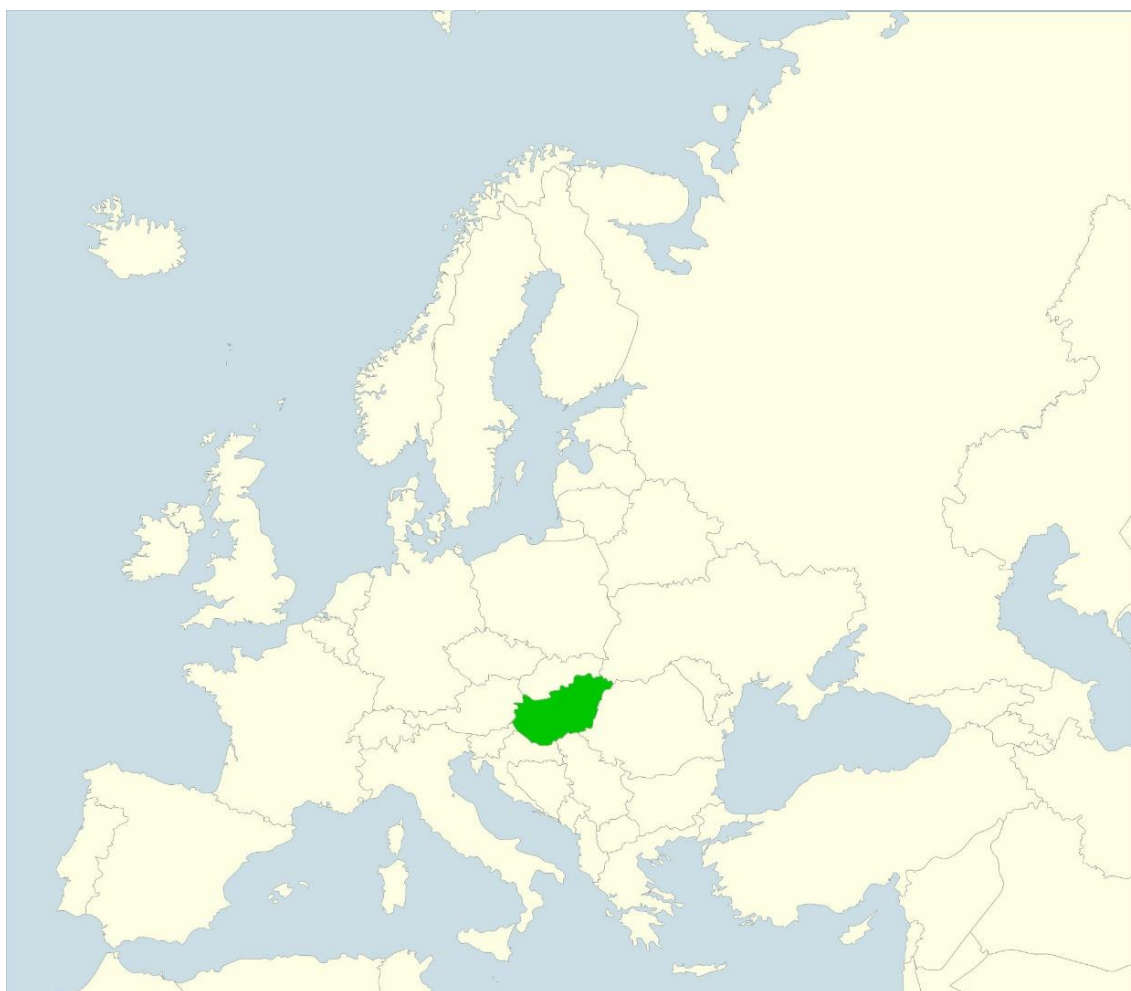


## THE NEW NEIGHBORS. GERMAN IMMIGRANTS IN HUNGARY SINCE THE 2010s

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**Abstract:** Contemporary migration is increasingly shaped by globalization, digitalization, and lifestyle considerations, moving beyond earlier models of unidirectional, economically driven mobility. In Europe, these processes affect not only metropolitan areas but also rural regions experiencing demographic decline. This article examines the migration of German citizens to rural Hungary, focusing on the roles of class position, life-course trajectories, and changing social expectations. Drawing on a one-year qualitative study conducted in four villages in southern Hungary, the analysis shows that later-life relocation is closely linked to “mobile aging” and the pursuit of active lifestyles. In addition to economic and lifestyle motivations, political factors emerge as a distinctive pull factor, including preferences for Hungary’s conservative political climate, limited EU regulation, and restrictive migration policies. The findings contribute to debates on lifestyle migration, geoarbitrage, and the socio-political dimensions of transnational aging.

**Keywords:** migration, Germany, Hungary, rural areas, geoarbitrage

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**Absztrakt:** Túllépve a korábbi, egyirányú, elsősorban gazdasági motivációkra épülő mobilitási modelleken manapság a migrációt mindinkább a globalizáció, a digitalizáció és az életmódbeli preferenciák formálják. Európában e folyamatok nem csupán a nagyvárosi térségeket érintik, hanem a demográfiai hanyatlással küzdő vidéki régiókat is. Jelen tanulmány a német állampolgárok magyarországi vidéki térségekbe irányuló migrációját vizsgálja, különös tekintettel a társadalmi osztályhelyzet, az életút alakulása és a változó társadalmi elvárások szerepére. Négy dél-magyarországi faluban végzett, egyéves kvalitatív kutatásra támaszkodva az elemzés rámutat arra, hogy az időskori áttelepülés szorosan összefonódik a „mobil öregedés” jelenségével és az aktív életmód fenntartásának igényével. Továbbá a gazdasági és életmódbeli motivációk mellett a politikai tényezők is meghatározó vonzerőként jelennek meg: ide sorolható a magyarországi konzervatív politikai klíma, az uniós szabályozás viszonylagos korlátozottsága, valamint a szigorú migrációs politika iránti preferencia. Az eredmények hozzájárulnak az életmód-migráció, a geoarbitrázs és a transznacionális öregedés társadalmi-politikai dimenzióiról szóló szakirodalmi diskurzusokhoz.

**Kulcsszavak:** migráció, Németország, Magyarország, vidéki térségek, geoarbitrázs

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### Highlights

- German migration reshapes demographic trends in rural Hungary.
- Later-life migration reflects mobile aging and active lifestyle strategies.

- Political motivations complement lifestyle and economic migration drivers.
  - Class and life-course shape transnational residential mobility.
  - Rural Hungary attracts migrants through socio-political as well as amenity factors.
  - The study advances debates on lifestyle migration and geoarbitrage.
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## 1. Introduction

Migration has been a constant feature of human history and remains an anthropological universal. In the contemporary era, mobility and migration processes – together with their social, economic, and cultural consequences – have become defining characteristics of globalization and are now embedded in everyday life (Düvell, 2006). For much of the twentieth century, migration research was dominated by bipolar models that emphasized unidirectional flows from less-developed to more-developed regions, largely attributed to economic disparities and the pursuit of better opportunities. Over time, however, this one-dimensional perspective has been challenged. Scholars now recognize that migration is deeply embedded in shifting economic, institutional, political, and social relationships, and that it takes increasingly diverse forms.

The intensification of globalization, the spread of digital communication, cheaper transportation, and the rise of individual lifestyle choices have all expanded the spectrum of mobility. In Europe, intra-continental migration has become particularly significant, shaping not only metropolitan centers but also rural regions that have long suffered from population decline. Explanations for individual migration decisions are equally diverse. For the middle class, migration to rural areas is often motivated by positive associations with landscapes and nature (Nemes and Tomay, 2022), alongside aspirations for an improved quality of life, which can be achieved through cross-border mobility (Benson and O'Reilly, 2016). By contrast, among less affluent groups, migration may be driven more by fears of social and economic decline. In this context, the phenomenon of “geoarbitrage” has gained relevance, as individuals seek out destinations with lower living costs (Hayes, 2018).

The COVID-19 pandemic further reshaped migration dynamics. Rural areas, associated with greater security, gained renewed appeal (Holleran, 2022), while the rapid proliferation of remote work expanded the feasibility of relocating from higher-cost urban regions to more affordable villages (Csurgó and Kovách, 2023). In Hungary, the presence of older foreign in-migrants underscores the growing importance of the “silver economy” (Váradi et al., 2018). Migration is also frequently driven by ideological and political considerations: Many individuals seek social environments that reflect their values, worldviews, and conceptions of freedom (Nyíri and Xiang, 2022). In this regard, some authors link the arrival of German citizens in Hungary to the welcoming atmosphere of rural settlements, the existence of a functioning “German infrastructure,” and perceptions of greater public safety (Bauer, 2023).

Against this backdrop, understanding the motivations, experiences, and impacts of such migrants is crucial to capturing the nuanced transformations occurring in rural communities. This study

contributes to the literature by examining the migration of German citizens to rural Hungary. It explores their reasons for choosing Hungary in general and certain localities in particular, as well as the extent and forms of their integration into local society. A distinctive aspect of the research is its focus on villages in southern Hungary that are home to a German minority. This raises additional questions: whether the presence of German-speaking communities serves as a destination-specific pull factor for contemporary German migrants, and whether historical, linguistic, and cultural proximity – including perceived similarities in values, attitudes, and everyday norms – shapes both settlement decisions and subsequent integration.

Empirically, this study draws on a one-year research project (2024–2025) conducted in four villages in Baranya and Bács-Kiskun counties, which share a German-Hungarian heritage. Thirty-six semi-structured interviews were conducted with German migrants, key local actors (mayors, teachers, social workers, etc.), and native residents. By situating the empirical case of rural Hungary within the broader field of international migration studies, this paper seeks to expand the understanding of German migration while offering new insights into geoarbitrage<sup>2</sup>, lifestyle migration, and the reconfiguration of aging in transnational social spaces.

By combining insights from migration studies, rural sociology, and the community integration literature, this study seeks to illuminate the complex interplay among mobility, settlement choices, and local social transformations. In doing so, it contributes to broader discussions on the contemporary dynamics of rural migration, transnational settlement patterns, and the sociocultural implications of lifestyle-driven relocation in Central and Eastern Europe.

## **2. Theoretical background**

The academic study of migration has been shaped by diverse historical and contemporary approaches. One widely used conceptual tool is the distinction between push and pull factors. For much of the twentieth century, migration research was dominated by bipolar models, which assumed flows from less developed to more developed regions, from East to West, or South to North, driven by economic inequalities. However, this view has been challenged. In the German context, discussions about brain drain (Bade, 2006; Dill and Dixon, 2005) have highlighted the emigration of highly qualified individuals. The emergence of migration within Western European societies with comparable living standards (Friedrich and Kaiser, 2002), and increased mobility linked to globalization, lifestyle choices, digital communication, and cheaper transportation, has drawn attention to new forms of movement (Beck, 1997; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1994). Diversified typologies have emerged, recognizing that migration is embedded in shifting economic, institutional, political, and social relations (Amelina et al., 2016). When conceptualizing the determinants of migration, there is consensus that a variety of personal and

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<sup>2</sup> Geographic arbitrage refers to the strategic exploitation of cross-national differences in the cost of living, whereby individuals relocate to contexts where everyday expenses are lower relative to their income or assets. By leveraging spatial disparities in housing, food, healthcare, insurance, and other basic costs – often mediated through currency differentials – such mobility can substantially enhance purchasing power and overall financial well-being.

contextual motivations are at play, with people's general life aspirations central alongside external factors. Complex motivations determine preference for migration over staying. According to Carling (2014), aspirations to migrate are socially constructed projects in which intrinsic values play just as much a role as the parallel desire to achieve something through them. The disposition towards mobility versus immobility is therefore strongly linked to attitudes. However, this aspiration must be accompanied by the ability to take the step towards migration, so that these intentions are translated into actual migration.

Faist observes a contemporary "mobility turn," whereby migration has increasingly become normalized and perceived as a common feature of social life (Faist 2020). According to Faist, social inequalities – including disparities in income, wealth, education, and status – constitute major drivers of migration processes. Migration can function as a strategy to reduce these inequalities and improve migrants' social positions. Importantly, inequality is not limited to economic dimensions but also entails political, social, and cultural consequences (Faist 2020). Although labour migration remains the dominant form of mobility globally (Faist 2020), this pattern is only partially applicable in the Hungarian context examined in this study. While Hungary also attracts highly skilled migrants, these groups are predominantly concentrated in urban centres and therefore fall outside the scope of the present research, which focuses primarily on rural retirement and lifestyle migration.

Research on amenity and lifestyle migration indicates many affluent individuals move for a perceived higher "quality of life" rather than jobs or political reasons. Benson and O'Reilly (2009: 609) define lifestyle migration as "the spatial mobility of relatively affluent individuals of all ages, moving either part-time or full-time to places that are meaningful because, for various reasons, they offer the potential of a better quality of life." These moves are motivated by aesthetic, cultural, or experiential factor – such as a pleasant climate, attractive scenery, or a slower pace of life – rather than direct economic advancement (Benson and O'Reilly, 2016). Studies ranging from middle-class Britons purchasing homes in rural France to American retirees in Latin America highlight how lifestyle migrants construct new identities and pursue emotionally meaningful visions of the "good life." Researchers also emphasize the role of social class and inequality in shaping these mobilities: amenity migrants are typically middle- or upper-class individuals possessing the financial, cultural, and legal capital necessary for international relocation (Hayes, 2018; Rainer, 2019).

A steadily increasing proportion of retirees from various European countries appear to pursue permanent or temporary retirement abroad, particularly in southern destinations (O'Reilly, 2007). In the context of migration in later life, scholars have noted that older migrants are frequently attracted to countries offering favorable climates, appealing landscapes, and extensive leisure opportunities. At the same time, significantly lower living costs often play a decisive role in relocation decisions (Schneider, 2010). Within retirement migration research, a distinction is commonly made between "amenity-seeking migrants" and "dependency migrants" (Bade et al., 2007). Amenity-seeking migrants are primarily motivated by quality-of-life improvements and therefore represent an active and proactive migration strategy. By

contrast, dependency-driven migration is associated with hardship, deprivation, or economic insecurity, reflecting avoidance or coping strategies in later life. Such migration may become necessary when living costs that had previously been manageable during working life become unaffordable after retirement due to reduced income (Schneider, 2010). Schneider also argues that the foreign property market itself should be understood as an important indicator and facilitator of retirement migration processes (Schneider, 2010).

Scholars of digital nomadism and remote work identify geoarbitrage as a related but distinct phenomenon emphasizing economic logic in mobility. Geoarbitrage involves earning income in a high-wage economy while living in a lower-cost location, thereby extending purchasing power and improving living standards (Thompson, 2019). Geoarbitrage typically involves Western professionals relocating to affordable destinations where salaries "go a long way" (Thompson, 2019). These migrants often select amenity-rich locales while emphasizing affordability and comfort. Geoarbitrage is accessible primarily to those with digital skills, flexible remote employment or pensions, and "strong" passports, allowing privileged migrants to capitalize on global price differentials unavailable to less mobile groups (Cook, 2020). Both lifestyle migrants and geoarbitrageurs seek improved living conditions beyond conventional labour migration frameworks and generally originate from comparatively privileged social strata. However, geoarbitrage places greater emphasis on economic arbitrage than on symbolic or identity-related rewards. For example, an American retiree's choice to live in Ecuador or Thailand may be justified by the climate or "living like a king" on relatively modest pension (Hayes, 2018). At the same time, both geoarbitrage and lifestyle migration can reinforce inequities: wealthy movers may boost local economies but contribute to rising housing prices and increase touristification (Sulyok et al., 2024).

Since the early 2000s, growing scholarly attention has been devoted to international retirement migration (IRM). This mobility is shaped by demographic changes, lifestyle diversification in later life, and structural opportunities available to older generations (Denninger et al., 2014). Retirement migration is influenced by climate, lifestyle preferences, healthcare systems, legal frameworks, and living costs (Weidinger and Kordel, 2015; Egidi, 2020; Faist, 2020). While the United States, Switzerland, Austria, and the Mediterranean remain key destinations for German retirees, the eastward enlargement of the European Union and the Schengen Area have opened migration pathways towards Central and Eastern Europe (Ette and Sauer, 2011; Gabanyi, 1991; Kordel and Lutsch, 2018; Wiegand, 2023). However, empirical research on German retirement migration to Eastern Europe, especially to Hungary, remains limited compared to Mediterranean cases (e.g., Kaiser, 2011; Kordel, 2013; Rainer, 2019; Yilmaz, 2019). Recent studies demonstrate that retirement migration extends beyond lifestyle considerations. Although many migrants seek a more comfortable and fulfilling life, others are increasingly driven by financial constraints, lower living costs, and access to affordable housing or care services (Bender et al., 2018; Iorio, 2020). Consequently, scholarly analysis has broadened from interpretations centred on voluntary lifestyle choices to approaches that emphasize strategies for coping with social and economic insecurities in later life.

### 3. German migration to rural Hungary

Germany, often seen as an immigration country, also experiences significant emigration. Annually, 1.2 to 1.3 million people leave, including about 270,000 German citizens, up from 150,000 in 2007 (Schneider, 2010). Popular destinations are Switzerland, Austria, and the USA, with Spain as a key retirement spot. Migration to Eastern Europe, especially Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, and Hungary, has grown. The current increase in emigration from Germany to Eastern Europe is driven primarily by the search for a higher quality of life, lower living costs, and political and cultural factors. As statistical data show, emigration to Eastern European countries (as of September 2025) is in the thousands (up to 6–7 thousand), whereas emigration to Hungary is in the tens of thousands, exceeding 23 thousand<sup>3</sup>. Most emigrants remain in the labor market and are often highly qualified, but retirement migration is notable: The German Federal Statistical Office reports pension transfers to 1.7 million abroad. Conversely, Hungary is mainly a country of emigration. In the past two decades, many young academics and skilled workers moved to Western Europe, notably Austria, Germany, and the UK, due to political and economic reasons. Immigration to Hungary is politically restricted, yet it attracts migrants from Asia and the EU.

German migration to Hungary has historical roots predating the 1990 political regime change. Previously, permanent settlement from abroad, particularly Western Europe, was rare. During the Kádár regime, West German tourists visited Hungary, mainly Lake Balaton (Lőrincz et al., 2021), Budapest, and villages with ethnic German populations. Many trips were family visits disguised as tourism. Similar patterns occurred in Poland and Czechoslovakia, where Heimwehtourismus ("homesick tourism") emerged after World War II: Germans who had been expelled visited former homes, maintained connections with relatives, and used these visits to prepare for real estate acquisitions (Bretschneider, 2018). This dynamic occurred in Hungary from the 1960s onwards (Slachta, 2020) and expanded to property purchases in the 1990s, as Germans with family ties acquired holiday homes for future settlement. After the regime change, a new wave of German immigration to Hungary emerged, with German nationals resettling in rural areas. Some were descendants of Hungary's German minority, expelled after World War II, who returned to ancestral villages, while others used their properties as second homes. This represents commuter migration or re-migration, reflecting mobility rooted in historical, identity, economic, or lifestyle factors.

German immigrant numbers have risen over the past decade, noted in Hungarian and German media, with Budapest and Lake Balaton being popular (Löke et al., 2020, Lőrincz et al., 2021, Koóset al., 2024, 2025, Váradi et al., 2025). Based on residence permit applications<sup>4</sup>, German citizens mostly reside in Southern Transdanubia (Somogy and Baranya counties) and in Bács-Kiskun county east of the Danube (Figure 1). Retirement migration from German-speaking

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.destatis.de/Europa/DE/Thema/Bevoelkerung-Arbeit-Soziales/Bevoelkerung/Deutsche\\_im\\_Ausland.html](https://www.destatis.de/Europa/DE/Thema/Bevoelkerung-Arbeit-Soziales/Bevoelkerung/Deutsche_im_Ausland.html)

<sup>4</sup> People staying in Hungary for more than 90 days must apply for a residence permit even if they come from an EU country.

countries, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Finland means that older migrants make up a large share of newcomers to Hungary. Máté and Pirisi (2019) examined Western European migration to Hungarian villages in the Baranya Hills through interviews with mayors and international residents. Their findings show non-Hungarians often occupy higher-status positions in small, disadvantaged settlements. Interviewees cite low property prices, reduced living costs, and favorable climate as key motivations for migration (Máté and Pirisi, 2019). The study categorizes migrants into two groups: middle-class lifestyle migrants seeking a better quality of life, and vulnerable individuals escaping adverse conditions. These migrants depend on pensions or benefits from their countries that exceed local Hungarian standards. Integration success depends on organized local communities and newcomers' participation in village life, while isolation, communication barriers, and economic disparities hinder integration (Máté and Pirisi, 2019). Koós, Tátrai, and Gábrriel (2024) studied the migration of elderly foreign nationals to rural Hungary using 2022 census data. Their analysis shows nearly one-third of foreign citizens over 60 are German, many choosing rural settlements (Koós, Tátrai, and Gábrriel, 2024). In several Southern Transdanubian villages, German immigrants exceed 10% of the elderly population. The sex ratio remains balanced, with slightly more males. Active retirees choose scenic locations, while lower-income pensioners select peripheral areas for financial reasons, following geoarbitrage theory (Koós, Tátrai, and Gábrriel, 2024). Germans prefer western Hungarian villages with larger populations, aging communities, and better infrastructure, avoiding younger settlements with higher Roma populations. They settle in economically disadvantaged villages near tourist regions, where affordable real estate offsets limited services. This pattern mirrors Italian pensioners' migration to Bulgaria (Koós, Tátrai, and Gábrriel, 2024).

Váradi et al. (2025) interviewed locals and German newcomers in six Southern Transdanubian villages. Their study examines German migration through the lenses of retirement migration, geoarbitrage, and transnational gentrification theories (Váradi et al., 2025). This study focuses on a region in the inner periphery that differs significantly from the villages with a Swabian minority we have studied in terms of history, language, and culture. Germans moving to disadvantaged settlements are often lower-middle-class and driven by livelihood crises and fears of decline. Inexpensive housing outweighs concerns about amenities or living environments. Some families rent before buying, while others relocate pre-retirement and renovate properties (Váradi et al., 2025). Interviewees cited German political and economic factors – governance crises, energy prices, migration, and war – as influencing their decisions, in contrast to Hungary's perceived stability. The authors note these movements do not generate gentrification: Low local purchasing power prevents competition with newcomers, and younger locals often relocate to better-served areas. German immigration creates a patchwork social structure, with limited integration between newcomers, local elites, urban migrants, and disadvantaged residents (Váradi et al., 2025). Tomay and Ragadics (2025) examined German migration to Swabian villages. They highlight that lower-status pensioners seeking financial security increasingly move to rural areas. Earlier patterns included post-World War II displaced returnees, rural investors, and

purchases of residential tourism properties. Recent arrivals include families relocating due to German Covid-19 regulations, and cryptocurrency miners (Tomay and Ragadics, 2025).

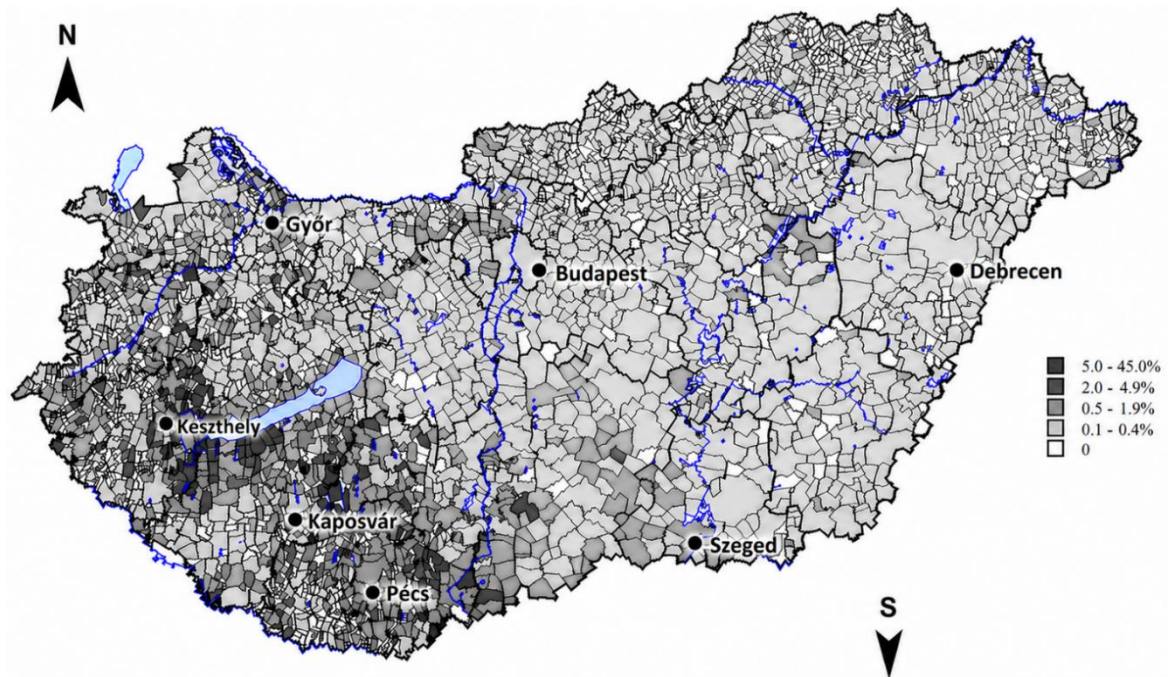


Figure 1. German-born residence permit applicants as a percentage of the resident population (2021). Source: created by Bálint Koós based on KSH data

#### 4. Research questions and methods

Our research explored why German citizens choose Hungary as their new home, examining factors influencing destination selection and permanent settlement. We explore how migrants perceive rural Hungarian life and how they are received by locals. Key questions include whether newcomers integrate into existing social structures or form enclaves, and the impact of these newcomers on village life. Building on the literature on lifestyle migration, geoarbitrage, retirement migration, and migration aspirations, this study examines how economic, ideological, and sociocultural factors shape the migration of German citizens to rural Hungary. Particular attention is paid to the role of historically German-speaking settlements and to the ways migrants negotiate belonging and integration within local communities. The study is guided by the following research questions:

- 1) To what extent do small Hungarian villages function as destinations for amenity- and lifestyle-oriented migration, particularly through the attractiveness of rural landscapes, tranquillity, slower-paced living and access to property (e.g., a house with a garden)?
- 2) How does the possibility of maintaining or improving living standards in Hungary – especially among migrants relying on German pensions, savings or remote income – shape migration decisions, and to what degree can these mobility strategies be interpreted through the concept of geoarbitrage?

- 3) In what ways do ideological and political considerations influence migration aspirations and destination choice, including migrants' perceptions of Hungary and Germany regarding issues such as Covid-19 governance, migration, public safety and broader political issues?
- 4) How do historical, linguistic, and cultural ties influence settlement choice and integration processes among German migrants in rural Hungary? More specifically, to what extent do German-speaking Swabian villages provide cultural familiarity, perceived value alignment, or a sense of social belonging that facilitate both the decision to settle in Hungary and the integration process into local communities?

In a one-year research project starting in September 2024, we conducted four case studies in two southern Hungarian counties (Bács-Kiskun and Baranya Counties). The selected villages are all historically associated with the Danube Swabians – German ethnic minority in Hungary – and have also become established destinations of contemporary immigration from Germany. The case study settlements were selected through purposive sampling to capture localities with both a historically embedded German cultural presence and recent international in-migration. We applied qualitative methodology using semi-structured interviews to ensure comparability across cases while also allowing participants to elaborate on personal experiences, migration trajectories, and locally embedded interpretations. Fieldwork was conducted between September 2024 and August 2025. In total, we conducted 36 in-depth interviews: 19 with German migrants who had settled in the selected villages, and 17 with key local actors, including municipal leaders, representatives of health and education sectors, members of local associations, and long-term residents involved in community life. The migrant participants varied in age, household composition, migration motivations, and length of residence, enabling exploration of diverse migration and integration experiences. However, the qualitative sample is not statistically representative; therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to the broader population of German migrants in Hungary.

The interviews focused on migration motivations, locality characteristics, integration experiences, everyday social relations and perceptions of local community change. Interviews typically lasted between 60 and 120 minutes and were recorded with informed consent. The recordings were transcribed and subjected to thematic coding. The analysis followed an inductive approach, allowing recurring patterns, contrasts, and locally embedded narratives to emerge from the data. All interview excerpts cited in the study were translated into English.

## **5. The case study settlements**

Dunafalva is a village of 800 inhabitants on the left bank of the Danube, with weekend homes and guesthouses. Tourists visit the Danube beach in summer and go hunting in winter. The population is aging rapidly, with only a lower-grade school and significant youth emigration. In Dunafalva, Swabian traditions are largely forgotten. No strong German community preserves traditions as in other settlements, and fewer residents speak German. The local government of

the German minority organizes community activities. Tourism development is a main goal, and the planned Danube bridge should improve accessibility.

Hajós was founded in the 1720s when the Archbishop of Kalocsa settled southern Germans on lands captured from the Turks. Winegrowing, promoted by the archbishopric, still determines the settlement's life, with over 1,200 cellars carved into loess walls. The uniform Swabian community was disrupted by post-World War II deportations, changing its ethnic, religious, and linguistic makeup. German traditions remain central to local cultural life. The settlement uses its proximity to the Danube for tourism. Since the 1980s, Danube boats have stopped at wine-cellar restaurants, though tourism declined in the 2000s. Young winemakers are developing ways to promote quality wine, with support from the new mayor. Hajós attained town status in 2008. Despite adequate infrastructure and services, local jobs are scarce. Young and educated residents often emigrate, while improved transportation and remote work have increased commuting. The main challenges are retaining young residents and revitalizing the town, which the government seeks to do through improved housing and affordable properties for young families.

Geresdlak formed in 1968 from three settlements, and this fragmentation still characterizes the village. In the eighteenth century, German settlers from the Black Forest joined local Serbians. After World War II deportations, Hungarians were resettled in the village, but Swabians remained the majority until the 1990s. During socialism and after the regime change, many young people left for urban centers or Germany to seek jobs. The population is aging, and the primary school struggles with student shortages despite serving an area that includes eight surrounding villages. Local jobs are scarce, and many work in German-speaking countries. Some Roma families live in the village. Finnish pensioners settled there in the early 2000s, attracted by the climate. They have renovated farmhouses, tend gardens, and produce wine. Geresdlak's cultural life links to German traditions and Swabian cuisine, including an annual display of gingerbread models of all 400 houses in the village.

Véménd is a village in the Geresdi Hills, west of the Danube, with a population of over 1,000, including ethnic Germans, Roma, and Hungarian settlers who arrived after World War II. This caused conflicts in the formerly German village, and mixed marriages became common only towards socialism's end. During that period, Véménd served as a hub for municipal functions and agricultural cooperatives, but later lost this role. Its elementary school serves children from neighboring settlements without one. The motorway, completed in 2010, improved accessibility but didn't stop the youth exodus and aging. Traditional Swabian events draw people from other villages.

*Table 1. Demographic characteristics of examined settlements (Census, 2022<sup>5</sup>; TeIR<sup>6</sup>). Source: Census, 2022, TEIR, own editing, with the footnotes as well*

|                                                              | Dunafalva | Hajós | Geresdlak | Véménd | Hungary    |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|-------|-----------|--------|------------|
| Population (2023)                                            | 837       | 2700  | 727       | 1163   | 9,599,744  |
| Population (2022) as a percentage of the 2001 population (%) | 79.0      | 77.2  | 74.9      | 70.2   | 94.15      |
| Average annual natural population decline (2011–2023) (%)    | -9.8      | -8.5  | -9.3      | -9.0   | 4.5        |
| Average annual migration balance (2011–2023) (%)             | -1.2      | -6.7  | -4.0      | -6.2   | 1.9 (2021) |
| Aging index (2023)                                           | 227.4     | 255.6 | 192.5     | 196.3  | 141        |
| Percentage of ethnic German minority (2022) (%)              | 12.0      | 32.8  | 28.7      | 26.5   | 1.48       |
| Number of EU foreigners (2022)                               | 32        | 108   | 39        | 20     | 218,061    |
| Percentage of foreigners (2022) (%)                          | 3.8       | 4.0   | 5.4       | 1.7    | 2.27       |

All settlements are characterized by population ageing and natural decline (approximately -9‰ annually). The ageing index exceeds the national average (141.5) in each case, reaching 255.6 in Hajós. Net migration remains negative, in line with district trends, although these settlements attract relatively more newcomers than more peripheral rural areas. Over the past two decades, low fertility and youth outmigration have reduced population levels to below 80% of their early-2000s size. In all four settlements, at least 10% of residents identify as ethnically German, with Hajós having the highest share (around one third). Owing to Swabian traditions and German-language education, German proficiency is widespread; many younger residents work in Germany or Austria, while some older women engage in cross-border care work. Foreign nationals – predominantly Germans – account for 1.7–5.3% of the population, although qualitative evidence (Máté and Pirisi, 2019) suggests their actual number is higher. Geresdlak has the highest proportion of foreign residents, including a small Finnish community. Maintaining village communities and institutions remains a key challenge for municipal decision-makers.

## 6. Results

Based on interviews with German migrants and key local actors, the following section examines the migration process from multiple perspectives. The first part explores the motivations of the German migrants, focusing on their expectations regarding life in a Hungarian village, the factors influencing their choice of settlement, and how they organize their everyday lives. The second part addresses the perspective of the host communities, represented by key local actors. This includes an assessment of how they view the arrival of German migrants, with

<sup>5</sup> Hungarian Central Statistic Office – Census 2022: <https://nepszamlalas2022.ksh.hu/en/database/>

<sup>6</sup> TeIR – National Regional Development and Spatial Planning Information System: <https://www.oeny.hu/oeny/teir/#/>

particular attention to the perceived benefits, as well as the challenges and tensions that accompany this process. Finally, the third part analyzes the integration of newcomers into the host communities, highlighting both their own experiences and broader perceptions of social and community transformation.

## **7. German migrants**

Most interviewees were born and raised in Germany, yet almost all of them experienced a form of “internal mobility” prior to emigration. Several had moved frequently within Germany, while others had lived abroad temporarily, worked in different regions due to military service, or spent extended periods travelling across Europe, often in camper vans. Some also resided in multiple places within Hungary before eventually settling in their current village, where they now consider themselves to have found a new “home.” The migrants were primarily couples or families, though some were single. Family ties to Germany varied: While some maintained close relationships with parents, siblings, or children, others reported limited or no contact, often due to divorce or estrangement. Many have restarted their lives multiple times, sometimes following bankruptcy or insolvency proceedings, which suggests a certain predisposition toward mobility and emigration.

Migrants originate from all parts of Germany. There is no significant difference in the number of people coming from East and West Germany. Most come from major metropolitan areas such as Leipzig, Munich, Stuttgart, Cologne, and Hamburg, and choose to relocate to rural Hungary – often to small villages where they can acquire a house with a garden. These areas, characterized by their peripheral location and the outmigration of younger locals, stand in sharp contrast to the urban centers the migrants left behind.

Their motivations for moving are complex and multifaceted, ranging from appreciation of Hungary’s climate and natural landscape – characteristic of lifestyle migration – to financial considerations such as lower living costs, a form of geoarbitrage.

Political views also featured prominently in the decision-making process, alongside the country’s proximity to Germany: *“Germany pays billions for Ukraine, and pensioners get nothing. Sometimes I feel homesick, but I sold everything there. The weather here is better, and life is cheaper”* (I26, German immigrant, Geresdlak). Many previously visited Hungary as tourists and developed a sense of familiarity and positive associations, which reinforced their decision to settle.

Two broad groups of German migrants can be distinguished. The first comprises those who arrived in the 1990s, typically at or after retirement age. Their migration decisions resulted from lengthy planning processes, during which they often considered other destinations, most notably Spain, but ultimately chose Hungary for its affordability and perceived quality of life. For them, the move was motivated by a search for tranquility, lower living expenses, and positive holiday experiences in Hungary: *“It is identical to how Germany used to be, how it was in our childhood.*

*Germany is different now. It takes me back to my childhood. The village is a small social system; people help each other" (I7, German immigrant, Dunafalva).*

The second group consists of more recent arrivals, many of whom relocated after 2015. They made their migration decisions more rapidly and with fewer alternative destinations in mind. *"It was clear that we had to leave Germany. At first, we considered Colombia or Cambodia because they are inexpensive. But my wife found a group on Facebook in Hungary. That's how we found this house, and now we live here"* (German migrant Hajós). Unlike the earlier group, these migrants were primarily motivated by dissatisfaction with political, social, and economic developments in Germany. They cited concerns about press freedom, public safety, and immigration, particularly the arrival of refugees, whom they associated with increased insecurity and what they perceived as unfair preferential treatment: *"In Germany, people are afraid to walk alone on the streets. Here in Hungary, there are no foreigners, so there is no fear"* (I27, German immigrant, Geresdlak). For these migrants, Hungary's political climate, viewed as more aligned with their values, was a decisive factor. Some even expressed the hope that Hungary would eventually leave the EU. Those who arrived in the 1990s often expressed a similar appreciation for conditions in Hungary and condemned recent changes in Germany, affirming their decision to relocate – even if their original motivation differed.

Alongside political considerations, other motivations were also cited, including affordable housing, the favorable climate, the attractive natural environment, and positive experiences with the local population. However, the choice of settlement was often less deliberate; property acquisition was frequently shaped by availability, as advertised through listings, real estate agents, or acquaintances, rather than by a desire to move to a particular village. Within this group, some further distinctions are necessary. For those who purchased second homes in Hungary before 2015, political motivations were initially absent, even though they later developed critical views of developments in Germany. Wealthier individuals within this group often retained property in Germany while purchasing and renovating multiple houses in Hungary. These migrants can be seen as "classic" lifestyle migrants, typically retirees in a privileged position who sought leisure opportunities, scenic landscapes, and proximity to amenities: *"I don't have a bad pension, so it wasn't for financial reasons that I came to Hungary. It's more of a pleasant side effect that it's cheaper here"* (I29, German immigrant, Geresdlak). They specifically looked for property along the Danube because of the higher quality of life and the beaches, where you can fish and go boating. As Weidinger & Kordel (2015) show, spa towns are increasingly becoming a destination for older migrants. They predict a rise in migration to such destinations, particularly in Central Europe. While the proximity of spa towns (Igal, Harkány) played a role for some interviewees, and others emphasized the importance of climate and landscape, according to our results, financial considerations clearly dominated.

By contrast, a subset of recent migrants can hardly be considered voluntary in the conventional sense. For them, precarious economic circumstances – including low pensions, high taxes, or unaffordable housing costs in Germany – made relocation a necessity rather than a choice.

In interviews, the migrants described their move as a response to financial hardship and a perceived decline in social justice, often emphasizing their belief that German citizens were disadvantaged in comparison to migrants. They did not receive help; at best, they could “collect bottles from the rubbish” in order to survive. In their view, migrants, by contrast, receive all the support they need without having to work. Some voiced strong disillusionment with Germany, declaring that they would “never set foot on German soil again.”

At the same time, all respondents were satisfied with their decision and with their new lives in Hungary, thereby retrospectively legitimizing it by highlighting factors such as the tidiness and community spirit of the villages and the ability to communicate in German with local residents. While the latter was mentioned in all interviews as something the respondents appreciated on arrival, none chose their place of residence because they had prior knowledge that the local residents spoke German.

Overall, the largest group consists of pensioners living on German retirement benefits, which ensure a stable livelihood. Their case thus resembles international retirement migration. Others, particularly more recent arrivals, are younger and often employed. While some continue their previous work remotely or in cross-border contexts such as tourism, real estate, or skilled trades catering to foreigners, others take on casual local jobs that do not require Hungarian language proficiency.

Most of them anticipate continued growth in the German migrant community and actively facilitate it, for example, by assisting relatives, friends, or other newcomers with administrative matters and integration, or by setting up associations for this purpose.

### **7.1 New neighbors – from the viewpoint of key local actors**

The case study settlements differ in their economic and social profiles and in their demographic structures. Consequently, German immigrants encounter diverse rural contexts. The influx of Germans has increased in all settlements over the past 8–10 years. Local respondents frequently compared the newcomers to earlier waves of migrants, in terms of their financial circumstances, the upkeep of purchased properties, relations with villagers and neighbors, cooperation with local institutions, and participation in community programs. A lifestyle aligned with the locality's social norms is generally expected and encouraged.

How local residents evaluate the behavior of newcomers is closely tied to their previous experiences. In the Swabian villages of Transdanubia, the displacement of ethnic Germans after the Second World War and their subsequent attempts to return after the regime change of the early 1990s provided an important frame of reference. In Geresdlak, a local interviewee described several waves of migration: *“The first wave came after the regime change, when Germans with roots here returned and bought back their family homes, if available, or otherwise purchased property because of their ties to the village. (...) This wave subsided quickly, and then came others who had no family connections to the area. That was when hunting started in our area, which attracted them...”* (I23, key local actor, Geresdlak). According to this interviewee,

houses purchased in the 1990s have since changed hands multiple times, first acquired by Finns and subsequently by other Germans.

For many locals, the key reference group remains the relatively affluent Germans who bought property in the 1990s, alongside the Dutch and Finns who arrived somewhat later. In comparison, more recent German arrivals appear less inclined to adapt to local expectations. Their approach to property renovation is often described as gradual and leisurely, in contrast to the swift and efficient practices favored by local residents. They are also perceived to have greater difficulty in establishing connections with the local population. The newcomers of the 2010s are characterized by lower educational attainment than the preceding generation, with German typically serving as their only language of communication. Their reluctance to invest in learning even basic Hungarian is widely interpreted as a lack of openness: *“They take it for granted that everyone here speaks German and is helpful. Of course, we are, but it would be nice if they showed some willingness to integrate”* (I11, key local actor, Hajós).

Among local residents, German identity holds strong cultural significance and serves as an important community-stabilizing force. For this reason, many earlier newcomers were motivated to purchase property in villages with Swabian traditions, where German was widely spoken. Today, however, the situation appears to have shifted: *“Maybe ten years ago, when the first ones arrived, that was the motivation. But now, since they are moving to [nearby settlements without Swabian roots], it seems the primary reason is no longer Swabian traditions, but simply cheap real estate”* (I10, key local actor, Hajós).

Financial considerations indeed play a central role for many recent arrivals. Several respondents observed that newcomers frequently prioritize low-maintenance properties and renovations tailored for convenience rather than an appreciation of the values associated with rural life. As one resident explained, *“...they want it renovated, preferably with the entire courtyard paved so they don’t have to mow the grass. This is very important to them”* (I25, key local actor, Geresdlak). Cheaper rural real estate is particularly attractive to lower-status migrants, whose incomes – while modest in Germany – remain relatively high by Hungarian standards.

Local actors across all settlements agreed that German migration has driven up property prices. In small, depopulating villages, this is often perceived positively, since rising property values counteract rural decline and reduce the likelihood that disadvantaged Roma families will move in, as has occurred elsewhere in Hungary. In more central villages with preserved institutions, however, local leaders acknowledge the negative consequences of this influx, as younger locals are increasingly unable to afford property: *“It is no longer possible to buy a house for less than 20 million forints. (...) This is a problem, as there are young people who would like to stay in the village but cannot afford to buy a house at that price”* (I8, key local actor, Hajós). Despite rising real estate prices, the broader economic impact of the newcomers is limited. While wealthier households often hire local or regional craftsmen for renovations and landscaping, their everyday consumption typically bypasses the local economy. Instead, shopping is concentrated in larger supermarkets located in nearby towns.

In every settlement, locals emphasized that many recent migrants come from socially disadvantaged backgrounds: *“Unfortunately, now they mostly come from the German social welfare system”* (I10, key local actor, Hajós). Many residents describe more recent arrivals as less aligned with local values and traditions: *“There is no conflict, but we are not happy that they are coming”* (I10, key local actor, Hajós). Differences in lifestyle, work ethic, and tidiness are frequently cited: *“The only problem we have in the village is that the people who settled here from Germany are, let’s say, the less demanding groups. There are exceptions, of course, but we see that many of them are neglected, both in terms of their appearance and their health”* (I13, key local actor, Hajós). Such views are echoed by community workers who characterize recent migrants as originating from more precarious social backgrounds, in contrast to earlier pensioner groups. While older couples and pensioners often enjoy stable incomes above the rural Hungarian average, families with children appear more vulnerable and attract closer scrutiny from local institutions. Teachers, health visitors<sup>7</sup>, and social workers report cases of neglect, poor hygiene, and inadequate childcare: *“They come from such substandard domestic circumstances”* (I4, key local actor, Dunafalva). Another key local actor in Hajós added, *“The living conditions are appalling – they live in filth, in squalor”* (I21, key local actor, Hajós).

Local professionals who interact with German families in their daily work often report arrogance, unrealistic expectations, or behavior that conflicts with community norms: *“I see that they think they come here from Germany, and if they have a problem, we should solve it immediately. Sometimes that’s how I feel”* (I21, Hajós). Similarly, an interviewee in Dunafalva explained, *“They were confused, even aggressive, and they thought anything goes here. But it doesn’t; there are rules”* (I3, Dunafalva). Other concerns mentioned by locals include inadequate animal care and alcoholism: *“Drinking is quite common among them”* (I13, Hajós).

In summary, local respondents present a nuanced picture of German immigration. On the one hand, benefits are acknowledged, particularly the stimulation of the housing market, the revitalization of the built environment, and the strengthening of symbolic ties with Germany and Swabian traditions. On the other hand, significant challenges are highlighted, including rising property prices for locals, cultural differences, language barriers, and difficulties in social integration. There is a broad consensus that the demographic composition of German migrants has shifted in recent years, with increasing numbers of lower-status individuals and families facing marginalization in both Germany and Hungary. Local actors regard integration and community engagement as pressing challenges for the future.

## 7.2 Integration into village communities

The examined settlements feature diverse community life, supported by numerous civic organizations relative to population size. Hajós hosts 13 organizations, Dunafalva five, Geresdlak seven, and Véménd eight. Compared to neighboring areas and national data, these figures show

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<sup>7</sup> A health visitor is a healthcare professional who supports the health and well-being of expectant mothers, infants, children, and families through preventive care, counselling, and regular home visits.

dense civic life. Each settlement has 25–50 highly active members who are central across public authorities, educational institutions, and local businesses. Their organizations span activities including tradition preservation, cultural promotion, religious practice, leisure, environmental protection, advocacy, education, social care, and local economic development. This civic core integrates individuals into the community and mobilizes them around shared objectives. In three settlements, community life is shaped by German minorities. While other minority groups exist, the German population is the largest and most active in community organizations. Though ethnic distinctions were stronger in the older generation, such divisions matter less for younger residents. About one-third of organizations focus on preserving German traditions and values. In multi-ethnic contexts, minority organizations contribute to social cohesion, and ethnically based associations have proven especially durable: They survived political disruptions, including the socialist period, maintaining their cultural roots. German civic associations in these villages safeguard minority rights, transmit traditions, and maintain the Swabian dialect. Examples include folk dance groups, choirs, volunteer fire brigades, and civil guards<sup>8</sup>. Transnational partnerships strengthen these organizations, with support from twin towns in Germany and places linked to displaced Germans. These collaborations – often dating back to cultural exchanges in the 1980s – provide material assistance through donations and grants, supporting local institutions such as kindergartens and schools where the preservation of German culture is central.

Historically, these settlements were closed Swabian communities until the mid-twentieth century. Socio-political disruptions – including forced labor, deportations, resettlements, collectivization, and nationalization – undermined their cohesion and weakened Swabian identity, yet adversity fostered resilience. As a key actor observed, *“They had a harsh fate, but if we look around now, we can see how beautiful our village is and that it is still inhabited by Swabians”* (I8, key local actor, Hajós).

Several interviewees confirmed that the settlements are no longer closed but welcome anyone interested in their development. Problems arise when local residents feel that newcomers do not share this view. As an NGO leader explained, *“People are very kind, welcoming, and hospitable, and the same can be said about our programs. We do not organize them just for ourselves; we welcome everyone”* (I33, key local actor, Véménd). In the 1990s, cultural associations fostered connections with Germany, with new arrivals purchasing homes and participating in annual events, particularly during summer festivals and harvests.

However, since the 2010s, local perceptions have shifted markedly. German newcomers are widely perceived as introverted and reluctant to participate in community life. They seldom participate in community events, which are crucial for sustaining village identity. As one organizer explained, *“We tried. For example, last year we prepared invitations in German and English for the lavender festival and distributed them in mailboxes, but no one came. A Dutch couple*

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<sup>8</sup> The Civil Guard is a volunteer-based NGO that cooperates with the police to help maintain public safety and prevent crime.

*attended, but they left in the middle of the concert. That was a bit disappointing for me” (I33, key local actor, Véménd).* Nevertheless, moments of coexistence are visible in joint celebrations, religious festivals, sporting events, and through children’s enrollment in local schools, which often serve as a bridge between families.

Moreover, German newcomers tend not to form close-knit communities even among themselves: *“Get-togethers are not a customary practice among Germans. The formation of such close-knit communities is not characteristic of this group” (I23, key local actor, Geresdlak).* Many locals interpret this as a conscious choice of a separatist lifestyle characterized by a withdrawal from the community and an independent existence in a rural setting, often embodied by a detached, isolated house. This decision was reinforced by the newcomers’ break from existing networks in Germany, which may have contributed to less intense community engagement prior to relocation. This is particularly disappointing for community organizers looking to strengthen local Swabian culture: *“We endeavor to engage them, we translate the news, but attendance remains poor” (I32, key local actor, Véménd).* The heterogeneity of new arrivals poses significant challenges to their integration. Some newcomers form their own circles of friends or frequent German-run cafés that cater specifically to their tastes. While these venues are open to locals, they rarely visit them, reinforcing perceptions of separation. As one local official commented, *“Anyone can go to the German café, but I haven’t been there yet” (I10, key local actor, Hajós).*

Despite these challenges, local governments and organizations actively attempt to integrate newcomers. Outcomes remain mixed: While some Germans joined the local civil guard and began cooperating in community safety activities, most remain socially withdrawn: *“They are nice and friendly, but they don’t form a community. We tried to involve them: We offered them the use of the village hall and help in setting up a civic organization. But they don’t take advantage of it” (I33, key local actor, Véménd).*

In everyday life, the relationships that have formed between German newcomers and locals are entirely based on interest, including help with paperwork and administration, buying property, care, or finding skilled workers. Essentially, these are not friendships, but business relationships.

Tensions are further exacerbated by the political activities of some German migrants, who actively participate in local and European elections and are perceived by locals as supportive of the Hungarian government: *“The Germans and Dutch are coming; do we need them? They’ll be good voting machines. Orbán’s foreign policy will be reinforced” (I32, key local actor, Véménd).* Anti-immigrant sentiments thus manifest in nuanced forms – not only as distrust of outsiders, rooted in the traditional closure of village societies, but also as envy of newcomers’ material resources: *“The villagers don’t think that all the money spent on the village is good. They see that he replaced his roof; he has money for it, I don’t...” (I2, key local actor, Dunafalva).* Overall, community life in these settlements reflects both continuity and change. Long-standing traditions of civic organization and Swabian identity remain resilient, yet the increasing heterogeneity of German newcomers has complicated their integration and local perceptions of them.

## 8. Conclusion

The individualization and pluralization of European societies have contributed to increasing migration heterogeneity and destination diversification (Ette and Sauer, 2011; Schneider, 2023). Old-age migration exemplifies this trend. Many individuals pre-select destinations before retirement, purchase property, and spend time in second homes, later transitioning to permanent residence at retirement age (Sulyok et al., 2024). This trajectory, often categorized as lifestyle migration (Croucher, 2012; Kaiser, 2011; Kahveci et al., 2020; Lücke et al.), was evident among immigrants interviewed in our study. Fieldwork suggests migrant numbers will likely rise as seasonal migrants transition into full-time retirement migrants. Most German migrants observed are retirees, though there is a smaller cohort of working-age individuals and families. Regarding migrants' motivations, we have found that while motivations vary, economic considerations emerge as dominant. Migration enables individuals to enhance living standards, increase leisure opportunities, or attain better subsistence with fewer resources. For these groups, mobility becomes a geoarbitrage strategy: Lower pensions stretch further in rural Hungary, where costs remain affordable. Yet the political and social context plays a role, with its perceived fragility highlighting uncertainty in migration decisions. The findings indicate that migration to rural Hungary cannot be reduced to voluntary versus forced migration. Rather, it reflects polymorphous mobility, shaped by class differences, life-course trajectories, and social expectations. As IRM literature emphasizes, cross-border mobility persists in later life, supported by "mobile aging" practices (Kahveci et al., 2020). Among respondents, retirement was conceptualized as an active life stage, focused on health, vitality, and well-being. Moving to Hungary offered the opportunity to adopt otherwise unaffordable lifestyle patterns. A distinctive finding concerns political motivations for migration. Unlike typical lifestyle migration patterns, where climate and affordability dominate, many respondents emphasized seeking a "politically conservative" environment. They valued Hungary as a place "without woke influences," with limited enforcement of EU directives and restrictive asylum policies. Such discourse centred on finding a country "where the world is still in order." Political attitudes thus represent a novel pull factor, differentiating Hungary from conventional destinations for lifestyle migration. Although interviewees frequently expressed criticism of migrants who have arrived in Germany in recent years, they do not perceive themselves as migrants in the same sense, despite not necessarily making substantial efforts to adapt to Hungarian and local cultural norms.

Contrary to expectations, German minorities in Hungary played a minimal role in shaping settlement choices. With one exception, none of the interviewees had selected their destination based on Swabian heritage or German-speaking traditions. Nevertheless, migrants expressed appreciation for the ability to communicate in German upon arrival, whether with neighbors, shopkeepers, or local institutions. This reflects a shift from heritage-based migration in the 1990s – when Swabian identity attracted descendants seeking to reconnect – to a pragmatic approach where language and cultural remnants function as everyday resources rather than drivers of integration. Our findings resonate with Kaiser's (2011) argument that migration is self-perpetuating, as earlier waves reduce risks and costs for later migrants. The development of

networks through personal ties and new media facilitates subsequent migration. Several respondents reported helping others relocate by advertising properties, assisting with bureaucratic procedures, or facilitating social connections. Individual migration decisions reshape the context for potential newcomers, transforming Hungary into an increasingly "thinkable" destination (Bade, 2006). Patterns of integration among German migrants are uneven. While earlier cohorts engaged in local traditions and participated in cultural life, recent arrivals exhibit limited involvement. Their participation tends to be sporadic, through occasional donations, selective attendance at events, or minimal collaboration with associations. Rather than embedding themselves in the cultural fabric of host villages, many reproduce elements of their past experiences, projecting nostalgic ideals of rural idyll, safety, and order. The result is often parallel social spaces: Newcomers live alongside locals but remain socially distant. It is also important to note that, although less numerous, families with children are increasingly present among the newcomers and tend to engage more directly with local institutions, such as schools and child welfare services. Despite their relatively small number, this subgroup exerts a disproportionate influence on local perceptions, often contributing to more negative evaluations of the incoming population.

This coexistence produces benefits and frictions. Economically, German migration contributes to revitalizing abandoned homes and raising property prices, a dynamic welcomed in shrinking villages but contested where rising real estate prices limit opportunities for younger locals. Socially, tensions manifest in everyday interactions, particularly around child-rearing, property upkeep, or community norms. While not causing open conflict, these frictions underscore the challenges of integrating heterogeneous migrant groups into small, cohesive rural societies.

The findings indicate the emergence of a locally constructed hierarchy of desirable and less desirable newcomers, shaped by socioeconomic status, household composition, and perceived cultural proximity. Earlier waves of relatively affluent German migrants serve as a positive reference group, in contrast to more recent arrivals, who are often portrayed as socially disadvantaged and less inclined to adapt. Local preferences also reflect distinctions between families with children and other groups, as well as implicit comparisons with other marginalized populations, particularly Roma. At the same time, the attitudes attributed to recent German migrants suggest the persistence of asymmetrical, quasi-postcolonial imaginaries, expressed in expectations of preferential treatment and limited engagement with local language and norms. Overall, rural immigration emerges as a field of symbolic boundary-making, in which both locals and newcomers reproduce and negotiate broader European inequalities and cultural hierarchies.

In summary, German migration to rural Hungary represents a complex phenomenon intersecting with broader debates on lifestyle migration, international retirement migration, and geoarbitrage. While sharing similarities with global patterns of old-age mobility, the Hungarian case is distinguished by politicized motivations and ambivalent local heritage. The findings highlight opportunities like demographic stabilization and housing stock upgrades, and challenges including social distance and generational tensions. The contrast between culturally motivated migration of the 1990s and pragmatic, politically infused migration of the 2010s

illustrates a transformation in rural immigration patterns. These shifts require understanding rural transformation in contemporary Hungary, where economic rationalities, political ideologies, and local identities shape community cohesion in an era of transnational mobility.

Two critical areas demand further research. The first concerns legislation introduced in summer 2025 (Act XLVIII of 2025 on the Protection of Local Identity), which allows municipalities to regulate property purchases by newcomers. Some villages have utilized this provision, though experts caution this may lead to property price devaluation. The second issue is that family support and child protection services struggle to function as an integrated assistance network when dealing with intra-EU mobility. This is evident when families from Germany do not enroll their children in local institutions (kindergartens, schools). Since enrollment requires the child's official documentation, parents who do not apply for residence permits, along with their children, often "disappear" from social care provision. Local stakeholders, such as public health nurses, family support officers, or municipal clerks, attempt to verify children's vaccination records or schooling, but lack effective means of intervention and adequate information channels. When parents tire of these monitoring attempts – sometimes lasting six months to a year – they often return to Germany or relocate elsewhere, where local authorities must restart official procedures. Consequently, child protection authorities may be circumvented for years. This issue warrants research, as the influx of families from increasingly impoverished backgrounds shows no signs of diminishing.

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