

**Collective embitterment, exclusionary regional political identities and
implications for regional firms and competitiveness –
the example of East Thuringia**

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Overview of published manuscripts

1. Hannemann, M., Henn, S., & Schäfer, S. (2023). Participation in Online Research: Towards a Typology of Research Subjects with Regard to Digital Access and Literacy. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069231205188>
2. Hannemann, M., Henn, S., Schäfer, S. (2023). Regions, emotions and left-behindness: a phase model for understanding the emergence of regional embitterment, *Regional Studies*, doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2023.2218886
3. Henn, S., & Hannemann, M. (2023). Populist resentments and identities and their repercussions on firms and regions. The example of East Thuringia. *Journal of Economic Geography*, doi.org/10.1093/jeg/lbad017

*Notes on the thesis:

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 were published in scientific journals. They were not changed in the present version. For better readability, the numbering of chapters, subchapters, footnotes, tables and figures was adapted to the rest of the thesis.

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List of abbreviations

AAG	American Association of Geographers
AfD	Alternative für Deutschland [Alternative for Germany, political party]
approx.	approximately
appx.	appendix
B2B	Business to Business
B2C	Business to Customer
CATI	Computer Assisted Telephone Interview
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CSP	Corporate Social Performance
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
CV	Curriculum Vitae
Dr.	Doctor
e. g.	exempli gratia [for example]
ESF	Europäischer Sozialfonds [European Social Funds]
et al.	et alii [and others]
etc.	et cetera [and so forth]
EU	European Union
e. V.	eingetragener Verein [registered association]
FSU	Friedrich-Schiller-Universität
GDR	German Democratic Republic
HR	Human Resources
ibid	ibidem [from the same source]
i. e.	id est [that is]
IT	Information Technology
KMU	Kleine und mittlere Unternehmen [Small and medium enterprises]
LK	Landkreis [district]
LLC	Limited Liability Company
M.A.	Master of Arts
MDR	Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk [public service TV Station]
min.	minute(s)
NPD	Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands [National Democratic Party of Germany, political party]
OTZ	Ostthüringer Zeitung [East Thuringian Newspaper]
p.	page(s)
Prof.	Professor
PTED	Post Traumatic Embitterment Disorder
R&D	Research and Development
SME	Small and medium enterprises
TLS	Thüringer Landesamt für Statistik [Thuringian State Office for Statistics]
TMASGFF	Thüringer Ministerium für Arbeit, Soziales, Gesundheit, Frauen und Familie [Thuringian Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Health, Women and Family]
TMIK	Thüringer Ministerium für Inneres und Kommunales [Thuringian Ministry of the Interior and Municipal Affairs]
u. a.	unter anderem [among others]
USA	United States of America
VG	Verwaltungsgericht [Administrative Court]
WOM	Wettoffen miteinander arbeiten in Thüringen (ESF-Forschungsprojekt) [Work together open-mindedly; ESF Research Project]
z. B.	zum Beispiel [for example]

Preface

In 2019, I took on the work on *Weltoffen miteinander arbeiten in Thüringen* (WOM), an ESF-funded project of the Chairs of Economic Geography, Finance, and Intercultural Business Communication at the FSU Jena. An important motivation for working in this field was my previous experience in the context of working with refugees at the Psychosocial Center REFUGIO Thüringen. Here, over the years, I have witnessed firsthand the significant challenges that refugees and immigrants, in general, encounter in rural areas of Thuringia when attempting to integrate into the labor market and society. From the very beginning, I considered it a valuable research goal to examine the effects of widespread reservations towards immigrants and the resulting concrete discrimination in the context of work and everyday life on the development of the region, also because an experienced and competent partner from the consortium, Intercultural Business Communication, was commissioned to design and launch specific measures in organizational and personnel development and public relations campaigns. From my perspective, which was strongly influenced by practical experience, the WOM project represented a meaningful combination of scientific research and practical application. While the effects of the strengthening of right-wing populist forces on regional economic structures and development perspectives are now recognized and openly discussed not only in academia but also in the general public, this was by no means the case at the beginning of the research in 2019. On the contrary: In some places, as a project consortium, we encountered a lack of understanding when presenting the project, along with concerns that we might stigmatize the region. This perception has now largely changed.

In addition to my supervisor, Prof. Dr. Sebastian Henn, who has always offered me both scientific freedom and helpful guidance, I would particularly like to thank my colleagues Susann Schäfer and Anika Zorn, who have regularly provided me with valuable advice and thus contributed to the success of the dissertation project.

This also applies in a special way to my family. I thank my parents for their unflappable and benevolent support throughout my entire career. And I would especially like to thank my partner Sandy for her often critical but always constructive and supportive backing, in particular during the challenging data collection phase and the very demanding review processes, as well as our children Wendelin, Hermine and Luca for the indispensable balance that they have given me, probably without even knowing it.

Abstract English

Right-wing populist attitudes have been spreading in many European countries in recent years, particularly in areas that are less urban and international and that are often referred to as left-behind places. In addition to the causes of this political development, the economic consequences for regions are increasingly becoming the focus of attention. The success of right-wing populist parties is often said to be linked to discontent among parts of the population. It is striking that this discontent is usually only insufficiently or not at all defined, both in the discussion in the general public and in the scientific debate. On closer examination, it becomes clear that the role of regional individual and collective emotions has so far been rather underexposed in the debates in diverse disciplines dealing with the topic. Hard, quantifiable factors continue to dominate these analyses, although most experts agree that subjective, e.g. affective and emotional, i.e. more qualitative, factors are at least as influential.

Furthermore, the economic implications of right-wing populist attitudes often remain vague and superficial. Although most scholars assume that right-wing populist, exclusionary tendencies have a negative impact on regional economic structures and dynamics, this has also only been examined at a synoptic, secondary-data-based level. The present work aims to make a concrete contribution to both questions on the basis of a case study: On the one hand, the question is pursued as to how right-wing populist, exclusionary attitudes form in the interdependent social fabric of the corporate context and environment and become regionally entrenched. On the other hand, it is examined how exactly these attitudes are reflected in corporate practices and what implications these practices have for the firms and for the regional economy as a whole.

Recommendations are derived from the results that can help with the political monitoring of emotions in regions in order to be able to identify disadvantageous developments earlier than it is possible so far and to offer concrete approaches for defusing socio-political polarization in so-called left-behind places.

These analyses are complemented by systematic methodological considerations that inevitably arose during the data collection phase, which was heavily influenced by contact restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These considerations contribute to the development of methods for conversation-based methods in times of crisis and for particularly challenging research contexts.

Abstract German

Rechtspopulistische Einstellungen verbreiten sich in vielen Ländern Europas in den letzten Jahren immer weiter, insbesondere in Räumen, die weniger städtisch und international geprägt sind und die häufig als Left-behind Places bezeichnet werden. Neben den Ursachen für diese politische Entwicklung stehen vermehrt auch deren wirtschaftliche Folgen für Regionen im Mittelpunkt der Betrachtung. Häufig wird im Zusammenhang mit den Erfolgen rechtspopulistischer Parteien von Unzufriedenheit in Teilen der Bevölkerung gesprochen. Auffällig ist, dass diese Unzufriedenheit meist nur unzureichend bis gar nicht definiert wird, sowohl in der Diskussion in der breiten Öffentlichkeit als auch in der wissenschaftlichen Auseinandersetzung. Deutlich wird bei genauerer Betrachtung zudem, dass in mit dem Thema befassten Fachdisziplinen die Rolle regionaler individueller und kollektiver Emotionen bisher eher unterbeleuchtet geblieben ist. Harte, quantifizierbare Faktoren dominieren nach wie vor diese Untersuchungen, obwohl sich die meisten Experten einig sind, dass emotionale, also eher qualitativ zu erhebende Einflussgrößen, mindestens ebenso wirkmächtig sind.

Auch die Betrachtungen der wirtschaftlichen Implikationen rechtspopulistischer Einstellungen bleiben häufig vage und oberflächlich. Zwar gehen die meisten Wissenschaftler davon aus, dass rechtspopulistische, also tendenziell exkludierende Tendenzen sich nachteilig auf wirtschaftliche Strukturen und Dynamiken auswirken, untersucht worden ist dies allerdings ebenfalls eher auf synoptischer, sekundärdatenbasierter Ebene. Die vorliegende Arbeit verfolgt das Ziel, anhand einer Fallstudie konkrete Beiträge zu beiden Fragestellungen zu leisten: Es wird zum einen die Frage verfolgt, wie sich rechtspopulistische, exkludierende Einstellungen im interdependenten sozialen Geflecht von Unternehmenskontext und -umfeld bilden und sich regional verfestigen. Zum anderen wird untersucht, wie genau sich diese Einstellungen in Unternehmenspraktiken niederschlagen und welche Implikationen diese Praktiken für die Unternehmen und für die regionale Wirtschaft als Ganzes haben.

Aus den Ergebnissen werden Empfehlungen abgeleitet, die beim politischen Monitoring von Emotionen in Regionen helfen können, um nachteilige Entwicklungen früher als bisher erkennen zu können und die konkrete Ansätze für die Entschärfung gesellschaftspolitischer Polarisierung in so genannten Left-behind Places bieten.

Ergänzt werden diese Analysen durch systematische methodische Überlegungen, die sich im Zuge der von Kontaktbeschränkungen durch die COVID-19-Pandemie stark beeinflussten Datenerhebungsphase zwangsläufig ergaben und einen Beitrag zur Methodenentwicklung mit Blick auf konversationsbasierte Methoden in Krisenzeiten und für besonders herausfordernde Forschungskontexte leisten.

1 Introduction

1.1 Introduction to the underlying scientific discussion

In January 2025, it became known that the Alternative for Germany (AfD, a right-wing populist political party) had received a large donation of almost 1 million euros for its federal election campaign from a person in Jena (Spiegel Online, 2025). On the same day, the city of Jena, in the person of Lord Mayor Thomas Nitzsche, distanced itself from this major donor. In this context, the potential implications mentioned by him are noteworthy:

“The stronger the AfD, the more it acts as a negative location factor for the industries that make our city and our region strong. This donation goes against the social consensus that supports and distinguishes Jena and our region.”

(translated from German) (Spiegel Online, 2025)

He also addressed the fact that the donor is a member of the supervisory board of a large, nationally operating Jena-based firm:

“I am sure that we will gain more clarity about the connection between the donation and the firm in the next few days. It is the firm's responsibility to quickly contribute to the clarification and to avert possible damage from the region.” (translated from German) (OTZ, 2025)

The immediacy of the reaction, which implies a high degree of urgency, as well as the explicit reference to possible negative economic consequences for the entire region, makes it clear that news of this kind is perceived at the economic policy level as potentially damaging for the region. Similar concerns were recently expressed by the Lord Mayor of the city of Gera in response to events organized by the extreme right, which have been very active in the East Thuringian city for years. He described events of this kind as “anti-business and damaging to the city's image” (translated from German) (Duwe & Grandjean, 2025).

Recent news from Thuringia shows that these concerns are not just based on vague suspicions:

“Basketball: Shift to the right in Thuringia: Clubs having problems with transfers” (translated from German) wrote the Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk in August 2024 (MDR online, 2024) and the Ostthüringer Zeitung headlined in September 2024: “Foreign doctors in Thuringia concerned about the rise of the AfD” (translated from German) (OTZ, 2024).

These headlines illustrate that right-wing populist and associated attitudes in regions actually cause negative perceptions among potential or existing economic actors and

can thus also have an impact on the regional economy as a whole. The two specific examples focus on labor recruitment (see also Rövekamp, 2018) and the possible loss of existing workers (see also Krinninger, 2018). Various other facets of this problem have been known for years – in this context, the declining or absent demand for regional products (Wille, 2018) and the deterrent effects on investors (Elvers-Guyot, 2007) have also been discussed. Yet it is only with the recent and sustained success of the AfD in state and federal elections that these trends are likely to be sustained, and that these debates are taking on greater depth and significance. At the center of these debates is usually the question of to what extent the AfD's electoral success deters various actors considered essential to a sustainable regional economy.

In an increasingly globalized world, in which the exchange of goods, services and labor across national borders has become commonplace, the question of the impact of xenophobia on local and regional economic systems is also becoming more and more important globally.

In numerous countries, right-wing populist forces have been gaining strength for years, and this is accompanied by a change in socio-political debates (Wodak & Krzyżanowski, 2017). Recently, migration-critical and even xenophobic attitudes have been expressed more openly than they were a few years ago. In many places, polarization is intensifying. This is often accompanied by political disaffection and discontent, stemming from perceived failures in adapting to the demands of a globalized world, leading to feelings of embitterment and being left behind. However, how exactly these phenomena are to be understood, which factors favor their emergence and persistence, and what implications they have for the development of regions are rarely discussed or defined in detail – pure descriptions of their manifestations dominate.

This thesis addresses these research gaps and examines how regional discontent arises, how it is linked to xenophobic attitudes, and how the resulting (socio)economic practices in firms, firm networks and the surrounding regional context can influence a region's economic development and competitiveness.

1.2 Objectives and research questions of the thesis

The present work is therefore devoted to the questions of how regionally influenced discontent related to right-wing populist tendencies arises as a collective phenomenon in the population and what effects its spread and consolidation has on corporate practices in the region. These two questions are to be understood as sub-questions of the central research question: How do right-wing populist and, in particular, xenophobic attitudes in the population affect the economic development and competitiveness of the corresponding regions?

These dynamics and the relationships between them are examined against the background of the left-behind places debate, which, to a certain extent, represents a sub-debate of the debate on regional inequalities.

The approach of quantitative data analysis, which has often been preferred in regional development research to date – Lobao notes: “Researchers emphasized structural determinants over human agency” (Lobao, 1996, p. 84) – has some practical advantages for research: A high degree of comparability is given, as is great potential for follow-up and supplementation for further investigations. In addition, the studies provide a fairly comprehensive overview of measurable determinants of spatial inequalities. However, the question of 'how?' remains, along with the influencing factors that cannot be quantified, as well as the social context of the actors: How exactly do the identified determinants affect the regional level and how are they interrelated, especially with regard to the interdependence of social and economic processes?

In quantitatively designed analyses of the causes of unequal regional development, this question and thus the micro perspective are largely neglected or even completely ignored, although Storper is not alone in considering it fundamental to a basic understanding of economic development: “Behavioural, institutional, cultural, historical processes are of great importance to the way economy develops” (in Hoyler et al., 2004, p. 70). Scott and Storper also state that “the theory of development must incorporate the role of cities and regions as active and causal elements in the economic growth process” (Scott & Storper, 2003, p. 579). The approach presented in this thesis goes one step further by not only examining the regions from an institutional perspective but, more importantly, focusing on the individuals active within them – specifically, those working in the firms located there – and their attitudes, motivations, relationships, and interactions. Individual and collective emotions play a central role in this.

The aim of this work is therefore to complement existing approaches by adding an additional layer, focusing on the processes that occur at the actor level within the region under investigation or in the firms based there. A better knowledge of the respective social context can help to understand the actors’ motivation and to recognize patterns that can contribute to an understanding of the emergence of economically unequal development. The central focus of the study is xenophobic attitudes within firms in a region, examining them as a factor contributing to economically disadvantageous development.

1.3 Structure of the thesis

The research questions of the thesis are addressed as follows: In Chapter 2, theoretical and conceptual foundations are presented: Chapter 2.1 provides a fundamental

introduction to relational economic geography, which can be seen as a conceptual framework. The following sub-chapters present three key conceptual reference points of the work: Section 2.2.1 addresses the debate on regional inequalities, which is further explored and differentiated in Sections 2.2.1.1 and 2.2.1.2 into discussions on left-behind places and geographies of discontent. Section 2.2.2 focuses on right-wing populism and xenophobia, while Section 2.2.3 examines corporate social responsibility and diversity in firms from an economic geography perspective.

Chapter 3 provides an overview of the study area as an introduction to the case study (3.1) and explains the methodology of the work. The latter is comparatively detailed and extensive for two reasons: First, the thematic focus of the research and the timing – data collection had to be conducted during a phase of strict COVID-19 contact restrictions – presented significant challenges that require a high degree of methodological transparency. Second, structured considerations emerged from the flexible organization of methodological requirements, which were published in an article that forms part of the present work. Chapters 3.2 and beyond thus also serve to clarify the connection between the methodological article and the two content-related articles, which together constitute the very core of the thesis.

Chapter 4 systematizes the aforementioned methodological considerations regarding the accessibility of the subjects to be researched, along with the resulting implications and proposed solutions. Following an introduction (4.1), the challenges of conversation-based data collection methods in online settings and their potential effects on research quality are conceptually discussed (4.2). In Chapter 4.3, comparative dimensions are developed based on various research projects conducted by the authors (4.3.1), leading to the identification of four types (4.3.3) through case grouping (4.3.2): digital outcasts, illiterates, skeptics, and natives. Finally, in Chapter 4.4, recommendations are provided for adapting research practices to these different types, helping to avoid significant distortions in results caused by unreflective research subject selection and data acquisition processes.

Chapter 5 begins the substantive examination of the interdependencies between xenophobic and exclusionary attitudes, corporate practices, and regional economic effects. Chapter 5.1 offers an introduction, followed by the theoretical foundations in Chapter 5.2. Discontent in left-behind places (5.2.1), connections between emotions and regions (5.2.2), and individual, collective, and regional embitterment (5.2.3) are conceptually presented. In Chapter 5.3, the phase model for the emergence of regional embitterment based on these foundations is introduced, followed by an explanation of the methodological approach for applying the model to the case study region in Chapter 5.4. Chapter 5.5 presents the empirical data, where the four phases are discussed in detail (5.5.1 to 5.5.4), before concluding in Chapter 5.6.

In Chapter 6, corporate practices arising from the emotions discussed in Chapter 5 are examined. Chapter 6.1 introduces the topic, followed by the conceptual foundations in Chapter 6.2, which begin with the contrast between diversity concepts and exclusionary political identities (6.2.1), proceed to political identities in the corporate context (6.2.2), and conclude with exclusionary political identities and corporate practices (6.2.3). Chapter 6.3 provides a presentation of the research design and methodology, divided into an introduction to the case study region (6.3.1), explanations of data collection (6.3.2), and type construction (6.3.3). The empirical results are presented in Chapter 6.4, where the three identified types – exclusionary (6.4.1), open (6.4.2), and opportunistic (6.4.3) firms – are compared in detail, followed by the conclusions drawn in Chapter 6.5.

Chapter 7 begins with reflections on the research process (7.1), summarizes the findings of the three articles in the main section with reference to the research questions (7.2), draws conclusions (7.3), and formulates recommendations for policymakers and further research (7.4). Finally, in Chapter 8 an overall summary is provided, along with the bibliography and the appendix.

2 Theoretical basics

The aim of this chapter is to present the theoretical concepts underlying the thesis and their interrelationships, ultimately highlighting the research gap addressed in contrast to other works.

Chapter 2.1 provides an introduction to relational economic geography, which serves as the foundational framework for the thesis. The subsequent chapters focus on the central debates relevant to the case study. These debates are not purely (economic) geographical but, in line with the study's subject, are partly interdisciplinary. Chapter 2.2.1 outlines the main features of the debates on regional inequalities, left-behind places, and geographies of discontent. Chapter 2.2.2 presents the foundational aspects of the debates on right-wing populism, resentment, and xenophobia, and defines the operationalization of these not always clearly defined terms, as used in this thesis. In Chapter 2.2.3, key aspects of CSR and diversity concepts are linked to economic geography and regional development perspectives, and integrated into the concept used in this work.

2.1 Theoretical basis of the thesis – relational economic geography

The processes underlying the present analyses are significantly shaped by relationships – personal and professional – as well as by associated or even interdependent network dynamics. Therefore, an explicitly relational perspective seems best suited for the analysis (Bathelt & Glückler, 2018; Bathelt et al., 2002; Boggs & Rantisi, 2003). It allows for a well-founded consideration of positioning and the related, interdependent practices (Debaise, 2004) and thus the analysis of regional – even comparatively small-scale – contexts of action.

The basic concept of relational economic geography relativizes the importance of spatial conditions for economic processes and focuses on the relationships between economic actors and the actions that result directly or indirectly from them as decisive factors (Bathelt et al., 2002; Yeung, 2002). Since actors are embedded in their spatial environment in a variety of ways (Granovetter, 1985), economic relationships and practices can never be entirely detached from space. Thus, they can and should be analyzed from an explicitly geographical perspective (Bathelt & Glückler, 2014). In this context, spatially specific conditions such as cultural, social and political systems and dynamics also play a role (Ettliger, 2001).

The present thesis is explicitly concerned with the relationships between individuals, rather than the firms in which they work (Boggs & Rantisi, 2003). This focus seems particularly appropriate because the rural regions at the center of interest have some

special features with regard to economic relationships and networks (Bürcher et al., 2016; Greenberg et al., 2018) that can change the way they are embedded (Korsgaard et al., 2015) and increase the complexity of relationships, e.g., through a high degree of social control (Smailes et al., 2002), shared beliefs (Woods, 2011), and the relatively strong overlap between private and professional contexts and actions (Backman & Palmberg, 2015).

Relational economic geography attaches particular importance to the context in which relationships and practices unfold. It assumes that individuals do not act purely rationally in the sense of a homo oeconomicus, but are always embedded in the contexts surrounding them. Granovetter distinguishes between structural and relational embedding in his conception (Granovetter, 1985, 1990). The importance of this for the thesis is demonstrated by the results of the analyses in Chapters 5 and 6, which show that it is precisely these relational embedding contexts that can significantly shape individuals' practices, even when they contradict their own preferences and beliefs.

At this point, it should be noted that the relational economic geography as the theoretical basis of this thesis should not be understood as a rigid construct, but rather as a permeable framework that allows the research questions to be examined from different – but always relational – perspectives. This is accompanied by the absolutely necessary inclusion of concepts from other disciplines (Chapters 2.2.2 and 2.2.3) in view of the complexity of the subject under investigation. Bathelt and Glückler (2012) also emphasize the openness of the concept for related disciplines, drawing on the various dimensions of economic processes. The explicit reference to migration research (Bathelt & Glückler, 2017) exemplifies the relevance of this conceptual openness for the present thesis, because aspects of migration also play a not insignificant role here in several respects: On the one hand, migration is a key component of right-wing populist criticism of the alleged failures of the current political order and, to some extent, a strategic core element of corresponding political agitation. On the other hand, it is, in a completely contrary way, seen as a solution to alleviate socio-economic challenges in rural and economically weak areas, as envisioned by numerous experts.

In addition to other related disciplines, such as the sociology of work and political science, this thesis also incorporates concepts from psychology (Chapters 2.2.1.3 and 2.2.2), organizational and personnel development, and (regional) marketing (Chapter 2.2.3). At first glance, these may seem only loosely related to the issues discussed here, but upon closer inspection, they are complementary and essential for understanding the analyses presented.

The micro spatial context is suitable as an analytical framework not only for the explanation of relationships and practices, but also as a basis for the explanation of network dynamics (Glückler & Doreian, 2016, p. 1124), which are of particular importance for

the analyses in the present case study. In essence, it is about a relational understanding of the causes of spatially uneven development.

2.2 Conceptual foundations

2.2.1 Regional inequalities

Regional inequalities have been a core topic of economic geography for a long time and remain so today (Bathelt et al., 2024). However, the focus of this multi-layered debate has always changed, which is why a brief outline of the development of the debate up to the status quo is given here:

In the 1930s, geography experienced a major upheaval, as at that time strong disagreement about the central topics and goals of the discipline overlapped with substantive debates. This disagreement was partly due to the fact that geography covered a very broad spectrum, which in some cases could not be clearly distinguished from the areas of work in other disciplines. Although there was a perception that science cannot be strictly compartmentalized and that boundaries of this kind are always artificially constructed (Hettner, 1927), the need to make certain distinctions was recognized in order to better organize scientific projects. This sharpening of the profile was intended to create clarity about the nature of the discipline. With his influential work *The Nature of Geography*, Richard Hartshorne (1939) pursued two main goals: to integrate the American and German traditions of geography and to answer the question of how the entire discipline should set its priorities in the spectrum between the systematic and regional perspectives. His argument in favor of the latter often led to him being seen as the founding father of the paradigm shift towards regional geography. At the core of this paradigm is the diversity of regions and their differentiation. This view also called into question, at least in part, the strict separation between physical and anthropogeography that was common at the time. For Hartshorne, the appropriate variables to apply in the study and analysis of spaces and their relationships were always those that were appropriate in the respective context, be they physical or social laws. He also broadened the understanding of the relationship between these two factors: One should no longer assume that human or social activities are always influenced by the space in which they take place, but rather assume an interdependency: Space shapes social action and vice versa. Consequently, both dynamics are suitable for describing the essence of a region (Hartshorne, 1939). This view implies that from now on spatial inequalities became a central, if not the central topic of anthropogeography (Wei, 2015). In the 1950s and 60s, geographical debates on spatial inequality were strongly influenced by modernization, neoclassical economic, and in particular convergence

theories. These assume that factor mobility and diffusion will lead to a convergence of regional differences in the long term. The supply side is central to this: Assuming that capital and labor are mobile, it can be expected that work will move to where higher wages are paid, i.e. to more developed regions. Capital, on the other hand, moves to less developed regions with the prospect of higher profitability. Over time, wages in the latter also rise, thus evening out the regional differences (Borts & Stein, 1964). The latter therefore arise from a temporary imbalance between supply and demand and are thus not only considered normal, but also fundamentally temporary. Williamson expanded on this point by using the inverted U model – based on Kuznets' theory of income inequality (Kuznets, 1955, 1957, 1966) and Rostow's stage theory of economic growth (Rostow, 1960) – to show that regional inequality tends to increase in the early development phase of economic entities and decrease in later phases (Williamson, 1965). In contrast to earlier approaches, this model includes both convergence and divergence dynamics.

Friedmann's center-periphery model describes how growth processes begin in centers, strengthen there, and radiate out to the surrounding periphery. Spatial systems arise that are functionally interdependent (Friedman, 1966). Despite the many changes that have occurred since the establishment of this model, the fundamental center-periphery structure is still recognizable in many places today and is of considerable importance for this thesis, albeit more with regard to debates about equal living conditions, the lack of jobs and skilled workers, and internationalization.

These neoclassical approaches were undoubtedly influential in scientific discourse and regional policy and development. Nevertheless, there were also dissenting positions. The sectoral regional polarization theories that also emerged at this time (Hill & Hirschman, 1959; Myrdal, 1957) criticized the legitimation of inequalities implicitly contained in these approaches and presented alternatives. Myrdal introduced his concept of negative backwash mode (Myrdal, 1957). This model also includes positive effects for peripheral areas, which are represented by the so-called spread effect, i.e. the possibility that backward regions can develop positively against the background of center-periphery dynamics. However, the focus is on opposite effects: Myrdal argues that growth rate differences are stable or tend to increase over time. So here, work and capital flow in the same direction, namely from the periphery towards the centers. According to this view, factor mobility does not favor convergence but rather divergence. Other elements – such as human capital and technology – also contribute to this, with the result that regional polarization and inequality between the center and the periphery increase. These arguments suggest that the market alone is unable to eliminate these inequalities through convergence and highlight the importance of political interventions to reduce regional disparities. In the context of this thesis, this assumption is central for

several reasons: Not only are political interventions, such as infrastructure measures, crucial for the developments discussed here, but interventions addressing regionally impactful social, emotional, and affective factors also appear to be particularly important for mitigating further social polarization and the resulting regional economic divergences (see Chapter 7).

In the 1970s and 1980s, there were two fundamentally opposing views on regional inequalities: On the one hand, there were numerous researchers who supported convergence and inverted U models and, on the basis of empirical studies, diagnosed and predicted a decline in regional inequality, particularly in developed countries. But other spatial contexts produced different results: The analyses of developing and socialist countries, for example, are not so clear-cut (Fuchs & Demko, 1979; Kanbur & Venables, 2005; Royuela & García, 2015; Wei, 1999; Zhang & Bao, 2015). The continuing sense of precarious inequality, particularly in these national spatial contexts, but also at the regional level, led not only to debates in society as a whole – think of the civil rights movement in the USA – but also to a polarization of science: In the 1960s and 70s, critical geographers dealt with these issues just as intensively as development sociologists. The debate intensified and various alternative models emerged, based on a fundamental critique of neoclassical approaches, in which the controversial concept of development is effectively equated with growth. The starting points for criticism were the fundamental elements of neoclassical economic theory: The underlying assumptions – perfect competition and information, free factor mobility, etc. – are ideal-typical and difficult or impossible to fulfill in reality; demand-side factors are largely ignored, and short-term changes are given as little consideration as regional divergence. Furthermore, geographical, cultural and institutional factors that can influence trade, factor mobility, innovation and regional development, should in the critics' eyes be included in the models.

On the basis of this criticism, new trends emerged, such as endogenous growth theory, new economic geography and institutional economics.

The inverted U-model was also increasingly criticized in the 1970s. The combination of characteristics in the USA on which it is based – “spatially integrated market economy, sustained high rates of economic expansion, high population mobility, long-term regional income convergence, cultural uniformity and a federal system of government” (Friedmann & Bloch, 1990, p. 576) – cannot be understood as universally transferable. At that time, not only was widespread poverty unchanged in many countries, but there was also weak diffusion and, ultimately, great inequality.

On this basis, the paradigm of bottom-up development emerged in the 1970s. It directly links underdevelopment and dependency and, with a view to solution and alignment strategies, emphasizes the endogenous potential of the respective areas (Friedmann,

1973; Korten, 1980). Self-reliance and the use of regional resources in the context of rural development are central facets of this bottom-up empowerment approach (Chambers, 1983).

Structural models of dependency theory – which stand in sharp contrast to modernization theories and emphasize dependency and divergence – gained in importance. The spread of capital into the periphery thus causes a one-sided, dependent core-periphery structure that inhibits the development of the periphery and manifests or even increases inequality. Dependency theory always also includes a hierarchy that disadvantages the periphery. Slater assumes that the centers always benefit from the integration of peripheral regions into the capitalist economic system, in that the surplus generated there flows into the centers (Slater, 1975). Santos argues similarly, referring in this context in particular to the income disparities manifested by capitalism (Santos, 1979). In his influential Marxist analysis of peripheral economic areas and their comparatively disadvantageous development, Amin (1976) concludes that capitalism is responsible for the marginalization of pre-capitalist societies and thus also for regional inequalities at the national level, and from this he derives the necessity of implementing socialist approaches. Critics of dependency theory have pointed out that external forces, which supposedly underlie underdevelopment, are overstated; the mutual dynamics and interdependency of the center-periphery structure, on the other hand, are undervalued by emphasizing a one-sided, self-reinforcing dependency; the center-periphery structure is presented too strictly and, in any case, cannot be found in practice in this form (Bauer, 1976).

At this point, it is worth taking a brief detour into Marxian theory for the sake of a better overall understanding of the development of the debate on spatial inequalities: According to this, regional inequality is both necessary (necessity thesis) and unavoidable (unavoidability thesis) (Marx, 1867). Necessary because inequality is an indispensable condition for capital accumulation. In this sense, the periphery serves as a reserve for labor and markets, which are necessary for capitalism. Unavoidable because capital tends towards central areas with higher profit rates, thus actively creating and maintaining regional inequalities. The periphery, cut off from investment, subsequently stagnates. Both theses have been heavily criticized for placing a strong focus on the dependency paradigm and largely ignoring the dynamics of capital accumulation and spatial determinants (Popper, 1982). In an attempt to move away from such totalizing approaches and to achieve differentiation, Massey develops a theory of the spatial division of labor. In this theory, local economic structures are seen as the result of a combination of spatial conditions and investment rounds (Massey, 1984).

Research on Fordist and post-Fordist production in the 1980s also contributed to the debate on regional inequalities. Post-Fordist production is characterized by a

flexibilization of production, which includes differentiation and decentralization (Piore & Sabel, 1984). The latter, on the other hand, leads less to assimilation processes, but rather to increased spatial polarization and inequalities, with some regions establishing themselves as business locations where prosperity and growth opportunities are concentrated, while other regions tend to be suppliers (Castells, 1989; Harvey, 2020; Schwirian et al., 1991; Scott, 1988).

Since the late 1980s, phenomena such as globalization and liberalization have had a major influence on the debate on spatial inequalities (Ezcurra & Rodríguez-Pose, 2013; Wei & Ye, 2009). Accordingly, aspects such as the effects of the degree of openness of certain economies on spatial inequality – especially in developing countries (Anderson, 2005; Brülhard, 2011; Ezcurra & Rodríguez-Pose, 2014; Kanbur & Zhang, 2005) – and the targeted control of economic development – e.g. deregulation processes (Démurger et al., 2002) – have since received more attention in research.

In economics, Combes and Overman (2004) provided an analysis of the spatial distribution of economic activity in the EU and identified a core-periphery pattern along with strong regional specializations and disparities. It is noteworthy that their study emphasizes the need to include as many factors and micro geographic data as possible when analyzing regional inequalities. The implicit connection between geography and economic development is explicitly examined by Henderson et al. (2001). They note that a combination of theoretical and empirical analysis of these relationships is central to understanding development dynamics and deriving appropriate policy measures.

At that time, an interdisciplinary understanding of regional inequalities was developing. The topic is also becoming more present in other disciplines and bridges are being built. For example, Lobao (1996) addresses regional inequalities from a sociological perspective and emphasizes the importance of spatial contexts.

Contrary to the interdisciplinary influences of the 1990s and 2000s, which suggested a diversification of studies in terms of conceptual and methodological approaches, the debate on spatial inequalities has recently been predominantly shaped by quantitative studies with an economic focus, the core elements of which are typically labeled inequality decompositions (Fan & Sun, 2008; Novotný, 2007). In these studies, individual factors are separated from each other using appropriate statistical models in order to determine their influence on the emergence of spatial inequality. These studies are usually based on census or survey data. It is striking how often determinants of income differences (Rodríguez-Pose & Tselios, 2009) and unemployment (Puga, 2002) are analyzed, often discussing the convergence theory (Martin & Sunley, 1998; Rey & Janikas, 2005), regardless of the respective spatial focus, e.g. China (Sicular et al., 2007; Wan & Zhou, 2005), the USA (Rey & Montouri, 1999) and Europe (Boldrin & Canova, 2001; Lopez-Bazo et al., 1999). Many of these studies are devoted to intra-

national comparisons, particularly between economically stronger and weaker regions. In developing countries, the focus is usually on an analysis of urban-rural differences (Sahn & Stifel, 2003; Venables, 2005). For example, studies in China often compare the development of the rapidly growing and economically promising coastal regions with that of the inland regions (Benjamin et al., 2005; Démurger et al., 2002; Kanbur & Zhang, 1998).

In the European context, studies that make regional comparisons are also coming to the fore, sometimes across national borders (Head & Mayer, 2006; Iammarino et al., 2019; Le Gallo & Ertur, 2003; Lee & Rodriguez-Pose, 2013; Stephan et al., 2005). For example, Overman and Puga note in their study of regional differences in unemployment in European border regions that “neighbour effects extend across national borders” (2002, p. 139). It is clear that in the age of globalization, the focus is no longer primarily on inequalities between nations, but between regions.

Looking at the development of economic geography and the associated debates in economics, etc. since the 1930s, it is evident that perspectives and priorities have changed continuously. However, what the respective dominant approaches have in common is a focus on quantitatively measurable factors that are intended to serve as determinants to identify the causes of unequal development. Quantitative studies naturally examine factors that can be measured using the appropriate instruments, and for this purpose they usually make use of large secondary data sets.

In recent years, however, there has been a substantial change in the debate: There are increasing calls to analyze unequal development not only in terms of quantifiable, “hard” factors, but also to include “soft” factors, e.g. social and cultural ones (Peck, 2010), including space-specific characteristics (Martin & Sunley, 2006). Wei, for example, considers the inclusion of “locality, local context and local agents” (Wei, 2015, p. 6) to be indispensable for the analysis of regional inequalities that contain an explicitly social component.

For these positions, changing labor market parameters also play a role: In developed countries in particular, there is a shortage of labor, especially of skilled labor (ba.de, 2023; iab.de, 2024). This ultimately leads to a situation in which, in many places, it is no longer employees competing for jobs, but firms competing for employees. While hard factors such as wage levels etc. continue to play a role in their choice of location (Geis et al., 2013; Head & Mayer, 2006), there is also a tendency towards soft factors, towards “amenity” (Wei, 2015, p. 6). Employees are now more interested in soft factors that were of secondary importance when choosing a job a few years ago. These include firm-related factors such as flexible working hours, supplementary offers (Davidescu et al., 2020; Poggi, 2010), but also regional factors such as cultural and leisure opportunities (Beck et al., 2021; Döring, 2010; Florida et al., 2008). These soft

factors include corporate culture and the social atmosphere that results from it. This includes political attitudes and opinions of employees as well as their perceptibility (Danielzyk & Wood, 2001) (see Chapter 2.2.3).

The region as a place to work and do business is also perceived and evaluated from similar perspectives and criteria. Perceptible regional political identities and attitudes can therefore act as both pull and push factors on workers, firms and investors. Christoph Schemionek (Acting Delegate at Delegation of German Industry and Commerce in Washington DC, LLC) confirmed that “quality of life” is now more important than costs when it comes to location decisions and that this applies not only to individuals, but also, in view of the labor market situation, as a logical consequence for firms' location decisions. Regional development is determined on a hyper-local basis; neighborhoods and “identification features at the local level are central – the national level feels very far away.”¹ Georg Maier, the Thuringian Minister of the Interior, also sees similar patterns for investment decisions: “Uncertainty is the biggest enemy of investment. No one will invest here if questions arise: Can you live here safely and in peace?”² This means that firms and political decisionmakers must also pay more attention to these circumstances, which have so far been regarded as minor, in order to remain competitive. This thesis argues that, in addition to the factors for the location choice of workers, firms and investors presented above, other factors are also significant that are, so to speak, even “softer”, i.e. even more individual and subjective than social or cultural factors, namely emotional and affective factors that are closely related to attitudes and mindsets. Thus, a correlation between regional inequalities and socio-political attitudes is assumed and examined.

Inequalities are created by the actions of actors – including firms and their management – which are, in turn, shaped by attitudes and mindsets. To understand these complex interrelations, it is necessary to adopt a micro perspective and examine the firms themselves to identify practices in which these attitudes manifest and become influential. This thesis explores how the exclusionary socio-political attitudes of regional economic actors, and the resulting practices, contribute to or perpetuate regional inequalities. The central focus of this thesis is on regions referred to as left-behind places, which will be examined in greater detail in the following chapter.

¹ Christoph Schemionek made these statements in his lecture “Build Back Better - The Economic Agenda of US President Joe Biden” at the Jena Talks of Economic Geography on May 11, 2021.

² Georg Meyer made these statements during his appearance at the event “Virtuelles Café – Auf ein Wort mit Georg Maier und Prof. Dr. Marion Reiser” zum Thema “Standortattraktivität in Thüringen - Wie schädlich sind rechtsextreme Einstellungen für die Wirtschaft?” [“Virtual Café - A word with...” on the topic “Location attractiveness in Thuringia - How damaging are right-wing extremist attitudes for the economy?”] on June 19, 2023.

2.2.1.1 Left-behind places

There is no universally accepted definition of left-behind places (MacKinnon et al., 2021; Royer & Leibert, 2024), but various dimensions and characteristics can be identified that help to approach this somewhat fuzzy concept. At the same time, the differentiated presentation of multiple perspectives aims to clarify how the term left-behind places is understood and applied in this thesis.

First of all, with regard to the spatial contexts of the debate, it should be noted that, although some of the fundamental conceptual work could also be applied to the Global South (Fiorentino et al., 2024; MacKinnon et al., 2021), the debate has so far focused on the Global North, with a few exceptions (Tups et al., 2024).

Even though left-behind places are not infrequently located in areas defined as peripheries and the debate consequently focuses strongly on these regions (MacKinnon et al., 2024), they are not necessarily always congruent with them (Kühn, 2015; Kühn & Weck, 2013; Lang & Görmar, 2019). Nor are they exclusively former industrial regions (Pike et al., 2024), although they are often analyzed in this context (MacLeod & Jones, 2020; Tomaney, 2023a). Moreover, there are likely more overlaps than deviations in this context. In the framework of this thesis, two criteria are fundamental for classifying a region as a left-behind place: the presence of ongoing or impending unfavorable socio-economic transformation processes and the associated, sometimes collective, feelings of being left behind among parts of the population. For a more nuanced differentiation, it is useful to consider various levels of analysis and methodological approaches, along with the specific characteristics they address.

Many works refer to demographic, economic and infrastructural variables that can be measured quantitatively, e.g. comparatively weak and declining regional economies with below-average employment, wages and productivity (Kübler & Harris, 2024), low investment (Lichter & Schafft, 2019), high emigration and low immigration (Fiorentino et al., 2024), educational disadvantage (Tomaney et al., 2019), etc. These studies are mostly synoptic in nature and use secondary data for statistical analysis (Ezcurra & Rodríguez-Pose, 2013, 2014; Iammarino et al., 2019; McKay, 2019; Velthuis et al., 2024). This strand of literature provides a solid macro-level overview and helps to identify certain patterns, relate them to one another, and, where applicable, reveal trends over time. However, due to the limitations of the underlying factor analysis, it falls short when it comes to uncovering the causes and reasons for persistent disadvantageous regional development. This is because so-called 'soft factors' – such as individual attitudes, motivations, emotions, and affects, along with the associated social interdependencies and interactions within regions – also play a crucial role in this context (Huijsmans, 2023).

These softer factors are also being tried to being quantified in some cases (Muringani

et al., 2024), but overall, the choice of qualitative methods appears to be more promising for this purpose. Qualitative methods have come to the fore in a more recent strand of research in this context, which derives the necessity for further and more in-depth analyses at smaller spatial scales in order to explain the genesis of left-behind places in a more complex way (MacKinnon et al., 2024). The inclusion of regional specifics offers additional advantages, particularly in terms of the transferability of results and the development of policy measures.

This approach, which has so far been adopted only sporadically, is increasingly reflected in more recent works. These studies move beyond a primary focus on infrastructural deficits and instead address issues of social welfare and the alignment of living conditions (Boswell et al., 2022; Deppisch, 2019; Deppisch et al., 2023). Ultimately, the approaches outlined above can also be distinguished by whether they address regions that have been objectively left behind or those that perceive themselves as being left behind (Velthuis et al., 2023). There are arguments supporting both perspectives. Combining these two approaches appears beneficial for the analysis, as it requires a depiction that more precisely explains how the feeling of being left behind among large parts of a region's population is interdependent with their actual, objective state of being left behind – or not (Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2023). Causes and effects seem to overlap in a variety of ways here. To specify these interdependencies and overlaps, more attention should be paid to regionally distinct collective emotions in this context (Hertrich & Brenner, 2024; Hitchen, 2016; Tups et al., 2024).

Affects and emotions are important for the genesis and persistence of left-behind places in that they express themselves in discontent, for example through regional narratives and the associated opinion-forming processes (Hertrich & Brenner, 2024). This is now widely recognized as a defining characteristic of left-behind places, sparking a sub-debate on its development, which is the focus of the following chapter.

2.2.1.2 Geographies of discontent

According to McCann (2020), the discontent arising from actual or felt regional inequalities can concentrate in regions and shape the socio-political and economic climate there. This discontent is operationalized in the present work as embitterment, which can also be expressed collectively (see Chapter 5.2.3). McCann refers to the spatial patterns he has identified as “geographies of discontent” (2020, p. 256), a term that has come to define the entire debate. As with most analyses of left-behind places, these spatial patterns are typically examined using quantitative, objective data (Dijkstra et al., 2020; Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2024), e.g. on economic developments that cause perceived inequality – within and between regions, but also between individuals – and thus

discontent (Lenzi & Perucca, 2021).

However, as already mentioned, the connection between inequality and populist tendencies (Guriev, 2018; Jay et al., 2019) cannot be attributed solely to a region's measurable economic decline and/or individual economic inequality (Diermeier & Niehues, 2024). This brings perceptions, emotions and affects into focus (Bakker et al., 2016). This aspect is also central to McCann's works (McCann, 2019, 2020). Economic and socio-political transformation processes always have social and emotional effects (see also Küttel, 2024). Perceived overreach, social, economic, and political marginalization, as well as social stigmatization, contribute to a sense of inequality and perceived disadvantage. This perception, often expressed through the feeling of being left behind and fueled by various emotions (see Chapter 5), shapes the formation of identity and the attitudes associated with it (Di Matteo & Mariotti, 2020; Ruyter et al., 2021). Krumeich (2011) thematizes the collective embitterment in the Weimar Republic that resulted from the experiences of World War I. He describes how the defeat and the associated traumas had not only individual but also collective effects on German society. This embitterment manifested itself in a deep sense of disappointment and injustice that many people felt, influencing the political and social mood in the Weimar Republic. Krumeich argues that this collective grief and discontent over the defeat played an important role in the political radicalization and the search for scapegoats, which ultimately contributed to the instability of the Weimar Republic. Analogies to the developments analyzed in this work are unmistakable: Collectively expressed embitterment as a result of the perceived disadvantageous political handling of a trigger event and subsequent transformation processes leads to the formation of exclusionary attitudes and practices favoring societal polarization (see Chapters 5.3 and 5.5).

In left-behind places that are strongly characterized by far-reaching transformation processes, discontent can ultimately develop (Dijkstra et al., 2020; Koeppen et al., 2021; Ulrich-Schad & Duncan, 2018), because the security-providing identity continuity is at risk here (Iyer & Jetten, 2011), which in some places also draws on nostalgic elements and includes a sense of community (Kenny, 2017; Schulte & Lammers, 2024) – as is also the case in parts of the eastern German states with regard to the post-reunification transformation (Bürk, 2013). According to Giebler et al. (2021, p. 901), this discontent can be differentiated into “self-centered” and “society-centered”, whereby it can be assumed that both dimensions are almost invariably interdependent. Furthermore, various spatial levels can be relevant for the development of discontent. In this context, globalization has been widely studied as a powerful transformation process that triggers adjustment difficulties, insecurity and thus discontent in parts of the population (Broz et al., 2021; Dippel et al., 2015; Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2024). Even though the triggering moment occurs at a higher spatial level, this discontent often takes on

regional (Burdack et al., 2015; Essletzbichler et al., 2018; Lengfeld, 2017) and sometimes even collective traits (Altomonte et al., 2019; Cheung et al., 2017). At this regional level, a further element becomes apparent, namely the prerogative of interpretation of cultural and social norms, which are supposedly changing to the detriment of those affected, who feel left behind, in the course of the transformation processes (Carreras et al., 2019; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Rippl & Seipel, 2018). In the perception of those affected, traditional values, often shaped and developed regionally, that provide security and orientation, collide with innovations that are perceived as coming too quickly, being compulsory and heteronomous. While there are explanatory approaches that identify differences between urban and rural areas and find greater discontent in the latter (Kenny & Luca, 2021), these findings are not suitable for making statements about the genesis and persistence of regionally pronounced discontent.

Additionally, the experience of multiple crises plays a significant role in this context. The simultaneous or successive crises – such as the closely spaced energy, financial, and pandemic crises in the 2000s – have heightened feelings of insecurity in many regions, particularly in left-behind places (Leyshon, 2021). The crises amplify the feeling of powerlessness in the face of global developments that are seen as distant from local decision-makers. The repeated experience of crises fosters an increasingly pessimistic attitude toward the ability of political actors to address these issues. In times of multiple crises, the potential for widespread discontent grows, alongside the subjectively perceived pressure (Martin et al., 2022). The resulting focus on negatively perceived social and economic dynamics, driven by these developments or changes, along with the associated pressure to adapt, can create a breeding ground for a desire to resist those responsible for managing the socio-economic transformation processes (Droste, 2021; Özatağan & Eraydin, 2024; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). This desire for resistance favors right-wing populist influence (Miggelbrink & Mullis, 2022; Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2023; Spissinger, 2024) and thus also social polarization tendencies locally (Adamiak et al., 2024), which Schmalz et al. (2021) also confirm for East Thuringia (see Chapter 3.1). The growing sense of discontent, which is multidimensional and interconnected with economic and social inequalities and their perceptions in left-behind places, fosters the development of an oppositional collective identity. This, in turn, provides fertile ground for right-wing populist actors and initiatives to gain regional influence and prominence. These actors promote social polarization for strategic purposes and channel feelings of alienation and marginalization into political movements (Rico et al., 2017) that promise a return to security-providing structures (Rhodes-Purdy et al., 2021). This connection will be examined in more detail in the following chapter.

2.2.2 Right-wing populism, exclusionary regional political identities and xenophobia

There is no unanimous definition of the term right-wing populism. Rather, there are different conceptions, which, however, largely agree that right-wing populism is a non-liberal political orientation that includes an ethnic-nationalist level: Culture, race, ethnicity and origin are always key reference points (Pelinka, 2013; Rodrik, 2021; Salmela & Scheve, 2017). The present thesis is based on an understanding of right-wing populism that is similar to the descriptions by Müller (2017). It is characterized by constructed, normatively charged oppositions between the so-called 'people' and the so-called 'elites', as well as between one's own reference group and other groups, with a strong emphasis on nativism and authoritarianism as core ideological features. Müller identifies polarization, provocation, and emotionalization as key strategic levers employed by right-wing populist actors (see also Chapter 5). From a global perspective, right-wing populism has gained momentum in recent years, becoming the subject of numerous studies across a wide range of disciplines, particularly political science (Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Mudde, 2004), sociology (Dalton, 2019; Koppetsch, 2019), psychology (Feldman & Stenner, 1997; Rothmund & Walther, 2024; Zick et al., 2011) and media studies (Aalberg et al., 2017; van Aelst et al., 2017; Vreese et al., 2018). The topic is also currently gaining relevance in economics and geography. In the context of the present thesis, the main question is to what extent regional specifics of economic structures and practices are related to the formation, development and diffusion of right-wing populist tendencies.

Van Hauwaert et al. (2019) show that regional identities and the associated rejection of elites play a role here. According to Paasi (1986), regional identity can be understood in two ways: On the one hand, it refers to the identity of the region (Paasi, 1986), which relates to the perception of the region by external third parties and the resulting attributions and images. On the other hand – and this understanding is, to a certain extent, the basis for the conception of political regional identity in the present thesis – it refers to regional identity, which Paasi also refers to as regional consciousness – here, parallels to Blotevogel (1989) can certainly be seen – and in which the inhabitants of the region themselves, with their attitudes and ideas, are placed at the center of consideration. Through their relationships and social interactions, a common frame of reference is constituted that can also favor the emergence of regional political cultures and identities (Reiser et al., 2023), which significantly shape the political landscape (van Leeuwen & Vega, 2021). In some places, the favoring of right-wing populist parties (Heinisch & Jansesberger, 2023; Heinisch et al., 2018) can occur and according to Morettini and Compagnucci (2024), this in turn can influence the development of a region into a left-behind place.

The majority of economically oriented works on regional identity focus on its positive effects and the associated opportunities and growth perspectives (Anholt, 2007; Moscovitz, 2021; Raagmaa, 2002). A research gap can be seen here, which has only been addressed to a limited extent so far, namely the analysis of negative economic effects triggered by regional identity (Hildebrandt & Trüdinger, 2021; Semian & Chromý, 2014). This thesis aims to explore this issue in greater detail. Current debates on right-wing populism, homeland, and the so-called 'new retreat into the regional' – observable in many respects – support this claim. While positive perspectives on regional identities dominated in past decades, numerous contemporary discourses now provide reference points for problem-centered considerations. In light of discussions about social disintegration and polarization, the topic of regional identities has gained increased importance, particularly with regard to rural and more peripheral regions (Czaika & Di Lillo, 2018; Paasi, 2011; van Hauwaert et al., 2019; Zick et al., 2011).

Van Houwaert et al. (2019) show, based on a quantitative analysis for nine European countries, that pronounced regional identities can lead to high levels of agreement with right-wing populist arguments and ultimately to exclusionary attitudes. Small-scale regional specifics of a cultural and socio-economic nature, which explicitly include identities, thus have an influence on right-wing populist attitudes (Arzheimer & Bernemann, 2024; Garretsen et al., 2018). This applies in particular to those identities that refer to ethnic, national or cultural affiliations (Meléndez & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019). Hildebrandt and Trüdinger (2020) confirm this correlation on the basis of a survey data analysis for Germany. It turns out that this correlation varies greatly from region to region and is particularly pronounced in the new federal states. Consequently, there are good arguments for strengthening the regional perspective on the exclusionary elements of collective spatial identities, as is being done here. Semian and Chromý (2014) conclude from their case studies – which, although focusing on controlled processes of regional development, remain relevant to the central context here due to their emphasis on regional identity as an internalized self-perception of residents that can hinder development – that regional identity can indeed be seen as an obstacle to regional development, as the following quotations illustrate:

“It is necessary to take into consideration that regional identity based on the ‘us’ and ‘them’ dichotomy may under specific conditions act as a barrier in the form of opposition to imposed identity or the closing off from the outside world of a community with a particularly strong identity.” (Semian & Chromý, 2014, p. 265)

“Demonstrating uncritical regional patriotism, and emphasizing and celebrating regional characteristics instead of finding ways to use them in developing the region can act as a barrier. Reproducing stereotypes and preconceptions may

similarly hinder the development of cooperation among actors within and outside the region.” (Semian & Chromý, 2014, 268f.)

At this point, it seems appropriate to incorporate exclusivity or exclusion as an element of regional identity, both in terms of the processes that shape a shared perception of space within the region and in regard to the potential disintegrative effects this exclusion can have. Exclusionary collective identities place excessive emphasis on the perceived virtues and advantages of one's own group, the 'we'. This valuation inherently involves the devaluation of those not regarded as belonging. Since this concept always carries a regional dimension, it can be assumed that the ascribed sense of belonging is also influenced by spatial factors, such as one's origin or length of residence in a place. Consequently, this results in negative exclusionary effects (Bibouche et al., 2009; Held et al., 2008; Kühne & Schönwald, 2015), which act as factors for phenomena summarized under the term group-focused enmity (Zick et al., 2011) and for negative stereotyping. Regarding the latter, Skrobranek (2004) finds a highly significant correlation with regional identities. His area of investigation, Saxony, is similar in many respects to the neighboring region of East Thuringia, which is the focus here.

These phenomena manifest themselves in individual attitudes, particularly xenophobia (Czaika & Di Lillo, 2018; Hildebrandt & Trüdinger, 2020), which in turn are fostered by – both latent and strategically deployed – right-wing populist influences (Reusswig, 2019). In this context, Van Hauwaert et al. aptly speak of “the regional foundations of populism, most notably the predictive power of regional identity” (2019, p. 303).

Paasi's model refers to these exclusionary elements and makes it clear that they – like all other elements of regional identity – contribute significantly to the construction of narratives that form the basis of regional identity in the sense of regional consciousness:

“Narratives of regional identity lean on miscellaneous elements: ideas on nature, landscape, the built environment, culture/ethnicity, dialects, economic success/ recession, periphery/centre relations, marginalization, stereotypic images of a people/community, both of ‘us’ and ‘them’, actual/invented histories, utopias and diverging arguments on the identification of people. These elements are used contextually in practices, rituals and discourses to construct narratives of more or less closed, imagined identities.” (Paasi, 2003, p. 477)

This closed or exclusive nature sometimes manifests itself in the rejection of external individuals and groups (Legge et al., 2009). Various social science concepts include this rejection and the associated ideological concepts or beliefs, e.g. right-wing extremism, racism or xenophobia. After careful consideration, the term xenophobia is used to describe the focus of the present thesis and the instruments employed in its analysis

(see Chapter 3.3). This also encompasses exclusionary attitudes that target sub-groups, particularly racism, but defines the excluded group more broadly. According to this definition, not only members of ethnic or visible minorities are affected by various forms of exclusion, but also all individuals who are perceived as foreign within the specific context shaped by regional political identities, and are consequently defined as such. With regard to East Thuringia, this includes in particular people from the old federal states – ‘Wessis’ or ‘Besser-Wessis’ – or in extreme cases even people from other, even nearby localities. At this point, an anecdotal account from an interviewed managing director in East Thuringia can help illustrate these spatially influenced perceptions in a practical way: He shared that even today, nearly 35 years after German reunification, many villagers still drive eastward to the supermarket for groceries. Although the nearest supermarket in the west is much closer, it lies behind the former border and thus feels far away for many people (Interview 58).

Various studies show that right-wing populist attitudes are often found in regions with weak economic structures (Essletzbichler et al., 2018; Guiso et al., 2017; Stanig & Colantone, 2018) or where there is a feeling of being left behind (Rodríguez-Pose, 2020) (see Chapter 2.2.1.1).

The shortage of skilled workers affects many regions, which is why they are inevitably in competition with each other (Anholt, 2007; Terlouw, 2012). The necessity of immigration in the face of insufficient local human resources is undisputed (Kemeny & Cooke, 2017; Lang, 2015; Rodríguez-Pose & Berlepsch, 2014). Prevailing resentment in the region can be seen as an obstacle to the necessary influx of workers. Particularly in economics and political science, the question of the extent to which certain factors influence individual attitudes towards immigration and integration is addressed (O’Rourke & Sinnott, 2006; Poutvaara & Steinhardt, 2018). It is clear that emotional factors have a much greater influence on attitudes than rational ones (Poutvaara & Steinhardt, 2018). Brader et al. (2008, p. 960) state: “Recent research suggests that emotions play a central role in both political judgment and behavior”.

While negative attitudes towards immigration cannot be equated with right-wing populism, the overlap in content cannot be dismissed. For example, the AfD Thuringia emphasizes in its election program for the 2024 state election that Germany's cultural identity is threatened by immigration (AfD, 2024). It can be assumed that negative attitudes towards immigrant workers are also shaped by emotional aspects and that the strategic influence of right-wing populist parties plays a role in this dynamic (Semyonov et al., 2007; Semyonov et al., 2004; Wilkes et al., 2007). The connection between right-wing populist tendencies and phenomena such as xenophobia, racism, etc. has been confirmed by numerous studies (Jylhä et al., 2022; Kende & Krekó, 2020; Ruzza, 2018).

The present thesis contributes to this debate: Especially in the new federal states, politicians and business representatives have been expressing concern for several years – parallel to the strengthening of populist parties – that public perception of these trends is leading to economic disadvantages for the respective regions. The public discourse on this issue can be seen in the increased media coverage (Becker & Kaufmann, 2024; Bergmann & Diermeier, 2024; Fratzscher, 2018; Krinninger, 2018): Customers and business partners (Schmidt-Mattern, 2019), applicants for job vacancies (Rövekamp, 2018) and investors (Prange & Münchrath, 2024) would become aware of populist and xenophobic attitudes in the region, particularly through media coverage, and increasingly perceive the circumstances described as a locational disadvantage (Krieger, 2024). This assumption is examined in the present thesis (see in particular Chapter 6) and fills a gap in the debate about the relationship between social attitudes – in this case specifically right-wing populism – and economic development, by considering the former as a determinant and the latter as an effect, contrary to the logic, previously dominant in most works. Specifically, this correlation is considered a mechanism of action when it comes to the issue of the shortage of skilled workers: “For example, strong right-wing radicalism in peripheralized regions can inhibit the necessary immigration of immigrants” (translated from German) (Kühn & Weck, 2013, p. 39).

In particular, highly visible events can represent such obstacles and, if they occur frequently, cumulatively shape the image of a region. Examples include the numerous right-wing rock concerts in Saxony and Thuringia, xenophobic attacks (Edinger & Hallermann, 2001; Heerdegen, 2016) and demonstrations organized by right-wing extremists (Salheiser & Quent, 2022). Bussmann and Werle (2004a, 2004b) prove that these events are not only perceived by the recipients, but also have a concrete effect on them and thus also bear implications for regional economic developments. They recognize the negative effects of xenophobic incidents on job applicants from outside the region and a resulting “locational disadvantage for the East” (Bussmann & Werle, 2004a).

This causal relationship requires further investigation through differentiation. A fundamental question arises regarding how xenophobic attitudes shape the image of a region, potentially hindering its economic development. In this context, the role of firms and the actors involved is particularly significant. The central question is how xenophobic attitudes within firms influence the economic development of a region. This question allows for a relational perspective on the discourses and social dynamics within regional firms and the mechanisms through which these dynamics affect the region. The aim is to examine the impact on three groups: (potential) customers, employees, and business partners.

The rise of right-wing populist sentiment, centered on exclusionary nationalism or

regionalism and the rejection of supposedly 'foreign' influences, sharply contrasts with the growing emphasis on the positive effects of diversity and inclusion in the economic and corporate context. As firms increasingly adopt CSR strategies that specifically and systematically promote diversity, social justice, and sustainability, the tension and potential for polarization between these progressive corporate values and right-wing populist influences becomes ever more evident, as the following chapter demonstrates.

2.2.3 Tolerance, CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) und corporate practices

The corporate or, more specifically, the firms' operational level can be understood as one of the contexts mentioned by Paasi (2003) that can contribute to the formation of exclusionary identities. At this point, the connection between the exclusionary regional political identities of the population and corporate practices should be outlined in order to focus corporate responsibility with a view to these connections and their implications for the development of the regional economy.

Regional political identities are transferred to local firms and expressed there in corresponding discourses, which may ultimately lead to certain practices that can be understood as "regional oriented activity" (translated from German) according to Blotevogel et al. (1989, p. 72). This also applies to exclusionary identities, as Bibouche et al. explicitly state for the work context:

"The strongly varying degrees of specific right-wing extremist attitude patterns in different regions show that regional specifics have an influence on the formation of political attitudes, and this also applies to employees." (translated from German) (Bibouche et al., 2009, p. 64)

It can be generally assumed that individuals express their attitudes and values not only in their private lives but also in their professional lives, especially if their colleagues' values and attitudes are similar to their own (O'Reilly et al., 1991). In this way, they consciously or unconsciously influence these contexts (Brodbeck et al., 2004) (see Chapter 6). From this, a responsibility can be derived for firms to actively confront these tendencies, since they can exert influence not only on their own organization, but indirectly, due to their socio-spatial embedding in the surrounding space (Oinas, 1997; Sintonen & Takala, 2002) on the business environment and the region (Fresen & Klatt, 2024; Rommerskirchen, 2018; Schmidt, 2006).

There is evidence that right-wing populist agendas are not conducive to a region's economic development (Feldmann & Morgan, 2023; Krieger, 2024). Florida's remarks on the three Ts (technology, talent, tolerance), which are interdependent and capable of

mutually reinforcing each other (Boschma & Fritsch, 2009), can be understood as fundamental in this context, although they essentially conceptualize the reverse dynamic: According to Florida's remarks, greater importance should be attached to soft location factors today than to hard ones. He shows that, in addition to the basic requirements of technology and talent, a region must also have the resource of tolerance in order to be attractive as a place to live and do business for highly qualified members of the 'creative class', who are seen as the key drivers of a region's economic prosperity (Florida, 2003). Although these comments tend to refer to urban areas, there are also works that manage to apply these considerations to rural areas, thus enabling the conceptual transfer (McGranahan et al., 2011; Mcgranahan & Wojan, 2007). Florida's tolerance is constituted by the Composite Diversity Index, which is made up of the Gay Index, the Melting Pot Index and the Bohemian Index, which reflect the proportion of the population that is homosexual, people with a migration background and artists (Florida, 2017). At this point, it is evident that these factors, which are perceived as advantageous, are not compatible with right-wing populist agitation and goals.

Ettlinger (2001) finds that diversity in firms plays a role as a factor for competitiveness. Brox and Krieger (2021a) basically confirm this finding, but they differentiate by stating that the beneficial complementary experiences and skills are counteracted by communication barriers that can reduce efficiency and productivity. They conclude that diversity in working groups can have both negative and positive effects, but also note that a moderate degree of diversity produces the best results. In other words, firms can use their corporate social performance (CSP) to positively influence corporate practices (Turban & Greening, 1997) and, cumulatively, to have a greater number of positive effects on the external perception of the regional culture as tolerant and cosmopolitan. This perception increases the region's attractiveness and attracts more highly qualified talent. Gärtner et al. (2010, p. 1) aptly summarize:

“Under certain conditions, the interplay between corporate and regional culture leads to a ‘virtuous circle’ – to a regional development dynamic – in which corporate and regional activities mutually reinforce each other with success.”

(translated from German)

If, as previously suggested, this dynamic is reversed and it is assumed that a tolerant environment is absent or that there is even a regional tendency toward exclusion, it would mean that the settlement of actors who could drive the region's economic development either does not occur or fades away shortly after it begins (Curran et al., 2016). If one infers from Gärtner et al.'s above-mentioned thesis, it can even be assumed that a 'vicious circle' is more likely to occur in this case. It is expected that the socio-economic climate of the region, when tolerance is lacking or open resentment is perceived,

will reproduce exclusionary attitudes and practices. This is also because those who hold exclusionary identities tend to either stay in place or move into the region (Buch & Rossen, 2024). The managing director of an employment agency specializing in medical personnel from Eastern Europe said in the interview, when asked about the possible image effects of regional exclusionary political identities: “Even if that shocks you now, for our target group it is more of a locational advantage” (Interview 21, translated from German). Most open actors, on the other hand, are repelled by such dynamics. Thus, Holtemöller (2015, p. 51), with explicit reference to Florida, states for Saxony-Anhalt, which in many respects shows strong similarities to corresponding regions in Thuringia with regard to left-behind places, “that the sometimes openly apparent xenophobia is a negative location factor” (translated from German).

More and more firms are recognizing a responsibility to take a stand in the face of these developments, although this trend is less pronounced in the eastern German states (Bergmann & Diermeier, 2024). Kinderman – building on analyses of the engagement of economic actors against right-wing populist influences in Saxonia (Kinderman, 2014) – finds, with regard to regional differentiation, that less engagement can be found where the level of populist attitudes is relatively high. He attributes this to the immediacy and power of dynamics such as social desirability, which is rooted in strong local ties and the resulting regional peer pressure. In addition, he also identifies certain characteristics in the firms themselves that tend to stand in the way of diversity-affirmative attitudes. Export-oriented firms, in particular, are committed to cosmopolitanism. In contrast to this, there are small, particularly local craft and service firms that are strongly rooted in the regional economy; here, only a few firms are committed to cosmopolitanism (Kinderman, 2020). Similar relationships can be assumed for East Thuringia. In order to provide a deeper introduction to the relevant studies (see Chapter 5 and in particular 6), the following chapter presents an introduction to the study region of East Thuringia and an outline of the methodology.

3 Case Study and methodology

3.1 Case study: East Thuringia

The study region of East Thuringia consists of five districts and two urban districts: the city of Gera, the city of Jena, the district of Altenburger Land, the district of Saale-Holzland, the district of Greiz, the district of Saale-Orla and the district of Saalfeld-Rudolstadt. East Thuringia has a population of around 650,000, of whom a good 110,000 live in the region's largest city, Jena. While Jena is prospering economically, the rural areas in particular are suffering from structural weakness and emigration, the effects of which can be seen in Figures 1 to 3. The economic development forecasts for East Thuringia, which has been classified as a structurally weak or vulnerable region for years (Hüther et al., 2019), remain negative (Ewald et al., 2024).

The region has been severely affected by demographic change for years. It has a comparatively high and rising average age. In 2022, three of the districts in the region – Altenburger Land, Greiz and Saalfeld-Rudolstadt – were among the seven districts in Germany with the highest average age (inkar.de, 2024, query 26.04.2024).

The severe shortage of skilled workers and labor in the region is also related to this.



Figures 1, 2 and 3: Vacancies and abandoned store in East Thuringia; Source: Own photos

The economic structure of East Thuringia is characterized by small and medium-sized firms. Traditionally shaped, close relationships within the region – Terlouw speaks of “thick relations” in this context (2012, p. 710) – are strongly anchored and powerful here. Among other things, they also give rise to widespread skepticism about globalization trends (Hebenstreit et al., 2022). Overall, socio-political discourses in the federal state have been strongly focused on the topic of migration in recent years. Prof. Dr. Marion Reiser refers in this context to a striking constellation, the ‘Thüringen-Paradox’ [‘Thuringia Paradox’]: In rural areas, where most skilled workers are needed, the proportion of people with negative attitudes towards foreign fellow citizens is highest.³

³ Prof. Dr., Marion Reiser made these statements during her appearance at the event “Virtuelles Café – Auf ein Wort mit Georg Maier und Prof. Dr. Marion Reiser” zum Thema “Standortattraktivität in Thüringen - Wie schädlich sind rechtsextreme Einstellungen für die Wirtschaft?” [“Virtual

In 2022, the East Thuringia region has a foreign population of 7%, well below the national average of 14.6% (inkar.de, 2024, query 26.04.2024). It is worth mentioning that Gera (11.2%) and Jena (12.3%) significantly raise the average, which is consequently much lower in the rural districts (4.3% to 6.4%). In contrast to this, studies show that a comparatively large number of people perceive a so-called foreign infiltration of the region (Reiser et al., 2018, p. 123).



Figures 4 and 5: Xenophobic and right-wing populist graffiti in East Thuringia; Source: Own photos

Although the federal state has been governed by a coalition of the Left Party, Social Democrats and Greens from 2014 to 2024, the AfD – whose parliamentary group leader Björn Höcke may officially be called a fascist according to a court ruling (Meiningen District Court, decision 2 E 1194/19 Me) – has seen a great deal of popularity in recent years, becoming the strongest party in the 2024 state elections (wahlen.thueringen.de, 2024). The far-right parties *Die Heimat* – formerly *NPD (Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands)* [National democratic party of Germany] – and *III. Weg* are also active in East Thuringia. In addition, there are local alliances that position themselves particularly in municipal elections, e.g. the *Bürgerforum Altenburger Land* (Reiser et al., 2019).

The popularity of the AfD and other far-right parties is partly due to the prevalence of xenophobic attitudes in the population, which are comparatively widespread in the region, as they are in large parts of the new federal states (Wagner et al., 2001) – see figure 4. Koch et al. note that in East Thuringia, “anti-migration, anti-liberal, and authoritarian political proposals that aim to seal off a national community of solidarity are successful” (translated from German) (2020, p. 16) – see figure 5. Anti-Semitism, as a core

Café - A word with...” on the topic “Location attractiveness in Thuringia - How damaging are right-wing extremist attitudes for the economy?”] on June 19, 2023.

component of radical right-wing ideology, is also present in the region (Thiele & Ben-Yehoshua, 2021, p. 30).

In addition to right-wing populist and extremist parties, groups operating outside the parliamentary framework, and in most cases further to the right, are also present in East Thuringia. Interfaces with the right-wing extremist milieu are not only common in organizations such as the *Identitäre Bewegung [Identitarian Movement]* or *Ein Prozent [One Percent]* (Reiser et al., 2019), but can also be observed for the AfD. This becomes particularly clear in the context of right-wing extremist demonstrations and protests, e.g. against the COVID-19 measures or the political governance of the pandemic in general, or against planned refugee shelters, where the AfD regularly closes ranks with neo-Nazi structures (Küppers & Reiser, 2022). These are not coincidences or isolated cases, but rather manifestations of the strong connections and substantive overlaps between the aforementioned actors and the AfD. Other groups, such as so-called vigilante organizations and nationalist fraternity structures, are also part of the active and well-connected scene, supported by the corresponding infrastructure (Michelsen et al., 2020). Several prominent representatives of the nationwide and European neo-Nazi scene live and work in Thuringia. Their activities range from local promotional events such as children's and family festivals to events with a wider catchment area, primarily demonstrations and right-wing extremist concerts (Lammert, 2017). The latter in particular have attracted nationwide public attention in recent years due to their large numbers of participants, sometimes as many as several thousand right-wing extremists. In addition to activities of this kind, which take place within the scene and primarily serve to maintain networks and finance structures, there are also decentralized actions that are specifically directed against political opponents or immigrants. This is confirmed by police statistics, which record propaganda, violence, terrorism and other crimes in this area in the category of politically motivated crime on the right (TMIK, 2023). The figures are comparatively high and rising: While 1,280 cases were recorded in this area of crime in 2021 and 1,555 in 2022, the figure for 2023 is 1,835 (TMIK, 2023). It can also be assumed that the number of unreported cases is very high in this area due to reporting behavior and categorization by the police (Geschke & Salheiser, 2021). With regard to the rural regions of Thuringia, Richter et al. speak of "right-wing normalization" (Richter et al., 2019, p. 12). This is able to build bridges to other milieus (Bednarz, 2024) and is therefore considered to be a particularly dangerous tactic of the extreme right (Quent, 2015).

In these aspects, the city of Jena differs significantly from the other districts, partly due to its economic and demographic structure. Many globally active firms are based here, including several market leaders, particularly in the technical-optical and IT sectors. Additionally, the two universities host nearly 22,000 students. These factors contribute to

a relatively young, heterogeneous, mobile, and international urban population. The AfD's election results are notably lower than in the other districts, and right-wing populist and extremist positions face strong resistance from the local population. As a result, such organizations are not significantly present in the city.

Due to the extreme characteristics in the East Thuringia region, it can be labelled an extreme case study (Yin, 2009). As such, it can help to uncover dynamics that occur more subtly elsewhere and are therefore more difficult to identify, and also to make them available for analysis in less extreme regions. Furthermore, the insights gained here can also be transferred to other regions with similar characteristics and developments, in particular to rural areas in eastern Germany, which have undergone similar demographic and socio-economic developments in many places (Lang, 2012) and where the attitudes and practices that are the focus of this study are also present (Backes & Kailitz, 2020, p. 392; Best et al., 2016, p. 119; Edinger, 2010).

3.2 The study context as a sensitive field of research

When designing the various data collections (see Chapter 3.3), considerable challenges were expected due to the particularly sensitive research field and the controversial regional discussions surrounding the topic. These challenges were thoroughly considered.

First of all, aspects concerning one's own positioning or positionality are to be mentioned here, because this can be regarded as a central element of considerations of research ethics (Krause, 2023). These include possible role conflicts – in the present case, in particular with regard to the discrepancy between one's own professional past and current voluntary work (see preface and CV) and the claim to objectivity in the face of suspected xenophobic attitudes of some respondents (Dayter & Rüdiger, 2017; Faust & Pfeifer, 2021; Fawcett, 2004). The researchers' own emotional burden, including worries of getting into unsafe situations as a result of the research, also had to be reflected upon (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007). This was primarily done in exchange with other researchers, e.g. as a research participant in the context of a corresponding project (Hedtke, 2025). Additionally, there are fundamental research ethics requirements regarding the research subjects. These apply to the entire research process, from conceptualization to data collection and analysis, with particular emphasis on transparency towards the research subjects, informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality, and the avoidance of potential stigmatization (Rodermond & Weerman, 2024).

In terms of research practice, the success of the project largely depended on how the interviews were initiated and conducted, particularly given the anticipated resistance from the respondents. Regarding the initiation, a high rejection rate was expected due

to widespread political disaffection and a pronounced skepticism towards elites (Kollmorgen & Schaller, 2024) in the region – which also includes scientists. Since most of those approached could be persuaded by the argument that finally their perspective would be included, this assumption proved to be incorrect – just as concerns that the individuals would not allow insights into confidential aspects concerning the firm did not materialize (Scott, 2013). However, at the beginning of the interviews, in various cases explicit negative reference was made to the author's work as a scientist and to the supposedly privileged position of Jena at the expense of the rural regions of Thuringia. This dichotomy is also discussed in general terms in research on left-behind places – the supposed argument that contributes to the discontent in left-behind places is: The more the core cities prosper, the less this applies to their surrounding areas (Lee & Rodriguez-Pose, 2013; Lee, 2011). This shows how important it is to include fundamental – including conceptual and empirical – literature in research practice. Analogous to the preparation for the interviews, the establishment of trust as a basis for obtaining valid data was also identified as a central challenge with regard to conducting the interviews. The preparation and execution of the interviews were therefore carried out with the utmost care. For this purpose, not only the above-mentioned conceptual publications were consulted, but also those of a methodological nature (e. g. Bruns & Henn, 2018; Cowles, 1988; Lee, 1993). In addition, numerous preparatory discussions were held: on the one hand, with experienced researchers who had conducted similar projects in the past and could provide helpful advice on methodology and research practice, e.g. on the field approach, and, on the other hand with individuals who have knowledge of the target groups in the region and were therefore able to provide specific advice on how to create a good basis for discussion.⁴

When making initial contact regarding the CATI or interview request, the key factors identified were the presentation of the thematic focus and – related to this – the choice of words. In this regard, it proved to be very helpful that at the time of the initial contact, all of the firm representatives who had been approached were affected by the shortage of skilled workers. This circumstance, which underlies the research question, was an ideal icebreaker. The much more controversial topic of migration, which had the potential to cause the interview to be terminated right at the beginning or at an early stage, could be introduced somewhat later as a follow-up topic, which mitigated its difficult character.

Since the interview is a conversation-based method, great importance was attached to establishing a good basis for the conversation when conducting the interviews. For this reason, the address and the introductory clarification of framework conditions were

⁴ At this point, many thanks to Prof. Dr. Sebastian Henn, Dr. Tim Leibert and Dr. Axel Salheiser.

meticulously planned in order to avoid distortion effects such as responses shaped by social desirability. Personal appearance on the ground – starting with seemingly trivial details such as clothing style and forms of address – as well as handling necessary bureaucratic tasks like confidentiality agreements and data protection regulations, were identified as sensitive points. Presenting these as unavoidable and somewhat unpleasant requirements for all parties involved helped establish a positive foundation for the conversation in many cases. This approach, framed as 'you know the annoying paperwork – we're in the same boat here', was always maintained within the bounds of objectivity and the professional distance required.

3.3 Research design

The study is based on a mixed-methods design, consisting of quantitative and qualitative methods, in accordance with the triangulation approach, which aims to increase validity by comparing data collected using different methods (Kelle, 1999; Strübing et al., 2018). Since the research interest is strongly focused on qualitatively distinct aspects such as communicative discourses, personal motivations and emotions, as well as social interactions, special attention is paid to the qualitative data in the analysis (see Chapter 3.4.2). This is also due to the fundamental orientation towards the framework of relational economic geography (see Chapter 2.1). With its focus on relationships and the resulting modes of action, this is particularly suitable for examining the dynamics that are the focus of interest (Bathelt & Glückler, 2003; Bathelt & Glückler, 2018; Boggs & Rantisi, 2003). More recent contributions to the left-behind places debate, which focus more strongly than before on the affective or emotional aspects of the topic, advocate a mixed-methods approach (Tomaney, 2023b) in the sense of a comprehensive recording of all relevant influencing factors – as do works that deal with political radicalization (Flecker et al., 2019; Rodermond & Weerman, 2024).

The quantitative data obtained through CATI were collected to verify the findings from the literature review in an intermediate step and to support them with regard to regional specifics. Thus, while this procedure was conducted thoroughly and in accordance with all scientific standards, it ultimately had a more exploratory and supportive role in relation to the qualitative case study (Danielzyk & Wood, 2001). For this reason, not only the implementation of the CATI, but also the results obtained from it are presented in this chapter.

3.4 Data collection methods

3.4.1 CATI (Computer Assisted Telephone Interviews)

In order to learn more about right-wing populist attitudes and discourses within regional firms, a CATI survey was conducted from October to December 2019 with 400 randomly selected individuals who, as managing directors, authorized signatories, or, in a few cases, HR managers, were able to provide first-hand information. The aim was to focus on the “employer perspective” (Scott, 2013, p. 703) on relationships, practices and interactions in the firms and their environment.

3.4.1.1 Selection of respondents and implementation of the CATI

The respondents were randomly selected on the basis of an AMADEUS dataset. The sample comprised 4710 firms. All firms across all sectors with at least three employees were included. Non-profit organizations were not included. All administrative districts were evenly represented according to the number of firms based there.

After adjustment, 3984 contacts were transferred to the CATI system as a gross sample. The sample-neutral dropouts (no connection, wrong number, no appointment possible at field time, number not dialed) – a total of 1400 addresses (35.1%) – must be deducted from the gross sample. A further 2168 telephone numbers represented systematic failures (no one available, interview refused or canceled). Ultimately, 16.1% of the net sample was converted into interviews (416 interviews). The pretest accounted for 16 of these. The survey was conducted by a service provider based in Thuringia that specializes in CATI and has extensive experience in the field of political issues.⁵ The questionnaire contained 37 questions – some of which were subdivided – in three areas: location image, working climate/discourse and international employees (see appendix Ia). The survey took an average of around 20 minutes.

3.4.1.2 Data analysis and results

The data set contains 31 characteristic variables (region, firm size, firm sector, etc.) and 131 variables according to the questionnaire used. The analysis was carried out using SPSS statistical software. Conclusions can be drawn from the CATI data about the attitudes of the respondents themselves as well as those of the respective

⁵ During a visit to the CATI laboratory, the author was able to see for himself that the survey was conducted properly.

workforces and about discourses and practices in the firms. Overall, the results confirm the picture painted by surveys of the overall population of the federal state or the corresponding districts (Reiser et al., 2018) and also provide information about firm-specific manifestations of resentment and the resulting forms of interaction, in particular discrimination practices in everyday working life.

In principle, the results of the CATI thus also confirm the findings of the literature, particularly with regard to possible factors that are relevant for the spread of right-wing populist and xenophobic resentment. Following the so-called contact hypothesis (Allport et al., 1954; Pettigrew, 1998), it can be assumed that xenophobic attitudes are more likely to be found in rural regions, where there is less contact with the group of non-established residents, than in urban agglomerations, which include Jena and Gera in particular, regarding the study area (Dylong & Uebelmesser, 2023). These assumptions were largely confirmed by the CATI data, with the exception of the city of Gera, where, despite its urban characteristics, a conspicuously high level of strong resentment was found. In summary, the following key findings can be noted:

There were clear reservations about immigrants, particularly in the rural regions, both among the surveyed firm managers and within the respective workforces, as the following figures illustrate: While more than 90% of respondents in Jena rejected the blanket xenophobic statement below, this figure was lower – often significantly lower – in all other, rural districts – see Table 1:

Table 1: CATI: Reservations towards immigrant colleagues on the part of firm management by district; Source: Own illustration

Table 2: CATI: Management's estimated reservations towards immigrant colleagues on the part of the workforce by district; Source: Own illustration

Evaluation of the statement: “International workers simply don't belong here.” Proportion of “completely reject” (N=395)		Estimate: How high is the proportion of your employees who have reservations about international colleagues because of their origin? Proportion within the region for values ≥ 33% (N=400)	
Jena	91,4%	Jena	9,1%
Gera	84,6%	Altenburger Land	10,8%
Altenburger Land	82,9%	Saale Holzland-Kreis	15,4%
Saale Holzland-Kreis	81,4%	<i>East Thuringia (7LK)</i>	17,1%
<i>East Thuringia (7LK)</i>	80,5%	Gera	19,6%
Greiz	75,8%	Saale Orla-Kreis	20%
Saale Orla-Kreis	75%	Saalfeld-Rudolstadt	21,2%
Saalfeld-Rudolstadt	71,2%	Greiz	24,5%

In addition, the assessment of the firm's own workforce showed a similar pattern: While in Jena only just over 9% of respondents stated that more than a third of their employees had reservations about immigrant colleagues due to their origin, this figure was higher in the other districts: In Greiz, nearly a quarter of respondents indicated that more than a third of the workforce held these reservations – see Table 2. Specifically, immigrant workers were accused of being criminals, or of being unable or unwilling to adapt to the customs prevalent in the region and at the firm. This was seen as a disruption of social coexistence. These negative attitudes were predominantly expressed by respondents who had no prior experience with immigrants. In contrast, some respondents perceived the positive effects of including immigrant workers as outweighing the negatives. Notably, these respondents were mostly from urban contexts and, almost without exception, represented firms that had prior experience with immigrant workers – experiences that were almost universally positive. Figure 6 shows that only 4 out of 148 respective firm managers surveyed drew a negative conclusion about the inclusion of international skilled workers. It is noteworthy that at the time of the survey, only 15 of the firms surveyed were participating in the Weltoffenes Thüringen initiative, although they were aware of the advantages of bringing in international workers as well as the obstacles that stand in the way of this in many places. This low level of participation could possibly indicate regional effects of social desirability or even implicit pressure from the environment – a hypothesis that is examined in more detail in Chapter 6 with reference to regionally shaped corporate practices.

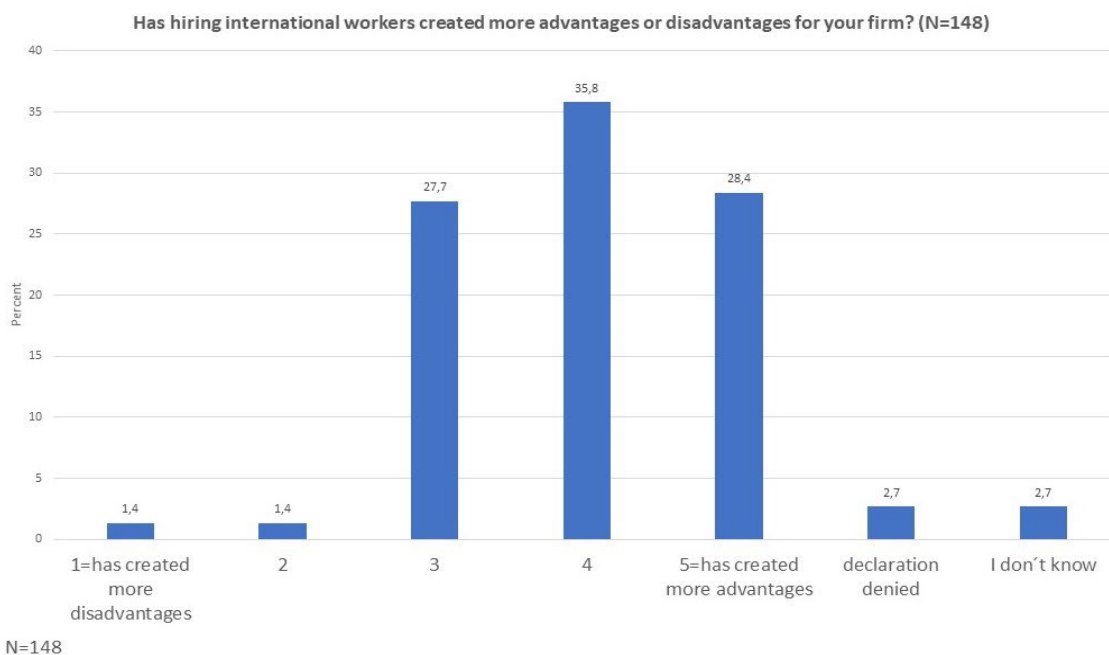


Figure 6: CATI: Assessment of the advantages and disadvantages of involving international experts;
Source: Own illustration

The shortage of workers affected almost all of the firms surveyed. In response to the question “How big do you think the problems will be for your firm in filling vacancies in the next 5 years?”, only 16.6% answered “none at all” or “no difficulties”. 28% saw great difficulties and 33.3% very great difficulties.

In this context, many respondents were concerned about the influence of xenophobic attitudes on the image of Thuringia as perceived outside the federal state. 25 percent agreed with the statement “Xenophobic attitudes in East Thuringia make it difficult to attract skilled workers”. With regard to image effects, many respondents feared negative consequences for the economy – as Figure 7 illustrates:

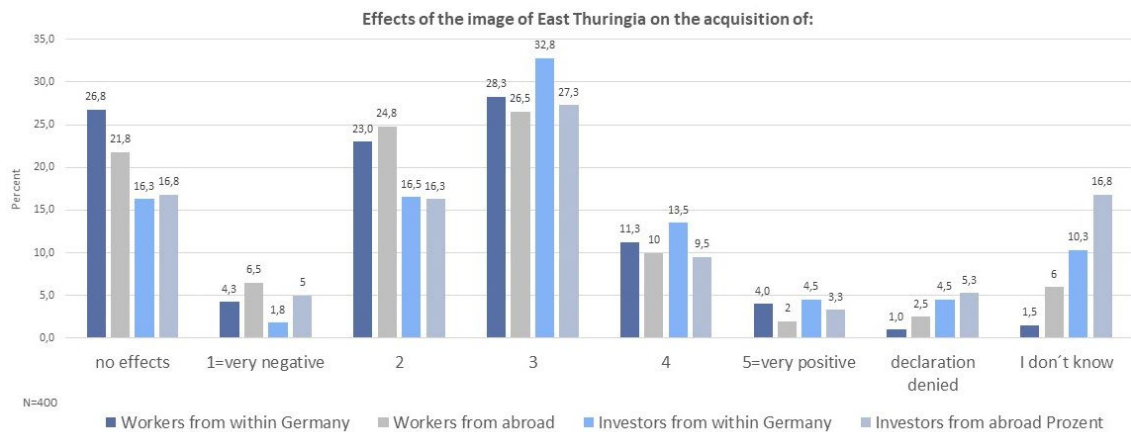


Figure 7: CATI: Assessment of the impact of image on attracting skilled workers and investors from Germany and abroad; Source: Own illustration

The attitudes of firm managers towards immigrants were therefore heterogeneous overall, but can generally be systematized according to certain factors. It is evident that, in addition to the sector, size, and market orientation of the firm – which are often correlated – the geographical location of the firm also plays a role. Xenophobic reservations were found more frequently in rural parts of East Thuringia than in cities, with Gera occupying a kind of intermediate position. Such reservations were more common in smaller firms. The more pronounced the contacts with international partners and/or the export orientation, the more open the surveyed firm managers seemed to be toward immigrant workers. In traditional firms – especially in the crafts – reservations about internationalization were more widespread than in firms with a more progressive orientation, such as those in the IT sector.

3.4.2 Guided interviews

3.4.2.1 Selection and acquisition of interview partners

The results of the CATI were integrated into the design of the subsequent surveys. To facilitate field access, which had been identified as a challenge during the planning phase due to the controversial nature of the topic, firm managers were asked after completing the CATI survey whether they would be available for an in-depth interview. This approach allowed for a targeted and systematic deepening of the knowledge gained from the CATI as part of an extreme case study. The number of positive responses was surprisingly high, at 186. Based on this, the original project was expanded, and the number of targeted interviews with firm managers was increased from 20 to 65.⁶

Since those interested in the in-depth interviews explicitly waived their anonymity during the CATI by agreeing to be contacted personally, the interview partners could be selected based on the CATI results. A problem-centered design, following the extreme case study approach, was applied: In line with the research question and the extreme case study methodology, the interview partners were chosen to specifically include those who had expressed criticism or rejection of the inclusion of foreigners in society and firms during the CATI. To capture complementary perspectives, moderate and tolerant entrepreneurs were also selected in equal proportion. The differentiation was based on a specially constructed, theoretically grounded index of the respondents' xenophobic tendencies, which was tested for significance using correlation (Spearman's Rho) and reliability analysis (Cronbach's alpha). The index was calculated based on the approval ratings for the following items:

- International workers are less reliable than German workers.
- International workers lead to higher crime rates in the workplace.
- International workers simply do not belong here.
- International workers change the environment and region negatively.

Two different perspectives emerged among the managers from the very first interview: On the one hand, numerous interviewees doubted that there was a relatively high level of xenophobia in the region and criticized that the region – like eastern Germany as a whole – was being further discredited and stigmatized by discourse and research of this kind. In some cases, the respondents fundamentally questioned the objectivity of the study – it was striking that these were entrepreneurs who were involved in local

⁶ For an anonymized list of interviewees see appendix Ic).

politics for the AfD at the time. On the other hand, many of the entrepreneurs welcomed the research and the opportunity to share their opinions, as they saw social and business risks in the attitudes being examined and wanted more attention to be given to the topic.

In addition, 11 interviews were conducted with experts from the corporate environment.⁷⁸ Experts are characterized by a high level of sensitivity to topics relevant in the context of this research project (Froschauer & Lueger, 2003) and knowledge of specific actors active in these fields (Meuser & Nagel, 1991; Scholl, 2014). The interview partners were selected according to their position and expertise so that as many perspectives as possible could be considered, e.g. employee-oriented, employer-oriented, migration-oriented, etc. These experts' statements, as well as the CATI results of the executive survey, basically confirm the relevance of the research question for the socio-economic status quo and the further development of the region.

The initiation of the interviews with the experts from the corporate environment posed comparatively few challenges, as the inquiries were without exception received and answered professionally as part of the professional self-image.

3.4.2.2 COVID19 as a methodological challenge

In contrast, initiating the interviews with the managing directors posed greater methodological and content-related communication challenges, as the basic mood among many regional entrepreneurs and managers was very poor at this time due to the COVID-19-related contact restrictions, which led to sometimes massive disruptions in corporate processes and even to a standstill in business, as the quote from a plastics manufacturer who supplied exclusively to the automotive industry – operations were completely shut down at the time – clearly illustrates: “It's a disaster here. Call back in a few months – if we're still around then” (translated from German). In the end, many rejected the request on principle, citing urgent internal firm problems, while others were persuaded with a great deal of effort.

The legally binding contact restrictions, which were changed at high but irregular frequency, had an equally serious impact during this phase, making it more difficult to plan and organize the data collection. In principle, the aim was to conduct all interviews face-to-face in the firms as far as legally possible in order to ensure the highest

⁷ For the respective list see appendix Ie).

⁸ A further 13 interviews, conducted with members of staff from selected firms whose management had previously been interviewed, could not be included in the analyses presented here as they were conducted at a later date, but overall it can be stated that they confirm the findings presented here.

possible quality of data and optimum comparability. This was also intended to gather additional direct impressions on site. However, there were two major hurdles here: Firstly, there were periods of total lockdown during which no form of face-to-face communication with non-family members was permitted. Secondly, some individuals to be interviewed were skeptical about direct personal contact. These circumstances inevitably meant that alternative formats had to be devised in the form of telephone or online video conference software interviews. The former were ultimately not used in any case, as an online video conferencing tool was preferred in all cases in which the interviewees agreed to accept a non-face-to-face setting for the interview.

During the inevitable adaptation measures and the negotiation of their use with potential interviewees, it became clear that the proposed use of digital tools for data collection through conversation-based methods – in this case, interviews – was far from uncontroversial among the potential interviewees. The first differences in the willingness to switch to these tools became apparent here.⁹ The sometimes hesitant to negative reactions to requests for online interviews were a motivation to analyze the factors underlying the skepticism in more detail, explicitly taking spatial variables into account (see Chapter 4). Without anticipating, it can be mentioned at this point that factors such as the professional environment and related practices and routines play a role in the digital literacy of potential interviewees. This digital literacy, in turn, can have a massive impact on their accessibility and thus on the selection of interviewees and ultimately on the quality of the survey and the overall analysis. Ergo, related considerations are fundamental to the overall methodological concept of the research project.

Furthermore, overlaps in content can also be identified: Requests for online interviews were conspicuously often declined by those who had stated attitudes strongly in line with right-wing populist theses in the course of the CATI. In particular, mistrust of and rejection of elites (Goodwin & Heath, 2016), to which the scientists involved were obviously counted, seemed to play a role here. These attitudes are explained in the phase model presented in Chapter 5 as a central feature of advanced discontent or embitterment. The potential interviewees who were approached expressed – both implicitly and explicitly – strong doubts about the integrity of the data handling and associated this with a supposed bias on the part of the researchers involved. In this context, negative references were also made several times to the TMASGFF (Thuringian Ministry of Thuringia for Work, Social Affairs, Health, Women and Family) as the funding body – a hidden agenda was obviously suspected behind the research project. There were also subtle to overt echoes of conspiracy narratives (Lamberty, 2024; Roose, 2020; Weiß, 2021). According to their own statements, these individuals preferred the face-to-face

⁹ For details on the factors influencing consent to different interview formats, see Chapter 4.3.2.

setting, as they felt safer in this setting and presumably assumed that they had a higher degree of control over the survey situation and the subsequent steps. This diverse mistrust can certainly be seen as characteristic of a milieu characterized by right-wing populist influences (Brettschneider, 2023). The fact that there is skepticism towards digitalization in the latter (Hövermann et al., 2021; Kohlrausch, 2018; Sauer & Detje, 2019) can be seen as a further element complicating access to the field. In view of the findings from Chapter 4 – particularly with regard to trust – creating a good interview situation as a basis for data collection (Helfferich, 2019) seems more likely to be possible in a face-to-face setting under these conditions. It can therefore be stated here that data collection in an online setting is rather unsuitable for the actors at the center of the present thesis – who can be understood as a special type of digital skeptics, so to speak. The large number and heterogeneity of the interviewees made it necessary to prepare for many potential scenarios in the survey context and to maintain a high degree of flexibility. One example is a case in which the interviewee requested that the interview may not be conducted on site at the firm, as she feared critical questions and social sanctions at work due to her open-minded attitude and the participation in the study. Such challenges regarding the possible vulnerability of the interviewees also had to be dealt with methodologically (Alexander et al., 2018; Dickson-Swift et al., 2007). Finally, during the interview at the Institute of Geography, the interviewee tearfully gave deep emotional insights into the xenophobic conditions in the firm and region.

3.4.2.3 Implementation of the guided interviews

With the exception of four out of 65 interviews with managing directors and four out of 11 interviews with experts from the firm environment, the vast majority of the interviews were ultimately conducted on site in the firms thanks to flexible planning and the willingness of many interviewees to accommodate schedules despite the strict COVID-19 restrictions at times. They were recorded as audio files with the written consent of the interviewees to enable subsequent verbatim analysis using transcripts (Dresing & Pehl, 2018; Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022).

The preference for a face-to-face setting, ideally on-site at the firm, stems from the need to establish a solid foundation for the conversation. The primary aim is to establish trust, e.g. through eye contact. Possible restrictive effects on the establishment of trust due to applicable hygiene rules (mouth-nose mask, distance) were consciously reflected upon and attempts were made to compensate for this via an increased level of verbal communication. In addition, sensory impressions that complement the purely acoustic conversation are often informative in order to be able to classify what is being said more precisely: Facial expressions could possibly still be captured via video conferencing

software, but this reaches its limits when it comes to gestures at the latest.¹⁰ Furthermore, other important insights can be gained by seeing the premises and surroundings of the firms first hand. Before, during and after the interviews, a great deal of attention was paid to gathering all possible impressions, e.g. on the design of the premises, the behavior of colleagues, customers, etc. Some interviewees offered a short tour of the firm, which was always accepted if time permitted. These impressions were systematically written down immediately after leaving the premises in order to supplement the primary data – as were the often very revealing off-the-record statements made by the interviewees after switching off the dictation machine (Strübing et al., 2018).

The premise of the greatest possible openness, which is particularly promising for the recording of subjective variables – e.g. “interpretations, relevance, structures of meaning” (Helfferich, 2019, p. 44) – was given high priority when conducting the interviews. In this sense, the guidelines were used uniformly as a structuring and comparability-ensuring framework, but the focus in the interview situation itself was largely left to the interviewees themselves. Reflection and control of precisely this subjectivity as a “quality criterion of qualitative research” (Helfferich, 2019, p. 683) is fundamental to the evaluation of the data obtained in this way.

3.4.2.4 Data analysis of the guided interviews

In addition to the last section of the previous chapter, reference should first be made to the quality criteria of qualitative research according to Mayring (2002): Documentation, argumentation, rule-guidedness, proximity to the object, communicative validation and triangulation. These criteria were reflected upon and always considered throughout the entire analysis process. A content-structuring content analysis (Kuckartz, 2018) was chosen for the analyses on which Chapters 5 and 6 are based. Building on this, the grounded theory approach was used to conduct the analysis. In principle, grounded theory serves less to test hypotheses than to make fundamental phenomena – e.g. of a social nature – visible and thus generate explanatory approaches. This approach is particularly suitable for the analysis of individual experiences, behavioral patterns and social interactions (Berg & Milmeister, 2008; Hutchinson & Wilson, 1993).

In accordance with the grounded theory approach, which is characterized by a rather open and partly explorative character (Glaser & Strauss, 2006; Mey & Mruck, 2011; Strauss et al., 1996), a combination of deductive and inductive coding and category formation was chosen and implemented in the analysis process after the interviews were

¹⁰ These aspects are discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

transcribed. The MaxQDA software (2018 and 2022) was used for the analysis (Rädiker & Kuckartz, 2019). This approach allows the category system for structuring the qualitative data, which was established at the beginning of the analysis process on the basis of systematic literature research and supplementary quasi-exploratory CATI analysis, to be continuously modified and, if necessary, expanded. In this way, aspects that were not initially foreseeable can also be included in the analysis, which is particularly valuable for the comparative analysis (Vogelpohl, 2013). In the context of the present thesis, this advantage was particularly helpful for the firm typifications, and here especially for the case grouping and analysis of empirical regularities (see Chapter 4.3.2 and 6.3.3). In addition, the procedure does justice to the approach of relational economic geography insofar as the inclusion of inductive category formation gives high priority to sensitivity to the study context or space and its particularity (Arzheimer & Bernemann, 2024; Gong & Hassink, 2020; Jones, 2009). In this way, the connection between the spatial environment, the attitudes of individuals or groups and the resulting practices can be analyzed comprehensively, e.g. with regard to attitudes towards immigration (Czaika & Di Lillo, 2018; Karreth et al., 2015).

During the process, the chosen approach proved to be fruitful, as the constant change and interaction between data collection, evaluation and theory formation meant that categories and subordinate aspects could be extracted from the data for analysis that could not be identified in advance either via the literature or the CATI. This enabled theoretical saturation to be achieved (Aldiabat & Le Navenec, 2018; Birks & Mills, 2015; Charmaz, 2015), for which the increased number of interviews also paid off – no new topics or significant findings emerged in the last interviews analyzed.

4 Participation in Online Research: Towards a Typology of Research Subjects with Regard to Digital Access and Literacy

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has severely impacted empirical research practices relying on face-to-face interactions, such as interviews and group discussions. Confronted with pandemic management measures such as lockdowns, researchers at the height of the pandemic were widely limited to the use of online methods that did not enable direct contact with their research subjects. Even as the pandemic subsides, online data collection procedures are being widely applied, in many cases possibly recklessly. In this paper, we urge the implementation of a reflective approach to online research. In particular, we argue that both digital access and the research subjects' digital literacy affect participation in online research and thus also the quality of the research. By combining these two dimensions, we develop a typology of four types of research subjects (digital outcasts, illiterates, skeptics and natives) that allows researchers to adapt their data collection to the specifics of each research situation. We illustrate these types in the context of our own research projects and discuss them with regard to three main challenges of empirical research, i.e., acquiring participants, establishing a basis for conversation, and maintaining ethical standards. We conclude by developing recommendations that help researchers to deal with these challenges in the context of online research to avoid unintended biases.

4.1 Introduction

Measures introduced to prevent the spread of Covid-19 such as lockdowns and other kinds of contact restrictions as well as an increased reluctance of many people during the pandemic to meet others in informal settings have affected empirical research in an unprecedented way (Howlett, 2022). Conversation-based methods such as interviews and group discussions were rarely implemented in face-to-face-settings at the height of the pandemic. While collecting data online for conversation-based methods was not the norm in the past, the need to apply software for data collection purposes significantly increased with the pandemic, as this seemed to be the only way to generate any empirical data at all. Researchers who needed to collect qualitative primary data through interviews or group discussions suddenly had to rely on video conferencing software such as Microsoft Teams, Webex or Zoom, to name only a few (Lobe et al., 2020), to connect to and engage with (potential) interview partners. While carrying out interviews and group discussions has thus remained possible in principle, it should not be ignored that not every research subject can be reached by online tools in the same way. A loss of potential research participants, however, can seriously affect the quality of research results and thus pose considerable problems to researchers when it comes to

publishing their results. To avoid such pitfalls, scholars in various social sciences need to greatly reflect upon how to access research subjects, especially when applying conversation-based and mixed research designs, and ensure a basis for conversation, while at the same time maintaining ethical standards well before they start collecting empirical data for their research. As little is known about the limitations connected with the virtual implementation of conversation-based methods in qualitative field research, we seek to systematically analyze which groups can or cannot be reached for qualitative data collection using online tools. In particular, by considering the research subjects' digital access, and their literacy with digital tools and practices, we derive a typology of research subjects that also provides relevant information about the efforts and opportunities to integrate them into the research process.

In the following, we first take a closer look at the challenges associated with field access in social science research and analyze how recruiting research participants for conversation-based qualitative data collection, establishing a basis for conversation, and maintaining ethical standards have changed in the face of digitization related to the constraints of the Covid-19 pandemic. We will then focus on the prerequisites for participating in online research. Based on this, we establish a typology of research subjects which we will explain in more detail using illustrative examples of our own research conducted during the pandemic. The final chapter summarizes our findings and outlines future directions for research.

4.2 Challenges of engaging research subjects in online guided interviews and group discussions

Literature on empirical methods in the social sciences has pointed out some great advantages related to carrying out conversation-based qualitative data collection, e.g., guided interviews online, such as the fast and uncomplicated bridging of large geographical distances between researchers and research subjects (Glassmeyer & Dibbs, 2012), the comparatively low costs and time involved (Rodham & Gavin, 2006), as well as the simplification of data processing using software (Flick, 2002). Furthermore, it has been shown that researchers benefit from applying appropriate online instruments when they themselves or their research subjects feel insecure about meeting one another face-to-face (Tiidenberg, 2019) – something which might be particularly relevant when it comes to addressing vulnerable research subjects and/or exploring unsafe or even dangerous research fields that may pose a risk to the researcher (Thunberg & Arnell, 2021). Also, for those researchers facing mobility constraints, or the ones who are unable to participate in personal meetings, for example, for physical or mental

reasons, or for those who prefer not to travel long distances for environmental reasons, methods of online data collection have multiple advantages over conventional settings. Despite these and other important advantages, online conversation-based qualitative research designs did not play a major role before the pandemic (Neville et al., 2016; Roberts et al., 2016; Rogers, 2013). With Covid-19 affecting the entire world, however, this changed fundamentally after 2020. Practical research standards, previously widely unquestioned, now had to be reflected upon and, if necessary, redefined. With regard to conversation-based methods, challenges related in data collection have arisen in three different areas (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) as a result of these changes:

- (1) Acquiring research subjects. It is without a doubt that online media and tools have simplified and sped up the process of identifying interview partners and group discussion participants and involve them in the research process (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014), even when located at very remote locations (Lo Iacono et al., 2016), e.g., by systematically screening social media platforms, mailing lists, websites etc. At the same time, however, there is a high risk that people who, in principle, belong to the relevant sample of research subjects will not be considered as they are not part of the social networks analyzed, or not included in the mailing lists accessed, e.g. when they conceal their profiles in order not to be identified for privacy reasons. Especially when it comes to collecting sensitive data (e.g., collecting personal work history), researchers have encountered significant reservations to acquire participants for their field work (Bürgin et al., 2022).
- (2) Establishing a basis for conversation. In addition to the basic requirements, such as the absence of disturbances – interruptions and technical problems can greatly affect the course of the data collection by causing tension and disrupting concentration (Lobe et al., 2020) – a number of other factors must also be considered to ensure a basis for conversation for data collection. In particular, the relationship between the researcher and the research subjects can have a significant impact on the data collection situation and thus on the quality of the data (Fink, 2000). It is widely recognised, for example, that researchers' and research subjects' roles and their associated positionings have an influence on interactions during the collection of qualitative data (Bourke, 2014). This needs to be reflected upon by researchers and considered accordingly in the planning of the project. Further, a certain degree of trust can foster information flows, which can be decisive, especially when it comes to sharing sensitive insights, and in settings where anonymity cannot be guaranteed (Seitz, 2016). Research, however, has shown that the specific framework conditions of online settings affect the way in which relationships are established between researchers and

research subjects (Jenner & Myers, 2019). It is, for example, difficult to build the same level of trust in online interview settings as it is in face-to-face meetings (Tiidenberg, 2019) because researchers and research subjects in digital settings find it more difficult to read their counterparts' body language and other sensory aspects (Longhurst, 2017). Also, psychological literature suggests that people intuitively make a lasting assessment of their counterpart when meeting someone for the very first time (Willis & Todorov, 2006). This kind of an assessment, however, clearly becomes more difficult in digital settings or even distorted, mainly because physical factors that extend beyond optical and acoustical ones (e.g., scents) play a crucial role and cannot yet be simulated digitally. With regard to data collection instruments that involve numerous people rather than just the researcher and one respondent (e.g., group discussions), these findings not only apply to the relationship and interaction between researchers and research subjects, but also to the manifold relations among the research subjects (Shamsuddin et al., 2021). Although some scholars argue that in certain data collection situations, such as in telephone interviews, the distance between the researcher and the research subject can have a beneficial effect on the quality of the data (Oltmann, 2016), in many cases the lack of physical presence will negatively affect the interviewer-interviewee-relationship (Seitz, 2016), or the relationship of the focus group participants among one another. This can lead to situations where information is intentionally or subconsciously held back, which may jeopardize the entire research process in certain cases (Johnson et al., 2021).

- (3) Keeping ethical standards. Ethical aspects are important as a moral compass for the researcher as they help to protect the rights of the parties involved in the research process (Henn et al., 2021; Wilson, 2020). While important ethical principles such as ensuring scientific quality and researcher integrity, avoiding harm and maintaining willingness and self-determination (Buchanan, 2011; Hopf, 2004) are still relevant, even when applying digital methods (Janghorban et al., 2014; Rodham & Gavin, 2006), participants may feel insecure about whether these standards are actually adhered to in online settings (Newman et al., 2021). For example, it might be more difficult for research subjects to rule out that the conversation is being recorded or that third parties are covertly present without permission (Sullivan, 2012), and in general many people feel more in control of a situation when they are able to look into each other's eyes (Thunberg & Arnell, 2021; Tiidenberg, 2019). In addition, perceived or actual inability to participate in online data collection due to a lack of literacy could embarrass research participants. This is not only an ethical issue, as these individuals find

themselves in an uncomfortable situation for taking part in the research, but could also cause these individuals to completely refrain from participating in research, sometimes also under the guise of other reasons. To prevent people from deciding not to participate in research for these reasons, ethical principles might have to be implemented and communicated in a different way in digital settings – something that should also be reflected in formalized processes, such as ethic reviews.

4.3 Including research subjects – conceptual considerations and typology construction

The practical experience gained in several research projects during the pandemic made us give more consideration to the challenges outlined above. Since potential research subjects can differ regarding their accessibility and familiarity with online tools, we believe a systematic segmentation is helpful in order to avoid systematic biases in empirical research. In constructing a typology, we followed the approach suggested by Kluge (2008) which includes four steps: (1) elaboration of relevant dimensions of comparison, (2) grouping of cases and analysis of empirical regularities, (3) analysis of the contextual meaning and formation of types and (4) characterization of the types formed.

4.3.1 Elaboration of relevant dimensions of comparison

We derived the typology by combining two dimensions that have been widely discussed in the literature dealing with equal access to and equal use of digital, especially online, communication and tools (Hargittai, 2003; Ragnedda & Muschert, 2013; Van Dijk, 2020): the research subjects' digital access and their competence in using digital technologies ('digital literacy'). We chose these dimensions as they not only refer to important prerequisites for participation in online data collection formats (Self, 2021), but also affect the extent to which research standards are successfully maintained (Duffy, 2002; Beddows, 2008).

- *Digital access.* Suitable technical infrastructure is a necessary prerequisite for receiving and transmitting data in the digital space. Without the appropriate hardware, software and an Internet connection (Lobe et al., 2020), research subjects can neither be reached nor participate in online research designs (Aydin, 2021). In the context of online research, we clearly observed disadvantages for those residing in regions which lack a fast and stable Internet connection

(Thompson et al., 2014), such as peripheral rural areas (Welser et al., 2019). This aspect is also reflected in the concept of the “first-level digital divide” (Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2019) which has been debated since the very early days of the Internet (Compaine, 2001; Hargittai, 2001). Of course, the lack of an Internet access is not always related to regional or other external circumstances. Rather, there are also actors who voluntarily and quite consciously disconnect from digital infrastructures (e.g., by not using a smartphone) (Radtko et al., 2022).

- *Digital literacy.* It is not just the mere access to technologies and infrastructures that determines individual communication practices and enables actors to participate in research (Hargittai, 2001). Rather, digital access constitutes a prerequisite for the development or utilization of what might be called digital literacy, which – in the sense of what Robinson (2009) described as the “information habitus” – enables individuals to both master the use of digital solutions such as online communication tools technically and understand them as part of their everyday lives. It can be assumed that potential research subjects who show this habitus will act more naturally and confidently in online data collection than those who have the fundamental and necessary skills, but do not regard the use of online solutions to be routine (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019). Several socio-economic factors were found to be critical (Dimaggio et al., 2004; Hargittai et al., 2019) in developing such skills (Simões et al., 2020; Van Deursen et al., 2017). In particular, formal education plays an important role, meaning that the higher the level of formal education, the more likely it is that people will have a high level of digital literacy (Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2010). Furthermore, it has been shown that the “parents’ level of education” strongly influences younger people’s degree of digital literacy (Aydin, 2021, p. 7). Moreover, research suggests that the younger research subjects are, the more likely they are to have a high degree of digital literacy, making age another important determinant (Hunsaker & Hargittai, 2018; Loges and Jung, 2001). In addition, numerous studies on differences in user behavior have shown that ethnicity is also a relevant factor with digital literacy comparatively lower among ethnic minorities (Fairlie, 2014; Jackson et al., 2008; Walker et al., 2020). With regard to gender, previous studies have not provided clear-cut results (Ertl & Helling, 2011; Hunsaker & Hargittai, 2018), but vary in their findings depending on the different forms of use and hardware (Kennedy et al., 2003). At the same time, numerous studies confirm a persistent general disadvantage of females in terms of digital literacy, which can be explained by particular financial hurdles and the influence of socio-cultural norms (Mariscal et al., 2019; Liff et al., 2004).

4.3.2 Grouping of cases and analysis of empirical regularities

Based on the expression of the two fundamental dimensions outlined above, we systematically reflected the practical experience from our own project work to group the cases and check them for intra-group homogeneity as well as for inter-group heterogeneity (Morse & Mitcham, 2002; Kluge, 2008). To ensure that all possible combinations of characteristics were considered for grouping the cases, a wide range of contexts, namely four research projects in Germany were included that differ in terms of their objectives, the study context, the participating research subjects' age, socio-economic status, education etc. and the primary mode of data collection.

Table 3: Overview of the four research projects; Source: Own illustration

	Research project			
Project period	2019-2022	2020-2023	2020-2024	2021-2022
Research objective	Measures to increase the future viability of Thuringian firms in terms of human resources policy	Developing a platform for climate-compliant action at the municipal and county level in mid-mountain regions	Developing a network for intelligent sensory telemedical solutions in structurally weak regions of Thuringia	Resilience of migrant enterprises in times of COVID-19
Research subject	CEOs of micro and small firms, experts from the corporate environment (e.g. business development and associations)	Mayors and district officials	Firm representatives (e.g., R&D), public policy administration (district, county), representatives of target group (elderly, chronically ill persons), doctors, nurses, social workers from various hospitals	Entrepreneurs
Regional context	Predominantly rural	Predominantly rural	Predominantly rural	Predominantly urban
Primary method of data collection	76 semi-structured interviews	12 semi-structured interviews	6 group discussions (between 22 and 110 participants)	36 narrative interviews

In one project we focused on resentment towards foreigners in regional business networks, and its associated effects on discourses and practices. We interviewed 65 chief executive officers and human resource managers in regional firms and 11 experts from the corporate environment (e.g., business development and associations) to understand how xenophobic discourses and practices are reproduced in firms and networks and thus influence the development of the regional economy. In this project, we did not face any problems in acquiring participants for online data collection since we could phone them using telephone numbers that we had systematically collected from databases to encourage them to participate in qualitative interviews conducted online. In some cases, however, it was not possible to establish a basis for discussion because some potential research participants regarded the topic to be too sensitive. Because of partly extreme political attitudes often accompanied by a rejection of political and academic elites, we were unable to generate a sufficient degree of trust in these cases. Two CEOs, for example, whom we sought to interview using Zoom because personal meetings were not possible at that time, withdrew their consent as they had concerns about the procedure. In particular, they feared that the information shared would not be kept confidential and that this could be disadvantageous for them. Both pointed out that they had no control over both recordings that could be made without their explicit consent and the subsequent use of the data. We tried to convince them by explaining the procedure in detail and also provided them with information on data protection and corresponding legally binding declarations but were not successful. Two other CEOs of small rural firms were unable to conduct the interview online due to lack of literacy. They felt unfamiliar with the setting, were unwilling to learn the necessary steps and therefore did not agree to the interview. Offers to provide active technical support could not change their minds. In the end, we were not able to include them in the project. Although we could reach other research subjects, these examples show that there is a risk of not being able to include certain individuals, particularly when it comes to researching sensitive topics such as xenophobic sentiments. We would also like to mention that some of the participating interview partners appeared nervous due to a lack of experience. They had to get used to the setting before they were able to fully concentrate on the content of the interview. At the same time, we observed how experts from the corporate environment, obviously familiar with computer work, felt very comfortable conducting the interview online.

A second research project dealt with climate change adaptation in the context of regional planning in rural areas. To better understand district officials' awareness of climate change risks and how they incorporate aspects of climate change into regional development plans, we conducted 12 expert interviews with the mayors of rural districts in Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt, and Thuringia in 2020 and 2021, which had to be designed

as online interviews for pandemic reasons. From the outset, the research team knew that the research subjects had Internet access, software, and digital devices due to their professional activity, which inevitably requires these prerequisites. As such, online acquisition was not a problem in this case. However, the team encountered several challenges along the way: First, due to data security issues and corresponding regulations, some mayors were not allowed to use certain video software. This issue was solved by using alternative software packages that they were allowed to use. Second, several research subjects struggled with the online interview situation, as they either had difficulties to log in or experienced problems with the audio and/or video connection. Some received help from co-workers, while others gave up and switched to the telephone. Once the connections had been established – either online or by phone – the interviews could take place.

A third project aimed at developing a platform for intelligent sensory telemedicine solutions for holistic health care in structurally weak regions. Because of the pandemic, all scheduled face-to-face events had to be switched to online formats. These included network meetings, workshops and regional conferences designed to bring together stakeholders from different fields. For the project, the challenges associated with this were particularly revealing, in that increasing trust and acceptance towards digital (medical) solutions was an explicit project goal. The very acquisition of research subjects proved to be a challenge, as we knew of many potential participants who did not use the Internet at all, for example, due to their age and personal circumstances. We addressed this problem by relying on various local stakeholders whom we already knew and who enabled us to indirectly contact the individuals in question to encourage them to participate. Finally, it became apparent at the beginning of the group discussions that people from different backgrounds reacted quite differently to the online format: The vast majority of business stakeholders were familiar with the software tools used, as they work in knowledge- and technology intensive sectors that apply the same or at least similar solutions. Individuals from public policy administration and the medical field sometimes seemed to experience minor issues with regard to access and digital literacy. This was evident, for example, in the fact that they were proficient in the basic functions of the tools, but not in advanced requirements, such as selecting and entering a breakout session. For those working in the area of volunteering, however, the hurdles appeared to be much higher: In particular, some older volunteers from rural areas required special support to enable participation, as they did not have an Internet connection on their premises and/or the corresponding literacy for the use of online conference tools. We therefore connected them with other actors in the vicinity, who helped them to overcome these challenges, especially in taking part in breakout sessions and participating in online polls, etc. that were part of the meeting. Although we

ultimately succeeded in directly reaching all of those people who were willing to participate and needed help, we had to assume that some people previously unknown to us, who might have participated in onsite events held locally did not do so in the online format due to felt personal insecurities. It can be stated that establishing a basis for the conversation became more complex and work-intensive, the more research subjects were involved at the same time. Since even the irritation of one person can affect the entire dynamics of the discussion and thus the quality of the data, it is important to anticipate the composition of the group and the individual participants' literacy as best as possible.

In the context of a fourth project, we conducted 36 narrative interviews with entrepreneurs of small firms in Germany to analyze their situation after the pandemic lockdowns and how they reacted to the crisis. Coordinating and implementing narrative interviews differed a lot depending on the industry of our interview partners. Acquiring suitable research participants and conducting the interviews with entrepreneurs having a background in knowledge-intensive industries turned out to be very uncomplicated. By contrast, several entrepreneurs working in retail and trade experienced problems registering the software and running the audio and video tracks. In some cases, interviews had to be delayed due to technical problems. The results gained from data collection in this project suggest that the interview partners perceived the atmosphere of the interviews differently: For some of them it appeared to be natural in the sense that the interview took place as if it was conducted face-to-face, while others experienced the entire situation as somewhat foreign and difficult to handle. This was, among other things, reflected in the fact that more comprehensive questions were asked and the course of the conversation became more fluid somewhat later compared to the other group. Further, keeping ethical standards turned out to be a challenge. Documents about the aim of the project and the participants' rights had been sent to the research subject in advance. However, the research team experienced difficulties in receiving the signed copies back. Although each entrepreneur agreed to the data management plan and acknowledged their own rights (e.g., terminating the interview at any time, anonymity) at the beginning of the interview, the lack of signed documents in some cases made us to think about suitable new ways to efficiently organize good scientific practice and ethical standards in online settings.

4.3.3 Analysis of the contextual meaning and type formation

Based on a combination of the two above-mentioned categories – digital access and digital literacy – we differentiate between four groups of research subjects (see Table 4). While the category “digital access” is binary – either access is given or not –, the

degree of literacy is influenced by a complex combination of the familiarity with digital technology, the attitude towards digital tools as well as digital lifestyle. Since there are, in principle, many ways to combine these factors, we propose keeping things simple and distinguishing between low, medium and high levels of digital literacy. It should be noted that, depending on the specific temporal and spatial contexts, potential research subjects cannot always be clearly assigned to one of these types. This is also because a person may belong to different types at different times, e.g., due to the different technical equipment of the place of residence and the place of work (Bürgin et al., 2022).

4.3.4 Characterization of the types formed

In the following, we illustrate the different types in more detail. In particular, we describe which actors they comprise, and how they differ with regard to the three central challenges of conversation-based online data collection discussed above. Finally, we explain the particular challenges that the different types pose for empirical research and provide examples of how we have dealt with them in our own research.

Table 4: Typology of research subjects; Source: Own illustration

	Access	Access available	No access
Literacy			
Low		<i>Digital illiterates</i>	<i>Digital outcasts</i>
Medium		<i>Digital skeptics</i>	
High		<i>Digital natives</i>	

- *Digital outcasts* are individuals living without any or with only a very restricted digital access. They are typically located in places severely lacking in infrastructure. This may be, for example, the case in very peripheral rural regions and some so-called “left behind places” (MacKinnon et al., 2021) or in regions that have been affected by a natural extreme event, e.g., a hurricane, resulting in a major destruction of the relevant digital infrastructure (German & Keane, 2022). Furthermore, digital outcasts also include those individuals who voluntarily (e.g., “digital detox”, Syvertsen & Enli, 2020) or due to third-party influences (have to) renounce the Internet connection, such as young children, mentally impaired individuals, imprisoned persons,

or persons in precarious economic situations (e.g., homeless people). Facing a lack of digital access in everyday life, these research subjects are unable to develop digital literacy. As these individuals are typically not part of online social networks and mailing lists, it is difficult to identify them through research on the Internet. If these individuals are assisted by third parties in gaining (temporary) access to the Internet to integrate them into the research process, uncertainties on their part are likely to impede the establishment of a basis for conversation for data collection. These uncertainties could, for example, hinder the formation of an unbiased relationship between the researcher and the research subjects. For the same reasons there will probably also be major doubts on their side as to whether the researchers will maintain ethical standards. Against the background of the last two aspects mentioned, only a comparatively reduced flow of information can be expected in such settings. Researchers have to keep these aspects in mind when focusing on these groups in their research. Consequently, projects that target this group must therefore look for alternatives in order to be able to come up with convincing results in the end. To include digital outcasts in their research designs, researchers basically have three options, namely: (1) returning to offline formats (e.g., face-to-face interviews), especially in cases of a complete lack of infrastructure – or, in the case of limited digital access (2) combining offline and online methods or (3) using digital intermediaries who provide research subjects with concrete support before and during data collection.

- *Digital illiterates* have digital access but lack or only have a low degree of digital literacy. This means that some groups (i.e. a significant amount of elderly people, illiterates, mentally impaired persons or persons living in precarious economic circumstances), even if they consume digital content (e.g., Netflix) are unable to regularly actively engage in digital communication or digital transactions (e.g., online banking, e-commerce) and thus only develop a very basic, to some extent passive digital literacy. As with the case of digital outcasts, these actors are unlikely to be organized in professional online social networks, which is why it is difficult to identify them on the basis of Internet inquiries. Also, in terms of building a basis for conversation for data collection and the presumed handling of ethical standards, these actors will largely correspond to the first type, although in individual cases it can be assumed that there will be somewhat less of a problem. To include digital illiterates in the research process, researchers must ensure that the target group is either provided with competencies that enable them to participate in the research (e.g., by providing a practicable guideline that have been designed exactly for the concrete contexts) or (additionally) switch to analog formats. Some scholars have therefore

proposed educating local digital experts in rural-peripheral regions so that they can act as multipliers in their community (Sept & Christmann, 2022).

- *Digital skeptics* can access digital infrastructures and are digitally literate but have major concerns when it comes to sharing, communicating and sometimes disclosing confidential information through digitally mediated forms of communication. In general, they are cautious about digitization and apprehensive about data protection or maintaining the quality of interpersonal relationships, which for them manifests itself primarily or exclusively in irreplaceable face-to-face interactions. In principle, there is a medium probability of being able to identify these actors by undertaking a suitable Internet search, so that their inclusion in online data collection seems possible in principle, assuming that the potential research subjects in question are registered on homepages or common platforms with their real names. However, it can be assumed that some representatives of this type do not want to be found on the Internet due to their skepticism and even if they can be found, it must be assumed that they greatly mistrust the online setting for data collection. This not only makes it difficult to establish a setting which enables reliable data collection, but also goes along with considerable doubts on their part with regard to the researcher's adherence to ethical standards. In case of research projects that could include digital skeptics, researchers need to anticipate reservations and should therefore try to apply a high level of transparency by taking time to explain the digital processes of data recording and storage in detail to build trust. In fact, it seems necessary to allocate additional time to get to know research subjects and to interact with them more frequently. When digital skeptics make up a major proportion of the study cohort, researchers can strengthen their involvement by including participatory elements in empirical research. In addition, communication with digital skeptics should be maintained after data collection to allow participants to follow the progress of the research project, which could also help prevent them from retroactively revoking their consent.
- *Digital natives* are characterized by having digital access, and being both digitally literate and familiar with sharing, communicating and sometimes disclosing confidential information online on a more or less daily basis. They are primarily, but by no means exclusively, located in urban areas. Digital natives are open to digitization and maintain their private and business relationships through various digital channels. They feel safe and confident in the online environment that they are used to (Hanna, 2012), and as such the situations of online interviews or group discussions are not unfamiliar to them. It is more likely than in the case of digital skeptics that these actors can be identified very quickly through suitable searches on the Internet, as they generally perceive the online environment as normal due to their

socialization, are less skeptical and see no reason to be cautious with their personal data. Furthermore, establishing a setting that enables reliable data collection in most cases will be quite easy as they are familiar with various online tools and will probably regularly take part in online meetings. For the same reasons, it can be expected that there will probably be no major concerns with regards to maintaining ethical standards on the side of the researchers. Including digital natives in online research therefore does not require any additional measures to be taken from the researcher's side. The uncomplicated access to digital natives can be confirmed by our own research experiences.

4.4 Conclusion and future research directions

“Come on, let's zoom” seems to be an easy solution for replacing face-to-face interviews and group discussions. However, as our typology has shown, carrying out conversation-based qualitative data collection on the basis of online formats is accompanied by major challenges. In fact, in many cases, merely the identification of potential research subjects and their acquisition will prove to be a major difficulty. Even if this can be achieved, establishing a basis for conversation with the research subjects to get this group to participate in the research process can turn out to be another challenge because, as in the case of digital skeptics, there may be significant privacy concerns or worries that data will be handled in an unethical manner. In this context, particular attention must be paid to the changed conditions for establishing a relationship between the researcher and the research subject. Only in the case of digital natives, which primarily include young, well-educated individuals from urban areas using digital technologies on a more or less daily basis, minimal to no challenges are likely to be expected when conducting conversation-based qualitative data collection online. Our analysis therefore makes one thing very clear: Since only in a minority of cases empirical researchers will be dealing exclusively with digital natives, they need to intensively reflect on the question about who their actual target group is, as early as possible in the research process. If there is an unreflective use of online tools, the exclusive use of digital methods will most likely result in more or less severe biases in data collection – something that should be avoided at all costs in the interest of the quality of the results. Otherwise, certain social problem fields could be overlooked in the resulting analysis and recommendations, which in the worst case could put socially disadvantaged people at an additional disadvantage. Not only because issues of social cohesion and justice are becoming more and more important, it may be necessary to include marginalized social groups in order to avoid such biases. For this purpose, it is necessary to reflect more on the methods used and, if necessary, to adapt them. In order to prevent

systematic dropouts, researchers can, for example, already consider implementing measures of sensitization and trust-building in the run-up to the data collection – e. g. by developing a manual of the software using pictograms, simple language or by explaining the data recording in detail. Alternatively, or additionally, digital intermediaries could be involved at all stages of the process, both for the overall improvement of the literacy of the population as well as for assistance in concrete data collection in individual cases. Furthermore, they can deploy a combination of established offline procedures and online methods (Bürgin et al., 2022). However, whether or not this is feasible from an empirical perspective in a specific case depends on factors that may be beyond the researchers' influence, as demonstrated by the pandemic. In the long term, it can be expected that digital literacy in the population will continue to increase, so that deploying online instruments to collect data will become increasingly promising in the future. In the short term, however, the challenges highlighted in this paper are likely to persist. To get a better picture of them, future studies should aim to further explore these four types. In particular, this could include more detailed descriptions of the types in terms of social milieus and spatial patterns so that requirements enable an equal inclusion in the data collection process based on our typology. An evaluation of the recommendations suggested could also contribute to this aim. Likewise, a comparison of different good practices in the combination of off- and online formats would presumably provide a substantial gain in knowledge.

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5 Regions, emotions and left-behindness: a phase model for understanding the emergence of regional embitterment

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Abstract

Discontent is an important feature of 'left-behind places', often reflected by a high percentage of voting for populist parties. Drawing on insights from psychology, we extend previous analyses by focusing on collective embitterment as the central underlying emotional state in a region. Arguing that such negative emotions do not arise 'out of the blue', we develop a four-phase model of regional embitterment that accounts for the emotional characterisation of and the level of embitterment among the population, as well as the role of policy interventions. Based on a case study in East Thuringia, we conclude that emotions should be given more attention in future studies.

5.1 Introduction

In recent years, spatial disparities between urban and rural-peripheral regions have become an intensively discussed field of research in regional economics and economic geography (Dijkstra et al., 2020; MacKinnon et al., 2021). In this context, research has been particularly interested in analysing regions that have undergone major socio-economic changes and in many cases were not or only partially able to keep up with the transition to a knowledge-based economy. Many of these so-called 'left-behind places' are characterised by strong discontent among the population, often reflected by a high percentage of votes for right-wing populist parties. While recent studies have sought to understand discontent by analysing statistical data, this study takes a different approach. Although we acknowledge that discontent can translate into a high percentage of votes for right-wing populist parties, we think that most quantitative indicators can only partially reflect the very nature of 'left-behind places', which we believe to be shaped by a particular collective emotion that sets in long before discontent is reflected in the election results. Our goal is to understand how such collective emotions emerge and to identify possible starting points for regional policy to counteract such negative feelings. In particular, by drawing on insights from psychology, we will focus on feelings of embitterment which we believe best describes the feeling of being left behind. We base our research on interviews with firm representatives. Although they make up a specific subgroup, we believe that our approach allows us to draw conclusions about the emotional state of the population as a whole. Furthermore, we assume that embitterment can spread and – under certain conditions – become chronic both on an individual and a collective level. In our eyes, this puts 'left-behind places' at risk of going through an emotional downward spiral from which it is difficult to get out of, once having embarked on such a path. Such a process, which we divide into four phases, may eventually lead to a situation characterised by highly embittered populations that feel

the need to take revenge by electing populist parties.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. Next, we conceptually engage with 'left-behind places', emotions and their spatial relations, as well as with embitterment as a collective emotion. Based on this, we develop a four-phase model of the emergence of regional embitterment, which we – after explaining the methodology – illustrate using a case study approach. Based on our findings, we finally argue for a stronger integration of emotions into debates of 'left-behindness' than was the case in the past, and moreover, to consider them as an important element in political decision-making processes.

5.2 Conceptual background

5.2.1 Discontent in 'left-behind places'

In recent years, a growing body of work in regional economics and economic geography has concentrated on the analysis of so-called 'left-behind places' (Leyshon, 2021; MacKinnon et al., 2021). Although this term is by no means uniformly used (Martin et al., 2021), a closer look at existing research on 'left-behind places' shows that they typically exhibit both a combination of socio-economic indicators that tend to foster negative long-term regional development (e.g., population decline over longer periods of time, declining real wages and low skill levels of the population), and, consequently, feelings from the population of marginalisation and of being left-behind in economic, political and social terms. This can create high levels of discontent among major segments of the local population and may ultimately result in feelings of revenge in those 'places that don't matter' (Rodríguez-Pose, 2020). Discontent has received a great deal of attention recently, with the related literature approaching it from basically two main perspectives.

The first one comprises quantitative studies (Dijkstra et al., 2020; Di Matteo & Mariotti, 2021) that seek to analyse spatial distribution patterns of the extent of discontent within the population based on selected indicators, for example, the electoral results of populist parties, as well as low education and income levels. (Artelaris, 2022). These studies allow for comparisons across several countries or within a country, and thus have made significant contributions to explaining socio-spatial polarisations and related political phenomena (e.g., Brexit). However, they also have their limits: discontent, often culminating in significant gains for right-wing populist parties at election events, does not emerge overnight, but rather develops over several years. This, however, means that latent discontent is likely to remain undetected as long as statistical thresholds for certain indicators are not exceeded. Furthermore, because of their focus on spatial

aggregates, most studies ignore intraregional differences at the micro-level. For example, many cities, most of which are typically not considered to be 'left-behind places', have certain neighbourhoods characterised by high rates of poverty and populist voters and therefore should not be treated as one statistical unit. Finally, a more general question is the extent to which discontent is actually associated with low scores on selected indicators, especially in light of the fact that studies have shown how individuals can exhibit high levels of satisfaction despite their low income (Boyce et al., 2010). A second perspective (Fritsch et al., 2021) argues that the discontent characteristic for 'left-behind places' should be viewed less as an expression of currently perceived spatial inequalities, but rather as a consequence of a long-term deterioration in the relative position of a region. Even if these analyses come up with statistically robust findings, the question arises as to the length of time necessary to detect such a relative shift, but also as to why such processes should be reflected in discontent today, since it cannot be expected that the regional population would constantly compare their current socio-economic situation with that of the past and act accordingly. Finally, it can be criticised that such a perspective does not provide scope for political intervention: regions, according to this view, are in a way at the mercy of their fate if they fail to more or less restore the past state.

Since we assume that emotions such as the discontent of the local population play an important role in how regional discourses develop and which social practices emerge, thus influencing seemingly objective indicators such as election results, we seek to understand how discontent in 'left-behind places' develops over the course of time. Unlike the second strand of literature, however, we argue to adopt a much shorter perspective.

5.2.2 Emotions and regions

The relationship between emotions and regions has so far not played a major role in regional economics and economic geography (Jones & Evans, 2012; Pile, 2010). Although substantial work since the early 2000s has emphasised the relevance of emotions in the context of spatial analyses (Anderson & Smith, 2001; Davidson & Milligan, 2004; Davidson et al., 2012), emotions still seem to receive very little attention in economic geography, which is certainly mainly due to methodological challenges in being able to capture them and the effects they have from an analytical perspective. This should, however, not lead to the assumption that they do not play a role in connection with economic geography. On the contrary, there is a lot to be said for a complex interaction between emotions and regional development: basically, on the one hand, regional contexts can influence people's emotional states – for example, by making them

emotionally affected by a particular environment (Smith, 2007). Conversely, emotions can also shape actors' discourses and practices, significantly influencing the social construction of regions (Sági, 2022). The latter underlines how emotions do not only concern the individual level, but can also emerge and change through and within collectives or social milieus (Huebner, 2011).

When dealing with emotions, following psychology, a distinction can be made between shared and collective emotions: shared emotions are based on a common origin and shared by single individuals. However, shared emotions do not necessarily constitute collective emotions: According to Goldenberg et al. (2020, p. 156), the latter presuppose that individuals 'have knowledge of each other's emotions' and 'emotional dynamics between them lead to mutual influence and a development of a sense of identity'. Thus, it is the awareness of a shared identity in combination with the social interaction of the actors which allows collective emotions to emerge (Metzler et al., 2023). In such situations, it is irrelevant whether these emotions are positive such as hope, or negative such as fear and hatred (Bar-Tal et al., 2007). Within a social group of actors, collective emotions can contribute to the development and stabilisation of an 'emotional climate' (p. 441) and corresponding moral concepts (Hübl, 2019); moreover, they influence how individuals and society cope with drastic events.

Although collective emotions were initially conceptualised without explicit spatial references, it is worth discussing collective emotions from a regional perspective for at least two reasons.

First, it can be assumed that collective emotions are influenced by regional-specific conditions. In other words, regional trajectories are likely to be characterised by developments and events that form the basis for the emergence and consolidation of collective emotions. A crucial factor are 'face-to-face encounters, culture and shared knowledge, and identification with a social collective' (Scheve & Ismer, 2013, p. 407) that characterise the social networks of a region, enabling a constant exchange of identical or similar experiences and allowing for emotions based on these impressions to be shared. Especially in regions where face-to-face contacts appear to be relatively stable, for example, due to low mobility of the population, a 'collectivisation' of emotional states seems plausible (Thonhauser, 2022). Under certain conditions, 'emotionally heightened spaces' (Anderson & Smith, 2001, p. 8) can emerge over time that stand out from their environment, for example, in the context of significant regional economic transformations, such as the closure of a mine or other sites of significant economic change (Pini et al., 2010).

Second, collective emotions affect regional identities and affiliations (Sandbu, 2020) which in turn influence social and economic practices and thus also the further development of the region (Huggins & Thompson, 2019; Schützeichel, 2012). It is, however,

possible for a reverse dynamic to take place. In other words, already existing regional identities can reinforce collective emotions, as they promote individual awareness of being part of a space-bound collective (Paasi, 2003). Further, following Paasi (1986), the institutionalisation of the respective region through social, cultural, economic and political practices contributes to the strengthening and reproduction of collective identities and emotions. In fact, many 'left-behind places' (Ford & Goodwin, 2014) are characterised by regional identities that are strongly related to the (often prosperous) past, also referred to as traditional or 'thick regional' identities (Terlouw, 2009). Against this background, it does not seem unlikely that discontent in these places is articulated collectively, for example, in the form of protest marches (Altomonte et al., 2019; Woods et al., 2012). These collective dynamics can, in turn, influence the actions of individuals, for example, by encouraging the election of so-called protest parties, the undermining of legitimacy of the liberal democratic order and the development of alternative narratives and visions regarding order and governance. As far as discontent in 'left-behind places' is concerned, we therefore assume that it mirrors a collective emotion shared by a larger body of the population (Spruyt et al., 2016), which is by no means a 'fleeting moment or passing fad' (Florida, 2021, p. 622), but should rather be regarded as a 'fundamental characteristic of the wrenching economic, social and cultural transformations' (p. 622) with long-term implications for the practices of regional actors (e.g., voting behaviour). It therefore seems promising to better understand the emergence and course of this emotion. For this purpose, we refer to the concept of embitterment, which originates from psychology.

5.2.3 Individual, collective and regional embitterment

Embitterment constitutes an emotion with a negative connotation that is familiar to most people. Under certain circumstances, and if strongly expressed, embitterment can develop into a mental disorder called post-traumatic embitterment disorder (PTED). This disorder is characterised by strong feelings of injustice, lack of appreciation and marginalisation (Linden & Rotter, 2018), deprivation (Kessler & Harth, 2020), humiliation and stigmatisation (Goffman, 1975), as well as helplessness (Linden, 2003). Recent research shows that the self-perception of living in an unjust world promotes embitterment, while social support tends to reduce it (You & Ju, 2020). Moreover, in extreme cases, embitterment may be accompanied by a desire for revenge (Linden, 2003). There is consensus in psychology that traumatic or at least negative events ('main trigger events') and personal experiences that cannot be measured objectively, can trigger and promote the emergence of PTED (You & Ju, 2020), which is then referred to as 'reactive embitterment' (Lee & Kim, 2019, p. 18). Embitterment develops and manifests

over time (Linden, 2003) and under certain circumstances can become chronic (Michailidis, 2017).

With regard to the above considerations, it does not seem implausible to assume that specific regional settings can support the development of embitterment. This is all the more true as research in psychology has shown that, under certain conditions, many individuals' embitterment can develop into collective embitterment (McKay, 2019). We suggest that in order to speak of regional collective embitterment, a significant proportion of a region's population must show signs of collective embitterment, without specifying concrete thresholds for this. Of course, our considerations should by no means be interpreted in such a way that we are implying that the population of a particular region is collectively psychologically disturbed or that we assume a spatially uniform expression of embitterment. Moreover, similar with findings from psychology, we assume that such collective embitterment does not occur all at once after such a trigger event, but rather emerges successively and presumably also with more or less pronounced gradations at the regional level (Boswell et al., 2020). In particular, we suggest, that collective embitterment is evoked by events that occurred no longer than one generation ago and thus were witnessed by the affected population – either personally or indirectly through their (grand-)parents' generation.

5.3 Phase model

When it comes to explaining how regional embitterment emerges, we suggest distinguishing between four different phases, the length of which varies depending on the context and therefore cannot be predicted a priori (Table 5). This distinction mainly rests on three main dimensions that refer to the emotional constitution of the regional population and its governance: (1) the characterisation of the emotional state of the population during that phase; (2) the level of embitterment; and (3) the role of policy interventions.

Table 5: Development phases of regional embitterment; Source: Own illustration

Phase	1st	2nd	3rd	4th
Title of phase	Pre-embitterment	Emergence	Consolidation	Chronification and emotional lock-in
Emotional characterisation	Stability	Uncertainty	Disappointment	Revenge
Level of embitterment (related to the main trigger event)	Zero	Individual	Collective	Institutional
Scale	External	Individual	Regional	Supra-regional/national
Policy intervention	None	None	Low	High

- Pre-embitterment.* The period before the onset of regional embitterment, the so-called ‘pre-embitterment’ phase, can, in principle, be very diverse with regard to the prevailing emotions in the region. What is most important for the following considerations is that the emotional state of the population in this phase differs significantly from that of the other phases. Even though there might already be some negative emotions at this stage, they tend to have a different basis than the emerging embitterment. Accordingly, it can also be assumed that there is no specific communication of embitterment on the part of individual actors or social collectives, nor is it perceptible to outsiders. For this reason, political interventions aiming at reducing embitterment do not exist. To use an analogy from psychology, we believe that a ‘main trigger event’, that is, either a single factor or a series of interconnected events, can cause a rupture of the regional development path. If the governance of this event proves to be problematic and regional resilience is weak, then this can have a significant impact on established socio-economic relationships or call them into question in large parts of the population (Linden, 2003), thereby initiating a development that ultimately leads to the formation of regional embitterment. Since individual planning certainties decrease dramatically in the aftermath of such events (Linden & Rotter, 2018), many people will regard them as extraordinarily negative, if not even existentially threatening. It is therefore not surprising that such events are capable of triggering massive stress as well as a sense of injustice, while also being perceived as the cause of their perceived negative individual situation. Even years later, a large proportion of those affected may still remember such an event, and in retrospect this memory is often perceived as shaping their identity (Linden, 2003). Depending on the magnitude of the main trigger event, the associated impacts

vary in severity with events that occur in the immediate regional environment, most likely having a comparatively strong impact on the emergence of embitterment. Examples of such events are the closure of a coal mine (Pini et al., 2010), a natural disaster (Cerqua et al., 2021), or the implementation of a different political system. However, externally caused events at higher scales can also have this effect, because the decisive factor is not the scale of the event itself, but the emotional evaluation of the governance of the event at the regional or local level through the affected population groups.

- *Emergence of embitterment.* If the expectations and hopes attached to the governance of a main trigger event and its consequences are disappointed in large numbers and fundamental convictions are called into question or violated, different kinds of individual embitterment can emerge in this phase. Initially, these are usually articulated in the immediate environment of the actors concerned, such as family networks and close social relationships (e.g., friends, close work colleagues), which is why they are hardly perceptible from the outside. Though the mood in the region becomes more diversified in this phase, there are practically no starting points for political intervention as embitterment is primarily articulated at the individual level.
- *Consolidation of embitterment.* In this phase, the feeling of disappointment and an increased consolidation of embitterment become increasingly widespread. Disappointed by what they perceive as inappropriate political handling of the consequences of the main trigger event and by increased social inequalities, numerous actors consider themselves as victims and begin to question established political parties, structures, and processes. Through this dynamic and the effect of potential reinforcing (smaller) events, embitterment becomes the subject of public informal and formal discourse in the region, for example, in local media, in workforces, and in corporate and other regional networks. This is where the so-called neighborhood effects come into play, which have been studied in human geography primarily in the context of voting decisions (Tunstall et al., 2000). In our context it is also worth noting that such effects can lead to a homogenisation of local emotions (Baumeister & Leary, 2017). In connection with this, embitterment gradually moves from the individual level to the level of collectives on a regional scale. A lack of exchange opportunities with people from other regional contexts, and consequently, a lack of spatial and mental mobility, which result from demographic developments that characterise many 'left-behind places' (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008) foster a homogenisation of attitudes and an increasing uniformity of regional discourses (Johnston et al., 2005). As a result of these developments, 'left-behind places' are increasingly

recognised from the outside, but a need for political intervention is often not yet seen.

- *Chronification of embitterment and emotional lock-in.* The last phase of our model is characterised by the chronification and institutionalisation of regional embitterment, which is reflected in a growing number of people involved in regional discontent-discourses and also in an increasing percentage of voters for populist parties. The communication of discontent in this phase predominantly takes place within these wide-ranging but at the same time largely self-contained regional networks with regionally accepted key figures negotiating and shaping the norms, values, and standards (Gailing & Ibert, 2016). Diverse developments further exacerbate these tendencies. First, given the homogenisation described above, individuals seeking differentiating experiences increasingly migrate out of the region (van Hear et al., 2017), so that they can no longer influence regional discourses. Second, individuals with extreme attitudes often express their views offensively, while more moderate individuals tend to hold back on clear positioning (Crano & Gaffney, 2021). One consequence of this is that regional discourses are increasingly shaped by extreme positions, and that such extreme views are perceived as the regional norm in increasingly larger proportions of the population (Simon, 2020). Further, a growing number of actors are emotionally composed in a way that makes them want to resist those who they hold responsible for their situation. The questioning of established policies ultimately culminates in rejecting them (Pile, 1997) and even active acts of revenge may occur at this stage (Linden, 2003). Here, too, regional identity plays a central role in that the population's immanent identification with its region can be a constituting element for resistance (Zimmerbauer & Paasi, 2013), especially with regard to political decisions (Terlouw, 2017). In particular, populist activists and parties see this as an opportunity to offer collective embitterment public arenas for articulation. With the growing intensity of regional discontent, it is also increasingly conveyed outside of the region, as the national media, for example, pick up on local developments and project certain images of the region in question to the outside world. Political measures aimed at reducing embitterment or strengthening social cohesion gain importance. Since collective embitterment has already become an integral part of many people's identity, it will mostly be impossible or only possible to implement these measures promisingly with a considerable use of resources. Following concepts from the evolutionary social sciences, such a situation can therefore be referred to as 'emotional lock-in'.

The above presented phase model was developed in an approach that was inductive and deductive at the same time. The distinction between the phases is based, first, on the psychological literature on the development of embitterment and the literature on the collectivisation of emotions, supplemented by political science literature on the strategic instrumentalisation of emotions. On the other hand, in the empirical analysis conducted, this structure was confirmed in that the data could be well assigned to the four phases using codes. However, we are aware that – similar to other phase models of regional development (Cantner et al., 2021; Menzel & Fornahl, 2010) – the proposed phase sequence undoubtedly represents an idealtypical simplification of complex causal structures. Of course, the patterns outlined above (in most cases) do not mean that we are dealing with a homogeneous, collectively embittered society as a whole. Rather, different degrees of embitterment will exist within different societal groups and areas in each phase. However, we assume that, within the framework of the dynamics outlined here, embitterment can spread starting from certain social and/or spatial centres. Furthermore, we want to emphasise that our model does not imply a deterministic development path for several reasons. First, not all regions will go through the phases described with the same intensity and duration. Second, not all regions that experience a ‘main trigger event’ will develop regional embitterment in the same way, in particular because individual actors have great influence in the individual phases or in connection with the transition from one phase to the next. Finally, there is also the possibility that the duration of individual phases is influenced by political measures or civil society action, or that the entry into certain phases is completely prevented. At the same time, looking at the works of Martin et al. (2021), Ulrich-Schad and Duncan (2018) and Kemeny and Storper (2020), we believe that the embitterment encountered in numerous ‘left-behind places’ has developed along the phases described above.

5.4 Methodology

With the aim of analysing the emergence of embitterment in a specific regional context and elaborating the characteristic features of the different phases outlined above, we applied the model to East Thuringia in Germany, as a case study. Largely rural, this region, with a population of about 650,000 and an economy that is mainly characterised by micro and small enterprises, exhibits many key characteristics of ‘left-behind places’ in a very pronounced way. For example, studies have highlighted a very high level of perceived deprivation (Salomo, 2019), the presence of distinct regional identities with exclusionary expressions (Hildebrandt & Trüdinger, 2021), and a very high percentage of right-wing voters and right-wing activities (Reiser et al., 2018). The fact that the feelings of the local population of being left-behind are sometimes in sharp contrast to

actual developments, for example, the unemployment rate has de facto been falling for years while the disposable household income has been increasing, suggest that the feelings among the population have developed to a large extent independently of the situation since German reunification. This in turn means that the analysis of 'hard indicators' (e.g., statistical data) can lead to a false picture of the current state of the region.

Our empirical study is based on 62 semi-structured interviews with firm managers conducted in 2020 and 2021. They lasted on average about 60 minutes and revolved, amongst other things, around the relationship between self-perception and external perception of the region as a business location and entrepreneurial practices as an expression and an outcome of regional political identities. We focused on firms in particular, since regional discourses on regional development unfold in them in a special way. Moreover, by being connected to many different actors in the region, local firms can influence the emotional atmosphere of a region, especially in rural areas that are strongly characterised by an overlap of private and professional networks (Backman & Palmberg, 2015). Although we are aware that the local business leaders we focus on represent only a particular segment of society, we assume that our results are robust as these actors are well embedded in diverse regional networks and usually have a significant influence on related dynamics, especially those running small firms with very few levels of hierarchy. It is up to them to perceive and, to a certain extent, keep an eye on the emotions of their employees (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Further, they are also often highly respected, and influential voices in regional discourse (Onyx et al., 2007), and thus play an exceptionally important role in terms of the reproduction and collectivisation of emotions. This is also true for our study region. In addition, micro and small enterprises dominate here, most of which are run by people who grew up in the region, are in most cases rather down-to-earth and do not match the image of a detached management. Consequently, they are able to provide well-founded insights and hands-on assessments not only of the present situation, but also in retrospect. As managers of the respective firms, they naturally have a special dual social role as citizens on the one hand and people in charge on the other. Based on the detailed descriptions they provided and the consistent picture that emerges from those individual descriptions, we are convinced that this role does not lead to distorted, but rather to reflected, credible assessments, which include both perspectives.

To capture complementary perspectives, but also to be able to identify potential contradictions or other relevant factors influencing emotional development, we also conducted three semi-standardised interviews with the managers of private employment agencies as well as with 11 experts from the regional corporate environment. All interviews were electronically recorded, transcribed, and analysed for content using the

software MaxQDA (Kuckartz, 2018).

Although many of our interviewees were even able to recall not very important details from the past, there is a fundamental risk that their memories are influenced by more recent events and that, in retrospect, earlier situations and circumstances may only be remembered in a biased way. Furthermore, the interviewees may not be able to relate to the period of interest to us as a whole, since they moved to the region at a later time. To avoid false conclusions that may result from such problems, we also included comprehensive supplementary data, such as secondary statistical data from the region and studies by third parties that aimed to capture emotions and specific attitudes in the region at different points in the past. The combined analysis of these data did not reveal any contradictions in terms of content, which leads us to believe that we were able to draw a very consistent picture of the overall developments.

5.5 Emergence of discontent in East Thuringia

Our analyses below refer to the period from shortly before German reunification in 1989/90 up until now, that is, the transition of the German Democratic Republic's (GDR) centralised economic system to the West German social market economy. The associated upheavals affected all sectors of the former GDR and transformed all areas of life, including the economy, the education system and the labour market.

5.5.1 Pre-embitterment

This phase covers the period up to German reunification. Our interviewees recall the time before reunification in a very ambivalent way. On the one hand, most of them remember social life very positively in terms of cohesion and mutual support in the face of a lack of resources. On the other hand, they describe their personal professional situation at that time in a rather ambivalent to negative light. Many, for example, report great pressure from the political system and a lack of opportunities to realise their full potential professionally. There is agreement that the time before reunification was much less complex for them compared to afterwards, partly because life was more or less mapped out for individuals. In the words of one baker who was interviewed, life was 'simply less complicated'. [Note] However, we could also see from the interviewees' expressions that the regionally dominant emotions were not all positive, especially with regard to the economic situation. And yet, at the same time, according to the interviewees, there was a high certainty of expectations which enabled most people to adapt to the specific conditions.

This phase ended very abruptly with German reunification, which was a massive turning point with serious consequences in all areas of life. The sudden political, economic, and social upheavals and the acfirming change in dominant values and standards led to great uncertainties in large parts of the population. The once formative rather stable emotional patterns suddenly dissolved. In retrospect, this 'political trauma' (Sonnenmoser, 2003) was, in a way, the trigger for the phases that followed (Frommer, 2002).

5.5.2 Emergence of embitterment

In the selected region, this phase roughly covers the period from 1990 to around the beginning of the 2000s.

5.5.2.1 Emotional characterization

The loss of the orientation framework caused by the 'shock transformation' (expert from corporate environment) in 1990 was inevitably followed by a readjustment of the emotional state of the population. On the one hand, there was a feeling of euphoria about being able to leave behind the GDR system, and to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the new freedom; on the other hand, however, uncertainty about personal and professional prospects, uncertainties, and fears about the future prevailed. At that time, according to some older interviewees, many hoped that they would now be able to fulfil their dream of self-employment, but at the same time they were also worried that they would be taken advantage of by business partners from West Germany and that they would not be able to keep up with the changes because of this. Employees wondered, for example, to what extent they would be able to gain a foothold in the new labour market with the qualifications they had acquired in the GDR. But also, the accounts of entrepreneurs who founded their firms shortly after reunification or took them over again through reprivatisation testify to great skepticism of not being perceived and treated as partners on an equal footing by their new contacts in the West. The negative emotions resulting from the perception of a lack of representation, appreciation and equal rights, as well as actual experiences of marginalisation and stigmatisation, are the first signs of burgeoning embitterment, which was to become even more powerful as time went on, as described by one engineer who was interviewed, '[t]his has something to do with discontent. They beat us down after the fall of communism. This ... is coming to a head today'.

The results of a panel study conducted in East Thuringia from 1992 to 1996 confirm not only the massive effect of reunification in the sense of a main trigger event (Schmidt et al., 1997), but also the ambivalence at the beginning of the second phase, the increasing disillusionment after the early euphoria, and the initial formation of negative regional

moods (Schmidt et al., 1997). The authors explicitly point out that these negative assessments are not based on a comparison with the situation in the GDR, but with the old federal states – ‘and this comparison leads to a negative assessment despite actually increased living standards’ (p. 10). This is also expressed by the ‘high levels of mistrust’ (p. 17) found by the authors in 1996 in relation to institutions and politics.

5.5.2.2 Level and communication of embitterment

Embitterment primarily unfolded at the individual level during this phase and thus did not yet spread to larger spatial scales. According to the interviewees, many East Thuringians felt personally affected by the political governance of the transformation, which they viewed as disadvantageous to them, and slowly became embittered, in part because they felt alone with the implementation of the transformation. At that time, however, they did not yet realise that many other East Thuringians felt the same way. This circumstance, reinforced by feelings of personal inadequacy and shame, resulted in a certain restraint and passiveness in how they handled their negative emotions. As a consequence, according to the interviewees, exchange about these negative emotions was limited to close contacts, that is, to close family, friends, acquaintances and close colleagues. One engineer, for example, told us about his father’s attempts to win back the family business by re-privatisation. This involved major bureaucratic hurdles and almost two years of uncertainty and sleepless nights. The resulting depressed mood determined every aspect of family life and gradually turned into embitterment, which left a lasting mark on the entire family. On that basis, trust in the new system could not be built.

5.5.2.3 Policy intervention

The fact that emotions are only negotiated in networks of limited scope meant that no policy interventions were taken at this stage to address the emotional mood in the region under focus.

5.5.3 Consolidation of embitterment

This phase set in in the early 2000s and ended around 2013, yet before the right-wing populist party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD – Alternative for Germany) was established in Thuringia.

5.5.3.1 Emotional characterization

In this phase an increasing percentage of the population showed feelings of deprivation, disappointment, and mistrust. According to some of the interviewees, the longer the disappointment with politics lasted, the more serious its effects became. This is also confirmed by a study carried out in 2000 according to which 58% of Thuringian citizens were disillusioned with politics and directly linked this to German reunification (Dicke et al., 2000). In 2005, it was shown that the assessment of German unity as a whole had been subject to a strong negative trend since 2000 (Edinger et al., 2005). Many people in East Thuringia were subjectively disappointed by political and economic developments during this phase, not least because they were confronted with an environment, which they found more difficult to cope with than people from the old federal states due to their socialisation in the GDR. In addition, there were effects specific to the region, such as the progressive poaching of skilled workers to West Germany and the resulting feeling of being patronised in economic matters. One representative from the Chamber of Skilled Crafts put this as follows: 'We hoped that everything would get better, and now we're being left out. Many, many years. We have been ignored and what was important to us has all been swept under the table.' Several entrepreneurs report having felt like 'second-class people' at the time, meaning that they felt structurally degraded by political decisions, for example, not to adjust wage and pension levels, and by people from West Germany.

5.5.3.2 Level and communication of embitterment

This phase is characterised by rising levels of collective embitterment, which is now evident on a regional scale. People began to realise that they were not alone with their emotions and started talking about them in contexts that reached beyond their immediate environment, for example, in extended professional networks, in associations, and in the public sphere. In fact, other studies support that the widespread 'political deprivation' (Dicke et al., 2000) conditioned a 'great potential for discontent' (p. 65), which showed its first collective manifestations in this phase. In a study dated as of 2000, for example, 70% of respondents said they would definitely, fairly definitely, or possibly participate in a demonstration (Dicke et al., 2000, appx I, p. 26). Actual participation in demonstrations increased from 15% to 32% between 2001 and 2005 (Edinger et al., 2005). An intensified exchange strengthened regional political identities and the sense of community, as confirmed by an expert from the corporate environment: 'At this level, it has to be said that this population group certainly feels a bit marginalised. And this creates a sense of cohesion, in the rejection of other politics, or people of other origins.' This cohesion as an expression of collective embitterment is also reflected in the sharp increase in membership of right-wing extremist organisations (Freistaat Thüringen,

1996ff.). Dicke et al. (2000) state that these collectivisation tendencies are based on negative experiences made since reunification and explicitly establish a connection between subjective deprivation and disappointment and ‘collective feelings of discontent’ (p. 107; translated from the German). Further studies confirmed the ‘collective imprinting power of the generation’ (Edinger et al., 2010, p. 65; translated from the German) related to reunification, as well as the immediate environment as a spatial reference point for collective discontent (Best et al., 2013).

5.5.3.3 Policy intervention

In this phase, individual facets of regional embitterment were perceived rather than its increasingly collective consolidation, which is why intervention was only selective, for example, in response to spreading right-wing extremist tendencies among young people.

5.5.4 Chronification of embitterment and emotional lock-in

This phase started around 2013 with the establishment of the AfD in Thuringia and has continued until today.

5.5.4.1 Emotional characterization

Regional emotions take on more extreme forms with helplessness, frustration, a rejection of elites and the desire for revenge for perceived injustices standing out as the most important features. Many interviewees feel as though they have been systematically lied to and abandoned by groups perceived as elitists (e.g., scientists) and politicians. Especially the negative perception of the latter has contributed to a consolidation of embitterment. Embitterment having grown over the years is now reflected in general thought patterns and becomes a dominant theme in everyday life of many inhabitants. It manifests itself in the strong support for the AfD. A supermarket manager, for example, stated that many regional entrepreneurs he knows recently voted for the AfD ‘for the others to get a kick up the backside.’ The fact that collective emotions play an important role in the emergence of discontent in eastern German rural regions was also confirmed by a 2017 study (Deppisch, 2019). These developments were clearly boosted by at least two other aspects: First, for many entrepreneurs an influx of refugees in 2015 was a negative milestone that reinforced their tendencies to reject local and federal politics. Similarly, the political management of the COVID-19 pandemic posed major challenges to many entrepreneurs and was considered disastrous by many interview partners. One managing director of a mechanical engineering firm referred to these developments by saying: ‘Certain things have gone wrong, that’s quite

clear. And ... that has contributed to the fact that this disillusion in rural regions has become worse.' Although these reinforcing events relate to the national and international level and thus to supra-regional scales, they are perceived as having a strong impact on regional developments. Accordingly, the population's negative assessment of the governance of these events has a substantial effect on the general alienation of the population from European, federal and national politics which contributes to fostering collective embitterment.

5.5.4.2 Level and communication of embitterment

Regional discourses characterised by embitterment become denser and more explosive in this phase. Right-wing populist actors recognise regional ways of thinking and emotions and come up with suitable 'arguments', 'and this has an effect on at least a certain part of the population, namely those who are frustrated', as a building contractor from Gera put it. Particularly in rural locations, embitterment in this phase is both an expression and an object of communication and becomes part of daily life. Even though those who are embittered do not make up the majority of society, their voices are usually louder than those who hold moderate positions, which is why they are able to represent their attitudes with great publicity and drive a normalisation of their extreme viewpoints. AfD representatives in particular recognise the political significance of collective emotions and instrumentalise them to derive strategic benefits for their agenda. The institutionalisation of embitterment, which in previous phases only took place in extreme contexts, for example, in right-wing extremist associations, has now reached large parts of society (Best et al., 2017). Our interviewees' descriptions prove that a great deal of trust is placed in well-known regional actors who are now involved in right-wing populist parties or associated initiatives. Prominent examples include the right-wing populist-influenced protest actions against pandemic measures, in which regional entrepreneurs often play a leading role, for example, the 'Unternehmer mit Herz' (Entrepreneurs with a Heart). It is striking that even moderate voices from the regionally oriented business community do not condemn these dynamics either in the interviews or publicly but tend to approve them with reference to the supposed personal merits of those responsible. This comparatively broad acceptance strengthens extreme actors, thus promoting the targeted institutionalisation of embitterment even more effectively which clearly favours the chronification of embitterment in the long run. In the worst case, this can give the region a specific image that deters urgently needed skilled workers and/or investors thereby limiting the region's development potential and exacerbating existing spatial inequalities.

5.5.4.3 Policy intervention

As regional embitterment is visible to actors outside the region, political intervention would, in principle, be possible. However, since discontent and related attitudes have become structurally anchored in the region (emotional lock-in) with major parts of the population no longer being amenable to objective arguments, it is very doubtful as to whether such political measures will be effective in the end at this stage.

5.6 Conclusions

Studies dealing with 'left-behind places' more or less agree that these places are characterised by significant levels of discontent from the local population. The literature either attributed this to a weak expression of various current indicators (e.g., education, income levels) or explained it as the outcome of a process of long-term decline in the relative importance of the region. In our view, however, both perspectives appear to be only partially capable of providing a satisfactory explanation as to why people in 'left-behind places' feel left behind. In this paper, we argue that discontent can be considered as an expression of a collective emotion that develops as a result of a main trigger event over a medium-term period if appropriate countermeasures are not taken early enough. We propose that starting from an initial phase, which depending on the regional context can look very different (phase 1), such an event can first lead to discontent on an individual level (phase 2), and later on at a collective level (phase 3), if the expectations attached to its governance are not met. In the most extreme case (phase 4), local actors (activists, political parties, etc.) recognise this situation and create forums that allow local people to articulate their discontent publicly. It is in this phase that 'left-behind places' become visible beyond the region. We are aware that our model describes an ideal-typical course of development that does not take into account the actions of individual actors, and that will vary in detail from region to region. As such it is far from being capable of explaining discontent in 'left-behind places' in general. Nevertheless, we argue that the dynamics we describe are likely to be found in numerous 'left-behind places'. Depending on the extent of the main trigger event, it seems plausible to us to assume very different regional impacts. Main trigger events of a relatively small magnitude (e.g., the closure of a coal mine) will most likely affect only a few people, whereas large-scale events such as the change of a political system will cause societal impacts that affect many individuals and numerous regional contexts. It seems to us that regions which are less able to cope with external disturbances, that is, which have a low level of resilience, are particularly susceptible to the consolidation of discontent and thus run the risk of falling into an emotional lock-in. Such developments can,

for example, affect those regions whose population is characterised by comparatively homogeneous identities and in which there are no opportunities to experience difference due to a lack of population growth and migration (Förtner et al., 2021). In such cases homogeneous communication patterns and related similar identities can form more easily. Consequently, rural–peripheral regions seem to be a particularly good breeding ground for discontent (Deppisch et al., 2022), which we have characterised – drawing on concepts in psychology – as collective embitterment. Our empirical analysis in East Thuringia, a region characterised, among other things, by a high number of votes for right-wing populist parties, was able to confirm the model. We assume that this area is representative of many other eastern German regions that today – some 30 years after reunification – feel disconnected from the economic and political growth centres and have high shares of right-wing populist voters, although some socio-economic indicators point in the opposite direction. Seen in this light, large parts of eastern Germany could have developed into a variegated landscape of differently structured ‘left-behind places’ since the early 1990s that are limited primarily by regions that experienced particularly strong economic growth and immigration in the past (e.g., Dresden).

One important conclusion can be drawn from our model, namely that the discontent that characterises these places is not something that suddenly emerges. Rather, today’s ‘left-behind places’ have gradually developed in a self-reinforcing process. In other words, embitterment in these places has existed for a much longer time before it becomes visible to the outside world, for example, in the number of votes for populist parties. However, this also means that as soon as these places become visible to the outside world at a certain point, they have already reached or are on the verge of reaching an emotional state that is difficult to change (emotional lock-in). This has, of course, significant implications for regional policy that must aim at avoiding emotional lock-ins by breaking up the emotional trajectories that we outlined, as early as possible. In fact, our model implies that the emotions of the population should become an important issue in place-based politics. In particular, we suggest a constant monitoring of the emotional state in a region, e. g. through regular surveys designed as mood barometers, as soon as there are first signs of the erosion of societal cohesion. In response to negative discourses that threaten to become entrenched, it would also be advisable to establish positive narratives as counterparts in the region, for example, via socially recognised gatekeepers. Measures to specifically promote social diversity could also have a supportive effect in the medium and long term, even if they require a higher degree of conflict capacity in the short term. In addition, we propose developing policy instruments that are tailored to the different phases. In this context, suitable indicators could also be developed to identify main trigger events early on, which may

seem insignificant at first glance, and to capture the emotional climate in different regional contexts, with the aim of producing time series data.

Future studies should test the phase model in other regional contexts. Comparative studies that elaborate the determinants of the duration of each phase also seem useful, specifically when focusing on the role of regional resilience (Boschma, 2015) and different main trigger events. Finally, research could analyse the phase transitions in more detail. In this context, interdisciplinary analyses involving expertise from economics, economic geography, sociology, and psychology seem promising. In any case, it should be an urgent concern of both researchers and practitioners to use the findings of our study to counteract collective embitterment at an early stage, since history has repeatedly shown that it can cause considerable damage both at the individual level and at the level of society as a whole.

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1. German language quotations are translated by the authors.

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6 Populist resentments and identities and their repercussions on firms and regions. The example of East Thuringia

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Abstract

Right-wing populism and related geographies of discontent have become central subjects in the recent debate on regional inequalities. The present contribution seeks to complement existing, predominantly synoptic approaches by looking at specific economic practices of local actors. We argue that exclusionary regional political identities are transferred to firms and shape corporate practices. Using 65 semi-structured interviews with representatives from firms in East Thuringia, we analyze these processes and how they affect recruitment, client and business networks. Furthermore, we show that these practices can have a negative impact on the business location and thus contribute to the consolidation of existing regional inequalities.

6.1 Introduction

Over recent years, significant increases in votes for right-wing populist parties have been observed in many Western countries. Although these parties differ in many aspects, one of their common features is their deliberate rejection of diversity which is typically reflected by their negative attitudes towards immigrants, especially from cultural backgrounds that are considered to be “foreign” (Salmela and von Scheve, 2017). Many recent studies in the social sciences have dealt intensively with this issue. While related research in economic geography has been mainly interested in understanding the spatial distribution patterns for populist voting behavior and therefore focused on populations and their characteristics (Dijkstra et al., 2020), the question as to how a major proportion of populist voters affect local businesses has not yet been dealt with systematically. This is surprising, as a better understanding about how populist convictions can affect corporate practices is crucial not only for economic geographers but also for policy makers: Evidence, for example, suggests that firms who do not sufficiently publicly distinguish themselves from xenophobia can in the worst case expect a deliberate decrease in the demand for their products (Sen et al., 2001; Harrison et al., 2005). In addition, other firms might feel prompted to exclude themselves from value chains if their activities appear incompatible with their code of conduct (Blackburn and Ram, 2006). Moreover, there is evidence that potential job applicants or potential investors might avoid a particular region because of xenophobic attitudes (Tagesspiegel Online, 2018/09/05) – a dynamic that ultimately prevents regional firms from reaping the multiple benefits of diversity. In some cases, the image of an entire region as a business location may be at stake if regional firms are perceived as being xenophobic by other third parties (Welt Online, 2018/11/22). All this suggests that the xenophobic mindsets of the population can affect regional development in a negative way,

contributing to the deepening of regional inequalities. Rural-peripheral regions characterized by significant outmigration deserve special consideration in this context: First, these regions often show significant levels of discontent among the population (Momonova et al., 2020) and have a comparatively high percentage of populist voters (Rodriguez-Pose, 2018). Second, the firms located there are primarily small and medium-sized and usually rely on hiring local staff. Political identities in the business environment thus can enter and dominate the local firms quite easily. Third, the absence of customer demand and investment can lead to negative effects on the development of an entire region to a much greater extent than in economically diverse urban areas. Against this background, we aim to answer the question of how local businesses react to what we call exclusionary political identities shared in their immediate environment. To systematically identify and characterize their reactions, we develop a typology of firms in rural areas that considers the practices that firms apply when emerging with their business environment, i.e., with job applicants, customers and business partners. The paper is structured as follows: First, we take a look at the spatial aspects of diversity and exclusionary identities. Subsequently, we address how political identities find their way into corporate contexts, before discussing how exclusionary political identities and underlying sentiments and attitudes such as xenophobia as well as strategic right-wing populist influence affect corporate practices. We then present the research design and the methodological approach, and discuss the empirical findings of our research. Therefore, we take a detailed look at the types of firms we have identified, and characterize the practices adopted by them regarding recruitment, customer relations, and local business networks. Finally, we summarize the most important results and provide an outlook on further research needs.

6.2 Conceptual framework

6.2.1 Diversity and Exclusionary Political Identities

For many economic geographers, the recent growing importance of populism and its divisive elements is surprising, given that a vast number of studies have pointed to reinforcing links between diversity and regional development (Alesina and Ferrara, 2005; Tomaney and Pike, 2020). On the one hand, it has been argued, for example, that diversity plays an important role in regional development because it attracts qualified labor (Florida, 2017), fosters worker productivity (Buchholz, 2021) and innovation (Florida, 2005) and is correlated with higher wages and rents (Ottaviano and Peri, 2006). On the other hand, diversity itself has been found to be strongly affected by the regional environment. Regions characterized by a progressive and tolerant social

environment have been found to stimulate diversity (Lee et al., 2004; Qian, 2013). As these conditions are typically found in major cities, it does not come as a surprise that the latter have attracted most interest in diversity-related research so far (Florida, 2005; Kemeny, 2017; Cooke and Kemeny, 2018). In fact, it is only recently that an increasing number of studies have focused on diversity issues in the context of rural areas, for example when it comes to integrating immigrant labor (Lähdesmäki and Suutari, 2020) or exploiting the potential of the creative economy (Roberts and Townsend, 2016). Unlike cities, rural regions like the one we will focus on in this study usually do not represent an environment conducive to diversity, but rather promote exclusion (Garcia and Davidson, 2013). This primarily has to do with the fact that most rural areas lack social diversity that could inform local discourses, shape individual experiences, and bring in new stimuli (Lobao and Saenz, 2002). In addition, particularly in peripheral rural areas, major demographic changes such as out-migration and aging may cause larger segments of the population to retreat into in-groups, a process that contributes to the gradual closure of local social networks formed by those who stay (Ulrich-Schad and Duncan, 2018).

The point we would like to make here is that the population in rural areas is often defined by political beliefs that differ significantly from those that characterize the majority of the population in socially diverse urban areas. With a view to our further analysis, three aspects are worth noting in this context:

First, studies have repeatedly pointed to the fact that the population in rural places in general tends to be more traditional and conservative (Garland and Chakraborti, 2006). This suggests that the political beliefs of major parts of the local population are neither temporary nor merely an expression of a spontaneous mood. Rather, many people have adopted and internalized political beliefs over time (Huddy, 2001). As they have become a key element of the social identity of major parts of the population (Tajfel, 1974), we refer to these as political identities in the following. These identities affect concrete political attitudes and accordingly determine the actions of those who hold them (Smith and Hogg, 2008; Goren and Plaut, 2012).

Second, political identities express themselves in both the individuals' own positioning in a society and their self-perception as part of an in-group that is potentially in conflict with other groups (Tajfel and Turner, 1982). For the reasons mentioned above, we believe that especially in the case of rural-peripheral areas, such group demarcations are represented and defended with particular stridency. In our study of East Thuringia, we particularly focus on political identities that manifest themselves in such clear social demarcations and social exclusion. We refer to them as exclusionary political identities. As political identities in principle are unlikely to change in the short term, measures that seek to implement and use diversity as a resource can quickly reach their limits in

regions where exclusionary identities prevail.

Third, while the rejection of what is perceived not to be in-group and, in particular, a tendency towards xenophobia can be considered as central features of exclusionary political identities, this does not mean that the latter would be homogeneous or always articulate themselves in the same way. On the contrary, we assume that they manifest themselves on a broad spectrum between moderate and extreme positions, resulting in a range of related social practices. While this means that we do not take the view that the population in rural areas are fundamentally xenophobic, we believe that negative attitudes of different intensities towards outsiders can be considered to be a central feature of the local population's political identity in many rural places (Joireman, 2003) – as is confirmed by our own findings.

6.2.2 Political Identities and Corporate Contexts

Political identities articulate themselves in different social contexts in organized bundles of activities of what is said and done (Schatzki, 1996). There are good reasons to assume that because of how they are embedded in regional networks, firms can be influenced by their local population's political identities. For example, local employees who "have the regional culture 'in their genes' and introduce local norms and habits" (Prud'Homme van Reine and Dankbaar 2011, 1866) into the firm can act as an important transfer channel. Also, managers who have expanded their local perspectives by experiences gained elsewhere or professional networks may be decisive in transmitting political identities into corporate contexts (ibid.).

Whether political identities will have a significant effect on the firm or even affect a larger number of businesses in a region, primarily depends on how pronounced they are in a region. In general, it can be assumed that the more widespread and the more coherent political identities are, the stronger their impact is likely to be on local businesses, by supporting workforces that are comparatively homogeneous in terms of their political views. Political identities, however, that characterize only a fraction of the population are unlikely to become a significant part of local firm contexts. In this context, it is also important to consider where firms are located: Those located in major cities, for example, are often characterized by nationally or globally oriented recruitment (Moretti, 2012; Lee and Cowling, 2015) and as a result bring together workforces shaped by very different political identities. Furthermore, many firms in cities will have international or national markets or serve local customers that are quite heterogeneous (e.g., in origin, language and political orientation). Finally, the population in cities is very heterogeneous in many respects and thus also characterized by a variety of different political identities. Accordingly, many firms located there will form rather heterogeneous

workspaces. At the same time, firms in rural areas are often not internationalized and employ a major part of their workforce from the immediate vicinity (Hoyos and Green, 2011; Billington et al., 2017). Professional, supra-regionally oriented recruitment tools are rarely used, especially as these firms tend to be small and medium-sized (Carroll et al., 1999). Ultimately, as many rural regions (e.g., in East Germany) are characterized by comparatively homogeneous identities among their populations, we argue that it is likely for smaller firms in rural areas with local catchment areas to have employees with rather similar sets of identities and thus adapt certain practices that are very much in line with the political identities shared by large parts of the local population (Paasi, 2003).

After having infiltrated local firms, political identities under certain circumstances can direct the opinion-forming process among workforces through both individual and collective action. In fact, while we assume that ideologies are typically not communicated through the official corporate information system, and even though many firms have a “no politics at work”-policy (Society for Human Resource Management, 2016), this does not mean that political issues will be completely ignored in the workplace (Kim et al., 2018). On the contrary, we assume that political aspects make up a significant part of the exchange in informal groups within the firm carried out in various forums via face-to-face contacts (e.g., lunch breaks, firm parties, etc.) (Whittacker et al., 1994; Mutz and Mondak, 2006) based on trusting relationships amongst the employees. Consequently, a distinct “organizational political ideology” (Gupta et al., 2017) can emerge or be established within a firm. Even though this is sometimes completely disconnected from the firms’ official goals and activities, it can nevertheless influence concrete actions of both the employees and the organization as a whole.

6.2.3 Exclusionary Political Identities and Corporate Contexts

In the firm context, exclusionary political identities will often go hand in hand with processes of social exclusion (“othering”). Whether this means that more extreme steps, such as actual discrimination or other exclusionary acts, are put into practice by individual employees, depends on various aspects, such as the level of education (Zick et al., 2011), professional and social positions (Feagin and Eckberg, 1980) as well as the socialization of the individuals involved (Parkins et al., 2006). Concerning the link to the surrounding environment, we assume that exclusionary political identities especially affect the following three fields:

- (1) *Recruitment*. Especially small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in rural areas are often characterized by a workforce that is homogeneous regarding

origin and attitude (Prat, 2002; Osthoff et al., 2011) and, related to this, by a working atmosphere characterized by dense social contacts and intense cooperation (Matlay, 1999). To keep up good relationships with their workforce, employers will preferably rely on information from their employees when recruiting new workers (Carroll et al., 1999). In these kinds of situations, outsiders with connections in the firms are preferred, while individuals without these connections will face greater hurdles; especially if their attitudes differ from those of the existing team. Given the fact that organizations tend to hire people with knowledge, skills and abilities similar to those already working there (Schneider, 1987; Petersen and Dietz, 2005; Hutton et al., 2014), and that individuals – vice versa – become attracted to such organizations whose members match them in terms of personality, values, interests, and other attributes, it seems likely that the employees' personal characteristics will become increasingly similar in terms of attitudes expressed over the course of time, especially as those who do not fit in well will tend to leave the organization (ibid.). Firms thus not only contribute to an ongoing reproduction of local political identities, but at the same time form exclusionary communication and action spaces characterized by similar interpretation schemes.

- (2) *Customer relations*. Many SMEs in rural regions have a regional market orientation (Gladwin et al., 1989). To be successful, their representatives must be able to understand their customers' needs and take this into account when processing orders. In other words, political identities articulated by the customers will require that certain practices are adopted by the firms if they want to be accepted in the local market in the long run; this is particularly important in the B2C (business-to-consumer)-sector with personal contact and a high level of direct communication crucially affecting client relations (Balaji et al., 2016). While this will surely influence the identities shared among the employees, the ongoing interactions in existing networks between both parties – the firm and its clients – who know the “rules of the game” will contribute to a continuous re-negotiation and reproduction of regional political identities in the course of time.
- (3) *Local business networks*. Firms constantly exchange information with various business partners, e.g., suppliers or developing partners, on a variety of subjects and formats, such as bilateral discussions as well as business roundtables. Since it can be assumed that such partnerships work particularly well when the parties involved have similar attitudes and a “normative context [...] founded on familiarity and common values” (BarNir and Smith, 2002), such interaction will also be informed by the actors' political identities (Niemelä, 2004; Martin et al., 2019). Furthermore, it is certainly also the case that the

employees' attitudes, shaped by regional political identities, will impact future collaborations in that, for example, firms will choose those as cooperation partners from which they can assume that their representatives hold similar ideological views.

Of course, the above-mentioned practices that arise from exclusionary political identities prevent firms from taking advantage of benefits offered by diversity. While this is already problematic at the level of the individual firm, if several firms in a region are characterized by such identities at the same time, significant challenges can arise on a regional level: such collectively experienced practices can hinder the recruitment of an urgently needed workers, giving the region a xenophobic image that deters potential business partners and investors. In the worst case, this can lead to competitive disadvantages and a solidification of regional inequalities. It should, however, be noticed, that of course, even if certain political identities are prevalent in some regions, this does not necessarily mean that identical practices will emerge. Rather, many variations can be expected to occur as political identities will be handled differently by the management on the basis of intra-firm power relations and thus affect corporate networks in numerous ways. Furthermore, they need not reach every firm in the same way and can also be received differently – depending on the composition of the work-force in the firm. Against this background, the question arises as to how firms react to exclusionary political identities held in their environment. To answer this, we constructed a typology of firms in rural regions that uses the three above-mentioned fields of action as distinguishing criteria.

6.3 Research Design and Methodology

6.3.1 Regional Case Study

We chose East Thuringia (see Figure 8), a sparsely populated region (approx. 650,000 inhabitants) marked by villages and small towns, as a regional case study. Like other parts of eastern Germany, Thuringia is still struggling with the political, economic and social restructuring that followed German reunification. Jena (110,000 inhabitants) – one of the few places in eastern Germany that has been experiencing economic growth for a longer period (inkar.de, 2022) – is East Thuringia's biggest city and, also because of major firms (like Carl Zeiss or Jenapharm), its universities and many research centers has a welcoming atmosphere to foreigners. Contrarily, Thuringia's rural areas are characterized by a population, which in many places bears migration-skeptical, exclusionary or even xenophobic attitudes (Salheiser, 2017). Since the reunification, these regions were also characterized by strong out-migration. They are now significantly

over-aged and – associated with this – have a severe shortage of skilled workers (TMSGFF, 2018).

A lack of services of general interest coupled with low prospects and other factors (Edinger and Hallermann, 2001; Brenke and Zimmermann, 2009) have contributed to a strong boost for right-wing and populist parties in the population. Thuringia, for example, serves both as a retreat for supporters of far-right parties and for local right-wing alliances that position themselves in local elections (Reiser et al., 2018) and as an important venue for right-wing events (KomRex, 2020). Moreover, in the local elections of 2019 the right-wing populist party AFD – Alternative für Deutschland (“Alternative for Germany”) became the second-strongest political power with 23,4% of the votes. With the exception of the city of Jena (12.7%), the figures for all counties in East Thuringia are above this average (23.5%–28.8%) (Dörffel et al., 2019). Central elements of the AFD ideology – the rejection of both established democratic parties and immigration – also form the basis for the party’s great support by the local population even though the percentage of foreigners in Thuringia (2.5%) remains well below the national average of 13.5% (TLS, 2020). These political convictions cannot be explained by specific demographic characteristics alone but must rather be viewed as an expression of exclusionary political identities that have infiltrated a significant part of society (Hansen and Olsen, 2018) and are relatively frequently expressed in public. Given these developments, it does not come as a surprise that Thuringia is often associated with a xenophobic and rather backward image in the media (e.g., dw online, 2015). Since some peculiarities of its socio-economic environment appear to be particularly conducive to the transfer of political identities to workplace contexts, we believe that Thuringia is very well suited as a case study.

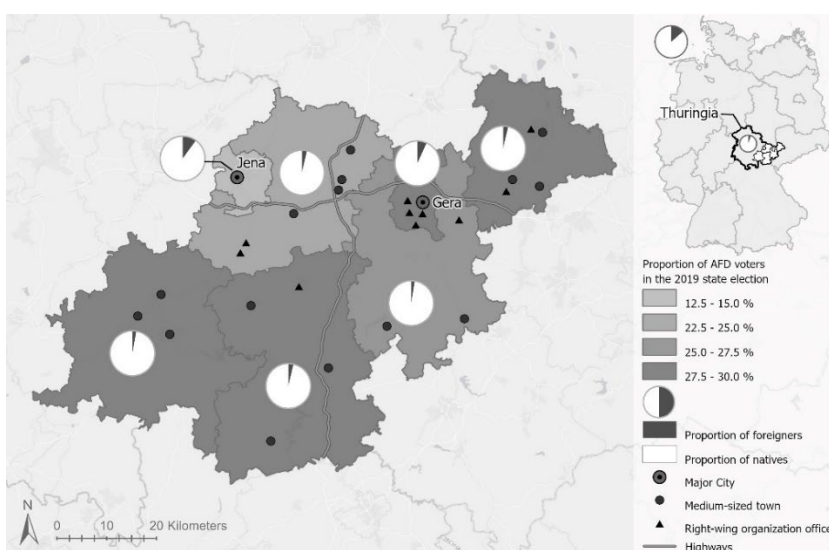


Figure 8: Map of East Thuringia; Source: Thorben Sell

First, the *small-scale organization of firms* in East Thuringia favors the formation of tight-knit communities in the workplace. Given a rather low labor market mobility in the region, many employees have known each other for years. Consequently, the relationships between them are characterized by strong trust, thus fostering the spread of information and rumors in the workplace, amongst them political ideas and convictions (Klein and D'Aunno, 1986).

Second, our study context is characterized by *numerous overlaps between private and professional social networks* (Backman and Palmberg, 2015). This means that employees typically maintain intense private relationships beyond the workplace, allowing for dense information to flow from one domain to another, often including political issues. Third, a homogeneity of political identities is fueled by the fact that many inhabitants of the region *share similar schemes of interpretation*. Many of them have made comparable experiences in the past and adopted similar perceptions of today's challenges, thereby laying the foundations for joint patterns of interpretation and communication (Woods, 2010). It can therefore be assumed that many of them share the same political identities. As exclusionary practices are not limited to the level of managers, the workforce or individual employees, we assume that they also affect the firms' relationships with other businesses in their immediate environment.

6.3.2 Data Collection

In total, we carried out 62 semi-structured interviews¹¹ with managing directors, department heads and human resource managers from SMEs as well as with four firms with more than 200 employees in East Thuringia between June 2020 and March 2021. The interview partners – most of them males born in the region – were selected according to the distribution of firm sizes and recruited as part of a preceding telephone survey of 400 firms.¹² In addition, we conducted interviews with three managing directors of private recruitment agencies who, due to their extraordinarily large networks and profound insights into the local firms' HR affairs, have excellent expertise in the region and were thus able to provide us with additional information.

¹¹ All interview excerpts have been translated from German.

¹² Between October and December 2019, we surveyed representatives of 400 regional firms of all firms listed in commercial registers (=5.6%) in East Thuringia with at least 3 employees across all branches. The sample was drawn randomly, considering the distribution in the counties. On average, the interviews lasted about 20 min. 37 questions, some of which were further subdivided, addressed the topics of regional image, work climate and discourse, and international employees.

As we aimed to explore (i) the corporate practices related to exclusionary political identities in both firm-related social interactions and in the local firms' networks, (ii) how managers evaluate these issues and (iii) how their handling affects the image and future development perspectives of both the firms and the region, our interview guide centered around resentments amongst the employees, specific exclusionary practices in local firms and their effects on the perception of the region as a whole. Having in-depth knowledge of the target group and regional cultures as well as of migration-related resentment from previous projects, we were initially concerned that respondents would not speak openly about controversial political issues. But this was not the case – on the contrary: We got the impression that some of the interviewees even took the opportunity to openly express their views, often incited by frustration, for example, about the governance of the COVID-19 pandemic by the state. For us, a high degree of consistency in the respondents' statements and their extreme responses, which in some cases even included emotional reactions, were a clear indication of the credibility of their statements. Apart from five interviews which had to be conducted digitally due to COVID19-restrictions, all interviews took place at the interview partners' firm sites. On average, they lasted 60 minutes. All of them were recorded. We transcribed the recordings and coded the transcripts. Using MaxQDA software, we identified and classified the relevant content aspects in order to structure and present them systematically.

6.3.3 Typology construction

The firm typology presented in the next section was based on “empirically grounded type construction” (Kluge, 2000) that includes (1) the elaboration of relevant dimensions of comparison, (2) the grouping of cases and analysis of empirical regularities, (3) the analysis of the contextual meaning and formation of types and (4) the characterization of the types formed. In particular, we created theory-based codes to which we assigned corresponding excerpts of the transcripts (Kuckartz, 2018). Specifically, semantic units were assigned – wherever possible – to the three dimensions explained above: recruitment, customer relations, and local business networks. In a next step, the statements relating to each of these dimensions were grouped according to similarity in content. This step was based on the idea that the statements allow conclusions to be drawn about similar political identities, while at the same time pointing to similarities in the actors' actions. By recombining dimensions with statements that can be attributed to similar identities, we were able to derive three types – exclusionary, open and opportunistic firms – which we characterize in more detail in the following.

6.4 Exclusionary Political Identities and Corporate Actions in Different Types of Firms

6.4.1 Exclusionary Firms

In our sample exclusionary attitudes at the management level are remarkably common in small, rural firms with a local market orientation. These are often craftsmen with firms that mainly or exclusively operate in the B2C-sector, or small industrial firms. Although these firms represent only a minor part of all firms in the region, their representatives succeed in influencing ongoing regional discourses to a significant extent, as they in many cases appear very dominant and recognizably polarizing. The corporate culture of these firms is characterized by a broad consensus between the predominantly male employees of different ages and the management, which is also almost exclusively male. The interviewed firm representatives see themselves as Thuringians strongly rooted in the region. They are skeptical of new external influences and express strong reservations, to the point of extreme positions and hostility towards foreigners, whom they blame for endangering their own and the region's identity (Hildebrandt and Trüdinger, 2021).¹³ One master plumber running a small firm, for example, referred to foreigners as not being "like us". According to an employment agency's manager, such attitudes are not restricted to single cases, they can be considered an everyday phenomenon. Not surprisingly, apart from very few exceptions where strong labor shortages forced managers to employ international workers, there were almost no foreigners working in these firms in our sample.

Recruitment: The firms of this type that we analyzed are characterized by extremely exclusionary practices. From many interviews we know, for instance, that ignoring foreign applicants is the norm in spite of the omnipresent high demand for employees. Some managers told us that they would even ignore applications by persons whose names they perceived as not being German or that they would only consider them if the labor market and order situation would force them to do so. In particular, visible minorities are met with great rejection. Many managers argued that they would not employ Arab or (North) African men; in fact, most reservations centered around male migrants. An electronics firm's manager, for example, stated: "The firms that operate regionally do not want to have anything to do with people like that. I know quite a few firms that say, 'For God's sake, hiring a black person is a no-go.'" The interviewed exclusionary firms'

¹³ These exclusionary attitudes and practices do not affect immigrants and visible minorities only, but generally people who do not conform to the accepted regional norms because of a variety of characteristics, including their sexual orientation or the fact that they „do not belong“, because they come from Western Germany.

managers prefer informal ways of recruiting employees to avoid hiring persons with a different, more open mindset. Vacant jobs are therefore not advertised officially but announced through private networks to increase the chances that new employees are in line with the attitudes of the management and the existing workforce (Carroll et al., 1999). Another feature of this type of firm obviously is that there is a good, often very close personal relationship among the employees as well as between them and the management. Since attitudes are openly expressed on this basis, the few foreigners who were employed in individual cases are directly confronted with strong rejections in the workplace.

Customer relations: Due to the interconnectedness of private and professional social spheres in the firms we interviewed, managers are not only very familiar with their employees but also with large parts of their B2C-customers, many of whom share the exclusionary attitudes that also characterize the corporate culture of those firms. Almost all managers of this firm type state that there is strong hostility towards foreigners from their customers, and that foreigners would not be granted access to their customers' premises, even if the management considered to deploy them. However, since foreigners are hardly ever employed in these firms anyway, it is not surprising that there is no related direct customer contact. In the few individual cases where foreign employees are hired, they do not interact with customers, but are intentionally deployed in less visible workplaces. If, in even rarer cases, 'it cannot be avoided' that foreigners are deployed with the customers, i.e., due to short-term labor bottlenecks, they are accompanied by German colleagues, as one master plumber put on record.

Local business networks: Exclusionary firms not only reject foreigners as employees, but also refuse to accept them as other firms' representatives. One manager of a ceramics firm with 28 employees, for example, stated: "We have two international firms as customers for whom this [xenophobia] is an alien concept. You can send foreigners there [for negotiations], and they will be greeted properly. But if you have long-established firms here in the region and send foreigners there, then there will be no deal". Exclusionary firms seem to maintain close contacts with each other based on shared values. For example, they exchange views on political issues – something which is avoided by more open firms. As a consequence, closed, trust-filled networks form between them. From interviews we know that firms passed on orders to friendly firms when they themselves lacked the necessary capacities. In many cases, these ties are strongly interconnected with the managers' private lives (BarNir and Smith, 2002). Semi-informal meetings and joint activities with other managers in their free time appear to be common, e.g., in sports clubs or as volunteers in the local fire department, and some even go on vacation together. Strong local networks of likeminded people are not only a means to an end for the exclusionary firms, but also their ideal

conception of cooperation. For the interviewed managers, there is a vital interest to maintain and even expand these networks in the future. At the same time, there is no interest in supra-regional expansion; rather, the firms appear to be satisfied with what they have achieved, as is suggested by the statement of a restaurateur with 12 employees saying: “We'll do ours and that's it.”

6.4.2 Open Firms

Open firms in our sample are typically medium-sized and have a supra-regional or international B2B (business-to-business)-market orientation. Typically, these firms can be found in small towns and cities, but hardly ever in East Thuringia's rural areas. In fact, this type is probably the one least represented in the region.

The management of this type of firm is open to foreigners, sees the need for their inclusion regarding labor shortages and competitiveness and therefore employs at least a few of them (Lähdesmäki and Suutari, 2020). Open firms usually have more departments and more employees with greater diversity in terms of gender, personal backgrounds and qualification levels than exclusionary firms. Compared to the exclusionary firms, in open firms, the relationships within the workforce and with the management are less characterized by personal relationships. The employees' attitudes are diverse, resulting in rather loose small group formations, compared to the closely-knit networks in exclusionary firms. Based on the interviews we can assume that the staff represents average society, except for progressive branches like software development usually characterized by an extremely open, international workforce and flat hierarchies.

A consensus between management and employees does not exist in all open firms, especially not in those with a large share of local employees with comparably low qualifications. The management has to make sure that their own open attitudes and political identities shape the organization so that exclusionary identities transferred by employees, customers or business partners do not dominate the internal communication environment, because, as the manager of a metalworking firm told us: “You cannot put up with everything. You have to keep the upper hand.”

Recruitment: These management have made good experiences with employing foreign workers and would like to further open up to internationalization (Alesina and Ferrara, 2005). Therefore, they adapt their recruitment strategies by using both online platforms that enable them to recruit staff nationwide and by presenting themselves as progressive and open via social media. Some interviewed HR managers of larger firms have directly addressed suitable candidates to increase their choices. At the same time, these firms find themselves confronted with an environment significantly shaped by exclusionary political identities, which complicates attracting highly-qualified international

workers. One larger firm's HR manager located in a small town referred to this by saying: "Foreign applicants are already asking about this. I can remember one case where an American asked about political attitudes because she was thinking: 'What kind of network am I entering here?'" He sees the reputation of his firm threatened, especially when it comes to hiring qualified personnel. Under these circumstances, the firms we surveyed usually spend a significant amount of time and financial resources to develop strategies to convince the favored potential employees. They are well prepared for their critical questions about xenophobia in the region and offer support in housing and other organizational matters.

Moreover, these firms actively try to keep regional xenophobic influences out or, at least, at bay, as they are, in their opinion, harmful to the firm both in terms of internal processes and public perception (Gupta et al., 2017). In other words, CEOs and HR managers pay particular attention not to hire someone who could transfer exclusionary identities into the organization. For example, some firms do background checks using Google and private applicant profiles on social media, even for unskilled positions. In addition, numerous managers pay explicit attention as to how employees behave towards foreign colleagues and give immediate warnings in case of unwanted incidents. Further, contact persons for onboarding and integration are deployed and teams characterized by the similar attitudes of their members are sometimes put together. Sometimes, extreme solutions are necessary, as a ceramic firm's HR manager states: „I take rigorous action against xenophobic behavior. I even fired one of my employees. That was a long and intense legal battle." This example shows that open leaders need a willingness to engage in conflict and steadfastness when it comes to asserting their views.

Customer relations: The firms we analyzed face the same resentments through their local B2C-customers as the exclusionary ones. However, since most of them are focused on supra-regional sales markets they can afford resisting the pressure linked to this. Some open firms anticipate possible rejections and therefore announce the deployment of foreign employees to local customers with whom they are not yet familiar to preemptively ensure that their employees will be approved. Managers react to xenophobic incidents, according to own statements, for example, by initiating direct dialogues or, if necessary, by breaking off the business relationship with clients who are critical of foreign professionals.

Local business networks: The interviewed management of these firms consciously resist the exclusionary identities held in the region, either because of personal conviction, business rationale or a combination of both. These firms can apparently afford to refrain from being deeply embedded in local business networks because of their international and B2B-focused market orientation. They avoid cooperating with local firms known to hold xenophobic attitudes. In a few cases, the requirement to work solely with

partners who share one's own values is explicitly communicated internally, e.g., through formalized ethic guidelines for cooperative ventures. "We would never work for someone whom we knew was xenophobic. There is a clear precept" we were told by a manager of an e-commerce firm. Other managers of this firm type told us that they had broken off existing business relationships with firms that they considered to be xenophobic. Further, CEOs had turned down certain requests, even though they would have provided them with new business contacts and economic value for their firm. The manager of a ventilation technology firm, for example, saw himself prompted to decline an invitation of the right-wing populist party AfD to travel to Russia in 2020 for the purpose of lobbying since he cannot identify with the party's politics – thereby practically transferring "personal views to the strategy of the firm".

6.4.3 Opportunistic Firms

In addition to open and exclusionary firms, we also encountered another type of firm whose characteristics and practices are rather diffuse and that we refer to as opportunistic firms. This firm type is the one most-spread in the region. Managers of these firms seem to recognize the problematic dynamics of exclusionary political identities in the region, but are unable to resist them. In comparison to exclusionary and open firms, they are rather diverse in terms of size, economic sectors and employees' age, gender and qualification levels. They are all characterized by their strong embeddedness in the regional economic context, as they rely on the B2C market and pursue local recruitment strategies (Greenberg et al., 2018). The relationships between the workforce and management can be controversial or even characterized by opposition. In contrast to managers in open firms, managers of this type of firm do not typically enforce their open attitudes but yield to external influences.

Recruitment: Opportunistic firms also tend to ignore foreign applicants as the management typically seeks to avoid resistance from local customers. A care service manager made this clear: "Many clients say right away, 'And you don't need to send foreigners.' [...] Of course, I could say 'Come hell or high water, I don't care!' But it's not that simple. [...] It is our bread and butter [...] and if the rejection is too great, then it becomes difficult." If they are hired, foreigners do not usually receive permanent employment contracts, but work with less job security. In a few other cases, before employing foreigners in permanent positions, management explicitly announces this step to their workforce to avoid any resistance. There is even evidence that strong headwinds from the workforce have sometimes led to the dismissal of foreigners.

Managers of the opportunistic firms we surveyed are not as rigorous as managers of open firms in disallowing employees to transfer exclusionary identities into the organization – which is mainly due to the local labor market situation (André et al., 2020). An IT-specialist with mainly regional B2B-clientele, for example, referred to the change of internal power relations in the face of the current labor shortage. According to him, xenophobic employees, aware of their own irreplaceability, can put management under pressure: “This is extreme in some cases. [...] There are statements from employees: ‘If the boss hires someone who is a refugee or something like that, then we’ll leave.’ Such hard-hitting statements are the order of the day there.” This awareness of the employees has a great impact on the authority of the management and the practices of the firms: Greatly concerned about their firm’s future, some managers are willing to make major compromises, as the HR manager of a ceramics firm told us: “You cannot take tough action because you cannot find a replacement employee.” Since managers cannot afford to control the private sentiments of individual employees or discourses in small groups within the firm, spaces open up that allow exclusionary regional identities to enter corporate contexts, as was expressed in numerous interviews.

Customer relations: Local customers’ exclusionary attitudes seem to massively affect the customer relations of opportunistic firms. Quite a few managers told us that many customers would express their disrespect about immigrants and do not want foreigners to provide them with the requested services. In some cases, foreign employees were dismissed because of customer rejections, as was illustrated by a bakery firm’s manager: “I can tell you an example, quite sad, my hairdresser had employed a Syrian woman who wears a headscarf, and he could not keep her since really so many people refused to visit his salon anymore.”

As rejections by B2C-customers can have major implications for corporate organizational processes, customers’ requirements are usually met, e.g., by delegating native German employees or explicitly announcing foreign employees in advance to avoid changes to plans, which might become necessary in case employees are not allowed in. The manager of a major bakery firm running several shops in Thuringia described how his customers’ regional ties were reflected not only in the product range (only traditional products are demanded in rural stores, while in the city of Jena, innovative and international products are also available) but also in exclusionary identities culminating in negative reactions towards foreign employees. Because of this, he deliberately does not employ foreign salespeople in the rural stores.

In some cases, employees with exclusionary attitudes can cause selective deployment: To avoid internal clashes managers of this type of firm sometimes deploy foreigners in separate teams grouped according to their origin, thus avoiding inclusion within the firm.

Local business networks: The way in which the management of the analyzed firms react to xenophobic business partners resembles the way in which they react to xenophobic employees. They do not resolutely oppose these groups' attitudes, because they, too, are indispensable for them given the demographic and economic challenges that characterize the region (Martin et al., 2018), as a garden center's manager admitted: "We also have business customers who openly act as Reichsbürger [extreme right-wing separatists]. But we do not take sides. We are happy if someone buys something from us." Another example of how opportunistic firms collaborate with xenophobic B2B-customers refers to an advertising agency whose manager mentioned that he takes orders from far-right parties even if they contradict his own personal views. The bottom line is that opportunistic firms apparently maintain relationships with business partners shaped by exclusionary identities, even though these are in strong contrast with their own attitudes. They participate in regional, partly exclusionary networks, but do not play a significant role in shaping them. Controversial topics like politics tend to be avoided, in order not to jeopardize sales. Overall, these firms adapt to existing exclusionary identities shared by many inhabitants in the region.

6.5 Conclusion

Using the example of East Thuringia, we analyzed how firms react to strong exclusionary political identities in their environment. In this context, by looking at the three dimensions of recruitment, customer relations, and local business networks, we were able to identify three types of firms, namely exclusionary, open, and opportunistic ones. While exclusionary firms rejected international employees completely, even if this meant facing disadvantages in the long run, open firms adopted a fairly open-minded attitude towards them. What particularly concerned us was the fact that the third type of firm, opportunistic firms, adapt exclusionary practices even though their managers are not against foreigners, as if they ignore their conscience. In our view, the reason for this lies in the specific regional conditions facing these firms. This is particularly true when it comes to the enormous demand for skilled workers, which gives the workforce a threat potential when it comes to filling vacant positions. By not accepting foreigners, the exclusionary and opportunistic firms that we analyzed not only defy the significant labor shortage, but also reject the great potential that can result from diversity in the workplace. This dynamic is reinforced by the fact that a lack of foreigners in the workplace prevents the local population from making experiences of difference, while at the same time strengthening exclusionary political identities and practices in the mid-term. In the long run, it could therefore be increasingly difficult to break this vicious circle.

Without question, East Thuringia is a region with numerous specific characteristics, some of which are rather extreme. Nevertheless, we are convinced that our results also apply to other contexts characterized by similar characteristics, socio-economic constellations and developments, especially rural areas undergoing transition processes. We are thinking primarily of other rural parts of eastern Germany (e.g., the states of Saxony and Brandenburg), which are characterized by similar structures and processes (e.g., out-migration, transition from a planned to a market economy and related challenges) but believe that the phenomena described extend far beyond that. For example, research has shown that xenophobia and right-wing populism are found in many rural regions in other European countries, such as Austria, France, Great Britain and Italy, to name a few (e.g., Blaschke and Ruiz Torres, 2002; Chakraborti and Garland, 2011), and the United States (Berlet and Sunshine, 2019). Hence, it can also be expected for these regions that such attitudes influence firms and their actions in similar ways as we have described in the case of Thuringia.

When detaching the results from the concrete context of Thuringia, it is important to note that we are dealing with different levels of social cohesion. Socio-economic practices on a micro level can constitute strong in-group dynamics that often take an exclusionary form towards outsiders. As a result, socio-economic fragmentation on a regional level can emerge. Opportunistic firms play an important role in this context. According to our findings, their positioning depends to a large extent on their immediate business environment. While it is likely that in urban areas, managers who wish to adapt open attitudes and practices can do so successfully, our findings suggest that in rural regions characterized by outmigration and labor-shortage, these firms are likely to adapt exclusionary practices. Especially when this occurs in aggregate, there is a great risk that opportunistic and exclusionary firms will give the region a certain image which further contributes to foreign professionals refraining from moving there. The general argument that we would like to make here is that the effects described (if everything else is equal) for several reasons can lead to a stabilization of regional inequalities or, in the worst case, even reinforce them:

First, in view of exhausting labor market potentials, firms may be facing considerable labor market bottlenecks, which could theoretically be alleviated by bringing in skilled foreign workers. As such, it might be difficult for them to maintain their production potential. Moreover, the practices in exclusionary and opportunistic firms could give the region an image that prevents foreign workers from applying. As a result, even open firms that do not harbor any resentments might face increasing difficulties in hiring qualified personnel. Further, since international skilled workers bring new knowledge and different ideas to a region in many cases (Hunt and Gauthier-Loiselle 2010; Jahn and Steinhardt, 2016), keeping them away could also imply foregoing innovation

potential. All in all, this can contribute to widening the gap with those regions that succeed in attracting talent on a global scale through a wide range of tools and resources – regardless of where they come from (Michaels et al., 2001; Sarraille et al., 2020).

Second, relevant contacts and demand from local firms may be lost because established and potential customers and business partners from outside the region may feel compelled to distance themselves from doing business with exclusionary or even with opportunistic firms (Sen et al., 2001; Harrison et al., 2005), which can have detrimental effects on local employment and income in the long term.

Third, regions facing these challenges might become more attractive to those wanting to further exacerbate existing problems, while open-minded people and investors could become deterred and existing businesses may feel compelled to relocate (cf. Bussmann and Werle, 2004). As a result, it might become even less attractive to potential employees.

Finally, potential investors, probably already deterred by the skilled labor situation, might also stay away to avoid being associated with xenophobic practices. Such a situation seems likely to further complicate future regional development, even more so as it is the less developed regions that show high levels of discontent, typically reflected in exclusionary identities.

In fact, we do not consider it improbable that the developments associated with them may contribute to deteriorating a region's overall development prospects in the long run.

At the same time, however, we also see clear scope for regional policy: In the long run, we can imagine that appropriate educational campaigns among the local population coupled with efforts to establish a welcoming culture may be promising. In the short term, we believe it makes sense to implement measures aiming at the managers of local firms that highlight the positive effects of integrating foreign workers, for example, by making relevant corporate role models known to other firms (Blackburn and Ram, 2006). Although we consider these measures to be very urgent in order to prevent further regional polarization in good time, we are under no illusion. These measures will not be met with a great deal of resistance and cost a lot of time. In particular, we consider measures aimed at opportunistic firms to be most effective, while instruments aimed at exclusionary firms due to the consolidated identities of their managements and workforce will probably not be successful.

As we assume that we have identified types of firms that are of universal importance, especially in rural areas where societal cohesion is at risk of eroding, we consider it essential to further analyze the relevance of political identities and their influence on firms. It seems of particular interest to us to verify whether similar types of firms described can be found in other regional contexts as well. Behind this is the question of

whether opportunistic firms are a phenomenon found only in rural-peripheral areas. Finally, future studies could be devoted to quantifying the types of firms – at best across several regions, in order to be able to make appropriate comparisons. Overall, we feel that it is important to pay more attention to the processes described in this paper to prevent social and regional inequalities from further increasing.

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7 Conclusion

7.1 Reflection

Reference is made to the extensive methodological considerations in Chapter 3, particularly Chapters 3.2 and 3.4.2.2, which provide detailed, context-related reflections. The extraordinary circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting practical research challenges required careful deliberation on the appropriate approach. The implementation strategies developed – primarily for data collection – needed to remain flexible due to frequent legal changes regarding direct personal contact during data collection. At the same time, maintaining the quality criteria for sound scientific work remained a central goal, despite the necessary flexibility.

Thanks to intensive communication with the interviewees, most interviews were ultimately conducted in the preferred face-to-face setting. Although only a relatively small number of interviews had to be conducted using online tools like Zoom, the varying reactions of participants and the need to uphold indispensable quality standards throughout the research process led to a systematic analysis of interviewees' digital accessibility and literacy (see Chapter 4).

7.2 Findings regarding the research objective

With reference to the research questions outlined in Chapter 1.2, the following section presents the relevant findings. This study focuses on the overarching question of how right-wing populist and, in particular, xenophobic attitudes among the population of left-behind places influence the economic development and future prospects of the corresponding regions. Closely connected to this is the issue of regional competitiveness within the broader economic-geographical debate on regional inequalities and related discussions, such as those in regional marketing.

To address the overarching research question, the following sub-questions are examined:

1. How does regionally driven discontent among the population emerge in connection with right-wing populist tendencies, and how is this development linked to the concept of left-behind places?
2. What impact does the spread and consolidation of collective embitterment or discontent have on corporate practices in the region? Furthermore, what are the consequences of these practices for the region's perception as a business location?

Ad 1: The model developed in Chapter 5 demonstrates that the genesis of collective embitterment or discontent in left-behind places, occurring over time, is triggered by the

political governance of a trigger event perceived negative. This main trigger event is often of an economic nature – for example, the closure of a regionally significant industrial plant – or is closely related to economic implications for the local population. In this case, German reunification represents the triggering event. Despite the uniqueness of this event, the model allows the key findings of the study to be applied to other spatial contexts. Over time, the development of various emotions and their regional distribution, in both private and professional environments, is accompanied by a solidification of collective embitterment as an expression of regional discontent.

Ad 2: The analysis presented in Chapter 6 shows that this embitterment, arising from the overlap of professional and private roles, relationships, and practices commonly found in rural, left-behind places, significantly impacts three central areas of corporate governance: first, personnel recruitment and management; second, customer relationships and order processing; and third, business partners and corporate networks. Based on these practices, three types of firms can be systematically distinguished: open, opportunistic, and exclusionary.

Ad 1 & 2: Combining these findings to answer the overarching research question, the following can be stated: The effects of the genesis of collective regional resentment and discontent, described in Chapters 5.3 and 5.5.4 – particularly the desire for resistance against those allegedly responsible in politics, fueled by insecurity, disappointment, and mistrust – serve as a significant driver of the discriminatory and exclusionary corporate practices identified in the East Thuringia region in Chapter 6. The emotional lock-in effect introduced in Chapters 5.3 and 5.5.4 causes the affected actors to alter their everyday professional practices, retreating into familiar, supposedly reliable regional or local contexts. This is accompanied by a rejection of all potential external influences, as detailed in Chapters 6.4.1 and 6.4.3. What is crucial for the regional economic implications is that even actors whose attitudes do not align with the embittered, exclusionary ones become part of the exclusionary system against their will, as they are unable to disengage from the relationship and network dynamics due to their nature and orientation. This will further polarize the region, with open firms on one side and exclusionary and opportunistic firms on the other.

Furthermore, it can be assumed that the social and entrepreneurial dynamics described in Chapter 6, which result in more or less exclusive and thus closed networks, create an ideal breeding ground for the emotional developments described in Chapter 5. These dynamics prevent people from encountering differences, narrow the horizons of local residents, and thus lead to narratives that may not align with reality becoming more entrenched. Certain events, even relatively normal ones, can be over-interpreted in this environment and thus act as intensifying trigger events that further reinforce the manifestation of collective embitterment. The resulting collective emotions, in turn,

favor the formation of precisely these closed networks. A dynamic develops, or, in the worst case, a state that is very difficult or impossible to break.

7.3 Discussion of the findings

Right-wing populist and related attitudes in the corporate context, and their potentially negative effects on the economy, are currently an intensively debated topic (Bergmann & Diermeier, 2024; Diermeier et al., 2025). Various scientific disciplines are exploring the links between right-wing populist attitudes and economic development. A common challenge is the existence of a vicious circle that complicates the identification of factors impacting the regional level and the underlying causalities: When an economically weak region also exhibits populist tendencies among parts of the population, it becomes difficult to determine which of these phenomena should be considered a cause and which a consequence.

In most cases, the argument is put forward that adverse economic development in a region leads – e.g. due to frustrations and the feeling of being left behind – to the strengthening of negative attributions and devaluations towards others, supposedly even weaker ones (Meyer et al., 2016), which may also imply favoring or agreeing with right-wing populist theses. Following this interpretation, it can be argued that the regional environment shapes both individual and collective emotions, which in turn influence attitudes and practices within the region. This work confirms this: Attitudes are transmitted from the regional social environment to local firms through various channels, strongly shaped by the local and regional context, and are reflected in practices – varying in intensity and impact depending on the type of firm (see Chapter 6.4). At the same time, this thesis demonstrates that, conversely, attitudes and practices also shape the regional environment, creating a self-reinforcing vicious circle. In this context, the chronification of collective regional embitterment identified in this study is particularly significant, as it results in a nearly irreversible lock-in effect that hinders organic change towards greater openness and presents a significant barrier to political interventions aimed at countering such trends. Such interventions are widely considered necessary to counter regional tendencies towards social withdrawal and exclusion, and to maintain or restore the competitiveness and prosperity of regions. Given that regions are increasingly competing with one another – especially for skilled workers and private investment (Terlouw, 2012) – this challenge is becoming more difficult to address. In this context, particular importance should be attached to the region's externally perceived image as a business location and as a place to live and work.

Anholt (2010) maintains that a firm's image is particularly important for its international reputation and thus also for its business relationships and development prospects. This

image is significantly influenced by the “place reputation” (Anholt, 2013, p. 3) of the region in which the firm is based (Anholt, 2007). Franz et al. support this assumption and substantiate it in the context of acquisitions, which involves similar image effects, with a view to exclusionary practices in firms: “actors within firms (as managers, workers, unions etc.) construct socio-cultural differences that can affect corporate success and existence” (Franz et al., 2018, p. 108). This success – or failure – can impact the region's perception as a business location and thus decisively influence its development (Krieger, 2024).

Reports from German-speaking countries suggest that this also applies to regional or national business relationships (Wille, 2018) and to the recruitment of workers in various sectors (MDR online, 2024). Thus, corporate practices are perceived at different levels and may be sanctioned if they do not correspond to one's own attitudes and guidelines. These sanctions, cumulatively interpreted as stigmatization, can have a strong impact on the identity of local people (Bretschneider, 2024; Bürk, 2013; Nayak, 2019) and favor populist tendencies, right-wing extremist attitudes, radicalization (Kurtenbach et al., 2024) and the electoral success of right-wing parties (Bürk et al., 2012; Weck & Beißwenger, 2014) – a vicious circle can arise.

However, these dynamics do not only apply to individual firms, but can affect entire regions. The existing labor and skills shortages are intensified because potential new workers become aware of right-wing populist and xenophobic regional tendencies through media coverage – e.g., of right-wing populist demonstrations – and/or exchanges within migrant communities, which are often extremely well connected (Brox & Krieger, 2021a, 2021b; Scott, 2013). The corporate practices described in this thesis and their effects on regional dynamics can reinforce this externally perceptible image (Busse, 2024). In contrast to controlled measures and processes to improve a place's image (Görmar, 2024), this creeping image damage is not intentional, but it is nonetheless perceptible from the outside and can have adverse effects for the region, e.g., with regard to the migration behavior of urgently needed workers (Buch & Rossen, 2024). In summary, it can be said that a vicious circle is at risk of developing, which unfolds as follows: Individuals and groups in left-behind areas feel neglected and, in turn, develop exclusionary attitudes that are reflected in both private and professional practices. The external perception of these attitudes and practices leads to negative repercussions for the region, manifested through reactions from outside, such as sanctions. This, in turn, validates the feeling of being left behind, further reinforcing the attitudes based on this perception. In the worst-case scenario, a perceived sense of being left behind may ultimately lead to an actual state of being left behind.

At this point, a parallel can be drawn to more general debates on population development and decline in rural areas. Sedlacek et al. (2009, p. 180) emphasize the following

with regard to an ageing society in rural areas: “A negative circular-cumulative process arises that leads to further losses of population, jobs, utilities, infrastructure, etc. and significantly limits the region's ability to act. Therefore, breaking this vicious circle is one of the most important challenges for many peripheral rural areas” (translated from German).

7.4 Prospects and recommendations

If economic geography is tasked with explicitly addressing the future of regions (Gong, 2024), i.e. their development, it also has a responsibility to provide recommendations for policymakers and other relevant stakeholders based on its analyses. This responsibility will be addressed here, building on the discussions in Chapters 5.6 and 6.5.

“Nor have studies fully engaged with the 'development' problems of such 'left behind places' and the aspirations and needs of their residents. Such engagement is a necessary pre-requisite for the formulation of any place-based policies for regional recovery that seek to harness their overlooked economic potential.” (MacKinnon et al., 2021, p. 2)

It is fundamentally necessary to include micro-level dynamics, including those of an (inter-)personal nature, regional political cultures (Reiser et al., 2023) and identities in governing and planning processes in order to reduce the feeling of being left behind (McKay, 2019) to enable full exploitation of the economic potential of regions (Mießner et al., 2024). However, not only the opportunities should be considered and carefully analyzed, as has been the predominant practice in regional marketing, e.g. in the tourism sector, to date (Gertner & Kotler, 2004), but also the risks. As this thesis demonstrates, exclusionary regional political identities pose a significant development risk. Regionally widespread narratives, some of which are quite localized, that affirm or arise from such identities should be integrated into regional development strategies and initiatives to mitigate the risk of negative outcomes (Roessler, 2024).

To capture such attitudes in regions, monitoring is crucial. The phase model presented in this work provides a useful starting point, as it enables the early identification of emerging regional collective embitterment, allowing for timely intervention – ideally before the resentment solidifies or becomes chronic.

The concrete strategies to be developed on this basis can include selective measures clearly focused on firms – such as the iWork Business Award from Jena, which honors positive integration stories in firms to present positive examples of successful integration (jenawirtschaft.de, 2024) – as well as the establishment of long-term initiatives such as *Weltoffenes Thüringen [Open-minded Thuringia]* (thueringen-weltoffen.de,

2025) and *Wirtschaft für ein Weltoffenes Sachsen e. V. [Economy for an open-minded Saxony]* (welcomesaxony.de, 2024). In summary, these measures should, to some extent, contain counter-narratives that promote positive feelings of identity (Butzin & Flögel, 2022; Butzin & Terstriep, 2023; Görmar, 2024). An interlocking with approaches for the successful integration of immigrants (e.g. Svynarets et al., 2023) at the interface of research and practice can also result in helpful synergies at this point. Effective communication with carefully chosen phrasing is necessary to restore the much-needed equal footing with influential local actors. The research presented here has shown that this requires ‘unburdened’ local gatekeepers with a good reputation, as regional embitterment has often advanced to such an extent that even initial contact from implicated actors perceived as part of the supposed elite is no longer seen as neutral, thus blocking further steps. Political measures should address two levels: First, the general regional population should be engaged to prevent the spread of exclusionary attitudes to regional firms. Second, opportunistic firms – which have the potential to develop in either an open or exclusionary direction – should be supported in adopting a more progressive stance by strengthening their management. Since regional firms represent a kind of “meso-level between individuals and society as a whole”¹⁴ in the reproduction of attitudes and practices, they act – whether intentionally or not – as multipliers. In the interest of social cohesion, policymakers should therefore empower opportunistic firm managers to serve as positive role models and multipliers. Ideally, these are individuals who, through their involvement in regional social networks, associations, and similar groups, already possess wide networks, a good reputation, and credibility. This approach provides support and guidance for those who remain undecided while simultaneously increasing pressure on exclusionary firms to reconsider and adapt their attitudes and practices through the gradual intercultural opening of regional networks. For this purpose, neutral settings, rather than orchestrated ones, seem to be essential, as the latter could be perceived as ideologically controlled. Local associations could serve as a practical starting point in this regard. These approaches can certainly be seen as components of a bottom-up strategy (Martin et al., 2022), but nonetheless require a competence-driven integrated strategy that aims at place-specific solutions, taking into account regional collective emotions and the resulting relationships, networks and practices.

At the methodological level, this requirement also implies the necessity for research to collect micro-level data and to analyze it with explicit consideration of regional specifics in order to develop context-adapted strategies (Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2024). This data

¹⁴ Matthias Quent at the OptoNet workshop “*Doch nicht bei uns?! – Rechtspopulismus am Arbeitsplatz*” [“*But not with us?! Right-wing populism at the workplace*”] on September 8, 2021.

explicitly includes data on emotions and attitudes, especially in their collective expression. In order to reliably collect this qualitative data, it is essential to take all relevant stakeholders into account. Since this sometimes requires the use of online-based settings, well-founded considerations must be made regarding the digital accessibility and literacy of the interviewees (see Chapter 4). The overall objective is an integrated, multidisciplinary approach that incorporates different perspectives and methods (Curti et al., 2011; Wilson, 2024) in order to analyze developments and trends as holistically as possible and to improve forecasts so that more comprehensive data can be generated for the governance of regional development (Benner et al., 2024; Leyshon, 2021). Further research should deepen the understanding of the relationships between collective regional emotions, identities, and their effects on corporate practices introduced in this thesis. Studies on regional narratives, as drivers of social and economic relationships, networks, and practices, would be valuable. Combining insights from disciplines such as the sociology of work, organizational psychology, and business communication into interdisciplinary approaches would be beneficial.

Future studies should also test the phase model in other regional contexts. Comparative studies examining the determinants of each phase's duration, especially regarding regional resilience and key trigger events, would be useful. Additionally, analyzing phase transitions in more detail would be valuable. Interdisciplinary analyses involving economics, economic geography, sociology, and psychology would be promising.

Regarding the typification of firms and its implications, it is of particular interest to verify whether similar types of firms can be found in other regional contexts, specifically questioning whether opportunistic firms are a phenomenon limited to rural or left-behind places. Future studies could focus on quantifying these types of firms, ideally across multiple regions, to enable meaningful comparisons that complement the findings presented here. Overall, more attention should be given to the processes described in this work by researchers and practitioners to address collective embitterment early, as history has shown its potential for significant harm at both the individual and societal levels, and to prevent further increases in social polarization and regional inequalities.

8 General summary

In the rural regions of East Thuringia, there is widespread support for right-wing populist and xenophobic theories, along with massive protests against politicians and other so-called elites. This dissertation uses East Thuringia as a case study to examine how related regional collective emotions arise over time and how they affect corporate practices and ultimately the economic development of the region. The data collection phase was heavily influenced by COVID-19-related restrictions, which, with regard to managing field access and ensuring data collection integrity, resulted in complex methodological challenges and questions. These were systematically addressed in parallel with the two research questions mentioned above and developed into methodological recommendations.

In the case of an online setting, which due to contact bans was temporarily the only viable option, the selection and acquisition of respondents, as well as communication with them, needed to be adapted to the personal characteristics of the potential respondents in order to ensure both transparency and the overall quality of the research. Given the digital divide in terms of online access, the use of online tools, and the corresponding literacy, four types of respondents were identified: digital outcasts, illiterates, skeptics, and natives. The recommendations derived from this classification can help researchers – e. g. with regard to the collection of emotions in the context of left-behind places – to avoid distortion effects in data collection using conversation-based methods.

One reason for the rise of right-wing populist tendencies and the resulting social polarization is seen in the discontent of the population, which brings collective, regionally shaped emotions into the focus of the investigation. Affects and emotions are often mentioned in the left-behind places debate as shaping developmental dynamics but have not yet been systematically investigated in this context. However, this is necessary in order to expand the existing work to include this important factor, because studies show that regional discontent – the subject of the geographies of discontent debate – not only depends on measurable factors: Even regions that are doing comparatively well in objective terms can exhibit a high level of discontent. In the present work, the case study of East Thuringia is used to explore the emotions in the region and their consequences for regional firms and competitiveness.

Based on the psychological concept of Posttraumatic Embitterment Disorder (PTED), the model developed in this context makes it possible to understand the development of embitterment as an expression of regional collective discontent. It comprises four phases: 1. the pre-embitterment phase, 2. the manifestation phase beginning with a main trigger event, 3. the consolidation phase, and 4. the chronification phase.

The model was tested in East Thuringia and was verified through qualitative data analysis: 76 interviews were conducted with managing directors (65) and experts from the business environment (11). Questions focused on the firm's own and assumed external perception of the region, political identity, and corporate practices. In addition, data from other studies were consulted to verify the results of the primary data.

Many interviewees described similar perceptions in retrospect:

1. Before reunification, there were also reasons for discontent and embitterment, but life was generally more predictable and felt more controllable. As a result, the emotional situation of most interviewees was comparatively stable.
2. Reunification meant a massive and sudden change for most people and represents the main trigger event. The manifestation phase lasted from 1990 to around 2000 and was characterized by insecurity as the predominant emotion. During this phase, emotions were almost exclusively communicated within the closest circle of family and friends.
3. The subsequent phase of consolidation lasted from the early 2000s until around 2013. Feelings of disadvantage, disappointment, and mistrust were added to the existing emotions. These emotions were no longer discussed exclusively within the closest circle but also in the wider environment, such as at work and in public. This significantly contributed to the development of a collective expression of embitterment.
4. The chronification phase began around 2013, the year the AfD was founded in Thuringia, and continues to this day. During this phase, regional emotions have taken on more extreme forms: Helplessness, frustration, rejection of elites, and a desire for resistance have emerged from the insecurity and frustration of the previous phases. Regional discourses characterized by embitterment have become denser, more expressive, and more powerful. Right-wing populist actors recognize these emotions and the underlying contexts and exploit them for their own political agenda. They reinforce regional emotions through targeted influence and use them strategically to achieve their goals. This has led to a chronic state of resentment in the region, which carries the risk of an emotional lock-in effect, making it extremely difficult or, in extreme cases, impossible to reverse these developments.

The present work also examined how the collective regional emotions that arise in this way affect corporate practices in the region. A key finding is that exclusionary corporate practices take place in three fields: recruitment, customer relations, and local business networks. The nature, prevalence, and intensity of these practices, as well as the role

of firm management, were systematically analyzed. The result is a firm typology that distinguishes between three types of regional firms: exclusionary, open, and opportunistic.

Exclusionary firms are mostly small, rural businesses with a regional focus on private customers, often in the craft sector. These firms can exert a great deal of influence on debates and opinions in their region because they often hold high social status and communicate in a dominant way. The cohesion of the predominantly male workforce is very pronounced, and there are usually no or very few migrants employed in these firms. The firm managers interviewed see themselves as Thuringians with strong roots in the region, are skeptical of new influences – especially from outside – and express reservations and hostility toward minorities and so-called elites from politics and science, whom they accuse of endangering their own identity and that of the region. According to a manager at a regional employment agency, these attitudes are not isolated cases but an everyday phenomenon. In these firms, applicants with non-German-sounding names are usually ignored, especially male applicants. New colleagues are primarily recruited through private networks or word of mouth to better assess their attitudes and ensure alignment within the firm. Almost all of the management in this type of firm report that their customers have strong reservations about migrants and that there is broad consensus on this issue. These management also refuse to accept migrants as representatives of other firms, for example, during negotiations.

However, these firms maintain close contacts with one another, based on shared values. The overlap of private and professional relationships is common practice, resulting in closed networks with a strong regional character, which these firms seek to maintain and keep free from external influences.

Open firms are usually medium-sized, B2C-oriented, and focused on supra-regional, national, or international markets. Many are located in cities, with only a few in rural East Thuringia. The attitude of management and employees toward minorities is positive, and the workforce is often composed of a correspondingly heterogeneous group of people. The management of this type of firm has already had good experiences with migrant workers in many respects and aims to further embrace internationalization in the future, even though this is often challenging due to the exclusionary regional environment. Many of these firms adopt a code of conduct to implement their intended CSR in a transparent and binding manner. The main goal is to avoid employing anyone who could transfer exclusionary attitudes and practices into the organization. Discriminatory behavior is severely sanctioned in this type of firm. Due to their supra-regional B2B market orientation, local ties – and thus the influence of regional customers and business partners – are rather limited. In cases of exclusionary behavior, direct contact is sought first, and if necessary, the business relationship is terminated. These firms can

afford not to be integrated into regional networks and avoid working with exclusionary firms.

Opportunistic firms cannot be categorized as either exclusionary or open. This type of firm is the most prevalent in the region and is highly heterogeneous in terms of size, industry, and employee characteristics – such as age, gender, and level of qualification. The management of these firms recognizes the emotional dynamics in the region and their possible negative implications for their own business and the regional economy. However, due to their strong regional roots and resulting economic dependence, they do not see themselves in a position to counteract these forces. Migrant workers are employed reluctantly and often only on a temporary basis in opportunistic firms to avoid resistance from regional customers and/or business partners, which would require additional effort to manage. Due to significant regional labor and skill shortages, the workforce exerts considerable influence over management. As a result, management is compelled to strike a balance between internal and external constraints and their personal attitudes. Exclusionary attitudes among regional customers have a massive impact on these firms, leading them to tolerate these views in order to maintain business relationships. In some cases, migrant employees have been dismissed without cause following complaints from customers. Migrants are often not employed in rural branches and tend to work in the background, sometimes even in separate teams formed according to ethnic affiliation. The management of opportunistic firms also accepts exclusionary business partners – such as Reichsbürger or right-wing extremist parties – to ensure profitability and economic survival. They participate in regional, sometimes exclusionary networks, but do not play a significant role in shaping them. Overall, these firms adapt to regional exclusionary identities.

In summary, the clear indications of the chronicization of embitterment in the region are particularly striking. So is the fact that this is reflected in exclusionary corporate practices. The fact that opportunistic firms bow to the high social and economic pressure from their workforce, customers, and business partners leads to further entrenchment of these dynamics. The region as a whole becomes more attractive to exclusionary actors. At the same time, these intensifying dynamics are making the region less attractive to inclusive actors. It could, therefore, become increasingly difficult to break this vicious circle of polarization. The consequences can be significant and affect all firms. In addition to internal firm effects, such as productivity losses due to differing attitudes in the workforce (Daniel Kindermann at the JTalks in Economic Geography on 04.05.2021), more far-reaching effects are also to be feared. Scientists and economists agree that the dynamics described can have a negative impact on the economic development of the region. If a region is perceived externally as comparatively xenophobic, for example, it loses its attractiveness for workers (especially highly qualified ones),

business partners from outside, and investors. Overall, the region's competitiveness can be affected, and effects on global value chains cannot be ruled out (M. Storper in Session Nature, Causes, and Consequences of Inter-Regional Inequality, AAG-Meeting 2021).

Political measures can play a key role in shaping public attitudes toward immigration (Bauer et al., 2000) and should focus on two levels: first, engaging the general population to prevent exclusionary views from spreading to regional firms; second, supporting opportunistic firms in adopting more progressive positions by strengthening their leadership. As regional firms act as intermediaries between individuals and society, they often amplify social attitudes and practices, whether intentionally or not. To foster social cohesion, it is crucial to empower firm managers who can serve as credible, well-connected role models. These individuals, already active in regional networks and associations, can help guide those who remain undecided and increase pressure on exclusionary firms to reassess and adjust their practices through the gradual intercultural opening of regional networks.

The development of collective regional emotions should always be considered: It is important to understand the emotions in the region well in order to react to them appropriately. Our model can serve as a kind of early warning system to recognize negative developments in time. The further it progresses, the more difficult it becomes to counteract, as regional collective embitterment can become chronic and develop into an emotional lock-in.

9 Gesamtzusammenfassung

In den ländlichen Regionen Ostthüringens gibt es vielerorts starke Zustimmung zu rechtspopulistischen und fremdenfeindlichen Thesen und massive Proteste gegen PolitikerInnen und andere so genannte Eliten. In der vorliegenden Dissertation wird anhand dieser Fallstudie untersucht, wie damit in Zusammenhang stehende regionale kollektive Emotionen über den Zeitverlauf entstehen und wie sie sich auf Unternehmenspraktiken und damit letztlich auf die wirtschaftliche Entwicklung der Region auswirken.

Die Erhebungsphase war stark von COVID19-bedingten Einschränkungen geprägt, woraus sich mit Blick auf eine integrale Bewerkerstellung des Feldzugangs und der Datenerhebung vielschichtige methodische Herausforderungen und Fragestellungen ergaben. Diese wurden parallel zu den beiden oben genannten Forschungsfragen systematisch bearbeitet und zu methodischen Empfehlungen weiterentwickelt. Selektion und Akquise von Beforschten sowie Kommunikation mit denselben muss im Falle eines avisierten online-Settings, das aufgrund der Kontaktverbote zeitweise alternativlos war, an die persönlichen Eigenschaften der potentiell Beforschten angepasst werden, um sowohl Transparenz als auch Güte der Forschung insgesamt zu gewährleisten. Es werden vor dem konzeptionellen Hintergrund des digital divide mit Blick auf Online-Zugang und Umgang mit online-Tools bzw. der entsprechenden Literacy vier Typen von Beforschten identifiziert: Ausgeschlossene, Analphabeten, Skeptiker und Natives. Die abgeleiteten Empfehlungen können Forschenden – insbesondere mit Blick auf die Erhebung von Emotionen, auch im Kontext von Left-behind Places – helfen, Verzerrungseffekte in der Datenerhebung anhand konversationsbasierter Erhebungsmethoden zu vermeiden. Einen Grund für das Erstarken rechtspopulistischer Tendenzen und daraus resultierenden gesellschaftlichen Polarisierungstendenzen wird in der für die vorliegende Arbeit zentralen Debatte um Left-behind Places in der Unzufriedenheit der Bevölkerung gesehen, womit kollektive, regional geprägte Emotionen in den Fokus der Untersuchung rücken.

Affekte und Emotionen werden in der Left-behind Places-Debatte zwar häufig als prägend für die Ausprägung von Entwicklungsdynamiken genannt, sind aber in diesem Kontext bisher nicht systematisch untersucht worden. Dies ist allerdings erforderlich, um die bestehenden Arbeiten um diesen wichtigen Faktor zu erweitern, denn Studien belegen, dass regionale Unzufriedenheit – Gegenstand der Geographies of discontent-Debatte – nicht nur von messbaren Faktoren abhängt: Auch Regionen, denen es objektiv vergleichsweise gut geht, können ein hohes Maß an Unzufriedenheit aufweisen. In der vorliegenden Arbeit wird anhand der Fallstudie Ostthüringens den Emotionen in Ostthüringens und ihren Folgen für regionale Unternehmen und die Wettbewerbsfähigkeit auf den Grund gegangen.

Angelehnt an das psychologische Konzept der Posttraumatischen Verbitterungsstörung (PTED) ermöglicht das in diesem Zuge entwickelte Modell, die Entstehung von Verbitterung als Ausdruck regionaler kollektiver Unzufriedenheit zu verstehen. Es umfasst vier Phasen: 1. die Vorverbitterungsphase, 2. die mit einem Main Trigger Event beginnende Manifestierungsphase, 3. die Verfestigungsphase und 4. die Chronifizierungsphase. Das Modell wurde in Ostthüringen getestet und konnte durch qualitative Datenanalysen verifiziert werden: 76 Interviews wurden geführt, mit Geschäftsführenden (65) und ExpertInnen aus dem Unternehmensumfeld (11). Es wurden u. a. Fragen zur eigenen und vermuteten externen Wahrnehmung der Region, zur politischen Identität und zu Unternehmenspraktiken gestellt. Ergänzend wurden Daten aus anderen Studien hinzugezogen, um die Ergebnisse der Primärdaten zu überprüfen.

Viele Interviewte schildern rückblickend ähnliche Wahrnehmungen:

1. Vor der Wiedervereinigung gab es zwar auch Gründe für Unzufriedenheit und Verbitterung, allerdings war das Leben insgesamt stärker von Vorhersehbarkeit geprägt und wurde als kontrollierbar empfunden. Die emotionale Situation der meisten Befragten war demzufolge vergleichsweise stabil.
2. Die Wiedervereinigung bedeutete eine massive und plötzliche Veränderung für die meisten Menschen und stellt das Main Trigger Event dar. Ergo war die Manifestierungsphase von 1990 bis ca. 2000 von Unsicherheit als vorherrschender Emotion geprägt. In dieser Phase wurden Emotionen fast ausnahmslos im engsten Vertrauten- und Familienkreis kommuniziert.
3. Die daran Anfang der 2000er Jahre anschließende Phase der Verfestigung dauerte bis etwa 2013 an. Nun kamen zu den bestehenden Emotionen Gefühle von Benachteiligung, Enttäuschung und Misstrauen hinzu. Diese wurden nun nicht mehr ausschließlich im engsten Kreis, sondern auch im weiteren Umfeld thematisiert, z. B. am Arbeitsplatz und in der Öffentlichkeit, wodurch die Entwicklung hin zu einer kollektiven Ausprägung der Verbitterung maßgeblich begünstigt wurde.
4. Die Chronifizierungsphase begann etwa im Jahr 2013, dem Gründungsjahr der AfD in Thüringen, und dauert bis heute an. Die regionalen Emotionen nehmen in dieser Phase extremere Formen an: Hilflosigkeit, Frustration, die Ablehnung von Eliten und der Wunsch nach Widerstand resultieren aus der Unsicherheit und Frustration der vorausgegangenen Phasen. Regionale, von Verbitterung geprägte Diskurse werden in dieser Phase dichter, expressiver und wirkmächtiger. Rechtspopulistische Akteure erkennen diese Emotionen sowie die zugrundeliegenden Zusammenhänge und instrumentalisieren diese für ihre eigene politische Agenda. Sie verstärken über gezielte Einflussnahme die regionalen Emotionen und nutzen sie strategisch für ihre

Ziele. Dies führt zu einer Chronifizierung der Verbitterung in der Region, die die Gefahr eines emotionalen Lock-in-Effekts birgt, der eine Umkehr dieser Entwicklungen extrem erschwert oder in extremen Fällen gar verunmöglicht.

Untersucht wurde in vorliegender Arbeit zudem, wie sich die auf diese Weise entstandenen kollektiven regionalen Emotionen auf die Unternehmenspraktiken in der Region auswirken. Ein zentrales Ergebnis ist, dass ausgrenzende Unternehmenspraktiken in drei Bereichen stattfinden: Rekrutierung, Kundenbeziehungen und lokale Geschäftsnetzwerke. Art, Verbreitung und Intensität dieser Praktiken sowie die Rolle der Unternehmensleitungen wurden systematisch analysiert. Im Ergebnis steht eine Unternehmenstypologie, anhand derer sich regionale Unternehmen in drei Typen unterscheiden lassen: exkludierende, offene und opportunistische.

Exkludierende Unternehmen sind meist kleine, ländlich gelegene Unternehmen mit regionaler Privatkunden-Ausrichtung. Häufig handelt es sich um Handwerksbetriebe. Sie können großen Einfluss auf Debatten und Meinungen in ihrer Region nehmen, da sie häufig einen hohen sozialen Status innehaben und zudem sehr dominant auftreten und kommunizieren. Der Zusammenhalt der überwiegend männlichen Belegschaft ist sehr ausgeprägt, es arbeiten üblicherweise keine oder nur sehr wenige MigrantInnen in diesen Unternehmen. Die befragten Firmenleitungen betrachten sich selbst als stark in der Region verwurzelte Thüringer, sind skeptisch gegenüber neuen – insbesondere externen – Einflüssen und äußern Vorbehalte und Feindseligkeiten gegenüber Minderheiten (und so genannten Eliten aus Politik und Wissenschaft), denen sie vorwerfen, ihre eigene Identität und die der Region zu gefährden. Laut einem Manager einer regionalen Arbeitsvermittlung handelt es sich dabei nicht um Einzelfälle, sondern um ein alltägliches Phänomen. In diesen Unternehmen werden BewerberInnen mit nicht-deutsch klingenden Namen üblicherweise ignoriert, insbesondere männliche. Neue KollegInnen werden primär über private Netzwerke bzw. Mund-zu-Mund-Propaganda gewonnen, um die Gesinnung besser einschätzen und unternehmensintern homogen auf Linie halten zu können. Fast alle Unternehmensleitungen dieses Typs geben an, dass es bei ihrer Kundschaft starke Vorbehalte gegenüber MigrantInnen gibt und dass darin weitgehend Einigkeit besteht. Diese Leitungen weigern sich außerdem, MigrantInnen als VertreterInnen anderer Unternehmen zu akzeptieren, beispielsweise bei Verhandlungsgesprächen. Sie halten untereinander hingegen enge Kontakte aufrecht, basierend auf gemeinsamen Werten. Überschneidungen von privaten und beruflichen Beziehungen sind gängige Praxis. So entstehen stark regionale geprägte geschlossene Netzwerke, welche die Unternehmen erhalten und von äußeren Einflüssen fernhalten wollen.

Offene Unternehmen sind in der Regel mittelgroß, geschäftskundenorientiert und konzentrieren sich auf überregionale, nationale oder internationale Märkte. Viele befinden sich in Städten, nur die wenigsten im ländlichen Ostthüringen. Die Einstellung von

Leitung und Mitarbeitenden gegenüber Minderheiten ist positiv und die Belegschaft häufig entsprechend heterogen zusammengesetzt. Die Geschäftsleitungen dieses Typs haben in vielerlei Hinsicht bereits gute Erfahrungen mit migrantischen Arbeitskräften gemacht und möchten sich zukünftig für weitere Internationalisierung öffnen, auch wenn das wegen des exkludierenden regionalen Umfeldes oft nicht einfach ist. Viele dieser Unternehmen geben sich selbst einen Verhaltenskodex, um die avisierte CSR transparent und verbindlich in die Praxis zu bringen. Maßgeblicher Anspruch ist es, niemanden einzustellen, der exkludierende Einstellungen und Praktiken in die Organisation transferieren könnte. Diskriminierendes Verhalten wird in diesem Unternehmenstyp streng sanktioniert. Aufgrund der überregionalen B2B-Marktorientierung sind die regionalen Verbindungen und Abhängigkeiten und damit der Einfluss regionaler Kundschaft und Geschäftspartner auf diese Unternehmen eher gering. Bei ausschließendem Verhalten wird zunächst der direkte Austausch gesucht und notfalls die Geschäftsbeziehung beendet.

Diese Unternehmen können es sich leisten, nicht in regionale Netzwerke eingebunden zu sein und meiden die Zusammenarbeit mit exkludierenden Unternehmen.

Opportunistische Unternehmen lassen sich weder den exkludierenden noch den offenen zuordnen. Dieser Unternehmenstyp ist in der Region am weitesten verbreitet und in Größe, Branche sowie Charakteristika der Mitarbeitenden – Alter, Geschlecht und Qualifikationsniveau etc. – sehr heterogen. Die Leitung dieser Unternehmen erkennt die emotionalen Dynamiken in der Region und deren mögliche negative Implikationen für das eigene Unternehmen sowie die regionale Wirtschaft, sieht sich aber aufgrund der starken Verankerung in der Region und der daraus resultierenden wirtschaftlichen Abhängigkeit nicht in der Lage, diesen entgegenzustehen. MigrantInnen werden in opportunistischen Unternehmen ungern und oft nur befristet eingestellt, um Widerstand von regionaler Kundschaft und/oder Geschäftspartnern, der mit erhöhtem Aufwand einherginge, zu vermeiden. Die Belegschaft hat aufgrund des regional sehr stark ausgeprägten Arbeits- und Fachkräftemangels großen Einfluss auf die Leitung. Entsprechend sieht sich die Leitung gezwungen, Kompromisse zwischen diesen internen und externen Zwängen und der persönlichen Einstellung einzugehen. Exkludierende Einstellungen regionaler Kundschaft beeinflussen diese Unternehmen stark. Sie tolerieren diese, um die Aufträge nicht zu verlieren. In einigen Fällen wurden migrantische Mitarbeitende aufgrund von Beschwerden seitens der Kundschaft anlasslos entlassen. MigrantInnen werden häufig nicht in ländlichen Filialen eingesetzt und müssen tendenziell im Hintergrund arbeiten, manchmal sogar in separaten, zum Teil nach ethnischen Zugehörigkeiten zusammengestellten Teams. Die Leitungen opportunistischer Unternehmen akzeptieren auch exkludierende Geschäftspartner (z. B. Reichsbürger oder rechtsextreme Parteien), um ihre Wirtschaftlichkeit und Existenz zu sichern. Sie nehmen an

regionalen, teilweise exkludierenden Netzwerken teil, partizipieren jedoch nicht maßgeblich an deren Gestaltung. Insgesamt passen sich diese Unternehmen den regionalen exkludierenden Identitäten an.

Zusammenfassend sind insbesondere die deutlichen Hinweise auf eine Chronifizierung von Verbitterung in der Region auffällig sowie die Tatsache, dass diese sich in exkludierenden Unternehmenspraktiken niederschlägt. Dass opportunistische Unternehmen sich dem hohen sozialen und wirtschaftlichen Druck von Belegschaft, Kundschaft und Geschäftspartnern beugen, führt zur weiteren Verfestigung dieser Dynamiken.

Die Region wird so insgesamt attraktiver für ausschließende Akteure. Zugleich führen diese sich verstärkenden Dynamiken dazu, dass die Region für offene Akteure unattraktiver wird. Es könnte daher zunehmend schwierig werden, diesen Teufelskreis der fortschreitenden Polarisierung zu durchbrechen. Die Folgen können erheblich sein und treffen alle Unternehmen. Neben unternehmensinternen Effekten, z. B. Produktivitätsverlusten wegen differierenden Einstellungen in der Belegschaft (Daniel Kinderman bei den JTalks in Economic Geography am 04.05.2021) sind auch weiter reichende Effekte zu befürchten: WissenschaftlerInnen und WirtschaftsexpertInnen sind sich einig, dass die geschilderten Dynamiken einen negativen Einfluss auf die wirtschaftliche Entwicklung der Region haben können. Wenn eine Region von außen z. B. als vergleichsweise fremdenfeindlich wahrgenommen wird, verliert sie an Attraktivität, für Arbeitskräfte (insbesondere hochqualifizierte), für Geschäftspartner von außerhalb und für Investoren.

Insgesamt kann die Wettbewerbsfähigkeit der Region beeinträchtigt und können Effekte auf globale Wertschöpfungsketten nicht ausgeschlossen werden (M. Storper in Session *Nature, causes and consequences of inter-regional inequality*, AAG-Meeting 2021).

Politische Maßnahmen können eine entscheidende Rolle dabei spielen, Einstellungen zur Migration zu beeinflussen (Bauer et al., 2000) und sollten auf zwei Ebenen ansetzen: Erstens sollte die allgemeine Bevölkerung angesprochen werden, um die Übertragung exkludierender Haltungen in regionale Unternehmen zu verhindern. Zweitens sollten opportunistische Unternehmen in ihrer häufig grundsätzlich progressiven Ausrichtung unterstützt werden, indem ihre Leitung gestärkt wird. Da regionale Unternehmen als Vermittler zwischen Individuen und der Gesellschaft fungieren, verstärken sie – ob beabsichtigt oder nicht – gesellschaftliche Einstellungen und Praktiken. Um den sozialen Zusammenhalt zu fördern und weitere Polarisierung zu verhindern, ist es daher wichtig, Unternehmensleitungen zu stärken, die sodann als glaubwürdige und gut vernetzte Vorbilder wirken können. Diese Personen, die oft ohnehin bereits in regionalen Netzwerken und Verbänden aktiv sind, können Orientierung für Unentschlossene bieten und erhöhen zugleich den Druck auf exkludierende Unternehmen, ihre Haltung und

Praktiken im Angesicht einer schrittweisen interkulturellen Öffnung der Region zu überdenken und anzupassen.

Dabei sollte die Entwicklung kollektiver regionaler Emotionen stets einbezogen werden: Es ist wichtig, die Emotionen in der Region genau zu kennen, um entsprechend darauf reagieren zu können. Das hier vorgestellte Phasenmodell kann als eine Art Frühwarnsystem helfen, eine negative Entwicklung rechtzeitig zu erkennen. Denn je weiter diese fortschreitet, umso schwieriger wird die Gegensteuerung, da die regionale kollektive Unzufriedenheit chronisch werden und sich zu einem emotionalen Lock-in entwickeln kann.

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a) Questionnaire CATI

WOM – Fragebogen CATI-Befragung von Thüringer Unternehmen

Guten Tag, mein Name ist (Vor- und Nachname) vom Institut für Markt- und Sozialforschung in Weimar.

FÜR 1. KONTAKTPERSON: Im Auftrag der Professur für Wirtschaftsgeographie der Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena führen wir eine wissenschaftliche Erhebung in Ostthüringen durch. In der Befragung geht es um das Image der Region Ostthüringen und die Auswirkungen auf die Gewinnung von Fachkräften. Wäre es möglich, dass Sie mich in dieser Angelegenheit mit Herrn/Frau XYZ (falls kein Name verfügbar ist: „... mit jemandem aus der Geschäftsführung...“) verbinden?

FÜR ZIELPERSON: Im Rahmen eines Forschungsprojektes möchte der Lehrstuhl für Wirtschaftsgeographie der Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena ermitteln, wie sich der Fachkräftemangel in Thüringer Unternehmen bemerkbar macht. Konkretes Ziel ist es herauszufinden, welches Image der Unternehmensstandort Ostthüringen nach außen ausstrahlt und wie sich dieses auf die Gewinnung von Fachkräften auswirkt. Unsere Stichprobe beinhaltet alle Unternehmen Ostthüringens mit mehr als 2 Mitarbeitern. In diesem Zusammenhang möchten wir auch gern Sie befragen, ob Sie bereit sind, uns Informationen aus erster Hand zu geben, die für das Projekt wichtig sind und der Erarbeitung von Handlungsempfehlungen zugrundegelegt werden können. Auf diese Weise wirkt das Projekt konkret auch auf Ihr und die Unternehmen in der Region zurück. Das telefonische Interview dauert nur ca. 15-20 Minuten. Die zu erhebenden Daten unterliegen dem Datenschutz und werden ausschließlich für wissenschaftliche Zwecke genutzt. Die Teilnahme an der Befragung ist freiwillig. Sind Sie zu einem Interview bereit?

Alternativ:

Terminvereinbarung anbieten; E-Mail mit Infos und Datenschutzrichtlinien kann verschickt werden!

Kontaktdaten des Projektverantwortlichen:

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Eröffnung

- 1 Der Wirtschaftsstandort Ostthüringen leidet wie viele andere unter einem Fachkräftemangel. Zu Ostthüringen zählen wir die Landkreise Altenburger Land, Greiz, Saalfeld-Rudolstadt, Saale-Orla-Kreis, Saale-Holzland-Kreis, Jena und Gera. Bitte geben Sie auf einer Skala von 1 (= gar keine Schwierigkeiten) bis 5 (= sehr große Schwierigkeiten) an, wie groß Ihrer Einschätzung nach in den nächsten 5 Jahren die Probleme für Ihr Unternehmen sein werden, offene Stellen zu besetzen.

→ weiter mit 2

Image

- 2 Wir möchten nun auf die Region Ostthüringen als Unternehmensstandort zu sprechen kommen. Bitte bewerten Sie die folgenden Aussagen auf einer Skala von 1 (= lehne vollkommen ab) bis 5 (= stimme vollkommen zu). Es geht nicht um die Richtigkeit der Aussagen, sondern um Ihre persönliche Bewertung.

Ostthüringen ist...

- provinziell
- traditionsbewusst
- weltoffen
- landschaftlich attraktiv
- wirtschaftlich zukunftsfähig
- fremdenfeindlich

→ weiter mit 3

- 3 Bitte bewerten Sie die folgenden Aussagen auf einer Skala von 1 (= lehne vollkommen ab) bis 5 (= stimme vollkommen zu).

- Die Medienberichterstattung über Ostthüringen gibt die Ostthüringer Wirklichkeit gut wider.
- Fremdenfeindliche Einstellungen in Ostthüringen erschweren die Gewinnung von Fachkräften
- Die Region Ostthüringen wird außerhalb Thüringens negativer bewertet als von den Thüringern selbst.

→ weiter mit 4

- 4 Bitte geben Sie auf einer Skala von 1 (sehr negativ) bis 5 (sehr positiv) an, wie das Image der Region Ostthüringen Ihrer Meinung nach auf folgende Faktoren wirkt. Wenn es keine Auswirkungen hat, können Sie das auch sagen:
- die Gewinnung von Fachkräften aus dem Inland
 - die Gewinnung von Fachkräften aus dem Ausland
 - die Gewinnung von Investoren aus dem Inland
 - die Gewinnung von Investoren aus dem Ausland
 - die Gewinnung von Kunden aus dem Inland
 - die Gewinnung von Kunden aus dem Ausland
 - die Gewinnung von Lieferanten aus dem Inland
 - die Gewinnung von Lieferanten aus dem Ausland
- weiter mit 5
- 5 Bitte geben Sie auf einer Skala von 1 (= gar keine Sorgen) bis 5 (= sehr große Sorgen) an, wie groß ihre Sorgen sind, dass das Image der Region Ihrem Unternehmen langfristig schaden könnte.
- weiter mit 6
- 6 Mit welchen Maßnahmen könnte Ihrer Meinung nach dieses Image verbessert werden?
- <Freifeld>
- weiter mit 7
- 7 Kam es in den letzten 5 Jahren vor, dass in Gesprächen mit den folgenden Kontakten kritische Fragen zu Fremdenfeindlichkeit am Unternehmensstandort gestellt wurden?
- Von Investoren
 - Von Zulieferern
 - Von Kunden
 - Von Deutschen Bewerbern
 - Von Internationalen Bewerbern. Internationale Bewerber, Fachkräfte, Beschäftigte oder Kollege sind solche Personen, die im Ausland geboren sind und dort mindestens einen Schulabschluss erworben haben.
- Nein, nie
 - Ja, selten
 - Ja, gelegentlich
 - Ja, oft
 - Weiß nicht
 - Keine Angabe
- weiter je nach Einzelantworten

- 8 Kam es in den letzten 5 Jahren vor, dass potentielle Investoren sich gegen ein Investment in Ihr Unternehmen entschieden haben, weil sie den Standort als fremdenfeindlich wahrgenommen haben?
- Nein, nie
 - Ja, selten
 - Ja, gelegentlich
 - Ja, oft
 - Weiß nicht
 - Keine Angabe
- weiter je nach Filter aus Frage 7
- 9 Kam es in den letzten 5 Jahren vor, dass potentielle Zulieferer sich gegen eine Zusammenarbeit mit Ihrem Unternehmen entschieden haben, weil sie den Standort als fremdenfeindlich wahrgenommen haben?
- Nein, nie
 - Ja, selten
 - Ja, gelegentlich
 - Ja, oft
 - Weiß nicht
 - Keine Angabe
- weiter je nach Filter aus Frage 7
- 10 Kam es in den letzten 5 Jahren vor, dass potentielle Kunden Aufträge nicht an Sie vergeben haben, weil sie den Standort als fremdenfeindlich wahrgenommen haben?
- Nein, nie
 - Ja, selten
 - Ja, gelegentlich
 - Ja, oft
 - Weiß nicht
 - Keine Angabe
- weiter je nach Filter aus Frage 7
- 11 Ist Ihnen bekannt, dass deutsche Bewerber in den letzten 5 Jahren schon einmal ein Arbeitsangebot in Ihrem Unternehmen ausgeschlagen haben, weil sie den Standort als fremdenfeindlich wahrgenommen haben?
- Nein, nie
 - Ja, selten

- Ja, gelegentlich
- Ja, oft
- Weiß nicht
- Keine Angabe

→ weiter mit 11 → weiter je nach Filter aus Frage 7

12 Ist Ihnen bekannt, dass internationale Bewerber in den letzten 5 Jahren schon einmal ein Arbeitsangebot in Ihrem Unternehmen ausgeschlagen haben, weil sie den Standort als fremdenfeindlich wahrgenommen haben?

- Nein, nie
- Ja, selten
- Ja, gelegentlich
- Ja, oft
- Weiß nicht
- Keine Angabe

→ weiter mit 13

Betriebsklima / Diskurse

13 Wir möchten Sie nun zu internationalen Fachkräften befragen.

Welche Vorteile vermuten Sie in international aufgestellten Belegschaften?

<Freifeld>

→ weiter mit 14

14 Welche Nachteile vermuten Sie in international aufgestellten Belegschaften?

<Freifeld>

→ weiter mit 15

15 In Folgenden lese ich Ihnen einige Aussagen vor, die man hin und wieder so hört.

Bitte bewerten Sie persönlich die folgenden Sätze auf einer Skala von 1 (= lehne vollkommen ab) bis 5 (= stimme vollkommen zu)

- Internationale Fachkräfte sind unzuverlässiger als deutsche.
- Internationale Fachkräfte haben überhöhte Ansprüche, z. B. an das Gehalt.
- Internationale Fachkräfte verprellen die Kunden.
- Internationale Fachkräfte bringen Verständigungsprobleme, die Arbeitsabläufe stören.

- Internationale Fachkräfte bringen Verständigungsprobleme, die das kollegiale Miteinander stören.
- Internationale Fachkräfte bringen kulturelle oder religiöse Unterschiede, die Arbeitsabläufe stören.
- Internationale Fachkräfte bringen kulturelle oder religiöse Unterschiede, die das kollegiale Miteinander stören.
- Internationale Fachkräfte führen zu höherer Kriminalität am Arbeitsplatz.
- Internationale Fachkräfte gehören einfach nicht hierher.
- Internationale Fachkräfte verändern Umfeld und Region negativ.
- Internationale Fachkräfte verschlechtern das Image des Unternehmens.

→ weiter mit 16

16 Und bestehen die oben genannten Vorbehalte bei Beschäftigten Ihres Unternehmens? Bitte antworten Sie jeweils mit ja oder nein.

- Internationale Fachkräfte bedrohen den eigenen Arbeitsplatz.
- Internationale Fachkräfte sind unzuverlässiger als deutsche.
- Internationale Fachkräfte haben überhöhte Ansprüche, z. B. an das Gehalt.
- Internationale Fachkräfte bringen Verständigungsprobleme, die Arbeitsabläufe stören.
- Internationale Fachkräfte bringen Verständigungsprobleme, die das kollegiale Miteinander stören.
- Internationale Fachkräfte bringen kulturelle oder religiöse Unterschiede, die Arbeitsabläufe stören.
- Internationale Fachkräfte bringen kulturelle oder religiöse Unterschiede, die das kollegiale Miteinander stören.
- Internationale Fachkräfte führen zu höherer Kriminalität am Arbeitsplatz.
- Internationale Fachkräfte verändern Umfeld und Region negativ.
- Es bestehen keine Vorbehalte. → weiter mit 18

Weiß nicht

Keine Angabe

→ weiter mit 17

17 Zu welchen Gelegenheiten werden diese Vorbehalte in der Belegschaft thematisiert? Bitte antworten Sie jeweils mit ja oder nein.

- In den Pausen gegenüber Kollegen
- Am Arbeitsplatz gegenüber Kollegen
- Bei dienstlichen Treffen gegenüber Kollegen
- Gegenüber Vorgesetzten

- Gegenüber Kunden
- Gegenüber Geschäftspartnern
- Im privaten Kontext
- Sonstiges <Freifeld>
- Weiß nicht
- Keine Angabe
- weiter mit 18

18 Bitte geben Sie uns einen Schätzwert: Wie hoch ist der Anteil der Beschäftigten in Ihrem Unternehmen, die sich selbst als politisch rechts einordnen würden, in Prozent?
<Freifeld>
→ weiter mit 19

19 Bitte geben Sie uns einen weiteren Schätzwert: Wie hoch ist der Anteil der Beschäftigten, die Vorbehalte gegenüber internationalen Kollegen wegen deren Herkunft haben, in Prozent?
<Freifeld>
0 → weiter mit 22
>0 → weiter mit 20

20 Gibt es in der Belegschaft auch Kollegen, die sich offen gegen solche Vorbehalte aussprechen?
 Ja → weiter mit 21
 Nein → weiter mit 22
 Weiß nicht → weiter mit 22
 Keine Angabe → weiter mit 22

21 Wie äußern sich diese gegensätzlichen Einstellungen innerhalb der Belegschaft? Bitte antworten Sie jeweils mit ja oder nein.

- Streitgespräche zwischen Kollegen im Arbeitskontext
- Streitgespräche zwischen Kollegen im Privaten
- Offizielle Beschwerden bei Vorgesetzten
- Einbezug der Mitarbeitervertretung/des Betriebsrates
- Einbezug anderer offizieller Stellen, z. B. Beratungsstellen oder Polizei
- Sonstiges <Freifeld>
- Weiß nicht
- Keine Angabe

→ weiter mit 22

22 Gibt es in Ihrem Unternehmen einen Betriebsrat?

- Ja → weiter mit 23
- Nein → weiter mit 24
- Weiß nicht → weiter mit 24
- Keine Angabe → weiter mit 24

23 Hat der Betriebsrat das Thema Integration internationaler Kollegen bereits thematisiert?

- Ja
 - Nein
 - Weiß nicht
 - Keine Angabe
- weiter mit 24

24 Gibt es in Ihrem Unternehmen Maßnahmen, um auf Vorbehalte gegen internationale Kollegen zu reagieren oder diesen vorzubeugen?

- Ja → weiter mit 25
- Nein → weiter mit 26
- Weiß nicht → weiter mit 26
- Keine Angabe → weiter mit 26

25 Welche Maßnahmen gibt es? Bitte antworten Sie jeweils mit ja oder nein.

- Mitarbeitergespräche
- Schulungen oder Workshops
- Ethikvereinbarungen mit Beschäftigten
- Informationsmaterial, z. B. Broschüren
- Spezielle Angebote zur Einarbeitung internationaler Kollegen, z. B. Mentorenprogramme
- Organisation gemeinsamer Freizeitaktivitäten, z. B. Willkommensabend
- Unternehmensleitbild
- Engagement in der Initiative Willkommenskultur
- Sonstiges <Freifeld>
- Es gibt keine Maßnahmen dieser Art
- Weiß nicht
- Keine Angabe

→ weiter mit 26

Internationale Beschäftigte

26 Wie hoch ist in Ihrem Unternehmen der Anteil des Exportes am Umsatz?

- 0%
- 1-25%
- 26-50%
- 51-75%
- 76-100%
- Weiß nicht
- Keine Angabe

→ weiter mit 27

27 Wie viele internationale Beschäftigte (alle Qualifizierungsstufen, auch Auszubildende) sind aktuell in Ihrem Unternehmen angestellt?

<Freifeld>

>0: → weiter mit 28

0: → weiter mit 34

28 Wann wurde der erste internationale Beschäftigte in Ihrem Unternehmen eingestellt?

- nach 2015
- 2010-2015
- 2005-2010
- 2000-2005
- vor dem Jahr 2000

→ weiter mit 29

29 Aus welchen Ländern kommen die aktuell in Ihrem Unternehmen angestellten internationalen Beschäftigten?

<Freifeld>

→ weiter mit 30

30 In welchen Positionen werden die internationalen Beschäftigten aktuell in Ihrem Betrieb beschäftigt? Bitte antworten Sie jeweils mit ja oder nein.

- Geschäftsführung
- Führungskräfte

- Fachkräfte
- Hilfskräfte
- Auszubildende
- Praktikant/Trainee
- Sonstiges <Freifeld>
- Weiß nicht
- Keine Angabe

→ weiter mit 31

31 Ist es in der Vergangenheit schon vorgekommen, dass es folgende Reaktionen auf die Einstellung internationaler Kollegen gab? Bitte antworten Sie jeweils mit ja oder nein.

- Veränderte Arbeitsmoral aus Trotz, z. B. erhöhte Zahl an Krankschreibungen
- Drohung, zu kündigen
- Abwerten der internationalen Fachkräfte gegenüber Anderen
- Ausschließen der internationalen Fachkräfte
- offenes Mobbing, z. B. Beleidigungen
- verstecktes Mobbing, z. B. Aufkleber, Schmierereien etc.
- Gab es andere Reaktionen? <Freifeld>
- Keine Reaktionen dieser Art
- Weiß nicht
- Keine Angabe

→ weiter mit 32

32 Bitte geben Sie auf einer Skala von 1 (= hat sich deutlich verschlechtert) bis 5 (= hat sich deutlich verbessert) an, wie sie sich die Beschäftigung von internationalen Fachkräften auf folgende Faktoren ausgewirkt hat. Wenn sie keine Auswirkung gehabt hat, können Sie das auch sagen.

- Fachkräfteengpass im Unternehmen
- Beziehungen zu anderen Unternehmen im Ausland
- Erschließung neuer Märkte
- Entwicklung von technischen Innovationen
- Aufwertung des Unternehmensimages
- Organisatorische Flexibilität der Belegschaft
- Kreativität und Innovationsfähigkeit bei Problemlösungen

→ weiter mit 34

33 Bitte geben Sie auf einer Skala von 1 (= hat mehr Nachteile geschaffen) bis 5 (= hat mehr Vorteile geschaffen) an, ob die Einstellung internationaler Fachkräfte insgesamt für Ihr Unternehmen mehr Nachteile oder mehr Vorteile geschaffen hat.

→ weiter mit 37

34 Stellen Sie sich bitte folgende Situation vor: Sie sind auf der Suche nach einem neuen Mitarbeiter und Ihnen liegt die Bewerbung eines geeigneten internationalen Bewerbers vor. Wie denken Sie würden Beschäftigte Ihres Unternehmens reagieren, wenn sie davon wüssten? Bitte antworten Sie jeweils mit ja oder nein.

- Veränderte Arbeitsmoral aus Trotz, z. B. erhöhte Zahl an Krankschreibungen
- Drohung, zu kündigen
- Abwerten der internationalen Fachkräfte gegenüber Anderen
- verstecktes Mobbing, z. B. Aufkleber, Schmierereien etc.
- Sonstiges <Freifeld>
- Keine Reaktionen dieser Art
- Weiß nicht
- Keine Angabe

→ weiter mit 33

35 Können Sie sich grundsätzlich vorstellen, internationale Beschäftigte in Ihrem Unternehmen einzustellen?

Ja: → weiter mit 37

Nein: → weiter mit 36

36 Aus welchen Gründen können Sie sich das nicht vorstellen?

<Freifeld>

→ weiter mit 37

Abschluss

37 Gibt es Aspekte, die wir im Zusammenhang mit unserer Befragung stärker berücksichtigen sollten oder möchten Sie uns noch etwas zu den Themen Standortimage, Fachkräftemangel oder internationale Beschäftigte mitteilen, das wir nicht abgefragt haben?
<Freifeld>

Vielen Dank für Ihre Auskunftsbereitschaft und für Ihre Teilnahme. Sie haben uns sehr geholfen.

Ein Anliegen zum Schluss:

Im weiteren Verlauf des Projektes möchten wir genauere Einblicke in Unternehmen und insbesondere in die dortigen Diskurse zu den Themen Unternehmensperspektiven, Fachkräftemangel sowie internationale Beschäftigte erhalten.

Zu diesem Zweck planen wir Interviews mit Führungskräften und Mitgliedern der Belegschaften. Können Sie sich vorstellen, uns als Experte Auskunft zu geben und ggf. Beschäftigte anzufragen, ob sie dafür ebenfalls zur Verfügung stehen würden?

Natürlich unterliegen auch diese Punkte den Datenschutzrichtlinien. Ihre Anonymität bleibt jederzeit gewahrt.

Gerne können Sie auch erst einmal unverbindlich Interesse signalisieren.

Wir würden uns freuen, wenn Sie uns unterstützen würden. Haben Sie Interesse? Dann nennen Sie mir bitte eine/n AnsprechpartnerIn in Ihrem Unternehmen. Ein Mitarbeiter des Lehrstuhls für Wirtschaftsgeographie wird sich zeitnah bei Ihnen melden, um Ihnen weitere Informationen zu geben und ggf. Näheres zu besprechen.

Möchten Sie die Ergebnisse der Studie per E-Mail erhalten? Falls ja: Adresse?

b) Interview guide (Corporate management)

Interviewleitfaden „IMAGE - Image und Regionalentwicklung. Zum Einfluss fremdenfeindlicher Ressentiments auf die Attraktivität eines Wirtschaftsstandorts am Beispiel des Freistaats Thüringen“ (Unternehmen)

Gesprächspartner:

Datum:

Gesprächseinleitung

- Dank
- Vorstellung Projekt & Person (Definition von Ostthüringen)
- Ablauf / geplante Länge des Interviews
- Rollen
- Datenschutzvereinbarung kurz erläutern, lesen und unterzeichnen lassen
- Audioaufnahme starten, nach dem Einschalten: „Vielen Dank, dass Sie für ein Interview zur Verfügung stehen und dass Sie mit der Aufzeichnung einverstanden sind.“

Hintergrundinformationen zum Gesprächspartner

- Position und Aufgabenbereich im Unternehmen (GF, Prokurist etc.)?
- Seit wann im Unternehmen?
- Wie viele Mitarbeiter? Standorte/Filialen?

Standortimage

- Wie wird Ihrer Meinung nach Ostthüringen im Allgemeinen als Wirtschaftsstandort wahrgenommen?
 - o Worauf gründen Sie Ihre Einschätzung?
- Studien/objektive Zahlen belegen, dass die Region durch eine relativ große Fremdenfeindlichkeit geprägt ist. Wie bewerten Sie selbst diesen Umstand?
- Wie wirkt sich die Fremdenfeindlichkeit in der Region in Ihren Augen auf die wirtschaftliche Entwicklung (a) Ihres Unternehmens sowie (b) der gesamten Region aus?

Fremdenfeindliches Umfeld und Kunden

- Welche Rolle spielen die fremdenfeindlichen Tendenzen in Ostthüringen für Ihre Kunden bzw. die Beziehungen zu diesen?
- Wie hoch ist der Anteil der Kunden, die Sie auf fremdenfeindliche Tendenzen in der Region Ostthüringen und/oder in Ihrem Unternehmen angesprochen haben?
- Was denken Sie: Aus welchem Grund interessieren sich Ihre Kunden für diesen Sachverhalt?
- Wie gehen Ihre Kunden ganz konkret mit den fremdenfeindlichen Tendenzen in der Region Ostthüringen um? Wie reagieren sie darauf?
 - o Können Sie Beispiele geben?

Fremdenfeindliches Umfeld und Fachkräfte

- Welche Rolle spielen die fremdenfeindlichen Tendenzen in Ostthüringen für Ihre Belegschaft bzw. die Gewinnung von Fachkräften?
 - o Welche Unterschiede zwischen deutschen und internationalen Bewerbern können Sie diesbezügliche feststellen?
- Wie hoch ist der Anteil der BewerberInnen, die Sie auf fremdenfeindliche Tendenzen in der Region Ostthüringen und/oder in Ihrem Unternehmen angesprochen haben?
- Was denken Sie: Aus welchem Grund interessieren sich Ihre BewerberInnen für diesen Sachverhalt?
- Wie gehen Ihre Belegschaften und BewerberInnen ganz konkret mit den fremdenfeindlichen Tendenzen in der Region Ostthüringen um?
 - o Können Sie Beispiele geben?

Fremdenfeindliches Umfeld und Zulieferer

- Welche Rolle spielen die fremdenfeindlichen Tendenzen in Ostthüringen für Ihre Zulieferer bzw. die Beziehungen zu diesen?
- Wie hoch ist der Anteil der Zulieferer, die Sie auf fremdenfeindliche Tendenzen in der Region Ostthüringen und/oder in Ihrem Unternehmen angesprochen haben?
- Was denken Sie: Aus welchem Grund interessieren sich Ihre Zulieferer für diesen Sachverhalt?
- Wie gehen Ihre Zulieferer ganz konkret mit den fremdenfeindlichen Tendenzen in der Region Ostthüringen um? Wie reagieren sie darauf?
 - o Können Sie Beispiele geben?

Fremdenfeindliches Umfeld und Investoren

- Welche Rolle spielen die fremdenfeindlichen Tendenzen in Ostthüringen für Ihre Investoren bzw. die Beziehungen zu diesen?
- Wie hoch ist der Anteil der Investoren, die Sie auf fremdenfeindliche Tendenzen in der Region Ostthüringen und/oder in Ihrem Unternehmen angesprochen haben?
- Was denken Sie: Aus welchem Grund interessieren sich Ihre Investoren für diesen Sachverhalt?
- Wie gehen Ihre Investoren ganz konkret mit den fremdenfeindlichen Tendenzen in der Region Ostthüringen um? Wie reagieren sie darauf?
 - o Können Sie Beispiele geben?

Othering im Unternehmen

- Wie beurteilen Sie die Möglichkeit, Fachkräftemängeln in Ostthüringer Unternehmen durch die Einstellung internationaler Fachkräfte zu begegnen?
 - o Welche Rolle spielt die genaue Herkunft der Fachkräfte?
- Wie werden der Fachkräftemangel und die Zukunftsfähigkeit des Unternehmens durch Ihre Belegschaft beurteilt?
- Was meinen Sie: Wie steht die Belegschaft Ihres Unternehmens der Einstellung internationaler Fachkräfte gegenüber?
 - o Worauf genau stützt sich Ihre Einschätzung?
 - o Welche Rolle spielt die genaue Herkunft der Fachkräfte?
 - o Gibt es auch abweichende Stimmen in der Belegschaft?

Othering in der Region

- Wie schätzen Sie die Einstellung anderer Unternehmen gegenüber Zuwanderung hier in der Region genau ein? Woran machen Sie Ihre Einschätzung fest?
- Zu welchen Gelegenheiten tauschen Sie sich diesbezüglich mit anderen Unternehmen aus?
 - o Können Sie Beispiele geben?

Handlungsbedarfe

- Welche Maßnahmen oder Strategien halten Sie für erforderlich, um möglichen Nachteilen, die Ihrem Unternehmen infolge der fremdenfeindlichen Tendenzen im Umfeld erwachsen, zu begegnen?

Nachgespräch:

- Dank
- Frage, ob jemand aus der Belegschaft interviewt werden darf, ob der Kontakt hergestellt werden kann.
- Evtl. Nachfrage nach weiteren Interviewpartnern
- Bereitschaft, bei Rückfragen zur Verfügung zu stehen

c) List of interviewed corporate managements

1. Maschinenbau (Saalfeld-Rudolstadt)
2. Kfz-Werkstatt (Saalfeld-Rudolstadt)
3. Konditorei (Saale-Holzland-Kreis)
4. Optik (Saale-Holzland-Kreis)
5. Sanitär (Altenburger Land)
6. Maschinenbau (Saale-Orla-Kreis)
7. Taxi (Saale-Orla-Kreis)
8. Werbung (Saale-Holzland-Kreis)
9. Sanitär (Saale-Holzland-Kreis)
10. Büroeinrichtung (Saale-Holzland-Kreis)
11. Gaststätte (Saale-Holzland-Kreis)
12. Supermarkt (Greiz)
13. Baumaschinen (Saale-Holzland-Kreis)
14. Präzisionsmechanik (Jena)
15. Dentallabor (Gera)
16. Kfz-Werkstatt (Saale-Orla-Kreis)
17. Fliesenleger (Saale-Orla-Kreis)
18. Tischler (Saale-Holzland-Kreis)
19. Dachdecker (Greiz)
20. Betreutes Wohnen (Gera)
21. Personalvermittlung (Gera)
22. Ambulante Pflege (Gera)
23. Dentalkeramik (Saale-Holzland-Kreis)
24. Maler (Greiz)
25. Maschinenbau (Greiz)
26. Oberflächenveredelung (Greiz)
27. Kabelinfrastruktur (Greiz, per Zoom)
28. Elektrobetrieb (Altenburger Land)
29. Schlossereibetrieb (Altenburger Land)
30. Kunststoffverarbeitung (Altenburger Land)
31. Gastronomieunternehmen (Saale-Orla-Kreis)
32. Porzellanhersteller (Saale-Holzland-Kreis)
33. Personalvermittlung (Saalfeld-Rudolstadt)
34. Tischler (Altenburger Land, per Zoom)
35. Betonwerk (Saalfeld-Rudolstadt)
36. Automatisierung (Altenburger Land, per Zoom)
37. Steuerberatung (Greiz)
38. Personalvermittlung (Greiz)
39. Keramikherstellung (Greiz)
40. Detektorenherstellung (Altenburger Land)
41. Vermessung (Saale-Holzland-Kreis)
42. Landservice (Greiz)
43. Landmaschinenservice (Greiz)
44. Lüftungsherstellung (Saalfeld-Rudolstadt)
45. Schrott (Saalfeld-Rudolstadt)
46. Baubetrieb (Saalfeld-Rudolstadt)
47. Softwarebetrieb (Jena)
48. Immobilienverwaltung (Jena)
49. Handelsunternehmen (Jena)
50. Tiefbau (Gera)
51. Gebäudeservice (Gera)
52. Apotheke (Altenburger Land)
53. Optik (Gera)
54. Software (Jena, per Zoom)
55. Kunststoffverarbeitung (Saale-Holzland-Kreis)
56. Malerbetrieb (Saale-Holzland-Kreis)
57. Leitungsbau (Jena)
58. Holzbau (Saale-Orla-Kreis)
59. Ersatzteilservice (Saale-Orla-Kreis)
60. Werbung (Saale-Orla-Kreis)
61. Gärtnerei (Saalfeld-Rudolstadt)
62. Kunststoffverarbeitung (Saalfeld-Rudolstadt)
63. Brauerei (Saalfeld-Rudolstadt)
64. Bäckerei (Saalfeld-Rudolstadt)
65. Software (Jena, per Zoom)

d) Interview guide (Experts from corporate environment)

Interviewleitfaden „IMAGE – Image und Regionalentwicklung. Zum Einfluss fremdenfeindlicher Ressentiments auf die Attraktivität eines Wirtschaftsstandortes am Beispiel des Freistaats Thüringen“ (Unternehmensumfeld)

Gesprächspartner:

Datum:

Gesprächseinleitung:

- Dank
- Vorstellung Person und Projekt
- Definition Ostthüringen, Definition Fremdenfeindlichkeit
- Ablauf / Rollen / geplante Länge des Interviews
- Frage, ob Name (und/oder Organisation) in Veröffentlichungen genannt werden dürfen
- Datenschutzvereinbarung:
 - o digital: vor Gespräch zusammen mit Zoom-Link zusenden
 - o F2F: kurz erläutern, lesen und unterzeichnen lassen
- Audioaufnahme starten, nach dem Einschalten: „Vielen Dank, dass Sie für ein Interview zur Verfügung stehen und dass Sie mit der Aufzeichnung einverstanden sind.“

Hintergrundinformationen GesprächspartnerIn:

- Welche Position und welchen Aufgabenbereich haben Sie in Ihrer Organisation?
- Seit wann sind Sie in der Organisation?
- Wie viele Mitarbeitende hat Ihre Organisation derzeit? Wie viele Standorte gibt es?
- Welche Zielgruppen und Aufgaben sind für Ihre Organisation zentral?

Standortimage:

- Wie wird Ihrer Meinung nach Ostthüringen im Allgemeinen als Wirtschaftsstandort wahrgenommen?
 - o Worauf gründen Sie Ihre Einschätzung?
- Woran macht sich das Image der Region in Ihren Augen genau fest?

- Welche Unterschiede innerhalb der Region stellen Sie mit Blick auf die Wahrnehmung als Wirtschaftsstandort fest?

Fremdenfeindlichkeit in der Region:

- Studien/objektive Zahlen belegen, dass die Region Ostthüringen durch eine relativ große Fremdenfeindlichkeit geprägt ist. Wie bewerten Sie selbst diesen Umstand?
 - o Welche Gründe gibt es Ihrer Meinung nach für diese vergleichsweise große Fremdenfeindlichkeit in der Region Ostthüringen?
 - o Wie bewerten Sie die Ausprägung von Fremdenfeindlichkeit in der Region Ostthüringen
 - im Vergleich mit Gesamthüringen?
 - im bundesweiten Vergleich?
- Wie wirkt sich die Fremdenfeindlichkeit in der Region auf die wirtschaftliche Entwicklung der vor Ort ansässigen Unternehmen aus?
 - o Welche Unternehmen sind in Ihren Augen besonders betroffen und welche weniger?
 - o Worin liegen diese Unterschiede begründet?
 - o Worauf genau stützen Sie Ihre Argumente? Können Sie Beispiele nennen, die Ihre Argumentation stützen?
- Wie wirkt sich die Fremdenfeindlichkeit in der Region auf die wirtschaftliche Entwicklung der gesamten Region aus?
 - o Worauf genau stützen Sie Ihre Argumente? Können Sie Beispiele nennen, die Ihre Argumentation stützen?

Fremdenfeindlichkeit und Imageeffekte:

- Welche Rolle messen Sie den fremdenfeindlichen Einstellungen in der Region Ostthüringen im Zusammenhang mit...
 - o der Gewinnung neuer Arbeitskräfte (national, international) für in der Region ansässige Unternehmen bei?
 - o der Gewinnung von Geschäftspartnern (Zulieferer, Kunden; regional, überregional, international) für in der Region ansässige Unternehmen bei?
 - o der Gewinnung von Investoren (national, international) in der Region bei?

- Worauf genau stützen Sie Ihre Argumente jeweils? Können Sie Beispiele nennen, die Ihre Argumentation stützen?

(Implikationen von) Fremdenfeindlichkeit in Unternehmen:

- Inwiefern besteht Ihrer Meinung nach ein Zusammenhang zwischen der (a) Branche / (b) Größe der Unternehmen und der Einstellung der in den Unternehmen Arbeitnehmenden zu (potenziell) zugewanderten Beschäftigten?
 - o Welche weiteren Unternehmensmerkmale beeinflussen die Art und Weise, wie Arbeitnehmende (potenziell) zugewanderte beurteilen?
 - o Worauf genau stützen Sie Ihre Argumente? Können Sie Beispiele nennen, die Ihre Argumentation stützen?
- Inwiefern besteht Ihrer Meinung nach ein Zusammenhang zwischen der (a) Branche / (b) Größe der Unternehmen und der Einstellung der Arbeitgebenden zu zugewanderten Beschäftigten?
 - o Welche weiteren Unternehmensmerkmale beeinflussen die Art und Weise, wie Arbeitgebende (potenziell) Zugewanderte beurteilen?
 - o Worauf genau stützen Sie Ihre Argumente? Können Sie Beispiele nennen, die Ihre Argumentation stützen?
- Wie unterscheidet sich der konkrete Umgang von Arbeitnehmenden und Arbeitgebenden mit fremdenfeindlichen Einstellungen im Unternehmen je nach den zuvor angesprochenen Merkmalen?
 - o Haben Sie konkrete Beispiele?
- Welche Auswirkungen haben fremdenfeindliche Einstellungen auf...
 - o zugewanderte Arbeitskräfte, die aktuell in Unternehmen Ostthüringens beschäftigt sind?
 - o die Rekrutierungspraktiken regionaler Unternehmen?
 - o die Auftragsbearbeitung regionaler Unternehmen?
 - o auf die geschäftlichen Netzwerke regionaler Unternehmen?
- Worauf genau stützen Sie Ihre Argumente jeweils? Können Sie Beispiele nennen, die Ihre Argumentation stützen?

Interaktion mit Unternehmen:

- Zu welchen Gelegenheiten tauschen Sie sich mit Arbeitnehmenden über zugewanderte Beschäftigte in der Region aus?
- Zu welchen Gelegenheiten tauschen Sie sich mit Arbeitgebenden über zugewanderte Beschäftigte in der Region aus?
- Wie hoch ist der Anteil der konkreten Kontakte/Fälle in Ihrem Arbeitsalltag, bei denen es um Fremdenfeindlichkeit im Kontext regionaler Unternehmen geht?
- Wie und in welchem Ausmaß wirken sich fremdenfeindliche Einstellungen auf Ihr Verhältnis zu / Ihre Arbeit mit Arbeitgebenden bzw. Arbeitnehmenden aus (z. B. Konsultation anderer Organisationen/Vermittlung, Auseinandersetzungen, Kontaktabbruch, Strafanzeige)?

Handlungsbedarf:

- Welche Maßnahmen, mit denen Fremdenfeindlichkeit in regionalen Unternehmen entgegengewirkt werden wollen, sind Ihnen bekannt? Wie bewerten Sie diese?
- Welchen darüberhinausgehenden Handlungsbedarf sehen Sie bezüglich der Fremdenfeindlichkeit in regionalen Unternehmen?
- Welche Rolle könnte Ihre Organisation innerhalb dieser Maßnahmen spielen?

Nachgespräch:

- Dank
- Bereitschaft, bei Rückfragen zur Verfügung zu stehen?
- Evtl. Nachfrage nach weiteren Interviewpartnern, insbesondere zuwanderungsskeptische Arbeitnehmer

e) List of interviewed experts from corporate environment¹⁵

1. Blechschmidt, Adrian (Institut für Berufsbildung und Sozialmanagement gGmbH, Projektleitung IQ Integrationsmanagement Thüringen, per Zoom)
2. Jacobi, Steffen (Bildungswerk der Thüringer Wirtschaft e.V., Kaufmännische Geschäftsführung, Jena)
3. Jörk, Andreas (Handwerkskammer für Ostthüringen, Mobilitätsberater, Gera)
4. Kepke, Jürgen (Wirtschaftsfördergesellschaft Ostthüringen mbH, Geschäftsführer, Gera)
5. Knuhr, Andreas (Thüringer Agentur für Fachkräftegewinnung, Teamleitung, Erfurt)
6. Kuhirt, Stefan (Förderkreis Integration e.V., Geschäftsführer, Apolda)
7. Morgenroth, Tina (DBG-Bildungswerk Thüringen, Projektleitung Faire Mobilität, per Zoom)
8. Nehring, Frank (Wirtschaft und Markt GmbH, Verleger und Chefredakteur, per Zoom)
9. Nobereit, Sven (Verband der Wirtschaft Thüringens, Leitung Sozial- und Arbeitsmarktpolitik, per Zoom)
10. Raschke, Silke (Industrie- und Handelskammer Ostthüringen, Beratung Internationale Fachkräfte, Gera)
11. Wachsmann, Undine (Handwerkskammer für Ostthüringen, Migration und berufliche Integration, Gera)

¹⁵ Schriftliche Erlaubnis zur Nennung der Klarnamen liegt vor.

Appendix II

a) Selbständigkeitserklärung

Ich erkläre, dass ich die vorliegende Arbeit selbständig und unter Verwendung der angegebenen Hilfsmittel, persönlichen Mitteilungen und Quellen angefertigt habe.

Jena, den 04.02.2026

Ort, Datum

Unterschrift des Verfassers

b) Übersicht der Publikations- und Vortragsaktivitäten

Publikationsaktivitäten im Rahmen der Promotion:

Henn, S., Hannemann, M. (2023). Populist resentments and identities and their repercussions on firms and regions. The example of East Thuringia. *Journal of Economic Geography*,
<https://doi.org/10.1093/jeg/lbad017>

Hannemann, M., Henn, S. & Schäfer, S. (2023) Regions, emotions and left-behindness: a phase model for understanding the emergence of regional embitterment. *Regional Studies*,
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2023.2218886>

Hannemann, M., Henn, S., & Schäfer, S. (2023). Participation in Online Research: Towards a Typology of Research Subjects with Regard to Digital Access and Literacy. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 22.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069231205188>

Vortragsaktivitäten im Rahmen der Promotion:

2020:

~~AAG Annual Meeting~~ (scheduled, but cancelled on short notice due to COVID19-restrictions)

2021:

AAG Annual Meeting (online, April 08, 2021): “Exclusive Corporate Practices and Implications for Firms and Regional Development. The Example of East Thuringia.”

Regional Studies` Regions in Recovery Festival (online, June 03, 2021): “Populist Resentments and their Repercussions on Firm Networks in Rural Regions. The Example of East Thuringia.”

Online Workshop IRS Erkner, BTU Cottbus & UB Bern: COVID and what next? Methodological Implications for Digitalization Research in Rural-Peripheral Areas (online, November 17, 2021): “Research in the Digital periphery – Insights from Qualitative Research with Firms and Entrepreneurs during the COVID-19 Pandemic.”

AK Industriegeographie (online, November 25, 2021): “Populistische Ressentiments in ländlichen Regionen – Auswirkungen auf Unternehmenspraktiken und -netzwerke. Das

Beispiel Ostthüringen“ [„Populist Resentment in Rural Regions - Effects on Business Practices and Networks. The Example of East Thuringia“]

2022:

AAG Annual Meeting 2022 (online, February 27, 2022): “Periphery, Discontent and Exclusive Regional Identities. The Example of SMEs in East Thuringia, Germany.”

The 9th Nordic Geographers Meeting on Multiple Nordic Geographies (Joensuu, Finland, June 21, 2022): “Geographies of Embitterment. The Case of East Thuringia, Germany.”

2023:

Tagung Neue Kulturgeographie (Halle a. d. Saale, Germany, January 27, 2023): „Verbitterung in Left-Behind-Places. Entstehung und Implikationen.“ [„Embitterment in Left-behind Places. Emergence and Implications.“]

Doc.kolleg Forschungsnetzwerk Diaspora-Studies (online, February 10, 2023): “Barriers to attracting international workers in structurally weak regions: Emotions, political identities, right-wing populist resentments and corporate practices: the example of East Thuringia.“

Jahrestagung AK Qualitative Methoden des VGDH (Goslar, Germany, March 14, 2023): „Teilnahme an Online-Datenerhebung. Eine Typologie von Forschungssubjekten mit Blick auf digitalen Zugang und digitale Literacy.“ [“Participation in Online Data Collection. A Typology of Research Subjects with Regard to Digital Access and Digital Literacy.”]

Doktorand*innenworkshop Wirtschaftsgeographie LMU & FSU (Jena, Germany, April 20, 2023): „Von der Unzufriedenheit zum emotionalen Lock-in – Ein Phasenmodell zu Left-behind Places, angewandt auf Ostthüringen.“ [“From Discontent to Emotional Lock-in - A Phase Model on Left-behind Places applied to East Thuringia.”]

Tagung Weltoffenheit und Skepsis (Projekt WORT) – vom Umgang mit Widerstand in interkulturellen Öffnungsprozessen (online, September 14, 2023): Keynote „Rechtspopulismus und kollektive Emotionen im Unternehmenskontext – Eindrücke aus dem Feld“ [„Right-wing-populism and collective emotions in corporate context – impressions from the field“]

Deutscher Kongress für Geographie 2023 (Frankfurt am Main, Germany, September 20, 2023): „Verbitterung in Left-Behind-Places - Entstehung und Implikationen“ [„Embitterment in Left-behind Places - Emergence and Implications.“]

2024:

Zentrum für Interkulturelle Öffnung Webtalk (online, March 21, 2024): „Regionale Verbit-
terung & Rechtspopulismus – wie kollektive Emotionen die regionale Wirtschaft in
Ostthüringen beeinflussen“ [„Regional embitterment and right-wing-populism – how col-
lective emotions affect the regional economy in East Thuringia“]

Forschungskollektiv Peripherie und Zentrum (Erfurt, Germany, May 14, 2024): „Verbit-
terung in Left-Behind-Places - Entstehung und Implikationen“ [„Embitterment in Left-
behind Places - Emergence and Implications.“]

Volkshochschule Pößneck (Pößneck, Germany, August 22, 2024): „Regionale Verbit-
terung und Rechtspopulismus - Wie kollektive Emotionen die regionale Wirtschaft in
Ostthüringen beeinflussen“ [„Regional embitterment and right-wing-populism – how col-
lective emotions influence East Thuringia’s regional economy“]

c) Bestätigung des Einverständnisses der Co-Autoren

Für alle in dieser kumulativen Dissertation verwendeten Manuskripte liegen die notwendigen Genehmigungen der Verlage („Reprint permissions“) für die Zweitpublikation vor.

Die Co-Autorinnen/-Autoren der in dieser kumulativen Dissertation verwendeten Manuskripte sind sowohl über die Nutzung als auch über die unten angegebenen Eigenanteile der weiteren Doktorandinnen/Doktoranden als Co-Autorinnen/-Autoren an den Publikationen und Zweitpublikationsrechten bei einer kumulativen Dissertation informiert und stimmen dem zu.

Die Anteile der Promovendin/des Promovenden sowie der weiteren Doktorandinnen/Doktoranden als Co-Autorinnen/Co-Autoren an den Publikationen und Zweitpublikationsrechten bei einer kumulativen Dissertation sind in der Anlage IIe) aufgeführt.

Name des Promovenden	Datum	Ort	Unterschrift
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d) Erklärung zu den Eigenanteilen an den Publikationen

Titel: Participation in Online Research: Towards a Typology of Research Subjects with Regard to Digital Access and Literacy. (<i>International Journal of Qualitative Methods</i>)				
Beteiligt an (zutreffendes angekreuzt)				
AutorInnen:	Matthias Hannemann	Prof. Dr. Sebastian Henn	Dr. Susann Schäfer	
Konzeption des Forschungsansatzes	50%	k.A.	k.A.	
Planung der Untersuchung	50%	k.A.	k.A.	
Datenerhebung	60%	k.A.	k.A.	
Datenanalyse und -interpretation	50%	k.A.	k.A.	
Schreiben des Manuskriptes	50%	k.A.	k.A.	
Vorschlag Anrechnung Publikationsäquivalente	1,0	k.A.	k.A.	

Titel: Regions, emotions and left-behindness: A phase model for understanding the emergence of regional embitterment. (<i>Regional Studies</i>)				
Beteiligt an (zutreffendes angekreuzt)				
AutorInnen:	Matthias Hannemann	Prof. Dr. Sebastian Henn	Dr. Susann Schäfer	
Konzeption des Forschungsansatzes	50%	k.A.	k.A.	
Planung der Untersuchung	70%	k.A.	k.A.	
Datenerhebung	100%	k.A.	k.A.	
Datenanalyse und -interpretation	50%	k.A.	k.A.	
Schreiben des Manuskriptes	50%	k.A.	k.A.	
Vorschlag Anrechnung Publikationsäquivalente	1,0	k.A.	k.A.	

Titel: Populist Resentments and Identities and their Repercussions on Firms and Regions. The Example of East Thuringia. (<i>Journal of Economic Geography</i>)				
Beteiligt an (zutreffendes angekreuzt)				
Autoren:	Matthias Hannemann	Prof. Dr. Sebastian Henn		
Konzeption des Forschungsansatzes	40%	60%		
Planung der Untersuchung	70%	30%		
Datenerhebung	100%			
Datenanalyse und -interpretation	70%	30%		
Schreiben des Manuskriptes	50%	50%		
Vorschlag Anrechnung Publikationsäquivalente	1,0	k.A.		

e) Einverständniserklärung des Betreuers

Ich bin mit der Abfassung der Dissertation als publikationsbasierte Dissertation, d.h. kumulativ, einverstanden und bestätige die vorstehenden Angaben.

Prof. Dr. Sebastian Henn

Name Betreuer

Datum

Ort

Unterschrift