



Silent blight in a countryside of empty homes and shut shops

Young people are leaving rural areas of Europe for the cities at a time when birth rates are at historic lows. As the countryside empties, should rising immigration be seen as a solution, not a problem?

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From the forested plains of northern Germany to the dusty hills of the Spain-Portugal border, from the agricultural heartlands of *la France profonde* to the subsistence farms of Greece and Slovakia, Europe is facing a silent blight: a steady, almost unremarked haemorrhage of people leaving the countryside and moving to the more prosperous cities.

Even as Europe faces unprecedented external challenges with mass migration from the war zones of the Middle East and the poverty-stricken countries of north and west Africa, and even

as the world's population continues to expand inexorably, large parts of the EU face the opposite problem: the depopulation of rural areas.

As young people depart, they leave villages of empty houses and shuttered shops, of closed schools and cafes, and a greying population. Fields carefully tended for centuries are left uncultivated and overgrown. Farms and outbuildings crumble from neglect. As incomes plunge, those who remain struggle to maintain a way of life that seems doomed. Projections based on European Commission figures suggest up to 22% of people in rural France, Greece, Spain and Portugal are elderly retired, while only about 10% of farmers across the EU aged 35 or younger.

The depopulation of Europe's rural areas is not a new phenomenon - but it is increasingly troubling and expensive. In 19th-century Germany, the disruptive mass movement of people to the cities became known as *landflucht* - literally, flight from the land. In 1870 the rural population of Germany accounted for 64% of the total. By 1907, it had fallen to 33%.

England during the Industrial Revolution experienced similarly rapid urbanisation at the expense, demographically and economically, of rural communities. The vital, brutal peasant lifestyles so vividly memorialised by Emile Zola in *La Terre* and in Thomas Hardy's West Country novels were disappearing even as they wrote.

What is very different now is that, unlike the Europe of 150 years ago, natural population levels (based on the positive difference between live births and deaths) in most European countries are either static or falling. What the countryside loses in terms of people is thus much harder to replace. Another significant difference, as Reiner Klingholz of the Berlin Institute for Population and Development has noted, is that Europe is experiencing high levels of immigration at a time of rapidly rising global population. According to Eurostat, in 2014 net migration "continued to be the main determinant of population growth in the EU".

Europe has thus become a sort of demographic test-bed, Klingholz suggests. "The world's population nearly quadrupled in the past century... However, Europe [where population numbers are falling] records considerable immigration from other regions of the world, and can therefore be considered a pioneer in a demographic trend that sooner or later will reach many countries around the globe."

So should rising immigration into Europe be viewed as a potential boon for rural areas?

Immigrants compensate to a degree for declining birth rates among indigenous European populations. Germany is a prime example. At a time of falling fertility, it is coincidentally experiencing record immigration totalling 800,000 in 2015 alone.

But the newcomers tend to head for the towns and cities where jobs are more plentiful and where others from similar backgrounds have already established themselves. Any benefit to struggling rural communities may be indirect or partial, at best. The other side of the European demographic equation is the large-scale, expanding movement of people who already live in Europe, from one European country to another.

This is driven in part by a desire to escape from increasingly over-crowded cities - a trend recognised last week by the Chancellor, George Osborne, who is developing plans to help English rural communities absorb rising numbers of city incomers.

Britain appears to be an exception to the European rule. More significant in terms of the wider European rural economy are the large numbers of relatively affluent Germans, Dutch, Scandinavians and Britons leaving their home countries and moving to poorer, rural parts of southern Europe, buying or leasing properties and living there full-time or for long periods each year. A study by Portugal's University of Coimbra, reflecting the similar experience of many French and Spanish villages, found that the arrival of these north European immigrants had saved rural communities around the Spain-Portugal border from destruction.

“If the various communities of immigrants had not installed themselves along the frontier regions of Alto Alentejo and Badajoz, many other areas would be completely unpopulated and abandoned,” the study's author, Fátima Velez de Castro, was quoted as saying. The influx had led to “large positive changes”, including the preservation of the area's man-made landscape and ecology.

The incomers often chose to invest in businesses that promote local produce, from wine and olive oil to fishing, farming and rural tourism, thereby stimulating the rural economy, Velez de Castro said. “One curious fact is that, while the common paradigm sees depopulation as a pressing issue, immigrants see it as an attractive and decisive factor in their decision to settle” since it offered them “a very good quality of life”. The obvious downside is the potentially disruptive impact the new arrivals have of driving up property prices, and more broadly, on the social and cultural traditions of the community they join.

Medieval villages of yellow stone, ancient chateaux and idyllic rivers in Charente, in central France, or the Dordogne, where some cafes and bars are now run by English owners and packed with English-speaking customers, may have been saved from economic ruin. But their character has also changed, not necessarily for the better.

Putting aside the overall reduced fertility and falling national birthrates, common factors accelerating rural depopulation tend to be circular in nature. A lack of employment opportunities and affordable housing drives young people to the cities. This leads to the closure of schools, an ageing and increasingly dependent population, as well as a deterioration of health, transport and other services. This is then linked to falling incomes and tax revenues, which in turn limit investment in the internet and modern telecoms or new and existing businesses.

Critics point to a lack of central planning and policy-making by predominantly urban-centred, out-of-touch national governments, and by the EU as a whole. Austerity policies favoured by Brussels are blamed for disproportionately damaging the countryside. Cuts to agricultural subsidies have proved particularly painful. France was told this year to return €1.1bn in farms payments to Brussels. Globalisation of the agricultural markets has caused further dislocation, as in the current furore over what British dairy farmers say are unsustainably low milk prices.

But whether threatened rural areas are in Germany, Spain or eastern Europe, the projected,

continuing fall in Europe's overall indigenous population suggests immigration from outside the EU, complemented by internal, north-south and east-west migration within its borders, will be increasingly important in the future economic and social health of urban and rural communities.

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