



## Demographic Change : Migration

### Westward Migration Has Germany's "New States" Feeling Old

**Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, over 1.5 million people – mostly women – have left eastern Germany to seek jobs in the West. This undercuts the economic future of a region already saddled with low fertility, unemployment, and industrial decline.**



A girl crosses a line marking where the Berlin Wall used to stand. Most people who have left eastern Germany since 1990 have been younger than 35 years old (Photo Reuters)

Who can blame them: the thousands of young adults who leave their small, rural towns in eastern Germany with no intention of returning. For so many from the Germany's economically troubled eastern states who go West to study and work, the towns they leave behind may still feel like home, but they offer too few prospects to make a living.

Like elsewhere in the former European socialist bloc, eastern Germany is experiencing alarmingly low birth rates and a rapidly aging population. The root cause of these demographic trends is deep-seated economic problems that have already sent hundreds of thousands of young adults looking for opportunities elsewhere.



Locals walk by an empty apartment building in the eastern town of Schwedt (Photo Reuters)

#### Don't fence me in

The first "wave" of migration to the West occurred in the tumultuous months following the fall of the Berlin Wall. Between November 1989 and German reunification in October 1990, around 600,000 East Germans - or 3.7 percent of the country's population - abruptly moved to West Germany.

After reunification, outward migration from the six "New States" that had made up the East Germany slowed down. Recession in the West, state-supported wage increases in the East, and a general sense of

optimism tempered the urge to leave the East during the early 1990s.

By 1997, however, high unemployment in the East and an economic boom in western Germany ignited a second wave of East-West migration that still shows no signs of subsiding. Today, with unemployment hovering around 20 percent in some areas, particularly in rural areas, young adults pack up and look for jobs in big cities like Berlin and Hamburg or the prosperous southern states of Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg.

### **No woman, no cry**

This migration has resulted in a shortage of women in the East. There are as few as 76 women to every 100 men in some parts of eastern Germany. Nearly two thirds of those who have left since reunification have been women. Women, in the East as in most other highly developed countries, tend to do better in school and graduate with higher degrees than men, but there are fewer jobs in the East where women can put their skills to work.

This gender imbalance has a number of demographic and social consequences. The most obvious is that these women do not stay to have children locally. The estimated number of missing babies - babies not born because of the disproportionate number of women leaving eastern Germany during 1995-2005 - is around 100,000. The country as a whole already has one of the world's lowest fertility rates (1.36 children per woman in 2004), but in the eastern states, it is even lower.

Steffen Kroehnert, a researcher at the Berlin Institute for Population and Development, says a lack of women undercuts future economic growth in eastern Germany by depriving the region of skilled labor. It also has some unsavory social consequences, such as deep-seated frustration and political extremism among the men who remain.

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"Many men in this region with little education cannot find a female partner, and that can, along with the disintegration of the classic male role, lead to frustration and gravitation toward extreme right-wing political parties," says Kroehnert. "The (far-right) National Democratic Party still stands for classic gender roles where men have the power and women tend to the household."

There are, however, patches of demographic stability in the East, namely the bigger, more economically stable cities such as Leipzig, Dresden, Erfurt, and Berlin. But the demographic forecast for the region as a whole is more of the same - population decline.

"The fact is that since the early 1990s, there have been fewer children born than before," says Kroehnert. "This trend will continue, even if outward migration is somehow stopped."

editor: Valdis Wish

publishing date: September 18, 2007

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