# Dynamics of protests regarding the closing of small primary schools – evidence from Austria

Dynamiken des Protests bei Schließungen von kleinen Volksschulen in Österreich

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## Summary

This paper sets out to understand the dynamics between the political representatives (particularly the mayor) and the village population in rural municipalities in Austria where a small primary school was closed down. The results are based on fourteen qualitative interviews with mayors who have initiated the closing of the local village school, and where there is still one remaining school in the main town. It is shown that communication plays a key role in how the process develops. In most cases the mayors managed to make the school closure acceptable to the local population where reasonable arguments were put forward and enough time for discussions and negotiations were provided. In contrast, a lack of preparation was observed in conflict-ridden closure processes. Moreover, we found that the strength of the protest was also linked to the level of feeling of unity of the local population.

**Keywords:** small primary schools, school closures, protests, rural infrastructure, Austria

## Zusammenfassung

Der Artikel untersucht, wie politische EntscheidungsträgerInnen in österreichischen Landgemeinden mit Protesten der lokalen Bevölkerung umgehen, wenn eine Kleinschule in einem Ortsteil geschlossen wird und diese Schließung von der Gemeinde selbst initiiert wurde. Empirische Basis sind vierzehn qualitative Interviews mit BürgermeisterInnen, Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass die Art der Kommunikation eine wesentliche Rolle spielt, wie dieser Prozess abläuft. In den meisten Fällen ist es dem Bürgermeister oder der Bürgermeisterin durch Gespräche gelungen, Akzeptanz für die Schließung zu erreichen. Bedingungen dafür waren sowohl gut vorbereitete Argumente als auch ausreichend Zeit für die Abwicklung der Schließung. Sehr konfliktbehaftete Schließungsprozesse weisen in dieser Hinsicht deutliche Versäumnisse auf. Allerdings hängt die Stärke des Widerstands auch vom Zusammengehörigkeitsgefühl der lokalen Bevölkerung ab.

**Schlagworte:** kleine Volksschulen, Schulschließungen, Proteste, ländliche Infrastruktur, Österreich

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, school closures have become a frequent occurrence in Austria. In this context, the closure of more than 30 small schools by the Styrian government in 2012 was most prominent and provoked intensive protests (Der-Standard, 2012). However, not every school closure generates resistance, nor is the federal state always responsible for the closure. On the contrary, quite frequently, the decision to close the school is taken by the municipality itself. It is the aim of this article to address the question of how the political representatives in a municipality who want to shut down a small primary school in a local village, make this decision acceptable to the population. The majority of the investigated municipalities comprise around two thousand inhabitants, which means that the local population and the

political representatives are in close contact in everyday life. So, the question is: What strategies are used to maintain the social cohesion in the municipality?

This paper wants to contribute to the discussion on conflict situations *within* rural communities, which is a largely neglected topic in the literature on rural studies. If anything, it is the difficulties between the local population and immigrants who have attracted scientific research (Woods, 2003). In fact, living together in rural areas is very often associated with "community", where conflicts do not seem to be a part of daily interaction (Neu, 2016). This perspective is also reflected in Programmes for Rural Development where the topic of conflicts is also ignored (Marchner, 2016, 63).

The outline of this article is as follows: The next section provides an overview of the literature dealing with forms of protest in the context of a school closure. After having described the methods, the results are presented, based on fourteen interviews with mayors who initiated the closing of the small school in a local village. Three types of reaction are differentiated when the closure of a local school is at stake, with the strength of resistance put at the centre of the typology. In the final remarks, the implications of the analysis are exemplified.

## 2. Current state of research

According to Michael Woods (2003) a protest by a local population against rural school closure can be classified as "reactive ruralism", which implies the mobilization of a self-defined traditional rural population. He distinguishes this kind of protest from the "progressive ruralism" of environmental and anti-globalization protesters, and "aspirational ruralism", which means the mobilization of immigrants and like-minded actors to defend their fiscal and emotional investment in rural localities. Although this categorization is a helpful tool for classifying different kinds of protest in rural areas, the term "reactive ruralism" sounds somehow backwards-oriented and can easily be assumed to imply a conservative, non-progressive attitude on the part of the protesters, which might fall short of giving an adequately image of the reasons and the proceedings during the closing process.

Two aspects are of particular importance in this respect: firstly, the neoliberal policy agenda in the last three decades that is understood as a withdrawal of the state from public areas such as housing, health, or education. This has led to policies designed at the macro level by applying rules and principles which pretend to be rational, objective and efficient (Basu, 2003). Here, closing decisions are often number-driven by implementing new guidelines with regard to pupil numbers, school size, or fiscal objectives (Finnigan and Lavner, 2011, 4). In some cases the authorities in charge of decision-making simply equate the school size and educational quality, even though the debate about the closure was dominated by financial efficiency (Kearns et al., 2009; Kroismayr, 2016). Secondly, during the closing process, the par-

ticipatory rights of the community and procedural fairness are major issues. Communities perceive themselves as the real owners of the respective school as it is an integral part of the community's history and identity, where daily experiences of the community members amalgamate in multiple ways with the school (building) (Fredua-Kwarteng, 2005, 11). Protests by the local population indicate that the school has a meaning for them, which is a factor not usually taken into consideration in the larger decision-making process.

Other studies reveal further undemocratic proceedings, which mostly occurred within a neoliberal policy approach. In this context the use of a "neoliberal language" needs to be mentioned – a language which aims at hiding the fact that the decision has already been made, and pretending that another outcome is possible. Typical expressions are "community consultation" instead of "school closure" (Kearns et al., 2009, 135), "school consolidation", or "program relocation" (Basu, 2007, 118; Fredua-Kwarteng, 2005, 15). Deliberate ignorance of community rhythms can also be seen in the context of school-closure debates when, for instance, the participatory consultation meetings are scheduled during milking time in farming communities (Kearns et al., 2009, 135). Or, when politicians who decided to close a school in a Norwegian mountain village asked the local population after their visit for the safest way to go back, even though they had travelled along the same road as the school bus (Villa et al., 2015). Likewise, the role of the courts is questionable, as they normally refuse to quash a board's decision to close a school, not questioning the fairness or reasonableness of the board's closure policies or that of the ministerial regulations (Fredua-Kwarteng, 2005, 14). In a French case, the court stated that the closing process was contaminated by an "excess of power" on the board's side but was not willing to overturn the board's decision (Chignier-Riboulon and Fournier 2007, 232).

On a more structural level the lack of fairness in the closing processes is reflected by the fact that families disadvantaged in terms of income, language ability, education, or other resources are at a greater disadvantage when it comes to being able to protect their schools and are more likely to be affected by closing decisions (Bondi, 1988; Basu, 2003). That is why an analysis of protest letters without contextual socio-democratic information about the protest writers might lead to false conclusions. In recent studies, Swedish researchers Uba (2016) and Taghizadeh (2017) analyzed protest letters that are publicly accessible. Both found that schools defended by protest letters with a higher deliberative quality have a higher probability of remaining open than schools defended by letters of a lower deliberative quality. While Uba (2016, 11) points to the fact that compromise is an integral part of the political culture in Sweden, it could also be that the more sophisticated protest letters are related to the higher social background of the protest writers.

The forms of resistance presented in the following sections differ from the international results discussed above, as the closing decision was not initiated by the school board or the federal government but by the municipality itself. In

Austria, the municipality is the owner of the school building, which means it is responsible for upkeeping the school building, covering the running costs, and carrying out necessary repairs both inside and outside the building. As a result of these obligations, the municipality has the legal right to decide whether to close the school, although this can only be done with the permission of the federal state, which has the final say in any case. Since, as mentioned, the municipalities are small in size, with around two thousand inhabitants, the question is how mayors and the municipal council manage the closing process to preserve social cohesion and a friendly community atmosphere in the municipality.

## 3. Research design and methods

The data presented in this paper are a part of a larger research project which was carried out between 2013 and 2015. The aim was to gain preliminary insights into the extent of the closure of small primary schools in Austria and the consequences for the local communities, by interviewing mayors who had been involved with the school closure in their municipality. As a first step, all municipalities were identified that had closed down a small school permanently between 2001 and 2014. It turned out that a total of 230 small schools had been closed down. Out of this sample 30 municipalities all over Austria were selected, allocating the 30 interviews proportionally, according to the number of closures in each federal state. In order to make sure to get the "broadest" picture possible, a sampling plan for each federal state was made taking into consideration the number of pupils attending the school at the time of closure, the year of closure, the distance to the next school, the remaining number of schools in the municipality, the size of the municipality and the region it was located. This paper focuses on fourteen interviews with mayors who said in the interview that it was the municipality's own wish to close down the school in a local village, while one grammar school still remained open in the municipality's main town.

The qualitative interviews were held in the municipal offices. The mayors were asked to report on the process around the closure and to describe the changes the closure had brought to community life. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed following the practical guidelines given by Schmidt (2012) for the analysis of qualitative interviews. This means that the interviews were carefully read in order identify those passages that focused on the context and the process of the school closures. As a next step, these pas-

Table 1: Circumstances surrounding the closure of the small school

| Mayor/ Federal State | Number of Inhabitants (2015) | Number of pupils | Distance to new school (in km) | Main cause of closure | Level of Protest |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1/Tyrol | 1519 | 6 | 3 | Preventing the main town school of becoming a small school | High |
| 2/Upper A. | 1532 | 18 | 5 | Retirement of school principal | Low |
| 3/Carinthia | 3506 | 11 | 6 | Modernization of main town school | Medium |
| 4/Burgenland | 1416 | 9 | 4 | Modernization of main town school | Low |
| 5/Carinthia | 2673 | 21 | 4 | Retirement of school principal | Medium |
| 6/Carinthia | 2037 | 45 | 2 | Preventing the main town school of becoming a small | Low |
| 7/Carinthia | 3843 | 18 | 5 | Modernization of main town school | Medium |
| 8/Burgenland | 1631 | 15 | 4 | Modernization of main town school | Low |
| 9/Tyrol | 1966 | 23 | 5 | Modernization of main town school | High |
| 10/Tyrol | 2543 | 4 | 7 | Too few pupils | Low |
| 11/Lower A. | 2087 | 7 | 5 | Preventing the main town school of becoming a small school | Low |
| 12/Styria | 1742 | 28 | 4 | Retirement of school principal | Low |
| 13/Styria | 2087 | 23 | 4 | Retirement of school principal | Low |
| 14/Salzburg | 5735 | 17 | 5 | Modernization of main town school | Medium |

Source: Own Survey

sages were categorized and a table of these categories was made permitting the comparison of the fourteen cases.

It must be emphasised that the mayors belong to a special 'group' of interviewees, since, due to their political position in the municipality, they are used to presenting the municipal activities in a positive light, not only to the population who should re-elect them, but also to the outside world. They might well show a tendency to generally play down conflicts within the local population, in particular, speaking about the closing process in a more harmonious way than it really happened. As the perspective of the local community is missing, there is no other view – one which might differ from the mayors' view. Interestingly, the mayors used very similar expressions to describe the nature of the population's resistance. These expressions, together with the incidents that occurred in the course of the closing process helped to build a typology of the cases based on the strength of the protest.

The table 1 shows that the strength of resistance is not correlated with objective conditions such as the number of pupils attending the school at the time of closure, the distance to the nearest school, which is generally rather short, or the reasons for the closure.

## 4. Results

Local populations reacted differently to the municipality announcing the closure of a small village school. While some accepted it more or less immediately, perhaps accompanied by some questioning murmurs, others began to engage in discussions with the mayor or strongly resist the municipality's closing plans. The question in this context is what made the difference and what kind of strategies did the mayors use in implementing the decision to close the schools.

### 4.1 Low resistance

The mayors in this category said in the interviews that the parents showed "understanding" and they typically used the expression that the closing process "went without a hitch". However, the acceptance of the school closure by the local population was not really predictable and became obvious either when the mayors (8, 12) communicated with the parents on different occasions, explaining to them the need for closing the local school or when the first official meeting was called and went smoothly (mayors 2, 6, 13). While some mayors spent a year or more preparing the population for the closure, others completed the process within a few months. Mayor 11 commented that they acted very diplomatically, suggesting a step-by-step-closure to the local population, beginning with bussing the children of a particular class to the main town school in order to avoid cross-class-teaching there, resulting in a closing process that stretched over a period of four or five years.

In each case, the mayor managed to convince the population that the closure of the village school was necessary and reasonable probably with the exception of Mayor 10,

who referred to the fact that with fewer than five children the scope of the teaching was very limited and that this was also realized by the parents themselves. In two cases, the school in the main town was refurbished and two/three local village schools were affected by the closure in the municipality (mayors 4, 8). All these schools were in an unsatisfactory physical condition and it was necessary to focus on only one school in the municipality as the mayor stressed in the following quote:

> "The school in the main town has all the facilities: a big sports field, a big outdoor playing area, and as I said, the gym hall. And the school is equipped with whiteboards, computers in every class. And there's absolutely no way the municipality could do all this in all three local villages." (Mayor 4, p. 3/3-7)

### 4.2 Resistance described as "discussions"

In these cases, the mayors reported that the closing process was accompanied by "discussions"; "many" or "heated discussions", primarily between themselves and the local population. In some cases, these discussions started long before the school was actually closed down. Mayor 14 began to inform the local people several years prior to the school closure planned to coincide with the construction of a new school in the main town, because "all children should have the possibility to benefit from the new school".

Interestingly, this typology group contains all of the larger municipalities, which means that the school in the main town is comparatively large, with around 200 children. Indeed, the interviews showed that school size played an important role in these discussions. The mayors of the three largest municipalities (mayors 3, 7, 14) reported that the parents of the children attending the small school were particularly concerned about the fact that their children would have difficulties dealing with these "big structures". Some of the mayors (mayors 3, 5, 7) also pointed out that the educational setting in small schools had considerable social drawbacks for the children because they had fewer possibilities to engage with other children.

Another issue of intense debate was the "loss of identity" and the fear that village life would disappear, which was particularly highlighted by two mayors (3, 5). In order to allay the villagers' concerns, Mayor 3 reported that the municipality invested money to construct a new building to house the various community clubs. He said:

> „There we constructed a multi-purpose building with four wonderful apartments, all of which are rented out. So there is also immigration to the village. And there is also a room where the different clubs can meet – as well as premises for the local fire brigade (Mayor 3, p. 4/39–42).

### 4.3 Resistance described as "strong tensions"

In two municipalities, the mayors reported severe conflicts during the closing process. They described these protests as an "enormous outcry" and "intense resistance" on the part of the local population. These two cases have several aspects in common. One is that either the mayor or members of the municipal council were subjected to serious verbal attacks. In one municipality, someone even received death threats by post, which then resulted in a police investigation. So, the atmosphere became very tense during the closing process. Interestingly, the tensions in the population were also reflected by the fact that the decision to close the school was not taken unanimously by the municipal council. This was absolutely exceptional and did not happen in any other case in our sample. This protest pattern also cast a shadow over the future, as, characteristically, the animosities in the municipality persist. Mayor 1, who runs a restaurant, described the situation as follows:

> "Yes, it's definitely affected me. I can't tell you how much business I've lost because of the closure. Whole families stopped coming to my restaurant, and even now, they're staying away." (Mayor 1, p. 8/2–4)

In analyzing what has caused these unhappy situations in the closing process, it seems that the way in which the school closure was communicated to the local population was in part responsible for the conflict-ridden closing process. The mayors themselves favour this interpretation in their accounts, as both pointed to communication aspects that provoked the strong resistance of the population in the village. Mayor 1 admitted that he was "cheeky", meaning that he took hasty action without appropriate consultation with the local population, while Mayor 9 emphasised the fact that a discussion 'somehow' started and that the municipality was insufficiently prepared in its response. They failed to provide good reasons to make the closing process acceptable. And although in both cases, the former school building now accommodates a kindergarten (an integral part of the closure plans from the very beginning), and this kind of re-use of the school building is normally seen as the best solution, in these two cases it could not calm the outrage of the local population.

### 5. Conclusions

This paper set out to understand the dynamics of protests connected to the closing process of small schools in a local village where there is still a school in the main town. The review of the literature showed that the closing process is often accompanied by a lack of willingness on the part of the decision-making authorities to hear the arguments of the local population. As a consequence, the closure is decided top-down without considerations of the communities' concerns.

In the municipalities we researched in this study, the situation differs fundamentally from that in the literature because due to the small size of the municipalities, the political representatives responsible for the closing decision know the local population in the village quite well and are frequently in contact with them on various occasions in the course of community life. This might also be why the interviews with the fourteen mayors showed that communication turned out to be crucial in order to preserve mutual respect and to promote acceptance of the decision by the local population. In most cases, the mayor could convince the local population why it was necessary to close the local village school. As the municipalities are small in size and people are in regular contact with each other, the aim of achieving acceptance within the population is a necessary precondition to ensure that community relations continue to be amicable. This aspect seems not to have been considered carefully enough in those cases where the school closure happened in a very conflict-ridden and non-consensual way. In these cases, the announcement of the decision to close was done in an inadequate way, with the responsible politicians acting in a hasty and disorganized manner, provoking an outcry on the part of the villagers. This unfortunate beginning could not be 'neutralised' by further developments in the closure process and finally resulted in lasting tensions. As mentioned above, this study has only presented the viewpoint of the mayors, while the opinion of the parents and children and of the older village population was not part of the study. Here, further research is needed to get a comprehensive picture of the closing process.

In Austria, in the majority of cases, the municipality itself initiates the school closure and it was the aim of this article to focus on these circumstances. However, there are also other constellations of decisions to close: Either initiated by the federal state openly and, in most cases, against the will of the municipality itself. Or, in an indirect way such as the announcement of significant cuts in teaching hours in the local village school, so that the parents themselves finally agreed to close the village school as they wanted to ensure the best education for their children and realised that they would have to send them to another school. These dynamics differ from those described in this article and should be analysed separately.

### Acknowledgement

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