



Immigration to rural communities – attitudes from inside

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Abstract. This paper analyses the main trends of population change across the territory of Lithuania and the impact of immigration on the development of peripheral rural areas in the early 21st century. Qualitative methods were employed to reveal the attitudes of residents of peripheral areas towards arriving new residents and their potential contribution to local development. Special attention is paid on the attitudes of local community leaders and new settlers towards immigrants, including war refugees from Ukraine, illegal immigrants from distant countries, returnees, and residents arriving from other regions of Lithuania.

Keywords: immigrants, war refugees, illegal immigration, emigrants, Lithuania.

Introduction

The shrinkage of rural peripheries is a long-lasting phenomenon in Europe, and it has gained a lot of attention from various researchers for several decades. While the population decline in many rural areas related to urbanisation processes has been evident since the end of the Second World War, the changes in the Baltic countries have gained extreme speed in the last three decades, when the polarization of their development has been extremely evident (Lang et al., 2022). The introduction of a market economy and the resulting changes in agricultural production led to a rapid decline in agricultural employment in most countries of the CEE countries (Bański, 2019). The growing service economy, especially business services, was concentrated in the capital regions, and the depopulation of the rural peripheries was inevitable. Most of previous studies on Lithuania's demographic development analyzed the situation in the first decade of the 21st century and were based on data from the 2001 and 2011 censuses. Trends at the level of LAU 2 (Ubarevičienė, 2018a) or municipalities (LAU 1) (Burneika & Pocius, 2019; Tereškinas et al., 2022) were revealed, and the rapid shrinking of the most peripheral places and the increase of suburban areas of metropolitan cities (Vilnius, Kaunas, and Klaipėda) were reported (Barauskienė, 2019, 2021; Barauskienė & Burneika, 2021; Burneika et al., 2017; Ubarevičienė, 2018b). The ongoing processes influenced the emergence of socio-spatial exclusion, the ageing of the population, and other socio-economic problems (Pociūtė-Sereikienė et al., 2019a, 2019b; Barauskienė, 2021, Barauskienė & Burneika, 2021). Such processes (especially socio-spatial exclusion) caused by negative demographic trends have also been observed in other neighbouring European countries (Stępnik & Rosik, 2013; Stępnik et al., 2017; Bański et al., 2021; Szmytkie, 2022; Krisjane et al., 2023).

The decline in population and the associated shrinkage of service networks are subjects that have been widely discussed. However, from a scientific perspective, the shrinkage was hardly avoidable. In the early 1990s, the rural population share and agricultural employment in post-communist countries of Central Europe were several times higher than in Western Europe. Furthermore, agglomeration and urbanisation economies have also played a role in the depopulation of ageing peripheries across Europe. Out-migration, loss of local service infrastructure, and an ageing population are common to many Baltic Sea rural regions and communities, mostly accompanied by a decline in economic performance (Syssner, 2020). Even the attempts to stimulate new growth in small towns in terms of population are often regarded as wishful thinking (e.g. Albrecht & Kortelainen, 2021; Syssner, 2016). In this paper, we also claim that population growth cannot be expected in the near future in most peripheral settlements outside suburban rings. However, even a smaller number of immigrants can have a significant impact on the future socio-economic development and quality of life in small peripheral places. From our point of view, the much more important point is the structure of the population, which is leaving, staying in, or coming to rural peripheries. The previous research revealed that the structure of migration is a much more serious problem for peripheral regions than the number of migrants, because mainly young, active, better educated, and employed persons used to leave peripheries in Lithuania during the first decade of the 21st century (Ubarevičienė, 2016). Immigration to peripheral areas was much fewer and its structure was the opposite. Data from the second decade show that emigration from rural peripheries still dominates but immigration is also increasing. This paper aims to explore the potential role of newly arrived residents from urban areas and from abroad in future development scenarios of shrinking places. Immigrants to small rural places potentially can be regarded as an external event influencing the development path of the community, which often lacks human resources (Grillitsch et al., 2023).

The main aim of this paper is to find out what influence immigration from other Lithuanian and foreign regions may have on the development of peripheral rural areas, which are often regarded as “left behind places” (Pike et al., 2017). Statistical analysis will reveal the volume of migration flows and their relative influence on socio-demographic trends in the peripheries. Interviews with local actors should reveal the role newcomers of different origins play or could play in the development of such places.

The research itself had several tasks, including the identification of rural peripheral regions and the revelation of migration trends. However, these are not the main tasks of this paper, which will therefore only briefly discuss them later. This paper focuses on the micro-level perspective and the role that local agents can play. Consequently, the main attention here is on presenting the results of the interviews conducted.

Methodology and data

The quantitative methodology has been used to identify peripheral rural regions and to evaluate the general trends of population change and migration in these areas. Spatial analysis of secondary statistical data based on cartographic visualization using GIS (Geographic Information System) tools is the main research method. Spatial quantitative analysis uses data from the State Data Agency under the Government of the Republic

of Lithuania ([Valstybės duomenų agentūra, 2022](#)). The smallest local administrative unit, known as ‘seniūnija’ (LAU 2 or eldership, often coinciding with a parish in rural areas), is the main territorial research unit used to identify the demographic change across the country. Rural regions suffering from the most severe depopulation due to negative natural change and out-migration have been identified.

The maps produced illustrate spatial trends of change over the last two decades. However, it is important to note that these mapped changes illustrate the situation over the entire period(s). The increase in immigration during the last two mapped periods, when the population shrinkage in the country has stopped (due to labour immigrants from the former Soviet Union, incoming war refugees from Ukraine and returning Lithuanian citizens), may have had an impact, especially in urban areas. There were also some areal changes in LAU 2 regions across Lithuania, but these were minimal and did not change the general picture. However, the authors faced additional problems evaluating trends at a smaller scale. As a cartographic basic layer, we have used the administrative division of 2021, which merges LAU 2 regions in cases where areal changes have occurred. For the visualization we use the cartographic layer of the company “HNIT-Baltic” ([2023](#)), which originally consisted of 556 units. We assume that such a level can sufficiently illustrate spatial differences in mostly rural regions, although it would be a problematic for city-level analysis, which is not our task.

It is also important to consider the methodological differences between population censuses. This also can have the potential to influence population size, although to a lesser extent than its general spatial trends ([Lietuvos statistikos departamentas, 2011, 2020a, 2020b](#)):

- The direct census was conducted in 2001, during which all questionnaires were completed by an interviewer who visited each household in the country.
- A mixed census was conducted in 2011, with a portion of the residents completing their questionnaires online.
- An automatic register-based census was conducted in 2021, during which data from state registers and data banks were integrated into the Census data subsystem. This involved the use of 20 data sources ([Lietuvos statistikos departamentas, 2020a](#)).

All three censuses have their limitations, which can cause some discrepancies and this could cause some problems for the establishment of actual numbers in some specific areas but for the establishment of general trends, it is not so important.

The next stage of the research is based on qualitative methodology. The interview method was used to analyse the local population’s attitudes towards immigrants (arrivals, settlers). Specifically, semi-structured interviews were used. The interview questions were divided into ten question blocks (1 – questions revealing personal/individual data; 2 – questions revealing the motives of moving into the periphery; 3 – questions revealing the characteristics of the territory; 4 – questions revealing public infrastructure; 5 – questions revealing the community, community activities, and relations with the community; 6 – questions revealing attitudes towards immigration from other regions and countries; 7 – emigration revealing questions; 8 – questions that reveal leadership challenges; 9 – questions revealing the most important problems of the territory; 10 – questions revealing the prospects of the area’s development). This paper primarily focuses

on the sixth and seventh questions, which explore attitudes towards immigration from other regions and countries, as well as emigration.

A total of 42 interviews were conducted between 2022 and 2023 in 16 rural elderships (LAU 2) designated as rural peripheral areas in 13 municipalities. Of the total number of interviews conducted, 26 were conducted with local community leaders, including leaders of local community organisations (13) and heads of local administrations (13). It's important to note that LAU 2 regions in Lithuania operate as agencies of municipal governments and do not have self-governing rights. Additionally, 16 interviews were conducted with new settlers who moved to rural areas from outside within the last five years (for more detailed information about the conducted interviews is presented in table 1). The attitudes towards all immigrants to peripheral eldership were analysed but due to specific circumstances, particular attention was paid to Ukraine war refugees and immigrants from more distant Asian or African countries who illegally crossed the Lithuanian-Belarus state border. At the time of the interviews, there were no such immigrants in the majority of field research areas. However, they were present in Eastern case study areas located close to the EU border with Belarus.

Table 1. Data on conducted interviews

Territory	New settlers	Local community leaders	
		leaders of local community organizations	heads of local administrations
Western Lithuania			
Akmenė district municipality	2	1	1
Rietavas district municipality	3	1	2
Šiauliai district municipality	2	2	1
Radviliškis district municipality	–	1	1
Raseiniai municipality	2	1	1
Eastern Lithuania			
Kupiškis district municipality	3	–	1
Rokiškis district municipality	2	1	1
Ignalina district municipality	–	1	2
Molėtai district municipality	1	–	–
Southern Lithuania			
Druskininkai municipality	1	1	1
Alytus district municipality	–	2	1
Varėna district municipality	–	2	–
Lazdijai district municipality	–	–	1
Total	16	13	13

Results

Population changes in Lithuanian peripheries at the beginning of the 21st century

As previously, stated the fast decrease of population size was evident in most peripheral urban and rural regions during the first decade of the 21st century. This paper will focus on population trends during the recent two decades. Lithuania has lost almost 1/5 of its population during the analysed period (from 3.487 to 2.811 million). The decrease was the fastest during the first decade (-12.5%). The number of the population shrank slower during the second decade (-7.9%). This can be related to significant emigration waves related to the gained EU membership in 2004 and the economic crisis of 2009 (Burneika et al., 2017; Ubarevičienė, 2016, 2018a, 2018b; Baranauskienė, 2019, 2021). The changing economic system, the shrinking of jobs in primary and secondary sectors located in peripheral parts, and the growing service economy, which was concentrating in metropolitan areas were the main drivers behind these changes. The number of people employed in agriculture and industry decreased by 0.28 million and 0.24 million, respectively, while the number of employees in services increased by 0.18 million between 1989 and 2022 (Valstybės duomenų agentūra, 2023a). The period of shrinkage was observed until 2010, after which changes were minimal, with continued decline in agricultural and an increase in industrial and service employment. The increase of salaries, growth of the economy, return of emigrants, immigration, and other factors (e.g., Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic) have contributed to the stabilization and growth of the population in Lithuania since 2018. The presented maps illustrate slightly more profound changes during the first decade, but the spatial trends remain the same. Ageing peripheral rural places continue to shrink and geographical patterns though less polarised are quite similar. Most regions outside of metropolitan areas and major resorts lost more than 40% of their population during two decades (fig. 1). The foreign emigration was particularly intense in the western peripheries of Lithuania, so we may expect that namely, this peripheral region could have some more positive demographic trends because of reversing migration flows, as ageing eastern peripheries suffered most from negative natural population change (Baranauskienė & Burneika, 2021).

Distant rural settlements in the periphery, which do not benefit from being close to big cities (in suburban or periurban zones) and are not favorable places for commuting residents were our primary targets (distinguished as peripheral regions in Fig. 1). The shrinking rural peripheries have been identified in previous studies, which also revealed many other negative economic and social consequences there (Kriauciūnas et al., 2014a, 2014b; Ubarevičienė, 2014, 2016; Kriauciūnas, 2018; Burneika et al., 2017; Kriauciūnas & Burneika, 2019; Baranauskienė, 2019, 2021; Baranauskienė & Burneika, 2021).

The visual analysis of mapped trends (fig. 1) allows us to draw the main conclusions regarding spatial changes in the population during the last two decades. The population of Lithuania has been redistributed along the centre-periphery axis, with regions located most distant from the five biggest cities (Vilnius, Kaunas, Klaipėda, Šiauliai and Panevėžys) were shrinking the fastest. The trends of change were more intense during the first decade but spatial pattern remains the same. The metropolitan cities and their metro-areas divide Lithuania's periphery into three distinct peripheral regions. The North-eastern and Southern regions have experienced long-lasting depopulation trends, which mostly are related to an ageing population (Baranauskienė, 2021). The Western periphery (located

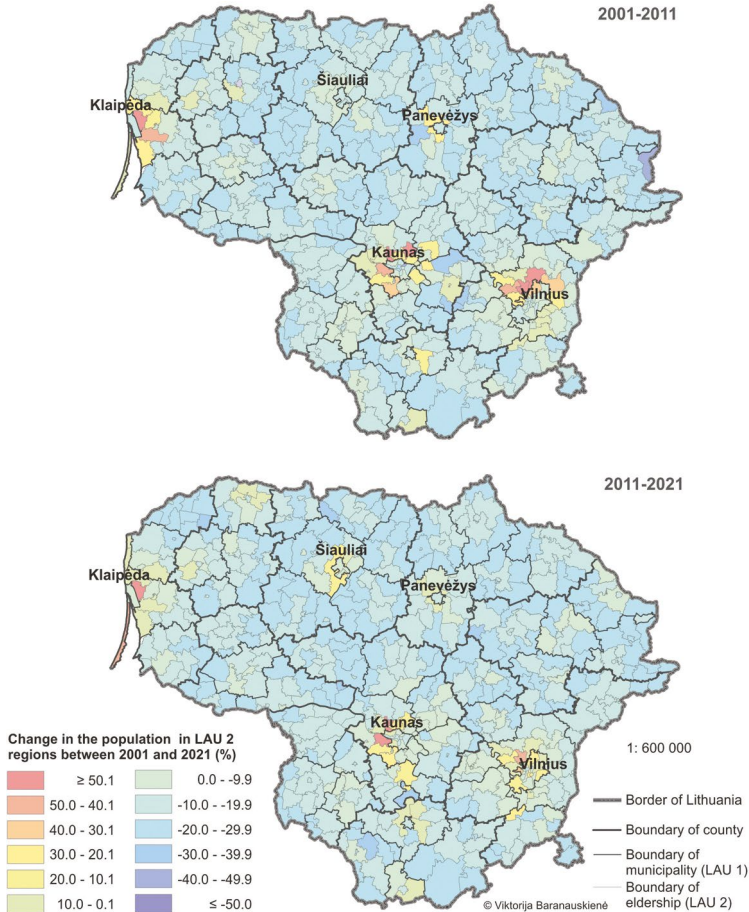


Fig. 1. Changes in the population in LAU 2 regions between 2001, 2011, and 2021

Authors' calculations based on data from the 2011 and 2021 population and housing census of the Lithuanian Department of Statistics.

in between Kaunas, Šiauliai and Klaipėda), which used to have a more balanced population structure was shrinking even faster during the first two decades. It is the peripheral region probably suffering from its negative geographical location in relation to the three growth poles of the country. Previous studies (Kriaučiūnas & Burneika, 2019) revealed that the rural areas are losing traditional agricultural jobs, and the majority of working-age residents have their main incomes in different sectors or even different areas which increases the role of the geographic location of the place even more.

The research focuses on areas that were shrinking the fastest and not bordering urban elderships (LAU 2). The main factor of population changes in Lithuanian settlements during the first two decades of independence (1990-2011) was their position in relation to the three biggest cities. The more distant the area the faster it shrank and this trend remained in the second decade. The peripheral rural areas lost 19.6% of their residents between 2011 and 2021 (Valstybės duomenų agentūra, 2023a). Lithuanian average was

-7.6%. Metropolitan urban areas remained stable, while the suburban areas grew by 5.6%. The peri-urban rural areas, located close to major cities (usually up to 50 km from the limits of five biggest cities) but outside suburbanization zones, were shrinking by 14.7%.

Rural peripheries of Lithuania – recent trends of migration

Both natural change and emigration were responsible for the shrinkage, though Eastern aging regions shrank mostly because of high death rates, while western ones were losing population mostly because of emigration. While our paper does not delve into the specifics of these macro-level trends, it is important to emphasise the growing physical mobility of the population. The number of emigrants from and immigrants to peripheral rural regions has increased compared to the previous decade (fig. 2).

Emigration is still the main factor contributing to shrinkage in most regions. Nevertheless, the fact that immigration is also increasing allows us to assume that immigrants play a more and more important role in small shrinking local communities because immigrants should compose an increasing proportion of their shrinking population. The increasing immigration is evident in almost all regions of Lithuania, which illustrates the growing mobility of its residents (fig. 3). Previous studies (Ubarevičienė, 2016, 2018a; Baranauskienė, 2021; Baranauskienė & Burneika, 2021) showed that population mobility has increased significantly since Lithuania joined the EU in 2004. This concerns both international and inner migration. Our analysis shows that mobility of population increased even more during the second decade. The population censuses only provide information on place of residence within a year of the last census. Therefore, it is not possible to determine with certainty the trends throughout the decade. On the other hand, the increase in 2021 is more than evident even keeping in mind the controversial circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic. While immigration has been relatively significant in metropolitan areas such as Vilnius, Kaunas, and Klaipėda, it has also been influential in many peripheral parts of eastern Lithuania, which traditionally serve as important nature tourism destinations for residents of Vilnius (Kriaučiūnas et al., 2023, Liutikas et al., 2023). Attractive environments and geographic location in relation to the capital and other major cities should be among the most important factors for those moving to the peripheries. Our hypothesis that Western regions should have higher immigration numbers benefiting from return

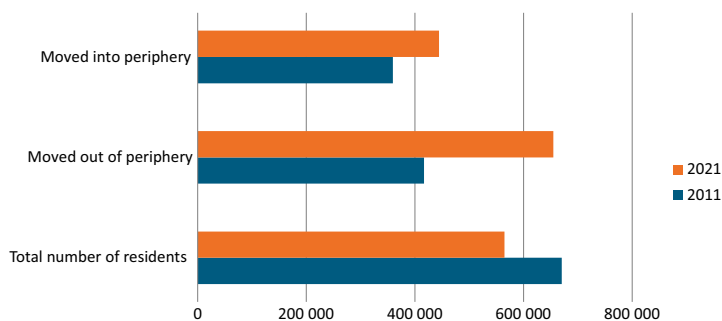


Fig. 2. Migration of residents of peripheral regions (share of population decreased from 22,2% till 20,1% of total)

Authors' calculation based on data of population censuses of 2011 and 2021.

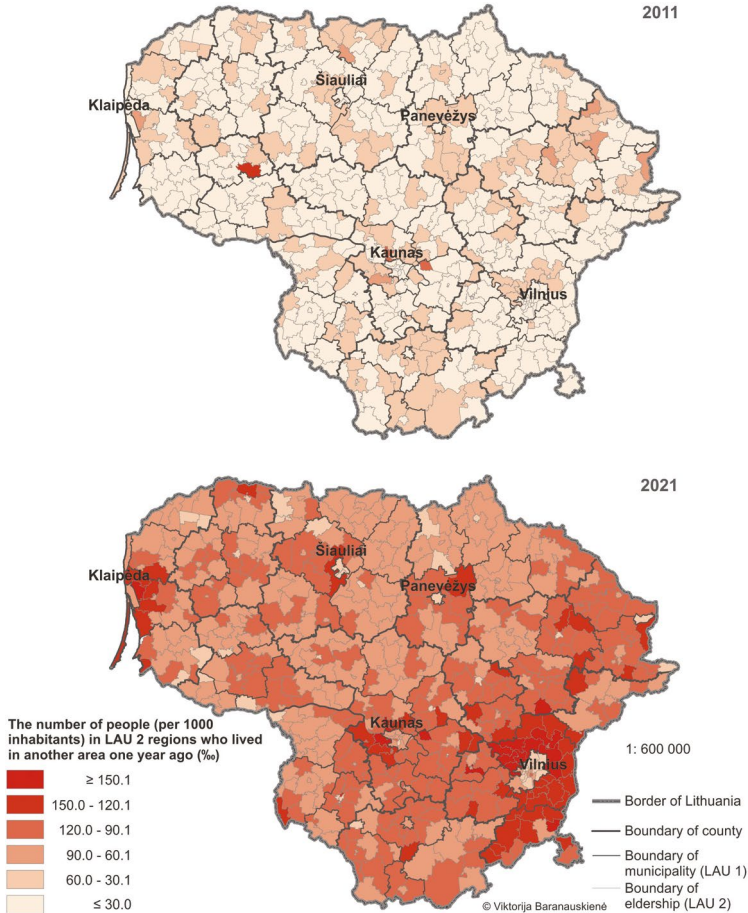


Fig. 3. The number of people (per 1000 inhabitants) in LAU 2 regions who lived in another area one year ago Authors' compilation according to the Lithuanian State Data Agency, 2022.

migration is not supported by the visual analysis of mapped changes. Even if the return migration was higher there, the number of immigrants from other Lithuanian places were relatively more numerous in most Eastern peripheral elderships. Their proximity to the capital city should be a major factor shaping counter-urbanisation processes there. The Northern elderships, which are the most distant from metropolitan cities, are rich in fertile soils but have poor recreational resources. Consequently, they had the lowest proportion of immigrants in the second decade of the 21st century.

Summarising the analysis of migration flows we must state that so far immigration is too small to change ongoing depopulation trends in peripheries though proportionally immigrants constitute growing share of rural population and there could have a role in changing life of small rural communities.

Attitudes of the representatives of rural communities toward immigrants into their regions

- The general attitude towards newcomers and their influence

The ongoing discourse in politics and mass media is optimistic about the increasing number of urban residents expressing a desire to live in rural areas (Bruzgytė, 2021; Stupakova, 2022). However, reliable information regarding the real number of counter-urbanisers or their social characteristics is lacking. The authors carried out a number of semi-structural interviews in remote peripheral places trying to find out how influential this trend looks from a local rural perspective. Such a method cannot reveal quantitative information about immigration but it does permit insight into its importance in at least some small rural communities, where “every person counts”. The available statistical information reveals the volume of immigrants but cannot reveal the actual influence they are making on the life of rural places. Are the newcomers welcomed, feared, or ignored? What kind of immigrants are welcomed and who is not? What benefits do newcomers give and how they can change life in the peripheries? These and similar questions can only be answered through direct field research in rural communities. This section presents the results of interviews conducted to understand how local communities perceive various kinds of immigration and the role immigrants could play. Lithuanian new settlers from urban regions, war refugees from Ukraine, and illegal immigrants who crossed the border of Belarus – attitudes towards these groups of newcomers were analysed in this paper. An attempt will be made to present the point of view about a certain group of newcomers (immigrants) and their potential contribution to the development of certain rural areas.

All interviews were conducted in small, shrinking rural places and the shrinkage of population was always mentioned as one of the most topical problems. Therefore, we expected to find generally positive attitudes towards immigrants and immigration into such towns and villages. However, the results of the interviews were not so one-sided, various attitudes were found. First of all, we would like to quote attitudes, which illustrate, that notwithstanding shrinkage, all immigrants (from within a country or abroad) are not automatically welcomed. This was particularly evident in interviews with new settlers, who had recently arrived in these places (within the last five years). We also should remember that being recent immigrants, they have experience of their own histories. We may hypothesize, that the shrinkage was not so topical problem for them if it did not prevent them from coming there.

Although negative (cautious) attitudes towards all immigrants were recorded, it was rather the exception than the rule. Notwithstanding that the shrinking of settlements is an evident problem, the recent new settlers express an opinion that rural communities are generally more conservative (residents are ageing) and therefore attitudes toward newcomers are cautious in advance:

“Well, maybe the mentality is also different, that’s why there is no tolerance. But I think there is a problem of rurality here. Just general rural intolerance of others. It doesn’t matter what minorities we belong to.” [A1, new settler, Southern Lithuania]

“Villagers are not very trusty anyway. They’ll put some kind of a label on you, probably [laughing]. I think you’ll be disliked because the majority is over 50 or even older people. There

is a lot of pensioners, youth is youth, but older people are already looking with distrust.” [V2, new settler, Western Lithuania]

“...When we came back... Ah, but anyway, every second person told us: Yeah, yeah, – how long will you stay here? Well, you will turn around and drive away. Well, let’s face it, if you left because life was very good abroad, you would not survive if you came back here. This is what every second person told us. Everyone laughed: How long will you stay here and drive back? Well, there is such an attitude...” [A1, new settler, Southern Lithuania]

In some cases, local leaders were also quite cautious about all incoming persons, expressing a kind of distrust of local residents:

“...Because now we live very quietly, we have no thieves, or something like that... And now what to expect? Maybe someone like this is coming now? Or maybe something will be stolen? Or maybe it won’t be so calm here anymore? Well, I would say, maybe that’s the reaction, but if everything is calm for a week, next, and a month, then... It would be like today [smiles].” [V10, community leader, Western Lithuania]

At the same time, unsurprisingly, more positive attitudes towards immigrants prevailed and were recorded. The positive attitudes were based on personal qualities rather than ethnic or geographic origins of the newcomers. Most of them were associated with the usefulness of newcomers to the local community, rather than with the general problem of a shrinking population. This could be related to the problem of shrinking service networks in depopulating areas.

“...Well, you see, it also depends on the person... I think it wouldn’t be a problem if someone settled down provide he has the initiative to work instead of waiting for the government allowance.” [A3, community leader, Southern Lithuania]

“It’s our community anyway, it’s, well, somehow, it’s really democratic. [...] Well, they dislike lazy people and drinkers the most.” [A6, community leader, Southern Lithuania]

“Positive because we have not only Ukrainians here. For example, there is one from Italy at school, in other words we have Italian speakers, English speakers, Ukrainian speakers, and Russian speakers. And everyone is accepted, and everyone is taken care of, so to say. Very positive.” [V4, new settler, Western Lithuania]

Attitudes towards illegal immigrants. The attitudes towards illegal immigrants will vary across different regions. This is the process in question is taking place in south-eastern peripheral regions, where residents have direct contact with some representatives of such immigrants. It can be observed that attitudes are typically contingent upon the specific circumstances of these interactions. The attitudes of residents in Western Lithuania are entirely shaped by the discourses disseminated by the mass media. Our results of this study support the hypothesis that attitudes towards illegal immigrants in the more distant and “younger” western Lithuania are somewhat more differentiated (negatively or positively), though in all regions negative, cautious opinions prevail. It is important to note that the research coincided with a period when illegal immigrants crossing of the Lithuanian – Belarus border was at its peak (2022-2023). The governmental organizations were struggling to control the process and were searching for places to accommodate detained persons. The situation was reflected extremely negatively in mass media, therefore nega-

tive attitudes towards illegal immigrants weren't a surprise. In the border regions illegal immigrants were detained, housed, and refugee camps were created. For some, it was a very close problem, in other words, a "backyard problem", because immigrants came directly to the houses, yards, and gardens of local residents, therefore, *negative attitude* towards illegal immigrants were recorded:

"...A person gets up in the morning, looks through the window – five or some persons are sitting in his gazebo..., you understand? He informs certain officers and that's it. Such is their attitude..." [A5, community leader, Southern Lithuania]

In some cases, the local population faced very unpleasant situations, leading many residents to react negatively. There was a negative attitude towards illegal immigrants because there was great fear, the population felt very insecure. The belief was that these immigrants must be constantly monitored and kept in a secure, locked area, as they were perceived to be from an "alien world":

"Illegal immigrants must be shepherded, must be in a gated area." [R4, new settler, Eastern Lithuania]

"If we talk about those migrants who are rushing to us here through the border [laughs], I can say that people treat them with such fear because you never know, the border is very close here. Let's say that they would come to the house, knock, enter, well, anyway... They looked at them, you know, very suspiciously or angrily." [A3, community leader, Southern Lithuania]

In regions not directly affected by the illegal migration flows, cautious opinions were also recorded.

"Well, we would be afraid of such ones [...]. Yes, you are afraid of what you don't know. [...] Yes, they will try to introduce their own culture." [V14, community leader, Western Lithuania]

Though cautious and negative attitudes towards immigrants prevail, we also received some more positive, conscious thoughts about illegal immigrants, which also permits us to state, that people have different attitudes even if one is dominant. The actual situation depends not only on prevailing discourses in the media but also on local persons, so it can be very place-specific:

"No one will run away from a good life, so whatever [laughs], if life was good for you, then you would stay..." [A3, community leader, Southern Lithuania]

"You know, maybe it's more favourable... Yeah, when they ran from Belarus, a large accommodation camp was set up here near Simnas, there were people who willingly contributed, and donated things for them. In that sense, there was really no condemnation, no rejection, well, they knew that people were in trouble..." [A8, community leader, Southern Lithuania]

"No, no, no, not malicious. But all people have the understanding that there are all kinds of people among them, just as there are all kinds of people among us. Sometimes you need to be afraid of Lithuanian more than that one or the other [laughs]." [A9, community leader, Southern Lithuania]

"Everything is fine. We don't see any problems. If [smiles] they want, they can buy, they can live and we'll help. [...] Well, there would be various opinions. Some would like it, some would not but I think we are all humans and we still have to help each other. After all, we cannot

immediately decide that the one will be like this or like that. Well, it wouldn't be fair." [V7, community leader, Western Lithuania]

Attitudes towards war refugees from Ukraine. Although the analysis of specific groups of newcomers was not initially a goal of the research, the unpredictable geopolitical situation and war in Ukraine resulted in a significant influx of Ukrainian refugees in 2022 and 2023. More than 84 thousand refugees were registered since 25.02.2022 in Lithuania at the end of 2023 (*Valstybės duomenų agentūra, 2023b*). While qualitative studies are typically unable to provide data for totalising generalisations, we did not find any negative attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees or their potential arrival in rural settlements. Such a result permits us to state that these newcomers were welcomed to the absolute majority of rural places at the time the interviews were taken. Many interviewed persons had direct encounters with Ukrainian new-comers but the answers weren't different anyway. We hypothesize that such attitude apart from other things is also based on long-lasting encounters with Russian-speaking immigrants and their culture, and interviews support this:

"There would be no problem with those from Ukraine because there are many Ukrainians in our village already. Old Ukrainians. Well, the ones left from the old days. [...] [Since the construction of the railway] So, there is a man, he brought his wife from Ukraine. Simply speaking, yes, there are such mixed families..." [A8, community leader, Southern Lithuania]

We observe that the positivity of attitudes is very much related to the reasons for immigration, its legitimacy, and consequently sympathy of locals:

"...when they come from Ukraine, a lot of people help, in other words, they donate both money and everything else. [...] But there are people who accommodated them, you know..." [A5, community leader, Southern Lithuania]

At the same time, the positive attitudes are also related to the benefits, these immigrants bring to local communities:

"...and also now with Ukraine, actually, when, there are also quite a few families who have moved here and they are really welcomed, especially when Ukrainian dentist works here now. It really is [smiling] positive, I think." [A8, community leader, Southern Lithuania]

"Very, very positive [smiles]. [...] Because we actually had 2 women from Ukraine with their families... They participated in all events, always came, and helped, that alone says it all." [V3, new settler, Western Lithuania]

"Positive attitude to them. Of course, they are mostly employed in agriculture as well. We have one teacher who works at the school." [V6, community leader, Western Lithuania]

- Contribution of newcomers to the development of remote/peripheral areas

Though several quotations have already illustrated the benefits that immigrants are bringing, we have to note some answers, that illustrate possible future contributions of the newcomers. Most informants mention those aspects, that are related to the contribution

of newcomers to the development of the local community. Though there are only very exceptional cases when new commers start new jobs in visited peripheral places (more often they chose them as suburban homes, while working elsewhere) but locals quite often mention such a possibility. In other words, new settlers are perceived as possible development factor of rural places.

“Anyway, I think they could really bring some new ideas. They could bring their practice from their country and develop it here [in the settlement]. And certainly, I think, they would be given every opportunity.... So, if upon arrival they came up with some tourism related or other kind of activity, I really think they would be successful.” [V4, new settler, Western Lithuania]

“...They usually find some kind of a job for they living and at the same time economy develops in Akmenė municipality. That’s good, I would think...” [V1, new settler, Western Lithuania]

“...Of course, if you offer a job..., if foreigners would come and create jobs, I think yes, they will accept him because he would give a job.” [V2, new settler, Western Lithuania]

Summarising the answers of the interviewed persons, we may distinguish several aspects, which were mentioned as benefits the newcomers could bring to rural areas. We summarized the answers as follows:

- increases the number of pupils in schools;
- priority for hard-working immigrants, especially with no language barrier;
- provides services to residents;
- new jobs are created, and unskilled work is done (in agriculture, education, cleaning services, etc.);
- actively participates in community life.

The additional number of pupils in local schools was most often mentioned benefit found in several places. Apparently, the possible closure of the school is perceived very negatively among villagers. A few quotations illustrating opinions on these and other benefits that new commers are bringing in:

“...I would say, I’m very happy that a lot of those Ukrainian families came to the [settlements’] school...” [V1, new settler, Western Lithuania]

“... and at least that’s what a man told me, near this garage: It doesn’t matter to me whether he is Ukrainian, or Lithuanian, or Arab, or anybody else. It is important that he works and that I, as the owner, can communicate with him. It doesn’t matter who works.” [V1, new settler, Western Lithuania]

“...those Ukrainian mothers, regardless of what kind of education they had in Ukraine, they work. Let’s say, some at school, some as cleaners or elsewhere. They stive for their living. When you want to, well, you probably still find what to do. And another plus is that those people who have come are very active. And they really participate in those community activities and everywhere. Well, they are everywhere.” [V5, new settler, Western Lithuania]

At the same time, there were several cases when opinion that only returned emigrants can contribute to the development of the territory was expressed. Those who return to their birthplace are positively met, because only they know the current situation and understand the local problems (place attachment matters). It is believed that foreigners cannot contribute to the development of a territory, which is “alien” to them.

“Maybe they would come back... It would be beneficial for a place if they returned there, let’s say, in that sense however if it’s a complete stranger who doesn’t even know who, with whom, and about what..., then I don’t think he would be interested [...]. I don’t think such one would do some change, but if, I’d say, it was their birthplace or some other attachment...”
[A7, community leader, Southern Lithuania]

Summarizing the results of field research, we may state that immigrants, according to local respondents, are already playing a positive role in the development of at least some small peripheral places, which benefit from new local services, additional kids at school or employees. Although newcomers of any origin are not automatically welcomed and some cautious attitudes exist, economically active persons from any country gradually would find their place in almost any rural settlement. On the other hand, so far, the people from shrinking places do not expect that new immigrants can reverse the shrinkage itself. We also observe that real differences in attitudes toward different immigrant groups exist but these attitudes are very place-specific and can vary even in the same region. We did not find attitudes that immigration can change demographic situations in areas of long-lasting depopulation and attitudes towards illegal immigrants from Belarus were predominantly negative. There were some more positive expectations on the role of newcomers (including even illegal immigrants) on the development in western peripheries, where opinions concerning newcomers of different origins were generally more polarised.

Conclusions and discussion

In conclusion, it can be stated that the analysis of statistical data indicates that the trends of population redistribution in Lithuania are similar to those observed other Baltic states (Berzins & Zvidrins, 2011; Krisjane & Berzins, 2012; Burneika et al., 2013a, 2013b; Ubarevičienė, 2018a, 2018b). Furthermore, there are no indications that these trends will be reversed in the near future. Even growing immigration to peripheral regions will not compensate depopulation caused by outnumbering emigration and negative natural decrease. However, the negative changes tend to slow down, and immigrants constitute an ever-increasing proportion of the rural population. In some cases, they are already making positive influence both on economy and community life. This influence will depend also on local attitudes towards newcomer, which is different in different places and not always positive if insecurity or ignorance exists.

Though many interviewed persons indicated certain problems, nobody has stated that the regions they represent are somehow bad, depressed, or inhabited by unhappy people. The absolute majority perceive their localities as “good places to live”, with typically quite positive prospects. Nobody has mentioned, that emigration is a serious problem at present, – on the contrary – the lack of free housing prevents the income of new families mostly from nearby non-metropolitan cities. We may expect some positive changes in migration flows as well at least in some less peripheral or industrially vital regions. The immigration towards rural places is very much related to the changing functions of rural settlements, which more and more often become residential areas for more distant towns (Kriaučiūnas & Burneika, 2019), whose economy becomes the decisive factor of demand

for housing in surrounding areas even outside suburbia. Apparently, in the multimodal settlement system of Lithuania, almost none of the rural places is far enough to be unable to serve as a sleeping suburb district of some municipal or even metropolitan centre.

The attitudes towards immigration are cautious, yet the majority of respondents believe that Lithuanian new settlers and Ukrainian refugees can positively contribute to the future of rural places. Still, some more cautious attitudes exist as well. The attitudes towards immigration from more distant countries (namely illegal immigrants) are more polarised and “safety” concerns prevail.

The attitudes towards immigrants and new settlers are very much place-dependent and every place has its own prevailing understanding of how “dangerous” or potentially useful various kinds of immigrants can be for the development of their rural community. Unsurprisingly people are much more positive toward the immigrants from less exotic places, especially Ukraine, but sometimes they are cautious even about Lithuanian new settlers, who also quite often have very weak if any influence on the life of local communities.

Based on the conducted qualitative research, it could be assumed that the positive attitudes towards illegal immigrants are more common for residents of western part of the country, which at the same time is more cautious towards Lithuanian newcomers. This could at least partly be explained by the higher share of the younger population and smaller problem of depopulation as well as a higher share of foreign emigration in this part of the country.

Further fate of peripheral areas will be determined by many different factors, which are hard to predict but which can make influence on the migration flows between urban and rural places internationally and locally. At the beginning of the third decade, we must state that there are no demographic preconditions for a rapid reversal of the monitored trends of depopulation in general. There are places already benefiting from newcomers but we did not find cases where new residents have changed the general development pathways of a community. Human agency can make a difference even under unfavourable structural conditions. Consequently, the growth of immigration is likely to be one of the factors influencing development in at least some places, even if the shrinkage persists.

This research was funded by a grant (“Peripheral regions in Lithuania: migration and local communities”, Nr. S-MIP-21-57) from the Research Council of Lithuania.

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