DOI https://doi.org/10.17234/SocEkol.35.2.3
UDK 316.346-053.6(1-22) 314.15-053.6(497.562)

Izvorni znanstveni rad
Primljeno: 26. 02. 2026.
Prihvaćeno: 24. 03. 2026.

YOUTH MOBILITY PATTERNS IN SPARSELY POPULATED AREAS OF CROATIA: THE CASE STUDY OF THE LIKA REGION

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Abstract

Rural areas of South-Eastern Europe have long been affected by depopulation, social marginalisation and lagging modernisation. This paper therefore contributes to the study of youth spatial mobility patterns in sparsely populated rural areas of Croatia, with a particular focus on the Lika region, identified as the country's most vulnerable area according to socio-demographic indicators. Drawing on the theoretical framework of lagging modernisation and the concept of neo-endogenous development, the study examines the reasons why young people stay, leave, return to, or settle in the region, as well as their perceptions of living conditions and development prospects. The analysis is based on qualitative research conducted in 2022, comprising 32 semi-structured interviews with young people representing different migration experiences, complemented by field insights and student reports. The data were analysed through thematic coding informed by the push-pull model of migration. Lika is interpreted as a paradigmatic example of a region shaped by long-term processes of lagging modernisation. Four waves of outmigration, weak institutional consolidation and fragmented development models have resulted in the erosion of human and social capital. The qualitative

findings indicate that economic factors, particularly employment security and opportunities for professional advancement, constitute the primary determinants of mobility decisions. Environmental quality, family ties and access to housing represent important retention and return factors, while political apathy and institutional closure constrain the transformative potential of existing human capital. The study concludes that youth mobility in Lika cannot be reduced to a simple brain drain but should be understood as a translocal and circulatory strategy of survival, in which education and employment frequently take place outside the region, while emotional attachment remains locally embedded. Lika is thus confirmed as an analytically relevant model for understanding similar dynamics in peripheral rural regions of South-Eastern Europe.

Keywords: *circular mobility, lagging modernisation, neo-endogenous development, rural youth.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Within the European Union, contemporary processes of globalisation have increasingly shaped rural areas according to models characteristic of highly developed societies, commonly described as reflexive or liquid modernity, marked by heightened social reflexivity, time-space distanciation and the reorganisation of social relations (Bauman, 2000; Beck, 2001; Giddens, 1990). One of the most prominent manifestations of these processes is the demographic abandonment of rural areas, particularly pronounced in Central and, especially, South-Eastern Europe during the entire 20th century. Following the country's accession to the European Union, population out-migration from these areas has even intensified, driven primarily by economic reasons, but also by sociocultural and political factors. These modernisation processes have also taken place in Croatia and, although delayed in rural areas, have led to changes in lifestyles and to mass emigration (Brlić, 2017; Cifrić, 2003; Holjevac, 2010; Rogić, 2000; Rogić & Čizmić, 2011). The characteristics of demographic collapse confirmed for Croatia (Boromisa, 2025; Gelo et al., 2005; Nejašmić, 1991, 2005; Wertheimer-Baletić, 2017) are also evident in the traditional Croatian region of Lika (Bušljeta Tonković, 2015; Marić et al., 2024; Pejnović, 2004a, 2004b), mirroring trends observed in other rural areas of Europe (Eurostat, 2024; Population Europe, 2024).

Contemporary processes related to liquid modernity in Central-Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, such as transition and market deregulation (Bauman, 2000), have continued a centuries-long process of de-ruralisation and de-agrarisation, leading to economic and socio-cultural decline in many rural areas. Despite the relevance of these transformations, they have not yet been fully explored in the Croatian context, particularly with regard to rural areas. Nevertheless, it should be noted that certain progress has been made in this field of research (Bokan & Obad, 2018; Bušljeta Tonković, 2015; Jež Rogelj et al., 2024; Jukić, 2014; Lukić & Obad, 2016; Orlić & Bokan, 2017; Puđak et al., 2025; Šikić-Mićanović, 2012; Štambuk, 2014a, 2014b).

Within this broader framework, rural restructuring, understood in the context of globalisation as a set of interconnected and multi-layered changes encompassing agriculture, the wider rural economy, social and demographic dynamics, rural service provision and environmental transformations, has been widely analysed in European rural studies (Brown & Shucksmith, 2024; Woods, 2005). However, such processes remain insuffi-

ciently researched in Croatia. According to Štambuk (2014b), the stage of rural recomposition has only just begun in the Croatian context, indicating a structural delay in key development processes, including industrial decentralisation, the development of the tertiary and quaternary sectors and the diversification of the rural economy. This delay ultimately contributes to the continued decline of the rural periphery (Boswell, 2009). Against this broader theoretical and empirical backdrop, an analysis of the causes and effects of the current situation in the rural Lika region, together with the establishment of criteria or metrics for evaluating these processes, can provide valuable insights into the persistent development challenges faced by other traditionally rural areas in Croatia, such as Gorski Kotar, Banovina, Kordun and Dalmatinska Zagora (eng. *Dalmatian Hinterland*), as well as comparable regions in South-Eastern Europe, particularly in the countries with a similar historical legacy. In this sense, Lika can be understood as a representative case of wider regional dynamics shaped by lagging modernisation and post-transition transformations.

At the same time, Hospers and Reverda (2015) argue that population decline in a specific rural area may serve as an analytical case for other rural regions in which such processes have not yet fully unfolded. Building on this perspective, the present study is grounded in the assumption that scientifically examined negative modernisation and post-transition processes observed in a concrete rural context can function as a heuristic framework for analysing and evaluating similar processes elsewhere, both in regions where demographic and structural decline is already pronounced and in those where key indicators remain relatively favourable. Consequently, the findings of this research are expected to be relevant not only in an academic sense, but also for the formulation of development-oriented policies, with particular relevance for youth-focused interventions in rural and peripheral areas.

Informed by the preceding discussion, the study adopts a qualitative, case-based research design to examine how young people in a shrinking rural and mountainous region experience mobility, attachment and future-making under conditions of lagging modernisation and structural peripheralisation. By focusing on different youth mobility positions and on everyday interpretations of staying, leaving, returning and settling, the methodological approach is designed to capture the multi-dimensional nature of rural restructuring and demographic decline outlined above, as well as their lived social and spatial consequences.

Placing rural youth at the centre of the empirical analysis is analytically justified by their structurally exposed position at the intersection of labour market transformation, limited service provision and constrained development opportunities in peripheral rural areas. Their perceptions, mobility decisions and future-oriented aspirations therefore provide a particularly sensitive lens through which the cumulative effects of long-term depopulation, post-transition restructuring and socio-environmental constraints can be examined. In this context, the concept of neo-endogenous development is employed not as a normative policy framework, but as an analytical perspective for assessing how locally embedded resources, aspirations and agency interact with broader structural

conditions. Through the case of Lika, the study seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of rural youth mobility and future-making in lagging rural regions, with relevance extending beyond the Croatian context to comparable peripheral areas, especially in South-Eastern Europe.

Grounded in the preceding theoretical and empirical discussion, this study aims to explore how young people in a shrinking rural and mountainous region experience and interpret mobility, place attachment and future-making within the broader context of lagging modernisation and structural peripheralisation. In doing so, it addresses the following research questions: how do young people make sense of and negotiate decisions to stay, leave, return or settle in the Lika region; and how are these mobility trajectories embedded in and shaped by wider socio-economic, political and environmental conditions of rural restructuring?

2. THEORETICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Beck (2001:76) defines reflexive modernisation as a form of "triggered modernisation that has the ability to change society." Importantly, he does not conceptualise desirable social change exclusively through past experiences marked by disruption and hardship. Instead, he argues that "different societies are not always born only in pain," emphasising that transitions in highly industrialised societies may also be driven by economic growth, high labour productivity, rapid technological development and employment security. Building on this understanding of reflexive modernity, the present study turns towards development-oriented perspectives that allow for the identification of transformative potential at the local level.

Within the European Union, contemporary approaches to rural development increasingly emphasise the importance of respecting the visions and needs of local communities, while simultaneously engaging with national and supranational development frameworks. This perspective is captured by the concept of neo-endogenous development, which seeks to empower local actors to formulate development strategies grounded in locally embedded resources and comparative advantages, while remaining connected to wider societal contexts (Bosworth et al., 2020a; Galdeano-Gómez et al., 2011). Unlike earlier exogenous or endogenous models, neo-endogenous development prioritises the valorisation of local assets and competitiveness rooted in place-specific resources, closely aligning with processes of social innovation aimed at addressing locally defined needs (Bosworth et al., 2020a).

Introduced into theoretical discourse by Ray (2001), the concept is grounded in the recognition of rural areas and local communities as key actors in shaping socio-economic development. Human and social capital are understood as central development resources, while a defining characteristic of the approach is the dynamic balance between bottom-up initiatives and top-down institutional support. Development outcomes emerge through the interaction of local knowledge, experiences and aspirations with broader governance frameworks (Atterton et al., 2011; Bosworth et al., 2020b; Galde-

ano-Gómez et al., 2011; Marango et al., 2021; Ray, 2001; Tolon-Becerra et al., 2010). In this study, the concept of neo-endogenous rural development in hilly and mountainous regions (Dax, 2020) is adopted as the central theoretical framework for assessing development outcomes and evaluating the current stage of its practical implementation in the observed area. Rural studies have consistently highlighted the enabling role of the state in raising awareness, stimulating innovation, mobilising stakeholders and transforming governance structures, particularly in remote and less integrated areas (Dax, 2020). Such a neo-endogenous approach does not imply a rigid development model but rather envisions rural and mountain regions as spaces of experimentation in which place-sensitive and context-specific development pathways may emerge. The insights derived from this framework, especially those related to future development visions and participant-driven recommendations, provide the foundation for proposing a neo-endogenous development concept tailored to the specific context of the Lika region.

In general, the paper is grounded in theories of modernity, drawing in particular on the works of Bauman (2000), Giddens (1990, 2000, 2001) and Beck (1992, 2001). The continuation of reflexive modernity (Beck et al., 1994) in the Croatian context can be understood, following the interpretation of the sociologist Ivan Rogić (2000), as a process of lagging modernisation. This process has been unfolding from the first industrial revolution to the present day and has had a specific and lasting impact on rural areas that have historically functioned as the frontiers of Europe.

Comparable effects of modernisation and state centralisation on rural communities were identified by Eugen Weber (1976) in his analysis of French society, which Rogić (2000) considers analytically relevant for understanding demographic (un)sustainability in peripheral regions. In this respect, the Croatian region of Lika, as one of the country's most rural areas, represents a paradigmatic case, having experienced four distinct waves of emigration over the course of its modern history.

The first wave of emigration occurred after the First World War and was predominantly overseas, primarily directed towards America and Australia. The second wave followed the Second World War and was largely driven by agricultural overcrowding (hrv. *fenomen agrarne prenapučenosti*), resulting mainly in emigration to Western Europe. The third wave unfolded throughout the socialist period and was marked by the resettlement of individuals deemed politically unsuitable or misaligned with the governing system, which again prompted emigration primarily to Western European countries, particularly Germany and Austria. The fourth wave of emigration from rural areas in Croatia is generally associated with the economic and political crises of the (post-)transition period, with particular emphasis on the time around Croatia's accession to the European Union, which coincided with the global economic crisis after 2008 (Erkens

1 This term has historically referred to the outer borders of Central Europe, encompassing geographical, political and cultural boundaries. Throughout its history, Croatia has been situated precisely at the crossroads between Central and South-Eastern Europe.

et al., 2012). Considering Croatia's specific socioeconomic and historical context, these crises began somewhat later and lasted longer than in many other countries (Draženović et al., 2018; Nejašmić, 2014; Wertheimer-Baletić, 2017), while the consequences of emigration became clearly visible in the most recent population census (CBS, 2021). This period triggered a renewed outflow, largely of human capital, towards other European countries (Kooiman et al., 2018), especially Ireland, Germany and Austria, where Croatian migrants actively contributed to labour markets and demographic renewal. Across these four Croatian modernisations, general modernisation processes have shaped three dominant types of Croatian peasants over time: the peasant-soldier or warrior, the peasant-worker, and the peasant-manager. Each of these types emerged in isolation, without the cumulative transfer of knowledge and skills characteristic of their urban contemporaries. The emergence of peripheral, wild capitalism (Županov, 2002), together with a slow transitional bureaucracy and further bureaucratisation (Rogić, 2003), represents a general outcome of modernisation processes in Croatian rural areas. These processes are further characterised by the presence of shell institutions (Giddens, 2001) and the near-complete dismantling of the planning sector, for which no viable alternative has emerged apart from overtourism (Bušljeta Tonković, 2019). It can therefore be assumed that the unfavourable state of human and social capital in Croatian rural areas is the result of a historical trajectory shaped by pre-industrial traditionalism, socialist egalitarianism and a persistent tendency towards state paternalism (Rogić, 2000).

3. METHODOLOGY

The decision to focus on rural youth is grounded in their structurally pivotal position within processes of rural shrinkage and lagging modernisation. Young people are the cohort through which demographic decline becomes most visible and through which development trajectories are either reproduced or redirected. Their decisions to stay, leave, return or settle are not isolated individual choices, but condensed expressions of broader structural conditions, including labour market transformation, governance practices and the availability of local opportunities. By examining youth mobility, the study captures how historical legacies, post-transition restructuring and contemporary development constraints materialise in everyday life and shape the future prospects of a shrinking rural region.

3.1. Qualitative research and regional context

Between 2012 and 2020, according to data from the Croatian Bureau of Statistics (CBS, 2021), a total of 310,191 people emigrated from Croatia, of whom 77,192 were young people aged 15-29 (24.88%). Emigration was most pronounced among young men aged 25-29. While the lowest number of young emigrants was recorded in 2012 (2,836), the number increased continuously, reaching 9,947 in 2020 (Adamović & Potočnik, 2022:410). Within this wider national out-migration pattern, the Lika region represents an intensified case of demographic vulnerability (CBS, 2013, 2022).

The traditional Croatian region of Lika represents a paradigmatic example of a shrinking region and was selected as a case study due to its predominantly rural and mountainous character, persistent depopulation trends and limited recovery capacity without clear development strategies and governmental support (Zhelezov, 2011). According to the 2021 Census (CBS, 2021), Lika has a population of 35,451, representing a decline of 19.6% since 2011. The region comprises 244 settlements with an average of 145 inhabitants per settlement and a population density of 6.3 inhabitants per square kilometre, making it the least densely populated region in Croatia. This pattern reflects characteristics of the sub-ecumene and long-term depopulation driven by lagging modernisation. Notably, depopulation in Lika is approximately double the national average, which declined by 9.6% between 2011 and 2021 (CBS, 2013, 2022).

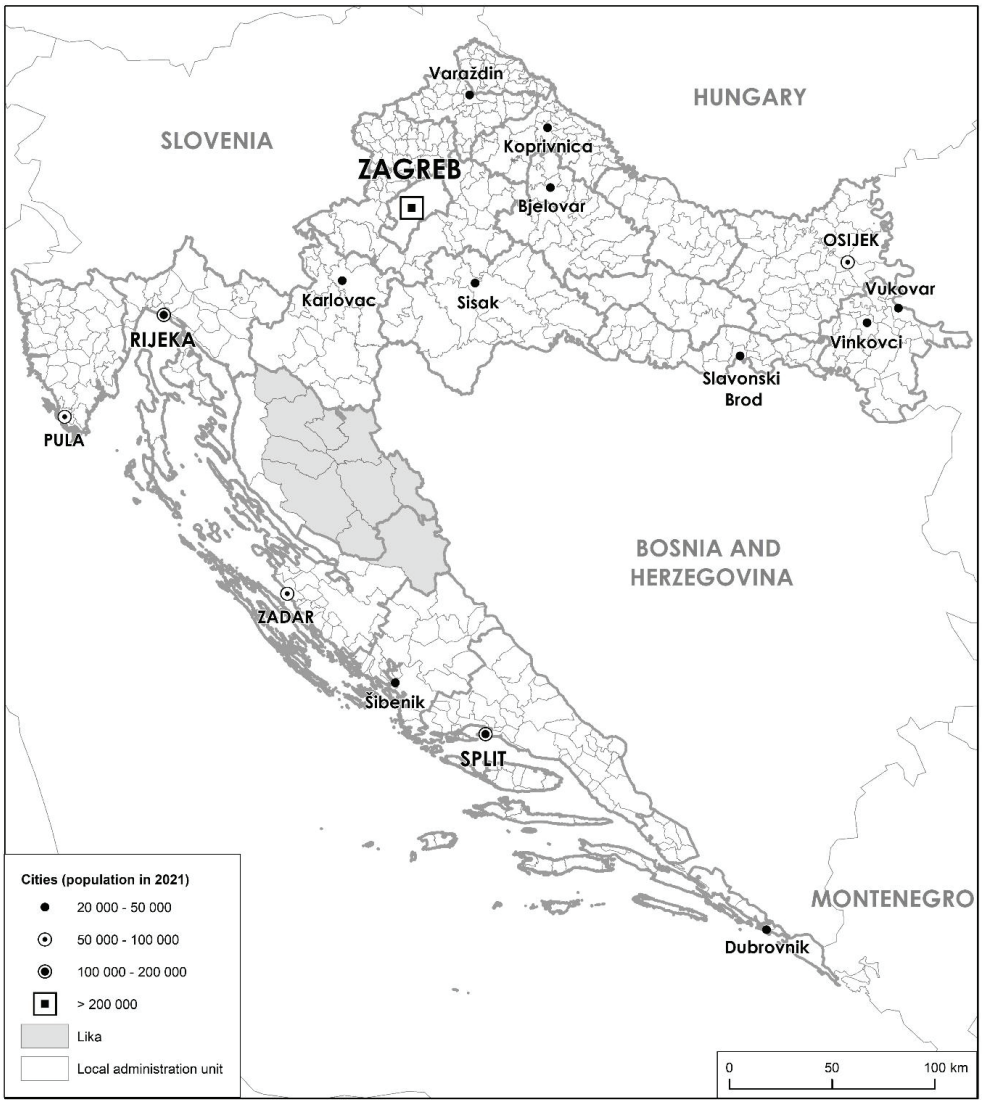
Depopulation results from negative natural change, characterised by low fertility and high mortality, combined with persistent negative migration balance (CBS, 2021). These trends have weakened the demographic base to such an extent that population renewal under existing conditions appears unlikely. In 2021, the elderly population accounted for 25.4%, more than double the share of young people (12.9%), exceeding both the national average (22.5%) and the ageing threshold. The age index of 197.8 and the elderly dependency ratio of 41.2 indicate a profoundly unfavourable age structure (CBS, 2013, 2022).

Building on the assumption that scientifically examined negative modernisation and post-transition processes in a concrete rural area may serve as a pilot case for understanding similar regions, the study applies a set of so-called soft criteria to provide an analytically grounded overview of Lika. One of these criteria is insight into depopulation processes obtained through qualitative research. The region's geographical position connects Adriatic and Pannonian Croatia and links northern and southern parts of the country with other European states, which is relevant for potential sectoral development (See Fig. 1)

A qualitative research approach was adopted, using semi-structured interviews. This choice reflected not only methodological suitability (Bryman, 2016; Clark et al., 2021; Strijker et al., 2022), but also an understanding of qualitative inquiry as a form of social practice enabling deeper insight into meanings and experiences (Brinkmann, 2018). Fieldwork was conducted in 2022, combining desk research with 32 semi-structured interviews and 11 student reports, forming a methodological bricolage suited to the socio-cultural context of Lika (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The researcher's positionality is relevant, as the corresponding author is herself a rural woman (Kincheloe et al., 2018).

2 As part of the internship, students from the University of Zagreb, some of whom came from rural backgrounds and provided additional analytical insight as co-interpreters in the research process, prepared interview transcripts and reflective reports (Kincheloe et al., 2018). With informed consent and institutional approval, 11 student reports were analysed using MAXQDA 24.1.0 (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019), as part of the same thematic analysis applied to the interviews.

Figure 1 *Location of the Lika Region*



Source: *State Geodetic Administration (2016)*

Apart from the opening life-history question, designed to establish contextual grounding and rapport with participants (Bryman, 2016; Clark et al., 2021), the interview guide was structured in accordance with Everett S. Lee's (1966) push-pull model of migration. The protocol comprised 20 semi-structured questions organised into thematic units reflecting economic, political, sociocultural and environmental dimensions of mobility. In addition to Lee's framework (Lee, 1966; Parkins, 2010; Peračković et al., 2024), the structure of the interview also drew on the multidimensional logic of susta-

inable development, ensuring that migration motives were examined within a broader socio-economic and environmental context (Bjarnason & Thorlindsson, 2006; Blewitt, 2008; Mladenov, 2011; Nikitović, 2011).

The first thematic unit addressed the economic dimension of life, focusing on motives for staying, leaving, returning, or moving to Lika, including education opportunities, employment and earnings, career advancement, housing, access to health and social services, and everyday infrastructure. The second thematic unit explored the ecological dimension, including perceptions of environmental quality, (de)industrialisation, air quality, landscape, food, and the value of quietness and spaciousness. The third thematic unit addressed the political dimension, including perceived relevance of politics, political affiliations, freedom and security, youth roles in policy processes, centre-periphery relations in decision-making, and war-related displacement experiences. The fourth thematic unit examined sociocultural factors, including interpersonal relations, patriarchal norms and gendered expectations, and the influence of partners and friends on mobility decisions. A final unit captured visions for the future, both for Lika and for personal trajectories, enabling participants to articulate desired development directions as well as perceived constraints.

During coding, two overarching streams emerged: (1) perceptions of the present (economic, environmental, political and sociocultural) and (2) visions of the future, resulting in five foundational codes and a set of subcodes that captured the principal interpretative patterns across interviews.

All interviews were conducted in person, despite challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. In situ research enabled observation of multiple consequences of depopulation, including abandoned settlements, infrastructural isolation and preserved natural resources.

Table 1 *Key Characteristics of the Interview Sample*

Characteristic	Category	Description
Age	Young people	All participants aged 18-35
Gender	Women	Majority
Gender	Men	Minority
Education level	Higher education (BA/MA)	Majority
Education level	Secondary education	Minority
Employment sector	Public sector	Majority (culture, healthcare, development agencies, civil service)
Employment sector	Private sector / agriculture	Minority
Place of residence	Lika region	Participants distributed across all municipalities
Place of residence	Urban areas outside Lika	Zagreb, Rijeka, Zadar

Household situation	Living with parents / parental property	Majority
Household situation	Independent housing (rent/ ownership)	Minority
Family status	Not married, no children	Majority
Family status	Married and/or with children	Minority

Source: *Authors' elaboration.*

Thematic coding was conducted by a single researcher following a qualitative interpretative approach (Bryman, 2016). From an initial pool of 115 interviews collected through snowball sampling, a sub-sample of 32 participants was selected based on age and life-course criteria. Specifically, only respondents aged between 18 and 35 were included, reflecting the extended upper boundary commonly used in defining youth, and ensuring that participants had already made key life decisions regarding residence and employment. While the broader study design aimed at a balanced distribution across predefined mobility categories, the application of these selection criteria resulted in a slight distortion of the original sample structure. The limitations associated with snowball sampling are acknowledged (Bryman, 2016), particularly in terms of representativeness; however, the approach enabled access to relevant participants with diverse mobility experiences. The coding process involved iterative reading and thematic categorisation, leading to the identification of core analytical themes related to mobility, attachment and future-making.

Participant recruitment relied primarily on snowball sampling supported by local networks. A total of 115 individuals were initially recruited and classified by migration experience, from which 32 interviews were selected for in-depth analysis (Table 1). Participants were grouped as stayers, leavers, returnees and settlers. Supplementary contextual data were gathered through reflections provided by transcribers.

All participants had a personal connection to Lika, whether through birth, return migration, wartime displacement, or moving to the region. Two-thirds of participants were women, reflecting patterns of higher research participation among highly educated women (Parvazian et al., 2017). Educational attainment varied, with returnees more frequently employed in tourism and nature protection sectors. Approximately two-thirds of participants were employed in the public sector, while fewer worked in the private sector or agriculture. Participants were evenly distributed across Lika, while those who had moved away resided in the cities of Zagreb, Rijeka and Zadar.

Most participants were unmarried and childless, reflecting broader trends of delayed family formation (Aassve et al., 2013; Billari & Liefbroer, 2010; Ilišin & Spajić Vrkaš, 2015; Majstorić, 2019; Spurling, 2024). Nearly 80% of young people in Croatia live with their parents, with Croatia recording the highest average age of leaving the parental home in the EU (Eurostat, 2024; Tomić-Koludrović & Petrić, 2007). This pattern was evident among participants, many of whom lived in parental properties either in Lika or in urban destinations.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The term "shrinkage", as mentioned earlier, is most often used to describe population decline, but it in fact denotes a wider interaction of economic, demographic, social and cultural processes. In such regions, it is also possible to trace what Shucksmith et al. (2023:152) describe as the "history of loss", shaped by events unfolding across the last century. In Croatia, as in other post-socialist contexts of South-Eastern Europe, shrinkage is commonly intensified by post-communist economic decline, deindustrialisation and diminishing local employment opportunities.

Van der Star and Hochstenbach (2022:371) summarise a key asymmetry in the field: most European "shrinkage" research focuses on urban contexts, while studies of rural shrinkage are more frequently situated in Eastern or Central Europe. In Croatia, a relevant example is the survey by Peračković et al. (2024), which examined why young people do or do not stay in less developed areas. More broadly, rural studies often concentrate on motives for leaving and on return intentions (Zollet and Qu, 2023), while the group that remains is less frequently analysed in depth (van der Star and Hochstenbach, 2022:371).

At a regional scale, Adamović and Potočnik (2022:417) found that youth across South-Eastern Europe predominantly express a desire to migrate for a better standard of living, higher wages and improved employment prospects, especially in nearby countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Romania and North Macedonia. Within this broader regional framework, our analysis integrates qualitative findings from Lika to illuminate how young people interpret staying, leaving, returning and (re)settling under conditions of long-term shrinking (and/or peripheralisation).

4.1. Reasons for staying, returning, and moving to Lika: "it is difficult to recount how I see Lika, I love it very much"

Participants' reasons for residing in Lika ranged from employment (most often in public, regional or local institutions) to forms of self-employment, including agriculture and tourism opportunities facilitated after the EU accession. A subset described how pandemic-era work arrangements made return more feasible, particularly where remote or hybrid work was available. In the European context, remote work is increasingly discussed as an instrument that can support rural and peripheral areas, while its effects depend strongly on infrastructure, services, and local ecosystems of support (Eurostat, 2024).

Participants also referred to "digital nomads" as a potential group of newcomers. This was usually framed as an opportunity linked to affordable real estate and the attractiveness of quiet, nature-based settings. Such narratives resonate with scholarship conceptualising digital nomadism as a technology-enabled mobile work style shaped by changing labour markets and lifestyles (Hannonen, 2020). In parallel, Croatia as an EU member state has established a legal basis for temporary stay for digital nomads, which participants sometimes referenced as a signal of new mobility possibilities.

Lower real estate prices and the possibility of living in family property, often rent-free, were repeatedly described as key practical advantages. Yet many participants also stres-

sed that inherited housing alone does not guarantee a high quality of life. For those who returned, a decisive condition remained stable employment: "If it wasn't for that job, I probably wouldn't even come back" (ABT11, Pos. 2).

Family support was described in both practical and emotional terms. Beyond housing, participants articulated the emotional "pull" of returning to a place associated with family, personal history and belonging: "Sometimes, more than anything, I want to return home…" (NB02, Pos. 43). Several accounts also highlighted a perceived gain in time and everyday ease due to short travel distances and low traffic, framed as an improvement in work-life rhythm.

Participants frequently argued that Lika's geographical position is strategically favourable, enabling access to major Croatian cities and the Adriatic coast, even if the region remains peripheral in socio-economic and political terms. This mismatch between connectivity and underutilised potential was often described as an "absurd" contradiction.

Environmental pull factors, encompassing quietness, access to land and food, and the affective meaning of "home", constituted one of the most prominent interpretative frames across the interviews. In that context, a dominant theme across interviews was the value of preserved nature, clean environment, spaciousness, and the sensory experience of "home" landscapes. Participants often contrasted rural environmental quality with perceived urban pollution, crowding, stress, and limited access to privately meaningful green space. For some, environmental concerns became more salient after existential issues such as education and employment were addressed, suggesting a temporal sequencing of priorities.

Food and land were repeatedly framed in terms of autonomy and security: "here you always have land (…) we can plant a garden (…) our nature is the most beautiful" (ABT02, Pos. 16). These accounts were sometimes linked to future family formation: several participants argued that families with children could be a realistic target group for (re)settlement because of perceived safety, clean air and calmer everyday life.

Social ties and the intimacy of small communities emerged as an ambivalent dimension of everyday life, simultaneously experienced as supportive and constraining. Participants recognised dense social familiarity and mutual awareness as a source of safety and warmth, but also as a mechanism of surveillance and social pressure. One participant captured this ambivalence by contrasting rural intimacy with urban anonymity: "in the city, neighbours may be reduced to 'good morning and goodbye', while in a village the closeness can be simultaneously irritating and comforting" (ABT13, Pos. 18–19).

This duality also aligns with the broader literature on place attachment in shrinking regions, where attachment can motivate engagement and resilience, but may also coexist with pressures that stimulate out-migration (van der Star & Hochstenbach, 2022).

4.2. Reasons for moving out of Lika: "went to university and did not return"

As indicated earlier, the history of the Lika region has been marked by continuous population movements, predominantly outward. These movements accelerated alongside broader processes of modernisation, post-socialist transition and technological change. Drawing on Giddens (1990, 2000, 2001) and Beck (1992, 2001), this transformation

can be understood as a reconfiguration of distance and proximity, in which technical networks compress social space and time and enable unprecedented mobility. From this perspective, freedom increasingly includes the capacity to autonomously change place of residence, supported by transport and communication infrastructures (Rogić & Čizmić, 2011).

While such transformations facilitated everyday life for those who remained, they simultaneously enabled the large-scale outflow of population from rural regions. In Lika, this process was intensified by the late and uneven development of basic infrastructure. Electricity, water supply, telecommunication networks and roads reached many rural settlements only towards the late 1980s, while the Homeland War further delayed infrastructural consolidation (Bušljeta Tonković, 2015). These structural conditions reinforced emigration during and after the transition period of the 1990s.

In empirical terms, most participants who left Lika did so initially for education. Secondary school tracks and university programmes were unavailable locally, prompting early departures, with some leaving as young as fourteen. Those who left at this age reported weaker expectations of return and described identities that became increasingly tied to the cities and regions where they studied. For them, Lika remained emotionally significant but no longer functioned as a realistic site of future life. This pattern is further reinforced by the predominance of economic motives underlying mobility decisions, as illustrated by one participant: "If we were to look at it in percentage terms, economic reasons are definitely the main ones. People simply did not have sufficient income and decided to leave. What they had been living until then was not considered a proper life. Lika offered them beautiful nature and the presence of family, but in order to truly enjoy all that, one must first have the financial means to support that same family" (PB, Pos. 1).

The second decisive factor was employment. A number of participants returned after completing formal education but encountered limited job opportunities. Several described informal signals received during registration at employment offices, suggesting that they were "overqualified" and unlikely to find appropriate work locally. After months, and in some cases up to a year of searching, most re-migrated to urban centres where they had studied, found employment relatively quickly, and described feeling "at home". In this sense, employment emerged as the critical turning point in mobility decisions. Emotional attachment, family ties and environmental quality were insufficient to offset prolonged economic insecurity. As one participant succinctly noted, without a job, there is little reason to stay, regardless of personal attachment.

Participants also articulated feelings of exclusion and a lack of recognition within the local context, which further motivated their decision to leave: "(…) I think both my wife and I said, well, if you don't want us here, we'll go where someone does." (SG02, Pos. 1). Participants also emphasised the lack of career advancement. Even when employment in Lika was secured, limited opportunities for professional development led some to relocate. This was particularly evident among those employed in public institutions or civil society organisations, where hierarchical structures and scarce positions restricted upward mobility. Precarious employment arrangements, especially short-term

project contracts and periods of unpaid volunteering, further contributed to existential uncertainty.

The causal relationship between employment opportunities and mobility decisions was frequently emphasised by participants: "It's a cause-and-effect relationship—if you don't have a job down there (in Lika, authors' note), you have no reason to stay. It pushes you to go elsewhere. Even if you have the desire to stay, it still pushes you somewhere else" (IS02, Pos. 53). Money was rarely discussed abstractly, yet it consistently appeared as a decisive practical concern. Participants framed financial stability not as luxury, but as a precondition for independence, family formation and long-term planning. In this respect, out-migration was not narrated as rejection of Lika, but as a rational response to structural constraints.

4.3. Criticism of Lika, its towns and municipalities: "human capital has long since moved out of Lika"

Participants consistently described life in Lika as pleasant, while economic factors, particularly employment opportunities, remained the primary motivation for leaving. These findings align with previous research on rural youth, place attachment and environmental belonging (Farrugia et al., 2016; Fehser et al., 2025; Gvozdanović et al., 2019).

These findings are also consistent with earlier Croatian and regional research that has long pointed to the interconnections between education, employment opportunities and political dynamics in shaping young people's life chances and mobility decisions. Studies conducted in Croatia since the early 2010s have repeatedly identified young people with lower levels of education and weaker socioeconomic backgrounds, living in structurally underdeveloped regions such as Lika, as a particularly vulnerable subgroup (Bušljeta Tonković, 2015; Gvozdanović et al., 2019; Ilišin & Spajić Vrkaš, 2015; Kuzmić et al., 2021). These works highlight how limited labour-market opportunities, combined with perceptions of political clientelism and unequal access to resources, contribute to political disengagement and reinforce out-migration aspirations among rural youth.

At the European level, similar patterns have been documented in the Youth Study Southeast Europe 2018/2019, conducted across ten countries (Lavrič et al., 2019). The study shows that young people across the region experience persistent political and economic insecurity, low employment prospects and widespread perceptions of corruption, particularly in education systems and labour markets. While many express pro-European orientations and demand equal opportunities, fair economic arrangements and open labour markets, they simultaneously emphasise the importance of an active welfare state capable of mitigating social and economic risks. In the Western Balkans 6 (WB6), political affiliation is perceived as a decisive factor in access to employment, reinforcing feelings of injustice and distrust in public institutions (Lavrič et al., 2019). These findings closely mirror the narratives expressed by participants in this study, where political disillusionment, perceived nepotism and clientelism were frequently cited as central drivers of both mobility decisions and political disengagement.

Within the interviews, education, employment and politics emerged as an interlinked triad shaping young people's everyday experiences and future orientations. Participants frequently connected their mobility decisions to political disillusionment, particularly perceptions of nepotism, clientelism and corruption. Employment in public and local institutions was widely perceived as dependent on political affiliation or personal connections rather than merit. This perception aligns with earlier research on youth political apathy in Croatia and the broader region (Barnes, 2023; Gvozdanović et al., 2019; Ilišin & Spajić Vrkaš, 2015; Kuzmić et al., 2021; Lavrič et al., 2019; Pap, 2020). Among the 32 interviewees, only one described active political engagement. While many participants initially claimed that politics did not significantly affect their everyday lives, a smaller group explicitly acknowledged its influence, often with frustration. As one participant stated: "Even if you don't care, it still affects you" (KH, Pos. 7).

Several interviewees described distancing themselves from politics as a coping strategy. Relocation to larger cities or deliberate political disengagement were framed as ways of reducing exposure to local power structures perceived as unjust, closed or stagnant. Students involved in transcription and analysis also noted strong emotional tones in the interviews, including anger, disappointment and resignation, particularly when participants reflected on local political dynamics and missed opportunities for change. This perception is further illustrated by one participant: "The political situation, which is poor across the country, is even more pronounced in Lika because it is a small community where everything is taken personally, prompting people to distance themselves from such an environment" (AB, Pos. 6).

Entrepreneurial aspirations were also present in participants' narratives, often framed as a pathway to autonomy and long-term return: "I actually have a goal that I hope to achieve one day—I would like to open my own private care home (for the elderly, authors' note). I believe this is needed in Lika because the population is quite old and waiting lists are long; there is simply not enough capacity in the entire Lika-Senj County. So I think I could succeed with that, but I feel I still need more experience in healthcare and a bit more maturity, so to speak…" (NB02, Pos. 43). At the same time, participants made a clear distinction between politics and markets. While corruption was acknowledged as a national-level issue, larger cities were perceived as offering more transparent recruitment processes due to a broader and more diversified private labour market. For some, entrepreneurship appeared as an idealised, politics-independent pathway to autonomy and self-realisation. Several participants imagined potential return to Lika only after establishing themselves economically elsewhere, most often through private business initiatives.

However, this confidence in market mechanisms was deeply ambivalent. While free-market dynamics were associated with meritocracy and opportunity, participants simultaneously expressed concerns about uncontrolled external capital, loss of local ownership and further marginalisation of local communities. This contradiction reflects a broader tension between profound distrust in local political institutions and limited confidence in the state's capacity to regulate market forces in a way that would protect local interests.

Local governments and municipalities were also criticised for their limited strategic capacity. Participants described persistent difficulties in attracting skilled professionals, such as medical staff, engineers and educators, while acknowledging the fine line between targeted recruitment and favouritism. Some forms of positive discrimination were recognised, particularly when local authorities attempted to employ individuals with roots in the region in hopes of long-term retention, as illustrated by one participant: "When I applied for the job, I think my only advantage was that I had a university degree and all the necessary qualifications, and that in such a small place they wanted to employ someone who has roots there, someone who would be willing to return…" (ABT11, Pos. 32). Yet these practices were often viewed with suspicion, reinforcing perceptions of informality and unequal access to opportunities.

Overall, participants frequently returned to the idea that "quality has already left." This phrase encapsulated not only demographic decline, but also a perceived depletion of expertise, initiative and leadership, reinforcing a broader sense of structural stagnation and diminished developmental capacity in Lika.

4.4. Future imaginaries: Lika as the "heart and lung of Croatia"

Despite extensive critique, participants articulated clear visions for the future. Across interviews, employment security emerged as the foundational condition for any demographic or social renewal. Jobs were seen as the prerequisite upon which all other measures depend.

Participants most frequently located future employment potential in services, especially rural and nature-based tourism, combined with agriculture and institutions for nature protection. Importantly, they explicitly rejected models of mass tourism characteristic of the Croatian coast, instead favouring low-density, environmentally sensitive forms aligned with Lika's landscape and identity. This vision of tourism development is further illustrated by one participant: "I think Lika could develop quite well in terms of tourism because it is at the heart, somewhere between the continental and coastal parts, and I believe there is a lot of potential for tourism development, especially short trips. It can offer quite a lot: hills, mountains, the sea, plains, rivers and lakes" (SG03, Pos. 13).

Small and medium entrepreneurship was mentioned less frequently, though when discussed it was framed as desirable precisely because of its perceived independence from political structures. Some participants envisaged "clean" industries, renewable energy projects or processing facilities linked to forestry and agriculture, often assuming external investment through EU funds or foreign capital. Local actors were rarely imagined as primary investors, reflecting limited confidence in endogenous economic capacity.

Governance featured prominently in future-oriented narratives. Participants expressed hope for younger, independent political leaders with managerial competence and integrity, as reflected in the following account: "New political currents have emerged, including quite a number of independent actors. Among those who are now mayors or municipal leaders, this at least brings some refreshment, as it opens space for different

kinds of change; the same structures had been in place for a very long time, and still are in some areas. I see this as a positive shift, perhaps in 10 or 20 years something more substantial will become visible at a higher level. There is, there is some movement" (IS02, Pos. 49). The EU membership and regulatory oversight were viewed as potential stabilising forces capable of raising standards and curbing local abuses of power.

Demographically, participants acknowledged that return migration alone is insufficient. Given the weakened population base, they argued that Lika must also attract new residents. Families with children were most frequently identified as a key target group, due to the perceived advantages of safety, environmental quality and space. At the same time, participants recognised practical barriers, including limited preschool provision, specialised healthcare and secondary education options.

Civil society development was repeatedly highlighted as underdeveloped yet crucial. Volunteering, cultural activities and youth initiatives were seen as important not only for the quality of life, but also for strengthening social cohesion and agency. Infrastructure improvements, such as sports facilities and contemporary cultural institutions, were likewise framed as symbolic signals that the region values its younger population.

Finally, participants consistently expressed strong place attachment, often emphasising the perceived advantages of rural living for family life: "(…) if they are starting a family, I believe it would be an advantage for them that their children grow up in a calmer environment like this, with clean and healthy air, and healthy food, as opposed to the urban hustle, confinement and the many buildings surrounding us with very little greenery" (ABT06, Pos. 15). They did not desire rapid growth, overcrowding or loss of local character. Instead, they envisioned a future in which Lika remains calm, safe and environmentally preserved, while offering fair opportunities for work and participation. This balance between continuity and change lies at the core of their development imaginaries.

Recent studies on rural youth published in 2025 emphasise that young people's decisions to leave, stay, or return constitute a key mechanism through which demographic trajectories and development pathways in rural areas are reproduced or disrupted. Research on rural return migration shows that return is often grounded in affective attachments to place, the natural environment, and the "social fabric" of local communities, yet remains deeply ambivalent due to persistent experiences of deprivation, limited services, and restricted life opportunities in rural settings (Carrasco-Cruz & Cruz-Souza, 2025). Migration-focused studies further demonstrate that, for many young people, "leaving" is structured as almost inevitable, while ties to rural land and identity frequently persist after migration. This suggests that mobility does not negate belonging but rather functions as a survival strategy and a means of future positioning (Clendenning, 2025). Educational mobilities are similarly framed as emotionally charged transitional phases, during which young people negotiate between social norms, expectations, and personal aspirations (Kettunen & Sitomaniemi-San, 2025).

Post-COVID-19 research points to an intensification of youth precarity in rural areas, alongside changing mobility pathways characterised by hybrid livelihood strategies that

Table 2 *Youth Mobility Patterns in the Lika Region: A Typological Overview*

Mobility Profile	Typical Life-Course Trigger	Key Pull / Retention Factors	Key Push / Exit Factors	Dominant Perceptions and Meanings	Implications for Development
Stayers	Securing local employment (often in the public sector); access to family housing	Employment stability; family support networks; inherited housing; environmental quality; short daily commute distances	Limited career advancement; political clientelism; weak public services	Strong place attachment combined with pragmatic acceptance of local constraints; loyalty mixed with a sense of frustration	Human capital remains locally embedded, but risks stagnation without institutional renewal
Leavers (education-led)	Early departure for secondary school or university (typically between the ages of 14 and 19)	Urban educational infrastructure; peer networks; broader life opportunities	Absence of secondary and tertiary education locally; lack of youth-oriented services	Identity gradually re-anchored in urban contexts; emotional ties to Lika persist but weaken over time	Out-migration becomes structurally normalised; probability of return decreases with duration of absence

Leavers (employment-led)	Failure to secure employment after completing education	Transparent labour markets; private-sector opportunities in cities	Unemployment; overqualification; precarious contracts; limited prospects for professional advancement	Leaving framed as necessity rather than choice; mobility experienced as a survival strategy	Represents a net loss of skilled youth; highlights the mismatch between educational outcomes and local labour market demand
Returnees	Job offers; availability of remote or hybrid work arrangements; family formation phase	Employment opportunity; housing availability; family ties; quality of life considerations	Limited institutional openness; fragile local labour markets	Conditional return: place attachment is strong, but the permanence of return depends on job security	Return migration is possible but fragile; highly sensitive to employment and housing policy interventions
Settlers (newcomers / lifestyle migrants)	Lifestyle reorientation; remote work; housing affordability	Low real-estate prices; well-preserved natural environment; perceived safety	Weak services; social closure; limited integration support	Lika perceived as a place of potential, but everyday realities quickly impose practical limits	Potential demographic renewal remains marginal without investment in infrastructure and services
Circular / translocal youth	Combined strategies: education and employment pursued elsewhere while emotional ties are maintained locally	Flexibility; access to a family base; digital connectivity	Absence of local professional ecosystems	Sense of belonging without permanent residence; mobility embraced as a long-term life strategy	Points to the need for policies supporting circulatory mobility, rather than focusing exclusively on permanent return

Source: *Authors' own elaboration based on qualitative research conducted in the Lika region (2022).*

combine rural and extra-rural resources (Muin et al., 2025). Finally, mixed-methods studies on "return-and-work" intentions highlight the decisive role of local infrastructure, empowerment programmes, and perceptions of realistic employment and decent-work opportunities, as these factors mediate between place attachment and the practical feasibility of building a life in rural areas (Ngoc Thao Vy et al., 2025).

The Lika case illustrates how these broader dynamics are experienced and interpreted in a shrinking, rural and historically peripheral region. In other words, rather than framing youth mobility as a simple "brain drain", the qualitative material underscores its structural and relational nature. Young people do not reject Lika as a place; they navigate constrained choices within unequal spatial, economic and political systems. Their narratives combine attachment with pragmatism, critique with hope, and local belonging with translocal strategies.

Table 2 provides an analytical synthesis of the youth mobility patterns emerging from the empirical material, illustrating how mobility decisions are shaped by the interplay of education, employment and local political conditions.

4.5. Integrating Neo-Endogenous Development into the Discussion

The findings from Lika highlight the applicability of neo-endogenous development as a framework to be embedded in future regional strategies and locally implemented development models in shrinking rural contexts. As conceptualised by Ray (2001) and further developed by Dax (2020) and Bosworth et al. (2020a, 2020b), this approach emphasises the mobilisation of locally embedded resources within multi-level governance structures. The results demonstrate that its effective implementation requires not only local initiative but also coherent institutional support and strategic alignment across governance levels.

First, participants' strong place attachment, combined with a clear rejection of mass tourism and uncontrolled growth, aligns closely with Woods' (2005) argument that contemporary rural restructuring is not merely economic, but deeply socio-cultural. Young people in Lika articulate development aspirations that prioritise environmental integrity, social cohesion and quality of life over purely economic indicators. This confirms that development in shrinking regions cannot be reduced to population growth, GDP expansion or the Development Index, but must be understood as a qualitative upgrading of local living conditions, a core premise of neo-endogenous thinking.

Second, the findings reveal that human and social capital, identified by Bosworth et al. (2020a, 2020b) as central to neo-endogenous development, are simultaneously present and depleted. While young people display high levels of reflexivity, skills and entrepreneurial imagination, their capacity to act locally is constrained by weak labour markets, limited institutional openness and perceived political clientelism (Atterton et al., 2011). This tension illustrates Dax's (2020) argument that neo-endogenous development does not emerge automatically from local initiative but requires an enabling state that active-

ly reduces structural barriers and supports experimentation in peripheral regions.
Third, the study highlights the importance of multi-level connectivity, a defining feature of neo-endogenous development. Participants' life strategies are inherently translocal: education, employment and professional experience are often acquired elsewhere, while emotional ties and long-term aspirations remain linked to Lika. This confirms Hedberg i do Carmo (2012) observation that contemporary rural development increasingly depends on circulatory mobility rather than permanent settlement. In this sense, out-migration should not be conceptualised solely as loss, but as a potential resource, provided that institutional conditions for return, settlement or hybrid living arrangements exist.
Fourth, the findings resonate strongly with Dax's (2020) notion of rural and mountain regions as spaces of experimentation rather than fixed development trajectories. Participants' visions include small-scale tourism, renewable energy, care services for the elderly, digital work and lifestyle migration, all of which imply flexible, place-sensitive and reversible development pathways. However, the absence of youth-oriented civil society organisations, weak local governance capacity and fragmented service provision indicate that Lika currently lacks the institutional density required to transform these imaginaries into coordinated development strategies.
Within the RURALIKA framework, these results confirm that Lika functions as a laboratory region for understanding the cumulative effects of lagging modernisation, demographic shrinkage and post-transition governance. At the same time, the findings demonstrate that neo-endogenous development in such contexts cannot rely exclusively on local initiative. Instead, it must be supported by targeted public policies that explicitly address youth employment, housing accessibility, service provision and participatory governance. From a broader perspective, the Lika case confirms that shrinking rural regions across South-Eastern Europe face structurally similar challenges rooted in historical peripherality, lagging modernisation and post-socialist transition. As such, Lika serves as an analytically relevant case for understanding wider regional dynamics.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Processes of depopulation and rural shrinkage in South-Eastern Europe are not merely demographic phenomena; they reflect deeply embedded patterns of historical peripheralisation, lagging modernisation, and post-transitional institutional fragmentation. In this context, youth mobility represents a key mechanism through which rural development trajectories are either reproduced or disrupted. The case study of Lika demonstrates that decisions to stay, leave, return, or engage in circular mobility cannot be reduced to individual preferences; rather, they emerge from the interaction between

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labour markets, educational infrastructures, political practices, and the symbolic relationship to place.

The theoretical and historical grounding of this study suggests that Lika can be understood as a paradigmatic example of a region shaped by long-term processes of lagging modernisation. Four waves of outmigration, weak institutional consolidation, and fragmented development models have resulted in the erosion of human and social capital. Within this framework, the concept of neo-endogenous development provides an analytical tool for assessing revitalisation potential, provided that local resources are effectively connected to multi-level governance structures.

Methodologically, focusing on rural youth has proven analytically justified, as this cohort most sensitively reflects the cumulative effects of structural marginalisation. Qualitative analysis reveals that economic factors, particularly employment security and opportunities for professional advancement, constitute the primary determinants of mobility decisions. At the same time, environmental quality, family ties, and access to housing resources act as important retention or return factors. However, political apathy, perceptions of clientelism, and a lack of institutional openness constrain the transformative potential of existing human capital.

The findings indicate that youth mobility in Lika is not a simple "brain drain", but rather a translocal strategy of survival and future positioning. Education and employment frequently take place outside the region, while emotional attachment and long-term aspirations remain connected to the local space. This confirms the need for policies that recognise circular mobility as a structural feature of contemporary rural areas, rather than relying exclusively on return migration as a development objective.

Participants' visions of the future emphasise a balance between continuity and change. Development potential is located in low-intensity tourism, agriculture, nature protection, renewable energy, and new forms of work, alongside a strong resistance to mass and extractive growth models. At the same time, there is a clearly articulated demand for institutional renewal, transparent governance, and the strengthening of civil society. These aspirations correspond to the core principles of neo-endogenous development, yet they also indicate that local initiative, without systematic state support, remains insufficient.

Within the broader European framework, Lika confirms patterns observed in other peripheral rural and mountain regions: a combination of strong place attachment, limited labour markets, weak service infrastructures, and distrust in political structures. It can therefore be considered an analytical model for understanding similar dynamics in regions such as Gorski Kotar, Banovina, and the Dalmatian Hinterland in Croatia, as well as in other parts of South-Eastern Europe, particularly in countries sharing comparable historical legacies.

By situating youth mobility within the historically embedded processes of lagging modernisation and post-transition restructuring, this study advances existing research on rural youth in South-Eastern Europe by moving beyond dominant push-pull and brain drain frameworks and conceptualising mobility as a relational, translocal and temporally dynamic process. Drawing on qualitative insights from a structurally marginalised

and demographically shrinking region, it demonstrates that mobility decisions are not merely individual responses to economic constraints, but are deeply embedded in the interplay of labour market conditions, governance practices, socio-cultural norms and environmental attachments. In doing so, the paper contributes to the literature by empirically grounding the notion of circular and hybrid mobility as a constitutive feature of rural life, while also highlighting the limits of neo-endogenous development in contexts marked by weak institutional capacity and persistent peripheralisation. As such, the case of Lika provides a nuanced analytical lens for understanding similar dynamics across peripheral rural regions of South-Eastern Europe.

In order to further empirically validate and comparatively test these findings, future research should adopt a multi-level and methodologically integrated approach to analysing youth mobility in peripheral rural and mountain regions of South-Eastern Europe. This entails conducting comparative qualitative studies in regions with similar demographic, historical, and institutional characteristics, as well as establishing longitudinal research designs capable of tracing mobility across key life stages, including education, labour market entry, and family formation. Particular analytical attention should be devoted to circular and hybrid forms of mobility, especially in the context of digital work and transnational networks, as well as to comparative analyses of concrete implementations of neo-endogenous development models in comparable rural regions. Such a comparative, longitudinal, and methodologically triangulated framework would enable a more robust verification of the thesis that youth mobility in peripheral rural areas does not represent solely an indicator of structural crisis, but may also constitute a potential development resource, provided that a coherent and functional link between local initiative and multi-level institutional support is established.

STATEMENT ON THE USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Artificial intelligence tools were used solely for language editing, stylistic refinement, and improving the clarity and coherence of the text. AI was not used for data collection, data analysis, interpretation of results, or the generation of original scientific content. All theoretical framing, empirical analysis, interpretations, and conclusions are the sole responsibility of the authors.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research has been funded by the Croatian Science Foundation Installation Research Project UIP-2019-04-3024 RURALIKA and as part of the 01/08-73/23-2519-14 BAD project, funded by NextGeneration EU. The authors gratefully acknowledge the contribution of project team members Ema Bašić, Nataša Bokan, Ivan Brlić, Slaven Gašparović and Adrian Knežević, who assisted in the collection of empirical data through field research.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Statistical data can be made available upon request. Sensitive, qualitative data will not be made available in order to protect the anonymity of participants in this study.

ETHICS APPROVAL STATEMENT

The research was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Ivo Pilar Institute (number: 11-73/19-902).

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OBRASCI MOBILNOSTI MLADIH U RIJETKO NASELJENIM PODRUČJIMA HRVATSKE: STUDIJA SLUČAJA REGIJE LIKE

Anita Bušljeta Tonković*, Ana Winship, Ivan Šulc i Alen Mujčinović

Sažetak

Ruralna područja Srednje i Jugoistočne Europe dugo su pogođena depopulacijom, društvenom marginalizacijom i zaostalom modernizacijom. Stoga ovaj rad daje doprinos istraživanju obrazaca prostorne pokretljivosti mladih u rijetko naseljenim ruralnim područjima Hrvatske, s posebnim naglaskom na ličku regiju, identificiranu kao najranjivije područje prema sociodemografskim pokazateljima. Oslanjajući se na teorijski okvir zakašnjele modernizacije i koncept neo-endogenog razvoja, istraživanje ispituje razloge zbog kojih mladi ostaju, odlaze, vraćaju se ili se doseljavaju u regiju, kao i njihove percepcije uvjeta života i razvojnih perspektiva. Analiza se temelji na kvalitativnom istraživanju provedenom 2022. godine, koje obuhvaća 32 polustrukturirana intervjua s mladima različitih migracijskih iskustava, dopunjena terenskim uvidima i studentskim izvješćima. Podaci su analizirani tematskim kodiranjem utemeljenim na push-pull modelu migracija. Lika se razmatra kao paradigmatski primjer regije oblikovane dugotrajnim procesima zakašnjele modernizacije. Četiri vala iseljavanja, slaba institucionalna konsolidacija i fragmentirani razvojni modeli rezultirali su erozijom ljudskog i socijalnog kapitala. Kvalitativna analiza pokazuje da ekonomski čimbenici, osobito sigurnost zapošljavanja i mogućnosti profesionalnog napredovanja, čine primarne odrednice odluka o mobilnosti. Kvaliteta okoliša, obiteljske veze i pristup stanovanju važni su čimbenici zadržavanja ili povratka, dok politička apatija i institucionalna zatvorenost ograničavaju transformativni potencijal postojećeg ljudskog kapitala. Zaključuje se da mobilnost mladih u Lici nije puki „odljev mozgova", već translokalna strategija opstanka u kojoj se obrazovanje i zapošljavanje najčešće događaju van regije, dok emocionalna vezanost ostaje lokalna. Stoga se Lika potvrđuje kao analitički relevantan model za razumijevanje sličnih dinamika u perifernim ruralnim regijama Srednje i Jugoistočne Europe.

Ključne riječi: *kružna mobilnost, mladi u ruralnim područjima, neo-endogeni razvoj, zakašnjela modernizacija*

MOBILITÄTSMUSTER VON JUGENDLICHEN IN DÜNN BESIEDELTEN GEBIETEN KROATIENS: EINE FALLSTUDIE ZUR REGION LIKA

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Zusammenfassung

Ländliche Gebiete in Südosteuropa sind seit langem von Entvölkerung, sozialer Marginalisierung und einer verzögerten Modernisierung betroffen. Der vorliegende Beitrag leistet daher einen Beitrag zur Erforschung der räumlichen Mobilitätsmuster junger Menschen in dünn besiedelten ländlichen Gebieten Kroatiens, wobei ein besonderer Schwerpunkt auf der Region Lika liegt, die anhand soziodemografischer Indikatoren als das am stärksten gefährdete Gebiet des Landes identifiziert wurde. Auf der Grundlage des theoretischen Rahmens der verzögerten Modernisierung und des Konzepts der neo-endogenen Entwicklung untersucht die Studie die Gründe, warum junge Menschen in der Region bleiben, sie verlassen, dorthin zurückkehren oder sich dort niederlassen, sowie ihre Wahrnehmung der Lebensbedingungen und Entwicklungsperspektiven. Die Analyse stützt sich auf eine im Jahr 2022 durchgeführte qualitative Untersuchung, die 32 halbstrukturierte Interviews mit jungen Menschen mit unterschiedlichen Migrationserfahrungen umfasst und durch Erkenntnisse aus der Feldforschung sowie studentische Berichte ergänzt wird. Die Daten wurden mittels thematischer Kodierung analysiert, die sich am Push-Pull-Modell der Migration orientiert. Lika wird als paradigmatisches Beispiel für eine Region interpretiert, die von langfristigen Prozessen der verzögerten Modernisierung geprägt ist. Vier Auswanderungswellen, eine schwache institutionelle Konsolidierung und

fragmentierte Entwicklungsmodelle haben zu einer Erosion des Human- und Sozialkapitals geführt. Die qualitativen Ergebnisse deuten darauf hin, dass wirtschaftliche Faktoren, insbesondere Beschäftigungssicherheit und Aufstiegsmöglichkeiten, die wichtigsten Faktoren für Mobilitätsentscheidungen sind. Umweltqualität, familiäre Bindungen und der Zugang zu Wohnraum stellen wichtige Gründe für den Verbleib und die Rückkehr dar, während politische Apathie und institutionelle Verschlossenheit das Transformationspotenzial des vorhandenen Humankapitals einschränken. Die Studie kommt zu dem Schluss, dass die Mobilität junger Menschen in Lika nicht auf einen einfachen Braindrain reduziert werden kann, sondern als translokale und zirkuläre Überlebensstrategie verstanden werden sollte, bei der Bildung und Beschäftigung häufig außerhalb der Region stattfinden, während die emotionale Bindung lokal verankert bleibt. Lika bestätigt sich somit als analytisch relevantes Modell zum Verständnis ähnlicher Dynamiken in den peripheren ländlichen Regionen Südosteuropas.

Schlüsselwörter: *zirkuläre Mobilität, verzögerte Modernisierung, neo-endogene Entwicklung, Jugendliche in ländlichen Räumen.*