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“Xenophobia in Germany’s regions limits the immigration of skilled workers.”

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Like many other European countries, Germany is experiencing a rise in xenophobic attitudes. Yet within Germany, there are significant regional differences. Business- and political leaders believe that xenophobic sentiment is already jeopardising the attractiveness of some German regions as a business location. Two studies by the Institute for Employment Research (IAB) now show how xenophobic attitudes in the regions affect both intra-German labour mobility and foreign workers’ choice of residence. The IAB Forum editorial team asked Tanja Buch and Carola Burkert about their findings.

Dr Buch, let’s first look at the mobility of workers within Germany: Within the current context of skilled-labour shortages, regions are competing with each other for workers. Do regions with more xenophobic attitudes have a competitive disadvantage?

Dr Tanja Buch is a senior researcher at IAB Northern Germany.

Tanja Buch: Yes, one can say that. Our results show that workers who move within Germany are less likely to move to regions where xenophobic attitudes are particularly widespread. Young workers and highly-qualified workers react most strongly; they particularly avoid regions where such attitudes are very predominant. This exacerbates a shortage of skilled labour, because young and well-qualified workers are precisely those who are most needed.

Do xenophobic attitudes also cause people to migrate from these regions to other regions?

Buch: Remarkably, this isn't the case. We actually find a lower emigration rate for German workers in regions where xenophobic attitudes are particularly widespread. However, the decision to move away from one's home region for a higher level of well-being is linked to many more factors that the choice between moving to one region or another. In addition to the high monetary costs of moving, the non-monetary costs, such as leaving one's circle of friends behind, must be considered. Therefore, we expected to find little or no effect on emigration. We attribute the lower emigration rate of German workers primarily to the fact that a significant proportion of people in these regions hold xenophobic attitudes and therefore see the confrontation with such attitudes in their neighbourhood or at work as a reason to stay rather than to emigrate. But there are also people in these regions who are committed to fighting right-wing radicalism and who consciously decide to stay so as not to leave their home region to the right-wing radicals.

> Our results show that foreign workers are indeed responding to xenophobia by moving away more frequently.

Higher levels of xenophobia certainly worsen the quality of life for non-German workers living in those regions. What effects do you observe for this group?

Buch: In contrast to Germans, non-German workers not only have to factor in negative impacts on their social well-being when moving to such regions, but also face immediate confrontation with rejection. Nevertheless, our results for workers with non-German citizenship who move to another region within Germany show that they are even more likely to move to regions where xenophobic attitudes are widespread. However, this finding does not apply to highly qualified workers – possibly because they have more freedom of choice regarding where they live and work. Less qualified foreign workers, on the other hand, may feel compelled to move to these regions if they are offered work there due to their weak position in the labour market. Furthermore, various studies show that higher-skilled workers are generally more critical of xenophobic ideas.

However, our results also show that foreign workers do indeed respond to xenophobia by moving away more frequently. Unlike Germans, they do not appear to take expected well-being into consideration as much when choosing a place to live, but do take negative experiences they have had in a region into consideration. Ultimately, however, only survey data can shed light on the reasons for this.

Dr Burkert, in addition to domestic mobility, in another study you examined whether xenophobic attitudes influence migrant workers' initial choice of residence. Do you see a connection between anti-immigration attitudes and their choice of residence?

Dr Carola Burkert is a member of the research staff at IAB Hessen.

Carola Burkert: Yes. Our results show that xenophobic attitudes in certain regions do indeed reduce the immigration of workers who come to work in Germany from abroad. EU migrants are more sensitive to regional xenophobic attitudes than people from non-European countries.

How do you explain this?

Burkert: We attribute this to two main reasons. First, EU migrant workers – unlike non-EU migrants – enjoy complete freedom of movement within the EU. This gives them much more flexibility in their choice of residence and workplace. The second reason could be that information on the regional prevalence of xenophobic attitudes is not equally available everywhere. Since reporting on this topic tends to decrease with increasing geographical distance, EU migrants are likely to be better informed about where in Germany such attitudes are particularly widespread than people from outside the EU.

> A higher level of public support for xenophobic attitudes is particularly characteristic of regions which are already suffering most from demographic change and thus from shortages of skilled labour.

Yet, you say, it is precisely those regions where xenophobic attitudes are particularly prevalent that urgently need the immigration of skilled workers.

Buch: That's true. Higher levels of xenophobic attitudes among the population are particularly characteristic of regions which are already suffering most from demographic change and thus from shortages of skilled labour. They are therefore particularly dependent on new workers. But mobile workers from Germany and abroad avoid these regions precisely because of the attitudes prevalent there.

Burkert: That's a problem because it can lead to or even exacerbate economic and social inequality between regions or even exacerbate it. For historical reasons, this regional inequality is already quite pronounced in Germany. Furthermore, immigration, especially of younger and better-educated people, leads to an exchange of ideas and lifestyles. If this doesn't happen, xenophobic ideas can become more entrenched, and this could further contribute to the polarisation of society.

> Our results show that cosmopolitanism – alongside political stability – is an important location factor for Germany.

What should politicians do to counteract this?

Buch: More political education is needed to strengthen democratic awareness, and social work is needed to show young people, especially in rural areas, alternatives to joining right-wing extremist groups. Unfortunately, due to budget constraints, adequate funding for these initiatives is facing constant challenges.

Burkert: Furthermore, it is essential that politicians in affected regions respond and clearly advocate for immigration, tolerance, and diversity. Business associations and companies also have a responsibility. For the sake of their own business-interests they, too, should make clear, where they stand politically: for cosmopolitanism, against isolation. Some are already leading the way, such as Reinhold Würth, Chairman of the Würth Group, who has taken a clear stance for his company. The initiative “Business for a Cosmopolitan Saxony” is also very committed. Its goal is to counteract the poor image of some regions in order to improve their attractiveness as a location. Trade unions should also focus more on this problem. Our results show that cosmopolitanism – alongside political stability – is an important location factor for Germany.

Data

The analyses are based on migration panels generated for the years 2003 to 2019 from the IAB's Integrated Employment Biographies (IEB). The IEB includes microdata on most employed persons in Germany, excluding civil servants and the self-employed. These data cover approximately 90% of the working population and, among other things, provide information on the residence and work locations of employees at the district regional level (360 regions). This enables a representative picture of labour mobility in Germany. For Further information on the IEB, visit the IAB-Forum.

Two indicators are used to measure xenophobic attitudes at the regional level: first, votes for parties ranging from right-wing populist to right-wing extremist, and second, politically motivated right-wing crimes.

The information on the election results is based on the aggregated second vote shares of the following parties: NPD, REP, DVU, DIE RECHTE, pro Deutschland, AfD, Offensive D, Ab jetzt… Demokratie durch Volksabstimmung, Pro DM/DM, BüSo, and BfB in federal and state elections between 2002 and 2017. Most of the parties did not participate in every election or in every region.

The information on right-wing extremist crimes comes from the statistics on "politically motivated right-wing crime" (PMK-rechts) from the State Criminal Police Offices. Crimes are classified as "politically-motivated right-wing"if, based on the circumstances of the crime and/or the attitudes of the perpetrator, there are indications that they can be attributed to a "right-wing" orientation after a reasonable examination, without the crime necessarily having the aim of suspending or abolishing an element of the free democratic constitutional order (extremism).

The essential characteristic of a "right-wing" ideology is the assumption of inequality or unequal value between people. Crimes in which references to ethnic nationalism, racism, social darwinism, or national socialism were the full or partial cause of the crime, are generally classified as right-wing extremist. Cases with a xenophobic or antisemitic background are generally classified as right-wing extremist crimes. Annual figures are available for all district regions, but sometimes for different time periods.

The studies control for factors that can also influence the choice of place of residence, such as regional economic and labour market conditions, the housing-market situation, population density, and other regional characteristics that reflect quality of life (e.g. crime rates or the availability of local recreational areas).

Literature

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