

INNER PERCEPTION AND REGIONAL IDENTIFICATION AMONG THE YOUTH – A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

This paper focuses on future perspectives of young people, as a result of their inner perception and regional identification, living in the Mur-Regions of Upper Styria West, South Styria (AUT) and Pomurje (SLO). These regions are facing structural challenges such as overaging, outward migration and a more or less strong brain drain.

Young people are the main future human potential of these regions, for which reason a survey among them was done. This study shows the results in a comparative way. Among others, priority is given to the reasons for staying in the region and the main perspectives for the future, regarding the youth's point of view. Furthermore, the study deals with regional differences and similarities, political strategies and their role concerning effective future regional planning.

Key words: Inner perception, young People, regional identification, overaging, outward migration, brain drain.

NOTRANJA PERCEPCIJA IN REGIONALNA IDENTIFIKACIJA MED MLADINO – PRIMERJALNA ŠTUDIJA

Izvleček

Primerjalna študija obravnava perspektive v prihodnosti mladine, živeče v obmurskih regijah Zahodna Zgornja Štajerska, Južna Štajerska (Avstrija) in Pomurje (Slovenija), kot rezultat njene notranje percepcije in regionalne identifikacije. Te regije se soočajo s strukturnimi izzivi, kot so staranje prebivalstva, izseljevanje in bolj ali manj močan proces bega možganov. Ker je mladina temeljni potencial za prihodnost teh regij, je bila med mladimi izvedena raziskava. Študija prikazuje dobljene rezultate na primerjalni način, pri čemer so, z vidika mladine, med drugim poudarjeni razlogi za nadaljnje bivanje v regiji in perspektive v prihodnosti. Nenazadnje študija obravnava regionalne razlike in podobnosti ter politične strategije in njihovo vlogo pri učinkovitem regionalnem načrtovanju za prihodnost.

Ključne besede: notranja percepcija, mladina, regionalna identifikacija, staranje prebivalstva, izseljevanje, beg možganov.

1. Introduction

According to the authors' opinion, networking and participation, two instruments without the process of regional development has become unimaginable, need to undergo new developments in order to more strongly facilitate the integration of adolescents, especially of their points of view and opinions. In the course of the election campaign for the 2008 parliamentary elections in Austria in September of 2008, for which 16 year olds had the voting right for the first time, the opinions of first-time voters were frequently published in various media. Among others, the statement of one adolescent girl from Judenburg in the Upper Styria West region, which, besides the region of Pomurje, was object of this investigation, appeared in the *Kleine Zeitung* on August 27, 2008. She said: "It bothers me that there are numerous benefits and discounts for retirees but that oftentimes little is done for young people." It is secondary if this is according to the opinion of the people responsible in the region. In this case it is essential to pay attention to the evaluations or perceptions of adolescents in the region, and, if necessary, to commence a desired (counter) development. The region Pomurje was chosen because of similar characteristics within the scope of regional development.

For that reason, intensive interviews with adolescents have been conducted for this study, which has also sparked interest in young people. By means of organized discussions and workshops contacts on both sides and mutual trust could be established whereby the already prevalent disenchantment with politics among adolescents gave way to interest for the region. This is a good initial position in order to apply measures against negative developments in the regions, which, for example, have led to migration of adolescents, especially from the peripheral regions. A crucial precondition for the decline of migration and the so-called "brain drain" process is the creation of a wide variety of employment positions. The generally held opinion that existing property, a sense of home, regional identity, cultural customs and traditions, family and community alone are sufficient have not proven true. On the contrary, future, long-term regional development measures must not disregard this assumption but need to respond to the adolescents' altered world of thought and need to involve them more than at present. For this reason, this subject was chosen for this study, and the focus was put on identifying how adolescents perceive their region, which future prospects they can deduce for themselves, and which developments, in their opinion, need to be pursued.

A comparison of the two regions investigated was not strictly necessary but because of numerous parallels seemed reasonable, and eventually yielded some interesting results. Both regions are situated peripherally and are affected by migration. The resulting, more or less severe demographic change poses a challenge for political and regional development measures. For both regions there is a necessity of involving adolescents in the processes of regional development, especially since a future needs to be created for this class of population, lest their staying in the region cannot be attained.

2. Survey Objectives

The primary objective of this survey is to determine the "Inner Perception" and the "Regional Identification" (cf. Mühler, 2006) among adolescents and to compare the findings from the two peripheral Mur-regions Upper-Styria-West (AUT) and Pomurje (SLO). The focus of the investigation is put on the future prospects, based on the "Inner Perception" and "Regional Identity", which the adolescents expect for themselves. In this regard current characteristics,

future developments, and potentials of the regions are assessed for their suitability. The findings are supposed to be drawn on as trend-setting recommendations for action for future regional policy questions.

3. Definition of Terms

The focus is on the “Inner Perception”, i. e. how the people living in a certain region perceive and experience that region. Since the construct “Inner Perception” is, by itself, inaccurate and not concrete we make use of the term “Regional Identity”. This term, which is often referred to in the regional sciences, is supposed to provide the necessary theoretical foundations, so this question can be approached. According to Bathelt, a region can be defined as a “concrete part of the earth’s surface which is delimitable according to certain structures and principles. Therefore, it can be distinguished from other regions” (Bathelt 2003, 44). Our notion of region goes beyond this rather general definition. For this reason, it seems to be reasonable for this study to expand Bathelt’s definition by a cultural aspect and to concretize it further. Thus, a region is a specific part of the earth’s surface which can be delineated from other regions by a common regional identity. Ipsen (1994, 232–234) stresses that regional identity is firstly a pre-scientific and diffuse term, which, moreover, was ideologically loaded in the past. Another, almost similar term from this thematic circle is “regional identification.” Mühler (2006) stresses that there is a conceptual difference between the two terms. While the “if” is foregrounded when dealing with regional identification, i.e. if identification with the region exists, the “how” is in focus when dealing with regional identity.

4. Methodology

At the outset of the study the main focus was put on the extensive analysis of current problems and challenges of peripheral regions in general and of the two investigated areas in particular. Subsequently, fundamental possible solutions were identified, discussed, and adapted for the local, regional-political objectives, and the current developments. Since a diminution of the negative migration balance is a primary objective in both regions, the focus was, therefore, put on minimizing or, respectively, stopping migration. A detailed analysis of the demographic development in these regions revealed that, primarily, adolescents and young families are moving from peripheral regions to urban areas. In order to guarantee balanced regional development with sustainable future prospects, the main focus of attention in this study was put on the population stratum ages 14 to 20. Adjusted to these circumstances, an adequate questionnaire was created with which 120 people were surveyed area-wide in both regions. Subsequently, evaluation, synopsis, and interpretation, as well as the formulation of recommendations for future regional political actions arising from these previous steps, were conducted.

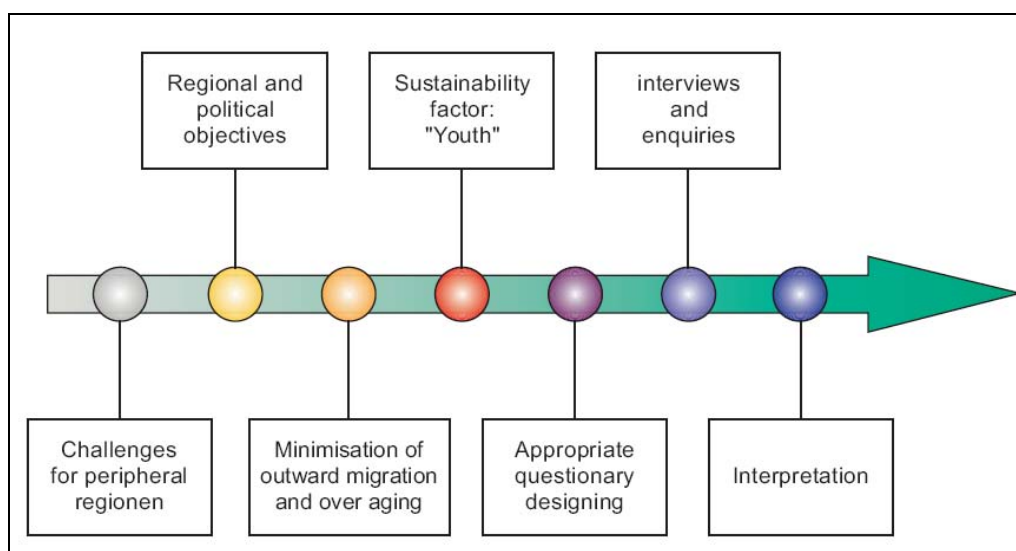


Figure 1: *Methodical way of proceeding.* (Illustration by Weigl Selina)

5. Description of the Upper Styria West region with special consideration of the demographic development¹

The Upper Styria West region is comprised of the three political districts Judenburg, Knittelfeld, and Murau, which, in total, consist of 72 communities. In a larger context, the region can be classified as peripheral, but with good intra-regional accessibility. Like the majority of today's peripheral regions, the Upper Styria West region faces the challenge of counteracting structural and social change as well as image problems.

Geographically, the region is characterized by the 'Niedere Tauern' and the Mur valley. Due to the high percentage of mountainous areas, only approx. 21 % are designated as permanent settlement area, which equals a population density of 36 inhabitants per km² for the entire region.

With regard to the economic conditions and the employment market, respectively, the area can be divided into two differently structured regions. In the region's center, the Aichfeld, large industrial and production plants are dominant, whereas the district of Murau is mainly characterized by tourism and, to some extent, agricultural activities.

Referring to the 2005 register of residents the region has 107,492 inhabitants. Like many peripheral regions, this region, too, has to deal with the problem of migration. A decline in population by 2.3 % from 1991 to 2001 and a further decline by 1.6 % in the years until 2005 were recorded. According to ÖROK a further decline by 4.2 % is to be expected until 2011. The decline in population, which has continued since 1980, can largely be attributed to structural changes due to the terciarization and the opening of markets. While the population has increased in areas surrounding the current urban centers, the migration balance in the Upper Styria West region is unambiguously negative with a minus of 2,715 people. Additionally, the share of over 65 yr. olds in the resident population is highly increased; the

¹ Amt der Steiermärkischen Landesregierung (2006): l.c.

under fifteen-year-old population is small. Thus, evidence for an over-aged society is unambiguously recognizable.

6. Description of the Pomurje region with special consideration of the demographic development²

Like Upper Styria West, the region Pomurje is a peripheral region, located in the northeast of Slovenia, bordering Austria, Croatia and Hungary. The whole Pomurje area covers 1,337 km², 6.6 % of the Slovenian territory and consists of 27 small municipalities. It has no official government, the Regional Council for Regional Development decides about regional priorities, programmes and projects.

Pomurje is divided into two sub-regions by the river Mur: Prekmurje and Prlekija. On the left bank of the river Mur, the landscape of Prekmurje is characterised by the hilly area of Goričko and the plain area of Ravensko and Dolinsko. The other side of the Mur, the Prlekija, is marked by the Apaško and Mursko polje and some hills, which form part of the Slovenske gorice.

Pomurje is primarily characterised by agricultural activities. Farmland covers 68 % of the region contrary to urban and settled areas with 5 %. Pomurje comprises 22.3 % of Slovene fields, 12.7 % of orchards, 11.7 % of vineyards and 7.6 % of meadows and pastures. Industrial activities are concentrated in urban centres, especially in the oil and textile sectors. Generally, 13.3 % of the people are working in the primary sector, 41 % in the secondary and 46.7 % in the tertiary sector (as of 2005).

Referring to the data of the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia the region had 122,453 inhabitants in 2005. Like the comparative region Upper Styria West, Pomurje also faces the problem of migration. Between 1991 and 2001 a decline in population of 5.3 %, and a further reduction by 1.2 % in the following years until 2005, could be recorded. This development can mainly be traced back to a negative migration balance. “Due to migrations of a predominantly younger population from problem areas (rural and border lines) to cities, certain areas have reached a critical demographic exhaustion point, designated the areas predominantly populated by a senescent generation, where natural population reproduction is not feasible” (www.interreg-slohucro.com 2007, 14). Additionally, the level of unemployment is very high (7.8 % in 2007) and contributes to the outward migration and Brain Drain process.

7. Adolescents as a Sustaining Lever Element

A detailed analysis of the demographic development in the two regions showed that - primarily - adolescents and young families are moving from the peripheral regions to the urban areas. Possibly also for this reason, the focus of the study was put on the social stratum ages 14 to 20, because this age-group is indispensable for a successful regional development in those regions in the future. Besides a professional working environment, an attractive social

² Slovenia-Hungary Operational Programme (2007): l.c. and Statistical Office of the Republic Slovenia (2008): l.c.

environment, and adequate leisure facilities, emotional attachment to the region (regional identification) is of great importance in order to keep adolescents in the region and to prevent negative consequences following migration and the ensuing excess of age of the remaining population. In this context, the inflationary used term “sustainability”, which, in addition to ecological and economical factors, also includes social components, is gaining importance, especially in regard to strengthening this crucial stakeholder group.

8. Results of the questionnaire about the inner perception and the identification with the Regions

The questionnaire used for the survey contained 12 questions, so that information about the adolescents’ perception of and identification with their region could be obtained. Additionally, the region’s potentials and future prospects could be surveyed from the adolescents’ point of view. Below, the questions relevant and conclusive for this publication will be discussed in greater detail.

Selected characteristics of the population – from the adolescents’ point of view:

By means of the question “How strongly do you associate the given terms with the population in your region?” first evaluations concerning the characteristics of the population, as perceived by adolescents, could be obtained. Thus, the results in Figure 2 (below), could be obtained from the adolescents’ responses.

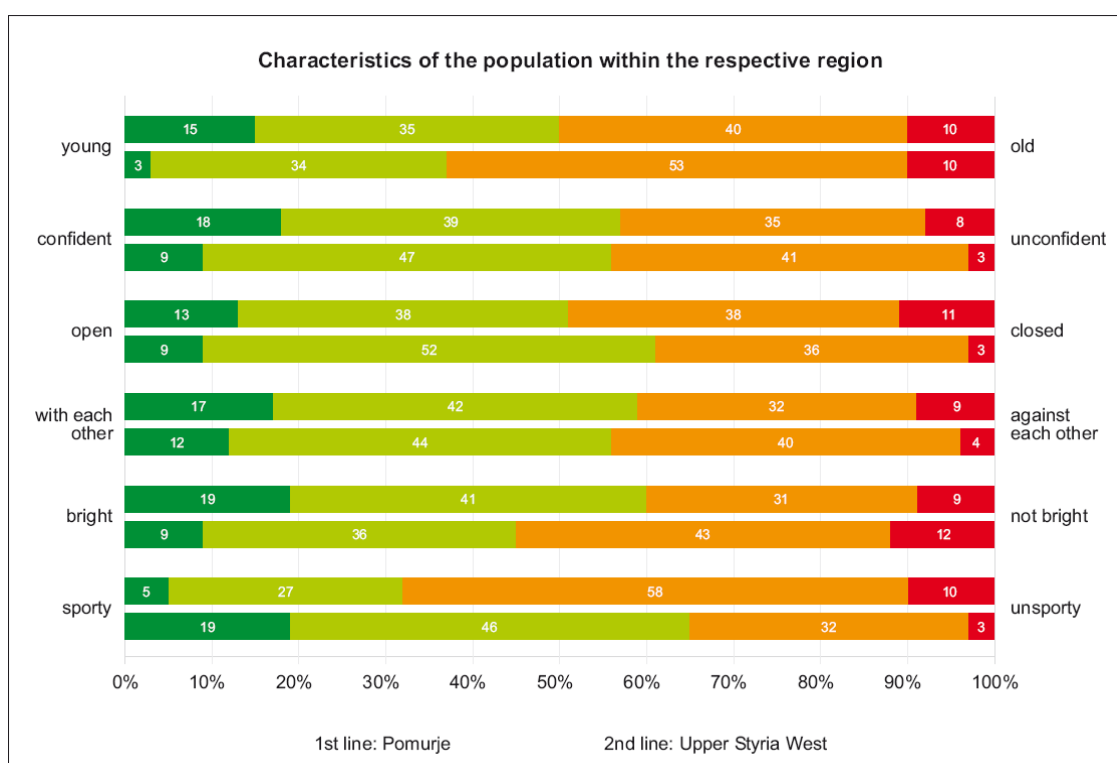


Figure 2: Characteristics of the population within the respective region. (Source: Survey by Fischer / Weigl)

The diagram shows that, concerning community and satisfaction, the adolescents assess their regions’ populations, in similar ways. A greater difference can be detected regarding the region’s openness. 51 % of the adolescents in Pomurje consider their region’s population as lively, compared to 63 % of the adolescents from the Upper Styria West region. Significant

differences can be observed concerning the populations' youthfulness and liveliness. 50 % of the respondents in Pomurje described the population as young or rather young, while only 37 % of the interviewed Austrian adolescents are of this opinion. A similar picture is revealed in regard to the regions' liveliness. With 60 %, the liveliness of the population is estimated higher in Pomurje, compared to the Upper Styria West region in which only 45 % of the population is considered lively. The biggest difference can be observed when comparing the responses concerning the athleticism of the populations. Thus, 65 % of the adolescents from Upper Styria West consider their fellow citizens as sporty, whereas only 37 % are of that opinion in Pomurje. One possible reason for this unambiguous perception among the Austrian respondents is the fact that investments in infrastructure which can be used by the population for sports activities during leisure have been made in the region in recent years. In this context, especially bicycle routes and hiking trails have gained in importance, and, together with the already existing winter sports facilities, assist in creating the image of an athletic population.

Apart from that, it is striking that the number of the rather positive responses and of the rather negative responses presents a fairly even image and also, that the results in both regions are quite even.

Selected characteristics and future possibilities of the regions – from the adolescents' point of view:

By means of the question "How strongly do you associate the following terms with your region?" a first impression could be received which grade of association the different terms evoke in the adolescents concerning their region.

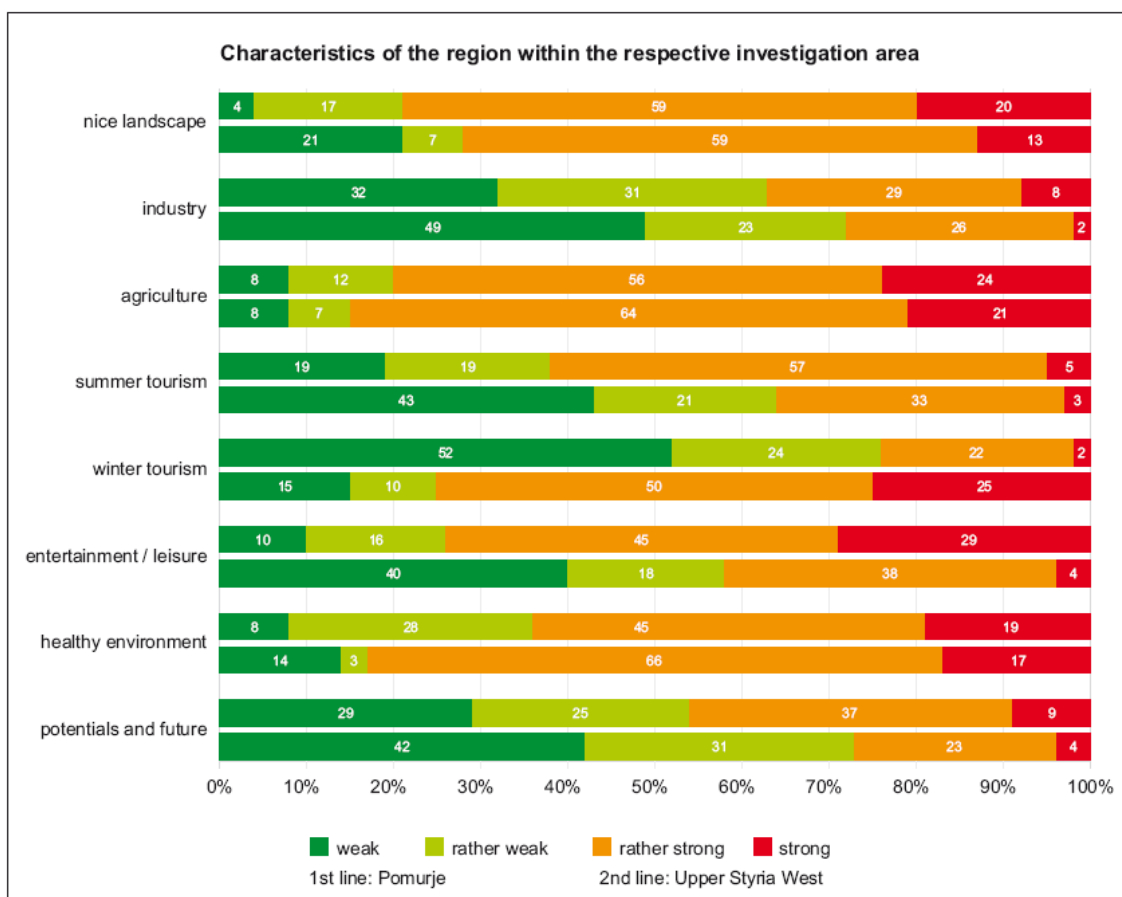


Figure 3: Characteristics of the region within the respective area. (Source: Survey by Fischer / Weigl)

According to figure 3, the adolescents interviewed associated their respective regions, Pomurje and Upper Styria West, most strongly with the term agriculture (85 % Upper Styria West; 80 % Pomurje). For most, nice landscape and healthy environment also seem to be important aspects of the region. Thus, both regions are perceived as mainly characterized by rurality. In the case of the Upper Styria West region, winter tourism is considered as another significant shaping element. Summer tourism, however, was only recognized by 36 % of the respondents, despite the overnight-stay statistics showing a different picture: with 52 % of the overnight stays winter tourism only marginally outweighs summer tourism.

A similarly contrary picture has resulted for the item 'industry', which is hardly associated with the region (28 %), despite western Upper Styria being an industrial center of the province. There has been a considerable change towards the service sector over the past few years, yet far too much importance is still accorded to industry. So, according to the responses, the region's image, or respectively, the perception of it by adolescents has already changed.

Of special interest, as pertaining to this study, was the estimation of potentials and the region's future from the adolescents' point of view. In Pomurje 46 %, which is almost half of the adolescents, are of the opinion that the region holds potentials and opportunities for the future. This attribute concerning their region had by far the lowest grade of association for the adolescents in Upper Styria West.

This is also reflected in the answers for the question if the adolescents interviewed generally see a chance for their future in the region. As expected, the results show a slightly more positive perception among adolescents from Pomurje. Thus, 51 % can imagine a future in the region.

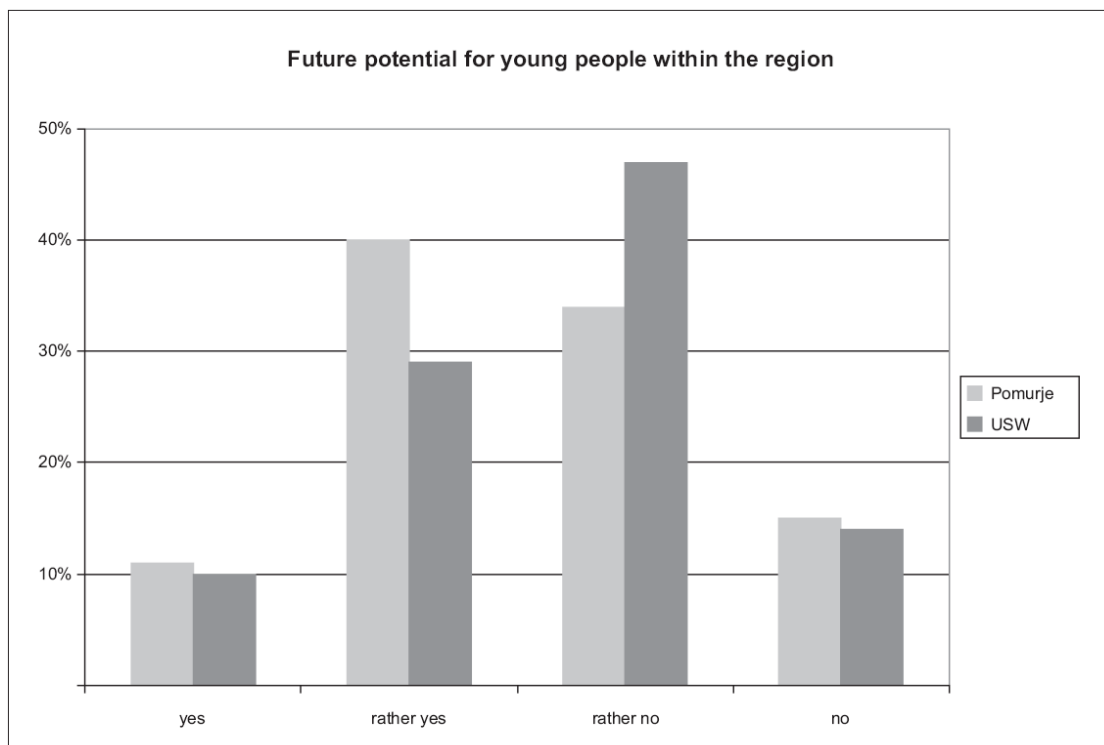


Figure 4: Future potentials for young people within the region according to adolescent. (Source: Survey by Fischer / Weigl)

Only 39 % of the adolescents interviewed in the Upper Styria West region can imagine staying in the region. Despite their strong to average attachment to the region, as the responses to the question “How strongly do you feel attached to your home region?” show, most rather do not see their future in their home region. This, then, is not a rejection of the identification with their home region. Therefore, future regional development measures need to convey potentials, prospects, and future possibilities in the region more strongly. In addition, the needs and demands of adolescents must be considered in order to create a solid foundation for their staying in the region. For that reason, the conceivable future fields of work of adolescents have also been identified.

A majority of the adolescents in both regions can imagine to work ‘free-lance’ (Pomurje: 14 %; USW: 15 %) or in organization and management (Pomurje / USW: 12 %) in the future. A large difference exists with regard to ‘commerce’: for this occupational field, together with ‘organization and management’, most votes could be recorded (14 %). In contrast, only 1 % of the adolescents in Upper Styria West declare commerce as a possible future field of work. Ranking first with 17 % is the ‘health’ sector, which, because of hospitals, health resorts, and rehabilitation facilities localized in the Murau district, offers professional employment.

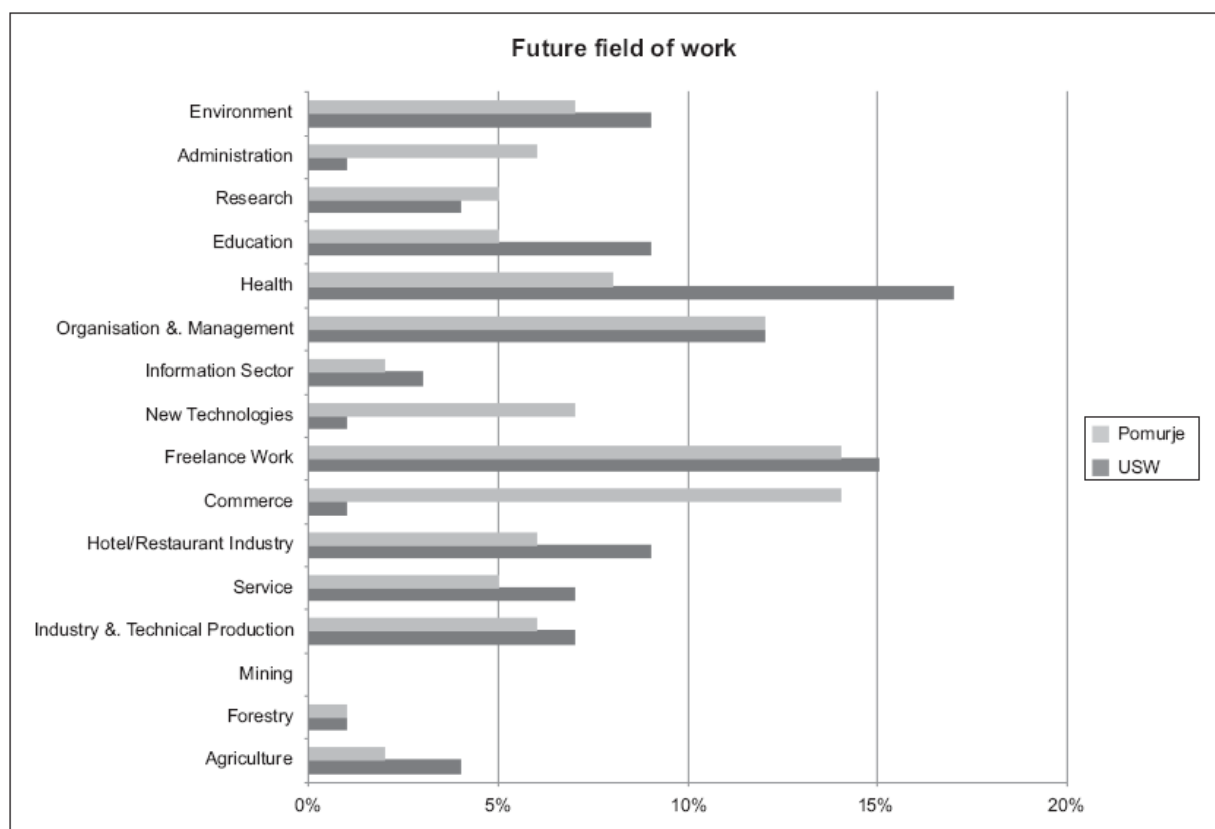


Figure 5: Conceivable future field of work from the adolescents' point of view. (Source: Survey by Fischer / Weigl)

Irrespective of the fields of work, the number of responses needs to be mentioned. In the case of Pomurje 333 responses could be collected, which is 2.4 times more than in Upper Styria West, where the full potential of responses could not be fully exhausted (137 responses). This could potentially be an indication for the lower estimation of the region's prospects and potentials and therefore of their own opportunities for the future, as can be concluded from

the analysis of figures 3 and 4. It is also possible that the adolescents in Pomurje perceive the region's diversity more strongly or that it is more transparent.

9. Analysis of the region regarding the results from the analysis of the survey, in consideration of possible regional political emphases and measures

Since the beginning of the 1990s the concept of "regional" has been much talked about in Geography as well as in the Social and Business Sciences. In contrast to tendencies characterized by autonomy and counter-movement towards appearances of globalization in the 1970s, the impetus of a "new form of regionalization" is its current complement. Especially the handling of a global structural transformation and politically initiated objectives such as a "Europe of Regions" are reasons for such a development. In this context, the term "regional development" appears in a new focus. In an increasingly globalized world the directed and strategic development of competitive, yet sustainably managing regions is one of the primary tasks of economic and regional development policy and an important task for society. Time and again the connection of chances for development and regional identity are foregrounded. The identification with a region and the awareness of similarities within a region are regarded as important preconditions for successful regional development.

As has been mentioned in the introduction, both regions are confronted with new challenges with regard to demographic change, negative migration balance of adolescents and brain drain. Specific endeavors towards appealing future possibilities and opportunities for adolescents need to be undertaken by the responsible regional developers, so that these negative developments will not advance any further. Especially the prevalent impression that the needs of older people are more catered to (e. g. Projekt 50+), but also the increased supply in tourist offerings (hotels for retirees where children are not allowed, or advertising strategies focusing on quiet landscape, hiking, and wellness) contribute to this image of the region among adolescents. Although this may result in new jobs for future employees, the region's image still deviates from the adolescents' perception to such a degree that they rather see their future in more active regions (urban centers). This can also be concluded from the workshops. Therefore, future measures which expand the opportunities and prospects for adolescents and which are adapted to the adolescents' perceptions are desirable, lest the already high mobility, together with the adolescents' querulousness towards 'their' region, lead to a continuously growing migration.

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NOTRANJA PERCEPCIJA IN REGIONALNA IDENTIFIKACIJA MED MLADINO – PRIMERJALNA ŠTUDIJA

Povzetek

Kot so pokazale učne delavnice in raziskave med mladostniki, živečimi v Pomurju in Zahodni Zgornji Štajerski, je perspektivna prihodnost glavni razlog, zaradi katerega mladi ostanejo v domači regiji. Čeprav sta prostorska navezanost in občutek domačnosti dandanašnji v splošnem razvita v manjši meri kot pri preteklih generacijah, je pri mladih mogoče razbrati potrebo po pripadnosti in identifikaciji z domačo regijo.

Skorajda neobstoječe ali nezaznavne razvojne možnosti so glavni vzrok, zaradi katerega se mladi iz obeh regij preseljujejo v urbana središča. Le malo mladih ostane in bo ostalo v domači regiji, če so soočeni z neprimernimi perspektivami za prihodnost ali če jih ni mogoče zaznati oziroma prepoznati.

Analiza raziskav je pokazala, da mladostniki v Pomurju v splošnem zaznavajo več priložnosti za svojo prihodnost. Dejstvo, da mladostniki iz Pomurja, v primerjavi z v študijo vključenimi mladostniki iz Zahodne Zgornje Štajerske, ocenjujejo potenciale svoje regije veliko bolje, je mogoče utemeljiti z ugotovitvijo, da mladostniki iz Pomurja navajajo veliko več zaposlitvenih možnosti v okviru domače regije. Poleg tega je bilo med slovenskimi mladostniki zaznati višji nivo sodelovanja in povečanega interesa. Izhajajoč iz potencialov, ki so jih zaznali slovenski mladostniki, se zdi, da so se veliko bolj pripravljeni spoprijeti z bodočimi regijskimi izzivi. Eden od razlogov je zagotovo ta, da slovenski mladostniki, v primerjavi z adolescenti iz Zahodne Zgornje Štajerske, veliko močneje zaznavajo perspektive v prihodnosti. Ali pa je morda, na primer, sama podoba Zahodne Zgornje Štajerske tista, ki jo domači mladostniki tako rekoč vsrkavajo in se je v njih utelesila v obliki splošnega negativnega razpoloženja? Ključni vprašanji, ki se pri tem zastavljata, sta, ali se mladostniki v Pomurju soočajo s pozitivnejšimi stvarmi in ali je samo razpoloženje v Pomurju boljše. Vsekakor je razvidno, da ostaja še veliko raznovrstnih vidikov, ki jih je potrebno v prihodnosti raziskati in da ostaja vrsta perečih vprašanj, na katere je nujno poiskati odgovore, tako da je v prihodnost naravnan regionalni razvoj vsekakor ključnega pomena za mladostniško generacijo. Mladostnike je potrebno intenzivneje vključiti v dogovarjanja o bodočem regionalnem razvoju. Za to pa sta potrebna volja in pripravljenost za sodelovanje v tovrstnih procesih – vroče žezlo je zdaj v rokah vseh vključenih in odgovornih.