural and urban decay.



#### *4.1. Research questions and methods*

As already presented in the introduction we had three guiding research questions for our empirical observations:

- How strategies on 'advancing backwards' could possibly work out in Austria?
- Who would be public and private stakeholders of which level to get motivated for such ideas?
- Which planning and development instruments are suitable to accompany 'sustainable decline processes'?

Four qualitative interviews have been realized with stakeholders of the three statutory levels, where spatial planning is carried out in Austria. In awareness of the differing planning laws and practices within the nine federal states, the interviews have been focused on one case study: the Federal State of Lower Austria. To get a comparable view there has been one additional interview realized with a representative from another federal state: Burgenland. So far the results can only be presented as results of a pilot study; further research and a bigger sample size are intended. While conducting the interviews additional themes around the research topic raised our interest: the priority of the topic as well as the acceptance and awareness. In the following chapters the results will be presented.

#### *4.2. Case study: shrinking regions in Lower Austria*

For the case study analysis the Federal State of Lower Austria was chosen to approach how the phenomena of shrinking is dealt with in Austria. Since spatial planning in Austria is a federal concern and there is no national authority with a legal appointment it is necessary to have a look on policies on the federal level. On the national level the Austrian Conference on Spatial Planning (ÖROK) plays nevertheless an important role especially for strategic development and represents in a way a consented opinion at national level. Table 1 gives an overview of the results that will be now described further.

##### *4.2.1. Perception of shrinking*

As already stated in the beginning, Austria's population size is growing and population decline can be observed only regionally. Lower Austria is a good example on how differently population develops within Austria. Certain regions of Lower Austria have experienced a shrinking population since the 1950s and have experienced decline of more than 50% since then. Regions with good accessibility and especially the suburban areas in the vicinity to Vienna have experienced a major growth of inhabitants – for some municipalities this meant more than a doubling of their population. Regions losing population are generally those in peripheral areas, for example in mountainous regions or border regions of the former Iron Curtain. Until the year 2000 one focused on regional development strategies that in some ways had effect on population decline to some regions. Also the opening of the borders had effected the federal state in a positive way.

Still, in the early 2000s for the first time shrinking as a long-standing scenario came onto the agenda of spatial planning. Back then for the first time there it was recognized that at some point (with an ongoing fertility decline) there will be regions of permanent decline in population. This cognition has been perceived by the operating administrative department for spatial planning. From the political side until today dealing with the topic 'shrinking' is challenging, since it is spotted as a possible abandonment by the population. While strategies for shrinking and growing are developed equally from the operating department, the political implementation is more difficult when it comes to the implementation of strategies and instruments to manage shrinking since they are generally connected

to unpopular decisions. But the missing political will is not solely connected to policies of population decline. In general the long-term decisions of spatial planning conflict with the short periods of political activity of certain actors.

The multitude of spatial challenges across Austria give some restriction to the importance of shrinking. From a national perspective, there are many urgent issues to deal with. Among topics of regional competitiveness, social progress and ecological concerns, the phenomenon of shrinking settlements or regions is not of prime interest in Austria but it is more of a regional problem in some parts of the country. However, there have been efforts within the Austrian Conference on Spatial Planning ÖROK to address the issue of shrinking regions, foremost in rural context and in context of demographic change, in the past years; documented in e.g. ÖROK Series No. 171 on the functioning of public services in rural areas (2006), No. 176 on spatial scenarios (2008), or No. 181 on opportunities for peripheral areas (2009) (see ÖROK).

Not only strategies and instruments are important but also sensitization for the topic, common understanding, the collection of apparent fears as well as knowledge of the different interests on the different levels. The interviews showed that although there is a lot of skepticism between the different levels, there are common objectives. Also the local level is interested to have efficient structures but has of course more understanding of the necessity of a local context. While the national level sees the number of small municipalities as inefficient there are other ways in the eyes of the municipalities to save money and to keep alive the close interaction with the local population. Still the topic is given different priority to, as it can be seen in table 1. During the interviews it also became clear that not every region within the federal state that is experiencing population decline is dealing equally with the topic of shrinking. First of all this can be explained by the fact that not every region is equally effected by it and thus not have equal priorities, but to a certain extent this can be also explained by different mentalities in regions and of regional stakeholders. The interaction between the different levels and moderation in order to develop common ideas have been already advanced in the last decades but it seems further steps must be taken.

#### *4.2.2. Strategies and responsibilities*

In order to have more precise ideas on how shrinking and population decline can be managed the following section will present strategies and instruments that are currently implemented or conducted by the different levels. Additionally, potential instruments have been compiled, that are not yet implemented but might be thought of in the future or just are imagined by the different stakeholders. The interview partners of the different levels have furthermore been asked about potential stakeholders that – in their opinion – are able to implement strategies and instruments in the first place.

On a local level strategies for decline are clearly seen to come from the side of regional development policy. Our interview partners have told us that there is a further need to bring in certain innovations to peripheries in order to make the regions attractive again, as for example new job opportunities or educational innovations. Other instruments to tackle population change in peripheries in Lower Austria are those to increase the (physical) accessibility: There are ideas to re-install train tracks to give alternatives to the individual transport. The local level furthermore also sees its own population as an important factor for managing population decline. The inhabitants do have a certain responsibility themselves and need to be involved in managing the withdrawal of public and private services and infrastructures. Being integrated in the process of shaping one's own living environment is not to be seen negative though but more as a chance. Additionally the municipalities are trying to focus activities in order to become a more livable places, e.g. for families, but also for older inhabitants. In both interviews with mayors was a clear message that population decline has to be



handled also on the local level. Although the interplay of higher levels has been described as equally important and the communication between the different stakeholders was said to be essential. There was a strong statement that only the local level is able to deal with sensitive topics and to create acceptance since it is closest to the citizens.

On the federal level regional depopulation certainly was a concern by the planning department of Lower Austria already since years. The federal state has developed strategies in the last years that should help dealing with population decline and its effects in certain areas. Mainly the strategies are trying to implement the ideas of ‘decentralized concentration’ and ‘inner-development’ in order to bundle strengths and potentials (see table 1). Despite the planning department's effort in developing strategies the political will is not always strong enough to implement them consequently. Therefore we were told that the implementation might be easier if it was of national concern. The responsibility on a higher level than the federal one was imagined to be more efficient than it is now. So far several pilot studies were performed with quite successful results but not consequently followed up later on. One of the pilot study projects was the regional strategic planning (‘Regionale Leitplanung’) of the northern suburban area of the capital city of Vienna. This initiative will be presented in the next section since it appears to be a possible strategic planning instrument to deal also with decline. So far it has been only conducted in regions with population growth but it might be a fruitful approach for integrated regional strategic planning also in declining regions.

The national level is missing a formal competence for spatial planning. Accordingly, strategies and instruments express in rather informal, co-operative studies in which best practices are exchanged and communicated; e.g. strengthening small and medium-sized towns and fostering urban-rural partnerships as outlined in the Austrian Spatial Development Concept ÖREK 2011(see ÖROK Series No. 185). An important support for the operative regional and local levels is the provision of background data and research. Small-scaled population prognosis and thematic scenarios belong to the pool of instruments that should help the regional and local levels identifying development paths and setting appropriate policy measures. For the upcoming agenda 2015-2018, the ÖROK will install a respective so-called ‘partnership’; a temporary discussion platform that brings together a wide range of actors who have a potential stake in managing shrinkage and secure service provision in foremost rural areas. From a broad perspective, also EU driven instruments may tackle the issue of urban and regional shrinking. ERDF-funded projects under Objective 2 or EAFRD-funded LEADER initiatives are close to the citizens (referring to CLLD-approach) and allow for innovative pilot studies.

The strategies and instruments for managing rural and urban decay, as well as the priority of the topic and possible responsibilities have been summarized in table 1. So far implemented strategies and instruments are generally ones that have been described above. It is still necessary to make clear the different as well as the common points of view within the federal state and on the national level. In the federal state of Burgenland where another interview was conducted, strategies and instruments are generally still very growth orientated. Population decline is perceived as a result of structural weakness that has to be abolished with regional development instruments. Lower Austria seems to have already a different view on the topic so that structural weaknesses can't be eliminated everywhere. The different perception in different regions as well as different instruments that are seen as successful tackling of population decline detect a certain need for the development of a common strategy as well as further communication and cooperation. A way of bringing together the different stakeholders and levels will be exemplified in the following chapter.

Table 1. Selective list of strategies and responsibilities concerning shrinking – results of stakeholder analysis in Lower Austria

Level	Priority	Responsibility / Stakeholder	Strategies and instruments
Municipality (LAU-level)	high	local/ regional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● reduction of shrinking (regional development) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ innovations</li> </ul> </li> <li>● accessibility and mobility</li> <li>● social activities (family-friendly infrastructures and services)</li> <li>● civic engagement</li> </ul>
Federal State (NUTS2-level)	high	national/ regional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● targeting general principles <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ decentralized concentration</li> <li>○ strengthen potentials (central places)</li> <li>○ inner-development</li> </ul> </li> <li>● strategic planning</li> </ul>
National State (NUTS0-level)	low	national/EU	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● ERDF and EAFRD investments; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ LEADER; CLLD</li> <li>○ EU Objective 2</li> </ul> </li> <li>● strengthen small towns;</li> <li>● sustain local services</li> <li>● ÖREK partnership</li> <li>● Small-regional population and labour market prognoses</li> </ul>

#### 4.2.3. Strategic regional planning – an instrument for decline?

Dealing with different implications and consequences of population growth and decline in municipalities in Lower Austria has been realized in the frame of the so called ‘Regionale Leitplanung’ (see Leitplanung Nordraum Wien), a new strategic regional planning instrument in the Federal State of Lower Austria. The idea behind the instrument was to coordinate population development on a regional level in order to regulate the settlement structure. The concept of Regionale Leitplanung partly fulfills Albrechts’ and Balducci’s criteria of strategic planning, Allmendinger’s and Haughton’s criteria of soft spaces as well as Healey’s criteria of communicative planning. Its main idea is a collaboratively decided strategy for a certain tailor-made supra-municipal region between formal holders of competence (i.e. municipalities and federal state) as well as representatives and intermediary actors (such as regional management bureau etc.). A direct or pro-active involvement of citizens is not part of the concept which delimits the participatory aspect. However, information on the process is provided to the interested public.

In chapter 3.1 we already described that the Austrian municipalities hold the competence on zoning and settlement development. Municipalities are furthermore competitors when it comes to attract new inhabitants and businesses. Until today municipalities are generally able to decide autarchic – with some juridical restriction for example regarding shopping centers – on the development of new settlement areas or business parks. As a consequence areas are often chosen as settlement areas or business areas that are not appropriate (creating new costs in the exploration and maintenance, increasing traffic, and so on). The necessity of a regional agreement seems obvious, especially when it

comes to handling growth that is expected for example for the areas surrounding Vienna. Despite growth, also for other planning goals a regional strategic planning seems to be reasonable.

Proposed by the Federal State of Lower Austria, 25 municipalities bordering Vienna on the North decided to take part in the regional strategic planning initiative in order to create a structured settlement area. There has been 3 categories decided on to play a key role in the planning process:

- Settlement development
- Development of green spaces
- Development of business areas

Topics like traffic, although of great importance has been laid aside, in awareness that this might be a too conflicting issue to deal with. Within different stakeholder groups discussions and talks took place with the aim to determine statements and principles by all municipalities and federal state together.

According the settlement structure the big question was if there can be guidelines developed on where the expected population growth will be able to settle in the future and where working places should be concentrated. All municipalities together decided on all villages taking part in the process to be categorized in one of the following 3 categories:

- Regional Development Center
- Additional Center
- Village with internal development only

Population growth was determined to take place up to 90% only in the first 2 categories, as well as the development of businesses. The categories has been created with the help of statistical analysis, mainly based on accessibility and the provision of services and facilities. Strategies of focusing on inner-development and decentralized concentration have been thus realized with the regional strategic planning.

Since spatial development mostly unfolds in a diffuse pattern with some areas of growth or concentration and others with decline the instrument of Regionale Leitplanung would also be a feasible option for shrinking regions. Not only has the process led to a sensitization and acceptance of the municipalities through different discussion groups and workshops but also a regional understanding was developed and a comprehensive perspective on the topics of growth and decline was realized. In the region where the planning process took place not all municipalities are experiencing growth but still they have been able to understand that settlement development makes more sense at some certain places than at others. The successful operation of the strategic planning was not expected and was probably also fortune to some extent. Still it is probably worth to give it a try to also moderate sustainable decline in Austrian regions with the described instrument.

The instrument at least seems to be what has been required already – a tailor-made regional development strategy that is able to consider the characteristics and specifics of particular (rural) regions with all structural challenges, its regional history and cultural features (Leber and Kunzmann, 2006, 64). It therefore is able to tackle more complex socio-spatial phenomena, such as shrinking. In Lower Austria great interest was shown by regions with shrinking population to start the process of regional strategic planning. Unfortunately, so far, there is no budget to further elaborate these strategies, so the financial feasibility is again a constraining dimension. The general idea of Regionale Leitplanung would be worth discussing more in-depth in the upcoming respective ÖREK partnership (see chapter 4.2.2). If key stakeholders participating in the partnership get convinced, the instrument

of Reginale Leitplanung and similar approaches will have a future field of application in context of shrinking regions.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

Although Austria's population is growing, processes of concentration towards urban agglomerations lead to regions with shrinking population and decline. Not only rural areas, also old industrial zones are showing decreasing population sizes, less economic activity as well as a thinning out in terms of infrastructure and services. In this paper we asked the question what planning can offer for those regions: which strategies and instruments can help to manage the decay and which stakeholders can possibly handle the situation in the context of the Austrian planning practice. During our research the question also appeared on the acceptance and awareness of the topic of shrinking among stakeholders and further more we wanted to know which role strategic spatial planning can take over around the issue of regional shrinking.

From the few interviews conducted it appears as if the topic of shrinking has been increasingly discussed in the last years, although achieving (population) growth is still the prime agenda concerning Austria's spatial development. Still, the awareness is rising and also the cognition that shrinking cannot be countered by regional development strategies everywhere is getting more established. For the planners and politicians that are directly confronted within shrinking in their own municipality it is difficult to acknowledge a decreasing population size as a lasting process. Especially since in-migration and integration for small-scale villages in an amount that would keep the population stable does not seem to be an option for many municipalities, coming back on the growth path appears to be difficult. It will be further necessary to work on sensitization and acceptance in order to create understanding of the process of decline. Cooperation of the different planning levels will have to be intensified. A further knowledge on demographic processes seems to be necessary on the local level in order to make clear how the population can possibly develop in the future.

Accomplishing acceptance will be most feasible on local level, close to the citizens. For the execution of greater political reforms as for example structural reforms our interview partners (except for the local level) have seen the national or even the level of the European Union as possible stakeholder, since the federal level (which is in charge of spatial planning in Austria) seems to be too little assertive due to political rationalities. From our perspective the regional level – i.e. between the federal state and the municipalities – is most appropriate to handle population decline. There is no statutory level of spatial planning at this scale but in sense of soft planning, it may be also an opportunity to do plan-making on such an informal, intermediary scale. Regional strategic planning has been performed in our case study region already, as described in chapter 4.2.3. This instrument holds promise to be also useful for developing strategies of decline; respectively for thinking growth and decline jointly. Additionally the interviews made clear that there are similar ideas on the different levels that need to be connected.

Before consolidated spatial consequences due to shrinking tendencies find entry into the statutory planning instruments like zoning plans, the strategic management and communicative preparation of solutions is better be organized within more strategic planning instruments first. The regionally diverse coexistence of growth and decline within Austria may be an additional complexity for planning practice but at the same time holds much potential in terms of testing and applying various planning instruments under different conditions. This can foster the set of planning instruments and approaches. Shrinking and growth should be treated comprehensively since it is a question of both phenomena on where to invest and where to draw back.

Strategic regional planning offers further the common decision on focusing on central places to channel investments and to prevent the thinning out. Decentralized concentration as a planning principal is held up high in the Federal State of Lower Austria and which we see as important also in terms of social fairness. Social transfers will also in the future be necessary to cushion tendencies of shrinking. Further it must be recognized that spatial shrinking costs money. It needs public investment – sometimes more than managing regional growth – but efficient spatial structures will pay off in the long run. When it comes to physical consequences of shrinking, so far there is very little experience for conversion or reconstruction in the Austrian context. For handling population decline, socio-politically sensitive procedures must accompany the loss of services and infrastructures over time. Individual solutions will have to be found for small municipalities, as well as the encouragement of civic engagement will play a more pronounced role in the future.

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