

Reinforcing path dependencies: The struggle to attract and integrate foreign workers in regions undergoing structural change

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Abstract

In order to address the demographically induced labour shortage, it is essential to attract and integrate foreign workers, particularly in the context of Germany's ongoing structural transformation. However, the example of the Saxony-Anhalt part of the central German mining district indicates that historical path dependencies make this process considerably more difficult. Structural, institutional and economic factors pose a challenge to attracting and integrating foreign workers. There is an urgent need to investigate the related causes scien-

tifically. Such research should be accompanied by a political, economic and social debate.

Keywords: Structural change ■ Attracting and integrating foreign workers ■ Central German mining area ■ Saxony-Anhalt

Verstärkung von Pfadabhängigkeiten: Der schwierige Gewinnungs- und Integrationsprozess ausländischer Arbeitskräfte in Regionen im Strukturwandel

Zusammenfassung

Um dem demographisch bedingten Fach- und Arbeitskräftemangel zu begegnen, ist es im Kontext des Strukturwandels in Deutschland unerlässlich, ausländische Fach- und Arbeitskräfte anzuwerben und zu integrieren. Am Beispiel des mitteldeutschen Braunkohlereviere in Sachsen-Anhalt zeigt sich jedoch, dass historisch gewachsene Pfadabhängigkeiten diesen Prozess erheblich erschweren. Strukturelle, institutionelle und ökonomische Faktoren stellen eine Herausforderung für die Gewinnung und Integration internationaler Fach- und Arbeitskräfte dar. Es besteht dringender Handlungsbedarf, die Gründe wissenschaftlich zu untersuchen. Die Forschung sollte von einer politischen, wirtschaftlichen und gesellschaftlichen Debatte begleitet werden.

Schlüsselwörter: Strukturwandel ■ Gewinnung und Integration ausländischer Fach- und Arbeitskräfte ■ mitteldeutsches Revier ■ Sachsen-Anhalt

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State elections will take place in Saxony-Anhalt in September 2026, and it does not take much foresight to predict that migration will be a central issue in the election campaign. For people in the central German mining district in the

southern part of Saxony-Anhalt, the other big issue will be the achievements and challenges associated with structural change, which has been ongoing since the government's decision in 2020 to phase out coal. This structural change is particularly challenging, as the affected area is especially impacted by demographic change: Saxony-Anhalt has the highest average age of all German federal states.¹ Accordingly, the transition towards new economic structures is hindered by two negative impacts from labour markets: demographic changes cause shortages not only of skilled workers but of workers in general, while excess labour resulting from job losses due to the phase-out processes in the mining industry does not match labour market gaps. The integration of foreign workers is essential to fill short-term labour market gaps and to boost the emergence of new sectors in the area. Workers from EU as well as non-EU countries will be needed. In this commentary, we argue that there are two path dependencies that collide and complicate the overcoming of these challenges. First, the region has limited experience with integrating foreign workers, due to political, economic and historical reasons. Second, location and employment decisions by migrants are influenced by access to (co-)ethnic networks which emerge along pathways. Consequently, without a path-breaking approach to attracting and integrating foreign workers, transformation in the affected regions will not be realized. The reinforcement of the two path-dependent processes are typical for many regions facing structural changes. The Saxony-Anhalt part of the central German mining district, however, faces specifically severe challenges, as the area is particularly characterized by negative political, economic and historical conditions for the integration of foreign workers and has an older population than many other regions facing structural changes. Lessons learned from this region may inspire other regions undergoing structural changes.

The working age population in the Saxony-Anhalt part of the central German mining district is expected to shrink by 20% between 2019 and 2040 (Prognos 2021: 8). The proportion of workers with foreign citizenship in the total workforce varied from 3.1% in the region Mansfeld-Südharz to 11.4% in the region Burgenlandkreis in 2022 (Leclerque/Fritzsche 2024: 35). Even though these figures are still below the 2022 German average of 14.4%, they have grown over the last decade (Leclerque/Fritzsche 2024: 8). This growth in foreign employment was the only factor preventing a shrinkage of the total workforce from 2021

to 2023.² But even this growth, if it can be sustained in the future, is still far from sufficient to meet the future gaps, and employers are already having difficulties finding suitable workers (Prognos 2021: 7). Therefore, it is necessary to look at preconditions for the successful recruitment and long-term integration of foreign workers into regional labour markets. With the term "integration", we refer not only to employment of foreign workers but also to their social participation in daily life and civil society, which includes adaptation processes among the majority population and individual efforts by companies (Hillmann 2018). Four key areas leading to a path dependence of migrant networks are usually mentioned in relevant studies.

First, *transparent legal and institutional frameworks* that are easily understood by all relevant actors are essential. Policy measures should enhance the dissemination of relevant information, reduce bureaucracy, foster bilateral agreements with countries and implement education and integration programs (Landesregierung Sachsen-Anhalt 2021: 91–92; Angenendt/Knapp/Kipp 2023: 40). Second, the *economic strength* of a region has been identified as a strong driver for attracting foreign employees (Tanis 2020: 492), with larger companies better able to provide sufficient training opportunities and to implement regular programs for the recruitment and integration of foreign employees (Pierenkemper/Jansen/Orange 2023: 19). Third, regions with more experience in integrating foreign nationals in the past tend to show *higher levels of openness and tolerance, and lower levels of resentment* towards foreign workers (Fielding 2018). Fourth, the three aforementioned areas will only successfully lead to a steady gain in foreign workers, if *(co-)ethnic networks* with social relations emerge. Once these networks are established in a region, new foreign workers tend to move to this region to find support, social linkages and communities (Tanis 2020: 492).

Unfortunately, these four preconditions are not only poorly developed in the central German mining district but are also thwarted by institutional, economic and social path dependencies. First, the integration of foreigners was *institutionalized late* in Saxony-Anhalt. It was not until 2016 that the ministry of integration was established (Blätte 2017). And until today, Saxony-Anhalt has not established a central authority for the recognition of internationally trained professionals, resulting in longer processing times than in other federal states. Political efforts to actively promote the region as attractive to foreign skilled workers were introduced in 2014 and since then intensified.

¹ <https://www.demografie-portal.de/DE/Fakten/bevoelkerungsaltersstruktur-sachsen-anhalt.html> (03.09.2025).

² <https://www.iwkoeln.de/presse/pressemitteilungen/fabian-semsarha-sarah-pierenkemper-lydia-malin-auslaender-halten-die-wirtschaft-in-ostdeutschland-am-laufen.html> (03.09.2025).

However, their effectiveness and lack of focus on low- and medium-skilled workers reveal unused potential.³

Second, the *economy* in the central German mining district is still characterized by challenges linked to the energy transition towards renewable energies and hydrogen while sticking to energy-intensive production. Few large companies have their headquarters in the region, leading to a limited number of research and development departments and below-average innovative strength in a nationwide comparison (Haunstein/Hoyer 2022: 11). Accordingly, companies in the region have fewer resources to integrate foreign workers and lack the capacity to deal with the legal issues of integration. Furthermore, a lack of educational opportunities and the dominance of rural areas are characteristic of economic structures without promising perspectives for foreign workers. To make matters even worse, ageing regions like the central German mining district face an increasing risk of losing working population to younger regions (Prenzel 2021).

Third, *mental lock-ins* and attitudes towards foreign workers are highly influenced by *historical pathways*. The former GDR strategically separated labour migrants from the population. Foreign labour migration was seen as a temporary phenomenon by the autocratic leadership and therefore also by the citizens. This lack of experience with successful economic, and also social, integration of foreigners is accompanied by general resentment in the region caused by structural change fatigue. During the 1990s, the region experienced structural change accompanied by massive job losses within just a few years, which defined the cognitive framing of change for the region. These historical pathways might explain the reduced openness to new experiences and emotional stability in East German rural areas (Obschonka/Wyrwich/Fritsch et al. 2019). Accordingly, the rise of right-wing populist movements in rural areas of Eastern Germany, measured by share of votes for right-wing parties as well as xenophobic violence, has led to a deterioration in everyday life, integration and security, especially for people of colour, and negatively impacts the recruitment of foreign labour forces (Buch/Burkert/Hell et al. 2025: 16–17).

As a result of the lack of the three prior conditions (co-) ethnic networks among foreign workers are still missing from the central German mining district.

These conflicting cycles of path dependencies can only be broken by path-breaking approaches for recruitment and integration policies. Proactive recruitment policies, such as welcome centres and economic development initiatives, aim to attract skilled workers and integrate them into lo-

cal labour markets. Key elements of integration policies include a clear political commitment to the role of foreign workers in the regional transition process, strategies to establish internationally recognized research and development institutions with potentials for start-ups and spin-offs, and strategic support of (co-) ethnic networks and community activities like sports, culture or care. These elements should be included in forthcoming election campaigns, while any support of negative cognitive framings of change and integration will only close down the pathways and result in a lock-in. On the local level, pro-active recruitment policies by companies and business development should include close linkages to important regions of origin of foreign workers, as well as close mentoring in work processes and for issues of social security, daily practices and local networks. So far, many companies fear the additional effort required to pro-actively turn to foreign recruitment, although growing labour market gaps will increase the pressure. The central German mining region with its specific combination of structural and demographic change is experiencing such pressure. However, it has the potential to become a testbed for path-breaking integration policies, if existing initiatives are pooled and successful role models disseminated to extend the range of companies and civil society involved.

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