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Upwind Despite Headwind? Degrowth Transformations Amidst Shrinkage and Eroding Democracy in an East German Small Town

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Abstract

Spatial transformation follows the logic of a growth-oriented economy that values cities according to their place in the chain of capitalist wealth production. Many cities in East Germany have lost their significance as sites of production and are consequently facing population decline and the weakening of social bonds in the community. For this reason, citizens of the East German small town of Zella-Mehlis (state of Thuringia) have begun to reflect on alternative models for urban development. In this article, the process of arriving at a degrowth strategy, as provided by the academic discourse, will be documented. It will be demonstrated that the process of shrinkage has not only left little space for a degrowth planning approach put into practice. Moreover, the article reveals that the costs of the growth economy on society are not limited to population shrinkage, but also have a severe impact on the sociability of the local community. The rise of right-wing populists and climate change-denying actors mirrors the decreasing social ability for collective learning processes needed for a shift to a solidary degrowth strategy. However, the case study shows how ambivalent these developments are: Long-term participatory processes within the public–civic partnership framework of the Aufwind (German for upwind) initiative in Zella-Mehlis can challenge path dependencies and open new degrowth-inspired perspectives. The article is informed by many years of intensive field research in a qualitative mixed-method design and focuses on the close links between shrinkage processes, the local degrowth agenda, and the consequences of an eroding democracy.

Keywords

civil society; degrowth; East Germany; municipality; public–civic partnership; urban shrinkage

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1. Introduction

By law, the German state of Thuringia must become climate-neutral by 2045 and will likely lose at least one-tenth of its population simultaneously (Thüringer Landesamt für Statistik, n.d.). These enormous transformation processes require decisive political and planning action, which can currently only be seen in rudimentary form. On the contrary, there are many indications that existing practices will prevail. In the field of tension between shrinking processes, socio-ecological transformation, and authoritarian and right-wing extremist political tendencies, this article puts Zella-Mehlis, a left-behind small town in Thuringia, in the spotlight. Instead of a one-sided rejection of any capacity for transformation, the focus is on the ambivalent perspectives of actors and their sociability.

Zella-Mehlis is a small town that developed in 1919 from the merger of small communities in Zella and Mehlis. Zella-Mehlis is part of the remote and sparsely populated south of the Eastern German state of Thuringia, with the nearest large city of Erfurt 44 km away (cf. Figure 1). As part of the Thuringian Forest region, which is economically structurally weak, Zella-Mehlis is also connected to the so-called Rennsteig, which is important for tourism as a hiking trail of national rank. In recent years, the population has stabilized at around 12,000. The population of 16,000 from the German Democratic Republic (GDR) era has not been reached since then and has now fallen to around 10,000 (cf. Figure 2). As the double town of Zella-Mehlis, in contrast to Suhl (Eckardt, 2015), was not occupied with the dismantling of large vacant housing estates from the GDR, a future-oriented discussion and an active civil society was able to establish itself relatively soon after 1990. This is reflected in a lively association system and the Aufwind (German for upwind) initiative, which was supported by a broad alliance of citizens, some of whom also came from the former opposition in the GDR.

However, degrowth transformations, also and especially in shrinking regions, must not close their eyes to the political realities—namely the erosion of liberal democracies in Central Europe. In 2023, the openly right-wing extremist, racist, and authoritarian party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) had consistently achieved over 30% in polls ("AfD mit hohen Werten in Wahlumfragen," 2024). This party thus has a considerable influence on
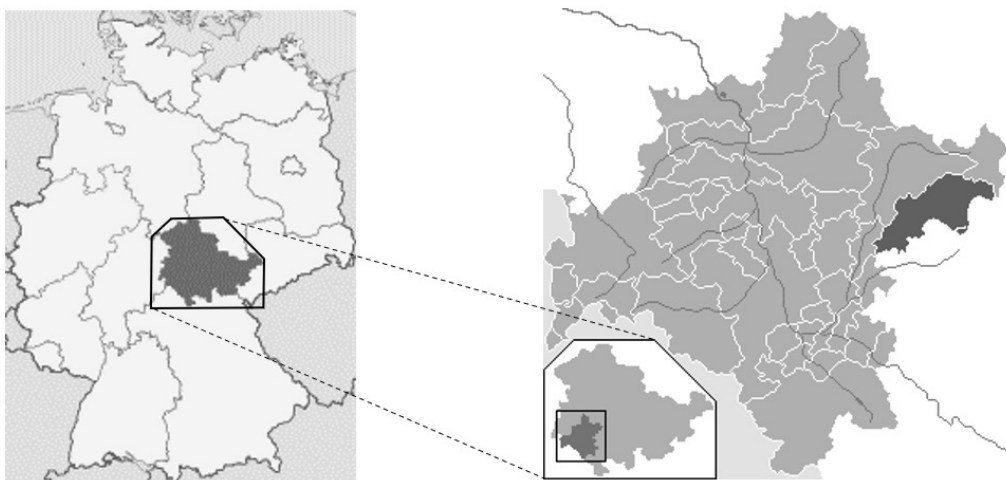

Figure 1. Location of Zella-Mehlis in the district of Schmalkalden-Meiningen in the federal state (Free State) of Thuringia in the Federal Republic of Germany. Own compilation based on maps from Wikimedia Commons (2005, 2007).
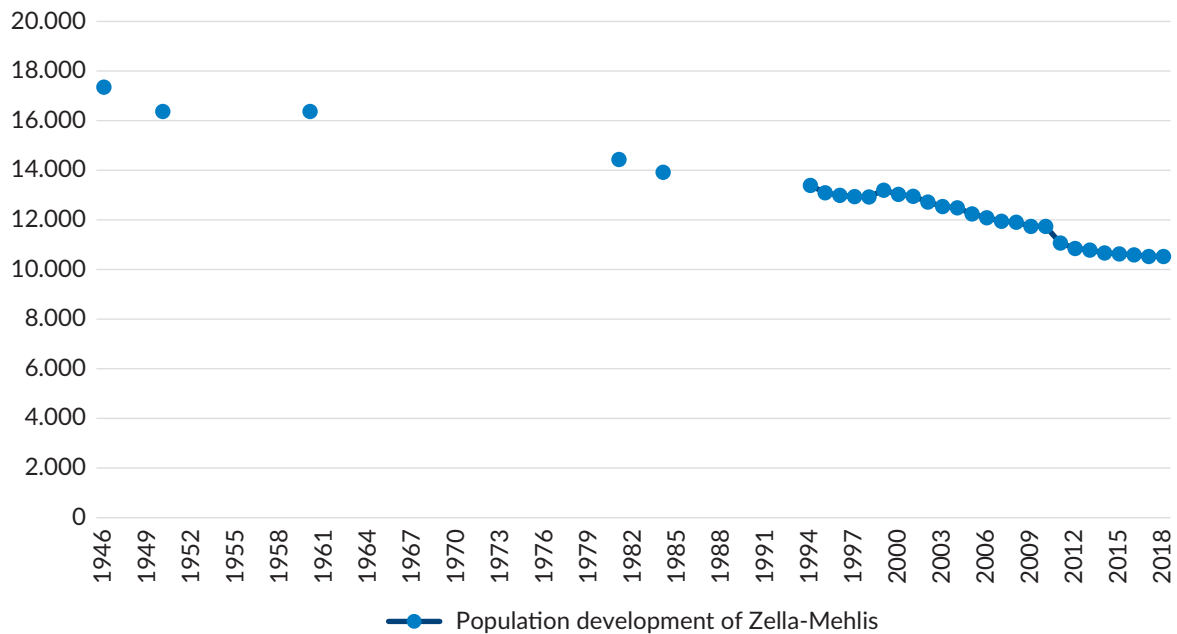
Figure 2. Population development of Zella-Mehlis between 1946 and 2018 before the incorporation of Bernshausen. For the years up to 1994, unfortunately, no continuous data availability could be established. Sources: Thüringer Landesamt für Statistik (n.d.) and Zentralverwaltung für Statistik der DDR (n.d.).

the political culture in Thuringia (Richter, 2022; Steiner, 2023) and also polarizes with its opposition to climate policy (Adam & Meyringer, 2019). In particular, the party was able to establish Thuringia and Saxony as its political homeland within just 10 years (Bergmann et al., 2023; Bergrich, 2019). This electoral success takes place in the context of significant problems with organized right-wing extremism, which is already intimidating cities in Thuringia with various forms of violence (Eckardt, 2022). Given the widespread rejection of ecological issues and the implementation of degrowth approaches, initiatives such as Aufwind appear to be particularly worthy of investigation.

This article therefore intends to provide an insight into how this initiative has developed in Zella-Mehlis—against the regional and general trend—that is openly committed to a degrowth policy and has initiated a bottom-up urban society perspective in different ways. The example raises further questions about which strategies discussed in the specialist literature for implementing the degrowth agenda have so far been discussed. In particular, the question of the relationship to the state (D'Alisa & Kallis, 2020) and its institutions becomes relevant because of the need to strengthen civil society against right-wing tendencies. This also includes the question of the political answer to the shrinking processes in the Zella-Mehlis area.

The article is organized as follows. First, we will conceptually discuss the connection between shrinking processes in Thuringia, the shift to the right, and the necessary adjustment of degrowth strategies. Then, based on a presentation of our observations on the processes in Zella-Mehlis since 2018, we will show how degrowth activists and municipal practitioners have developed their perspectives and activities since then. Finally, conclusions for the ambivalent aspects of a degrowth strategy under the conditions of shrinkage and strengthened authoritarianism will be discussed from the example of Zella-Mehlis.

2. Urban Shrinkage and Degrowth Amidst Eroding Democracy: Key Concepts and Their Relationships

To gain a focused overview, a systematic, analytical form of literature review is adapted here. Rather than presenting and defining the individual sub-areas of the problem individually—shrinkage, eroding democracy, and degrowth—the focus is placed directly on the respective relationships between them. This is intended to quickly get to the core of the multiple problems on the ground and to illustrate the interconnectedness and interdependence of current overlapping crisis dynamics. This is intended to highlight that it is less about what, for example, municipal shrinkage processes are in themselves, but rather what they mean in the context of growing authoritarianism with actors that work actively towards a degrowth agenda. This procedure is also intended to take account of the (in)ability to act on the part of municipal actors. The literature review refers to relevant literature primarily from the research field of urban planning, urban studies, and planning theory. The areas of tension identified in this theoretical manner have been critically examined, differentiated, and expanded through the empirical results.

2.1. Urban Shrinkage and Degrowth

Urban shrinkage and degrowth are related concepts, albeit with distinct meanings. Urban shrinkage refers to the decline in population, economic activity, or physical infrastructure in a previously thriving urban area or city (Hollander et al., 2009; Wiechmann & Bontje, 2015). Bartholomae and Schoenberg (2019) claim that only the combination of both population and economic decline can be defined as urban shrinkage. According to many authors, who have increasingly focused on the shrinkage processes in Central Europe since the 1990s, it is characterized by a decrease in the number of residents, vacant or abandoned buildings, and a reduction in public services and amenities. Urban shrinkage is typically associated with various factors such as deindustrialization, suburbanization, demographic changes, and economic downturns. It can have significant social, economic, and environmental impacts on affected cities, including increased poverty, unemployment, and disinvestment.

Conversely, degrowth is a broader socio-economic and political concept that promotes a deliberate reduction in economic production and consumption to achieve ecological sustainability and social justice (cf. D'Alisa & Kallis, 2020; Hickel, 2019; Khmara & Kronenberg, 2022). It is a response to the negative impacts of unlimited economic growth on the environment and social well-being. Degrowth advocates argue that societies should prioritize human well-being, community, fair distribution, and the environment over unlimited economic expansion (Schmelzer et al., 2022). Whereas urban shrinkage is a specific phenomenon related to declining urban areas, degrowth encompasses a wider perspective on sustainable and equitable development, including rethinking economic systems, resource consumption, and social structures. Urban shrinkage can be seen as a manifestation of the need for degrowth in urban areas, as it challenges the dominant paradigm of continuous economic growth and calls for alternative models of urban development. The blanket equation of degrowth with ongoing shrinkage processes and often subsequent austerity policies is particularly common in political discourse, which is why many degrowth scholars emphasize the essential difference. Hickel (2019, p. 66, emphasis in the original) notes that "while austerity calls for scarcity in order to generate more growth, degrowth calls for abundance *in order to render growth unnecessary*."

Connecting these related, complex processes in detail, with a particular focus on new horizons for urban planning, is an ambitious undertaking. In recent years, several articles have been published that lament the

"missing dialogue" (Xue, 2022) between degrowth and spatial planning. Nevertheless, there are now numerous articles that shed light on this field in a structured way (Brokow-Loga & Eckardt, 2020; Krähmer, 2022; Mocca, 2020; Savini, 2021; Schmid, 2022; see Krähmer & Brokow-Loga, 2024, for an overview). To this end, the Municipal Degrowth Network and the Postgrowth Cities Coalition were founded in 2021 and 2023, respectively (Postgrowth Cities Coalition, n.d.). Previous operationalizations either focus on the differentiation of municipal sectors such as housing and transport (Khmara & Kronenberg, 2022), the demystification of vanguard cities (Krähmer, 2022), or the role of conflicting interpretations of nature (Brokow-Loga & Krüger, 2023). Until now, much of the research on urban degrowth bypasses the shrinking periphery, with Khmara and Kronenberg's (2023) comparative analysis as an exception. Vice versa, the shrinking cities discourse fails to go into detail about degrowth-related perspectives, with Schindler's (2016) work on Detroit being a notable exception to this.

Thus far, however, an explicitly actor-related analysis has been lacking, which is one of the purposes of this article. This goes in line with the discourse on shrinkage, e.g., Hollander et al. (2009) identify, among other things, a special need for empirical studies on how planners, policy-makers, and other stakeholders operate within a shrinking city and how they conceptualize decline in economic activity or population loss. As Wiechmann and Bontje (2015) remind us, each shrinkage situation is unique and necessitates individual strategies and planning measures. The ambivalent strategies and positionalities of central agents—city council and city administration, businesses, and civil society initiatives—in a particular small town will therefore be examined in more detail here.

A central area of tension is the integration of the local experience of shrinkage into a planning reality that continues to be geared towards growth-creation:

> Planning in a structurally shrinking city or region is in many respects very different from planning in a city or region experiencing long-term growth. While planning laws, systems and strategies in most European countries are still mostly growth-oriented, possibilities to adapt to a situation in which shrinkage may become the rule rather than the exception should be considered more seriously than before. (Wiechmann & Bontje, 2015, p. 9)

While degrowth points to the social and ecological costs of a society-wide focus on the growth dogma, urban shrinkage already serves to a certain extent as illustrative material for the effects of this focus, and the lack of growth rates is seen as a deficit of a municipality per se. However, the municipal agency is limited in the face of the growth imperatives that have been embedded in the planning system (Xue, 2022, p. 410), such as municipal financing. In empirical research, particular attention must therefore be paid to the extent to which references are made to systemic growth constraints, criticizing them at the state or federal level. The question also arises as to whether the long-term shrinkage is accepted as a reality or whether it is much more likely that innovation-led political and planning strategies (Bartholomae & Schoenberg, 2019) will be used to stimulate economic and demographic growth again. However, the hope of a return to growth that improves the causes of poverty, inequality, and exclusion is often an illusion (Wiechmann & Bontje, 2015, p. 164). Thus, how far the degrowth ambitions result in a concrete approach to shrinkage is a key question, as Khmara and Kronenberg (2023, p. 3) rightly coined the variety of these approaches from "business-as-usual pro-growth policies to smart decline and right-sizing" towards radically new concepts.

A second area of tension deals with the question of the extent to which the experience of shrinkage promotes the capacity to act sustainably and adapt to a low-carbon world (e.g., Tumber, 2011)—for example through increased food production in the surrounding area, dense settlement patterns, and emission-reduced transport connections in a city of short distances (currently discussed under the catchphrase "15-minute city"). However, some authors point out that this intuition could be mistaken and that per capita emissions could instead increase even in shrinking areas. In this context, Großmann et al. (2013, p. 224) state:

> The contemporary reality of shrinkage can be fairly different, often resulting in a rise of emissions per capita. Shrunken, perforated urban structures require extra heating. Various networks of technical infrastructure, utilities, and transport become under-used and less efficient. On top, the fiscal stress of shrinkage hinders a compact city strategy. Given that political priorities are often geared towards stabilizing and re-growing the city as well as increasing competitiveness, what role do environmental policies play? What priority does climate change mitigation have in shrinking cities?

A third focus of the debate is dedicated to the question of concrete governance on the ground. Khmara and Kronenberg (2023, p. 3) state that "the halt of growth tracks in shrinking cities seems to provide possibilities for more non-profit-oriented uses of spaces, implementing new economic options and pathways, and creating niches for experimenting and innovation." However, alternative approaches and transformational policies would need institutional reconfiguration, shifts in the principles of planning and urban policy as well as in concrete power relations (Wiechmann & Bontje, 2015). Eventually, this raises questions about the specific degrowth coalitions (Béal et al., 2019) and potential partnerships between public, private, and civic actors (Eraydin & Özatağan, 2021) as well as the question of embedding bottom-up approaches in local cultures and institutional configurations (Bernt et al., 2014; Schlappa, 2017).

2.2. What Has All This Got to Do With (Eroding) Democracy?

In planning discourse, there is a lack of consideration of the current turning away of many people from liberal democracy and the associated idea of participatory and deliberative urban planning. The trend towards authoritarian notions of politics and, intrinsically linked to this, of urban planning that has been observed for a number of years, has led to enormous changes in the general political culture in some countries across Europe and the US. The strengthening of authoritative and climate change-denying political parties at the national level is being observed with great concern. However, the local effects have received less attention in public and professional discourse. Germany offers a good example for a better understanding of how the different local circumstances reinforce the authoritarian tendencies in society on the one hand, and on the other hand, it is also possible to observe to what extent possible effects on local strategies for degrowth transformation can still be implemented there. Although discourses on post-growth planning (cf. Ferreira & von Schönfeld, 2020; Lamker & Schulze Dieckhoff, 2022) in particular are gaining momentum, the analysis of the links between eroding municipal democracy and growth-critical municipal governance approaches in the climate crisis remains rudimentary.

In fact, the connected but partly contradictory processes of degrowth and shrinkage (and in between) do not occur in a political vacuum. On the contrary, the focus must be on how the planning policy processes in light of an eroding democracy have to be dealt with in the area under investigation. The analysis of German cities shows a double chain of causes. First, in a growth-driven society, where shrinking processes take place,

social crises intensify. This is particularly the case where there is no political culture of understanding and pragmatic approach to local issues. Second, where strong local politics and civil society fail to do this, strategies by anti-democratic groups can gain a foothold. This is achieved through different strategies (Stanley, 2020). An approach that has been particularly successful here is one that changes the political agenda in such a way that the issues of socio-ecological transformation are not seen as important, but other societal challenges are placed in the foreground with a threat scenario. This can be seen very clearly using the example of East Germany, where the AfD and right-wing movements such as Thügida and Pegida have succeeded in placing the issue of migration on the political agenda and public debate as an all-determining and priority issue (Eckardt, 2020). This new political orientation succeeded above all in those municipalities that can be described as peripheral in the changed political economy.

Despite a long-lasting economic boom in the 2010s, Germany did not develop regionally even growth. The growth economy created contrastingly developing areas, with a persistently strong disparity between the rich and economically strong Southwest of Germany and the poor and economically weak East (Küpper & Peters, 2019). This also applies to the geographic constellations within Eastern Germany, where highly profitable business locations such as Jena are located in a declining region. The new geography of the post-Fordist economy centralizes processes of increasing value in a few centralized places, while in the periphery, there are at most supplier companies, consumption, and the minimal provision of social infrastructure from the state (Schmalz et al., 2021). Progressive alliances for socio-ecological transformation, especially degrowth proposals, are mostly carried out locally where no peripheralization processes take place—this may also be due to the increased interest in these metropolitan regions from scholars in this field (Schmid, 2022). In the economic periphery, which neither receives much attention politically nor in academic or public discourse, organizations that can use the dissatisfaction of the citizens in view of this neglect to pursue their anti-democratic goals can therefore advertise themselves successfully. The connection between peripheralization and the emergence of right-wing populism and anti-environmental politics is not only clear in the Eastern German regions, where the boom town of Jena had an AfD share of only 10% in the local elections in 2019, whereas in the neighboring city of Gera, three times as many people voted for right-wing populists (Eckardt, 2011). The city of Gera has long suffered significantly from the consequences of deindustrialization, withdrawal, shrinkage, and poverty due to the closure of mining.

According to Krastev (2017), right-wing populism is particularly strong in regions that have seen a significant loss of inhabitants over the last 25 years due to immigration to other regions. For the (often old or poorly educated) people left behind, this not only means a so-called "demographic panic" (van der Walt, 2020) but also the loss of long-term figures of identification. Can degrowth approaches contribute to new narratives of the good life for all? It is precisely these specific degrowth narratives, which aim for frugal, primal, and sufficient individual lifestyles and understand localization as anti-globalization and closure, that can connect to these feelings and fears of loss (Benoist, 2023; Wilmsen, 2020). On the other hand, co-optation and overlaps with far-right or fascist agendas are also quickly apparent. In this context, Wilmsen (2020) states that the degrowth movement, at least in Germany, failed to develop an "anti-fascist consensus." In addition to the areas of tension mentioned above, this means a further nuance to the research design. The embedding of planning research in the conditions of eroding democratic systems requires a closer look at the attitude towards authoritarian or far-right ideologies, especially within the groups of actors who react to shrinkage processes with degrowth approaches.

3. Methodology

The data generated and discussed in this article is based on qualitative social research in a mixed-method case study design. The procedure was characterized by an explorative approach and iterative loops. The main methods used were taken from the toolbox of social science and urban studies: During the research period, semi-structured expert interviews, moderated workshop discussions and qualitatively evaluated workshops, urban planning surveys, and participatory observations during field trips were used. The variety of methods was chosen to gain an extensive understanding of the local political and planning processes, but also to be able to react flexibly to new social developments at a micro level (local elections) or macro level (Covid-19 pandemic). The starting point was the preliminary considerations on the connection between degrowth approaches and de-democratization processes in a shrinking small town, which are explained in more detail in the state of research in this article. However, the categories for evaluating the observations and interviews were formed, reviewed, and expanded both deductively and inductively.

The research results from a cooperation between the Aufwind initiative, the town of Zella-Mehlis, and the authors. The initiative for this came from members of the initiative, who sought conceptual support and approaches for reflecting on their actions from the university. The research period covers the years 2018 to 2024 and can be divided into four phases (Figure 3). In the first exploratory phase, there were intensive discussions with individual committed supporters of the association and local politicians, including the incumbent mayor. This phase can be understood as an orientation phase in which the committed members of the association collected content-related suggestions from academic contributions and the spatial planning debate (Brokow-Loga & Eckardt, 2020). The first phase was completed by a public event, forging connections and gaining the trust of the stakeholders.

In the second phase of the research, a project with urban planning students from the Bauhaus University Weimar was initialized. The project was able to follow up on the ongoing preparations for the celebrations of the 100th anniversary of the twin town of Zella-Mehlis in 2019. Opportunities and pitfalls to local action for a degrowth transformation should be identified. In this "stocktaking phase," the situation was systematically
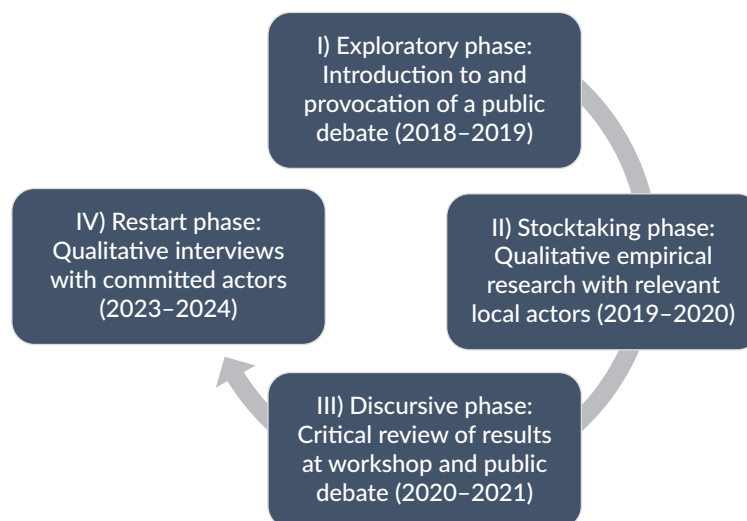

Figure 3. Visualization of research methods and process.

explored and interviews were conducted with 14 actors, including four economic actors, four political actors, and six civil society actors. As qualitative research is about selecting cases for the survey that are particularly important for answering the research question, a purposive sampling process was used here to identify exposed local actors from previously defined fields relevant to planning policy (civil society, urban policy and administration, and business). The structured interviews were then transcribed, anonymized, and systematically coded using qualitative content analysis (direct and paraphrased statements are cited in this article in anonymized form, e.g., Ref A). Sampling and analysis bias were reduced by triangulation and verification with other data sources; interview conception, conducting, and coding were carried out by several people; finally, the third phase incorporates a review by people with local and thematic knowledge.

The findings were presented and discussed in January 2020 at an expert workshop at Bauhaus University Weimar and at a public and well-attended event in Zella-Mehlis, which can be seen as the third phase. The feedback from citizens on the results presented confirmed the conclusions drawn from the interviews. The main topics of participation, politics, potential, nature, and sustainability were used for a subsequent workshop to be able to translate the process of cooperation between the municipal administration and the University into concrete projects of socio-ecological transformation.

However, for various reasons, this did not take place. By far the most significant was the Covid-19 pandemic, which meant a kind of restart of the cooperation could only be initiated in 2023 (fourth phase). Renewed interviews with committed actors gave the authors an insight into how the town and the exchange between its inhabitants was not only slowed down in its transformation by the pandemic but also how the town was strongly affected by the changed political culture in the state.

4. Aufwind Case Study: Upwind for Municipal Degrowth Through Increased Participation in Troubling Times

Aufwind is an initiative of the Art and Culture association and the town of Zella-Mehlis. It emerged from many years of voluntary work in the region, in particular from the local Transition Town group known as the Wendeinitiative. According to its description, the locally committed initiative focuses on:

> A design practice that is human- and nature-friendly and has a unifying view of the social fabric. The focus is on raising awareness and addressing current local and global challenges. We attach great importance to sustainable thinking and action in all areas. (Aufwind Zella-Mehlis, n.d.-a)

Thus, degrowth references are both implicit and explicit, though expanding the involvement of citizens in local future planning takes center stage (Roth, 2023, p. 126). The initiative's main tools are evening lectures, storytelling events, a repair café, guided tours on specific topics, and publicity campaigns.

It should be noted that, interestingly, the operational framework for this was a public–civic partnership (Frantzeskaki et al., 2017) between the municipality in the form of the Aufwind initiative, whose content-related work on the topic of socio-ecological transformation was significantly supported by the administration over several years with two staff positions. For a municipality in this population size category, this approach is rarely seen. In addition to the employees, who mainly take on organizational tasks, around 10 people between the ages of 20 and 80 years from the local population and neighboring villages are

involved in the initiative. From 2002 onward, events were organized with a supra-regional impact and with well-known critics of growth such as Harald Welzer (Aufwind Zella-Mehlis, n.d.-b).

A great deal of openness among many actors towards the interaction of social and ecological pressures for action and participatory means of overcoming (or at least accepting) shrinkage could be observed in the first and second phase of the observations (2018–2020). This followed, among other things, projects such as the permanent support for the Edible City project, which was used to grow food for their own town. For example, the initiative first had to deal with the topic intensively and organize many learning processes, such as the exchange with Andernach, a particularly exemplary community for local food production that some involved actors visited on an excursion (Ref H; cf. Sartison & Artmann, 2020). In this phase, a certain normativity in favor of degrowth policies could be observed, with climate adaptation and reduction of private traffic as general entry points.

It seems clear that the long periods of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis when group meetings on site were complicated or even impossible had a negative impact on civil society and, thus, the degrowth activities in Zella-Mehlis. As one person stated during the third phase of the observation, the citizens were self-isolating even after the end of the pandemic, developing rather private attitudes (Ref C). However, it is very clear that the participatory-deliberative approach was severely curtailed precisely by the restrictions and polarizations (Brokow-Loga, 2022) of the Covid-19 pandemic and has not been able to regain momentum since.

5. Local Actors and Their Degrowth-Related Agenda

As has been argued more comprehensively elsewhere (Brokow-Loga & Eckardt, 2020; Brokow-Loga & Krüger, 2023), this view of the individual sectors and thematic areas of planning and municipal policy is insufficient to address the totality of the transformation. Rather, a comprehensive view of the ascribed roles and power relations in the local context is needed to examine the heterogeneous motivations, drivers, and hurdles for municipal degrowth in shrinking regions. In the following, we therefore focus on the agency of actors from the fields of civil society (Section 5.1), municipal council and administration (Section 5.2), and companies (Section 5.3).

5.1. Civil Society and Public–Civic Partnerships

There are comparable strong and interlinked association structures in Zella-Mehlis (Roth, 2023, p. 127) as well as communication and consultation channels to the city administration, particularly through the senior and youth advisory councils. Actors from the civil society in Zella-Mehlis attest to themselves that they play a key role in the preservation and further development of the municipality: "Well, if it weren't for the work of the association, Zella-Mehlis would already look old" (Ref D). This self-image is even increased to a unique selling point: "We live in a village here, the culture of the village is association life" (Ref J). However, the positive contribution of the municipality in terms of civil commitment to the redesign is emphasized: "It is certainly also up to the mayor, the city administration" (Ref C). Within this context, the Aufwind initiative can be understood as a public–civic partnership (Frantzeskaki et al., 2017, p. 75), as it is supported by the municipal cultural association and financed by the municipality despite tight municipal budgets. However, we would be careful to characterize the constellation between the administration and the art and culture association as a "degrowth coalition" (Béal et al., 2019; Eraydin & Özatağan, 2021), due to its omnipresence of participation in redistribution and structural changes.

According to statements from the interviewees, there is a small group of citizens who call themselves the city caretakers (Stadtkümmerer) and consciously seek an exchange with the residents and check where there is room for improvement (Ref D). This group was not associated with the Aufwind initiative but was initiated by the town administration itself. Although this group could be assigned tasks and be institutionally supported in the future, similar to neighborhood management, however, the danger of a gradual (self)responsibilization of civil society for tasks that are the responsibility of the (welfare) state is not considered and is hardly mentioned in any of the interviews (cf. Jessop, 2020, pp. 149–150). This tendency should be taken particularly seriously, as the Stadtkümmerer group was apparently initiated top–down. Nevertheless, participation and deliberation are the central pillars of the transformation efforts in Zella-Mehlis. From community wasteland development over workshops to extensive citizen surveys, it has been shown that the efforts in this area have paid off in recent years, as more and more people have been motivated and the generation change is noticeable (Ref B; Ref K). "In all things, especially with what happened here in Zella-Mehlis, the population…is 80% behind it" (Ref K).

Others call for the socio-ecological expansion of natural resources into the cityscape itself: "There [in Andernach] the entire city is actually a bed that anyone can use….I think that makes sense here too, it just needs to be expanded a little further" (Ref H). There is also a desire for short distances to everyday infrastructure: "That I still have my baker…that I can still walk there as an old person to see a doctor…that I also have shopping facilities within walking distance" (Ref D). These highlights from organized civil society in Zella-Mehlis make it clear how intertwined social and ecological issues are (Roth, 2023, p. 132). With this awareness, they demand the preservation of social standards by ecologically transforming the city. The future of Zella-Mehlis is thought of here in very specific projects, such as changing the street space in favor of cycling, expanding the Edible City project, and improving the quality of local green spaces and woodland that refer to equally specific needs. These demands conceal starting points for a socio-ecological transformation, although this would require longer-term vision and strategy work (which is only partly visible). The self-made culture that characterizes the Aufwind initiative is clearly reflected in the activities of the other associations and civil society projects.

5.2. Municipal Council and Administration

Politically, with the election of Richard Rossel in 2012 and his re-election in 2019, the town population has also opted for a candidate who, as an independent, is perceived as pragmatic and future-oriented (Roth, 2023, p. 127). The national parties (CDU, Linke, SPD) have a share of only about 35% in the town council, while the three local parties Freie Wähler (German for Free Voters), Bürgerinitiative Rennsteig, and Verantwortung für Benshausen have a mathematical majority. In a way, the independent voter associations elude the traditional left-right scheme, as they were founded and operate partly on the basis of particular issues and events. According to Wurthmann et al. (2023, p. 99), the party Free Voters can be considered as a "decent alternative for conservatives" concerning their agenda: Voters often tend to be generally dissatisfied with democratic outputs. The right-wing AfD party only achieved 11% in the last local elections, while it received over 17% in other Thuringian cities. However, polls and electoral successes in nearby district elections suggest that the right-wing actors are gaining strength here as well ("AfD mit hohen Werten in Wahlumfragen," 2024).

After the city of Zella-Mehlis initially focused on stabilizing its financial budget, various necessary projects in connection with funding from the EU, the federal government, and the state of Thuringia have been

implemented over the past seven years (Ref B; Ref E). In this context, a connecting road between Zella and Mehlis was built, the Mehliser market was renewed, and investments were made in the redesign of the Lerchenberg and the station situation, which will be explained in more detail in the following two paragraphs. Some interviewees emphasize that the will to spatially transform the city could not least be attributed to the mayor and the sports clubs (Ref E; Ref K).

In terms of the transformation issues the council and administration are dealing with, three themes are ubiquitous on the ground. First, this concerns transport and mobility infrastructures. A good example in this area is the redesign of the station forecourt with funding from the state of Thuringia: In recent years, a hub for southern Thuringia with connections to all modes of transport has been created here. The local Verkehrswende (German for traffic transition; discursive term from the German debate, which can mean both a comprehensive and radical mobility turnaround and a gradual increase in electromobility) in the topographically challenging region could be advanced in particular through the e-bike boom. Second, the focus is on regional integration, with the "eternal rivalry between Suhl and Zella-Mehlis" (Ref A), which prevents cooperation, as a pitfall. Here, however, politics is seen as responsible for promoting regional ties to jointly face "changes such as municipality mergers [and] administrative communities" (Ref J). A current development here certainly concerns the controversial creation of a South Thuringian Uppercenter of the towns of Suhl, Zella-Mehlis, Oberhof, and Schleusingen.

The third topic, which according to several interview partners influences municipal decision-making, is contributions to an ecologically sustainable and climate-friendly development. The omnipresent starting point is the surrounding Thuringian Forest, which must be preserved and protected, which offers local recreation and is a resource for the development of sustainable tourism. The best example of this is the redesign of the area on the Lerchenberg—a redesign that was controversially discussed among the population and initially met with little acceptance. The construction of the barrier-free monument entrances, the arrangement of the seating niches and steps as well as the creation of the parking areas at the monument entrance, and the planting work were financed from the funds currently available in the budget, whereas the asphalt paving of the circular path was funded by the European Regional Development Fund (Stadt Zella-Mehlis, n.d.). In the meantime, however, it seems to be popular with the residents—especially the children—and the measure seems to have a positive effect on the coexistence of town and forest (Ref B; Ref E). The Aufwind initiative may also have contributed to this growing acceptance by organizing workshops on nature-oriented gardening and establishing beehives and insect hotels at Lerchenberg.

5.3. Economic Actors

Originally known for its weapons industry, the comparatively small companies of Zella-Mehlis are now also known for precision engineering in the automotive industry and tools used in auto parts supply or processing. Research and development seems to be underrepresented in Zella-Mehlis, with more cooperation with universities such as the TU Ilmenau or the FH Schmalkalden demanded by interviewees. However, a long-term approach appears to be difficult due to the high fluctuation of the students, as most of them would leave the region after completing their studies (Ref E).

One of the challenges for the municipal economy is compliance with the social, ecological, and economic pillars of sustainability (Knox & Mayer, 2009, p. 109)—or, to make it even more complex for the actors, with

a serious engagement in the sense of a "strong sustainability" (Dedeurwaerdere, 2014). In small towns, local companies promote the community of the place in a special way. Economic interests are combined with other values of coexistence (Knox & Mayer, 2009) which puts the focus on the credo of cooperation instead of competition. As shown in the Zella-Mehlis case, the creation of sustainability can only be made possible through participation and cultural encounters. This underlines the relevance of municipally active companies as potential sponsors for events of all kinds. Therefore, one possible development path is to strengthen cooperation between the local population and local companies in order to create "alternative economic spaces" (Knox & Mayer, 2009, p. 117). In the example of Zella-Mehlis, the strengthening of existing cooperation between the administration and civil society in the form of the Aufwind initiative, whose events and campaigns could be supported by economic stakeholders in the form of sponsorship, is also discussed here. The alternative economic strategies analyzed by Knox and Mayer (2009) and others thus appear here in the potential of public–civic-private partnerships.

Another mission for Zella-Mehlis is to continue to avoid dependence on (fossil) monostructures in order to be able to generate greater flexibility in economic structures that can adapt to environmental requirements and design new visions (cf. Rydin, 2023). Reliable supply structures are to be created and preserved that make it possible for the monetary service to remain within the city and prevent residents from spending the money outside of the community—a challenge many local actors point towards (Ref B; Ref E; Ref K). In the absence of regional models, there is no demand for regional currencies. However, this can be linked to Douthwaite's (2012) position that only the introduction of debt-free regional and local currencies, among others, could lead to degrowth by design instead of degrowth by disaster or catastrophic collapse.

Undoubtedly, the geographical location of the city and forestry is the pivotal point for this transformation. The upheavals taking place, especially the fluctuations in world market prices and the disruption of global value chains, can be an important opportunity for companies to initiate the shift towards a more sustainable economy. The strategy of local actors in this regard was based on showing the benefits of the local economy with sufficient ways of life, often contrasting it with a tendentially negatively associated globalized world order. However, this reveals the tension that has also been repeatedly described in research on municipal degrowth approaches (Schneider & Nelson, 2018), far-right localism (Benoist, 2023), and the "local trap" (Purcell, 2006): If local narratives only emphasize local strengths without mentioning the web of (global) relationships, this may encourage parochialism and far-right isolationist strategies. Even if no concrete personal links between degrowth-oriented and right-wing extremist actors can be identified, there is an argumentative openness and integrability that points to a merging of the camps. Thus, the research in Zella-Mehlis ultimately confirms Wilmsen's (2020) statement that a "clear line" is missing: "The post-growth spectrum in Germany lacks an anti-fascist consensus."

6. Conclusion: A Lot of Headwind for a New Hope

In the following, conclusions for the ambivalent perspectives of a degrowth strategy under the conditions of shrinkage and strengthened authoritarianism will be discussed from the example of Zella-Mehlis. In the literature review, we first focused on whether new objectives can indeed be achieved within the existing system; second, whether sustainable measures are really being taken; third, which governance models are (newly) emerging; and fourth, whether this ultimately contains or strengthens far-right tendencies.

First, the limitations of local or municipal degrowth approaches quickly become apparent, as they inevitably remain trapped in a growth-oriented planning system. Without path changes to sustainable development (Liu, 2020) or even a questioning of the paradigms of growth and development at the state or federal level, one cannot expect much from municipal policies. Ultimately, it remains an ambivalent relationship that is subject to micro–macro interactions: In this perspective, transformations in financing, funding, and requirement structures at the EU, state, and federal levels would include a mandatory municipal task of climate protection that is consistently financed. At the same time, these changes are neither conceivable nor feasible without experience, pressure, and scientific knowledge from the local level. However, the example of Zella-Mehlis demonstrates that a one-sided municipal powerlessness is by no means the case.

Concerning the second perspective opened up, it must be made clear that, beyond small, incremental measures, no comprehensive degrowth-related strategy for dealing with shrinkage could be designed. The shrinkage process in no way implies a substantial reduction of urban metabolism—rather, the precarious financial situation prevents a clear change towards a strategy of post-fossil energy, mobility, and housing. This finding is in line with Großmann et al.'s (2013) skepticism towards climate change mitigation in shrinking cities. Yet, it is precisely the advocacy for the local community and for communication and democracy that has acted as a door-opener and confidence-building measure in Zella-Mehlis. The prerequisite for this was the municipal assumption of costs for a few staff positions, connections to external partners from science and communication, and government funding programs. Following Mallach et al. (2017), the political will to address the problem and present positive framings can be recognized as a decisive factor here. In this way, thinking social and environmental dimensions of transformation together seems to succeed, but only incrementally.

Third, the governance system developed in Zella-Mehlis seems to be highly reliant on short-term public–civic agreements and a few persons instead of a stable governance structure. What the case study tells us is that participation and communication culture are key to navigating through governance transformations—they only emerge from the joint practice of storytelling and listening. Instead of explicit work on degrowth principles, the communicative and open approach often helped in Zella-Mehlis. As Gebauer et al. (2023, pp. 13–14) point out, transformation does not take place "on the ruins of post-socialism," but "with the ruins of post-socialism"—it thus remains shaped by pre-existing institutions and practices. Especially in East German communities like Zella-Mehlis, it seems necessary to open time and space for exchange about past practices and stories of loss and pain. Ultimately, the Aufwind initiative has done just that again and again—through open discussion groups, lectures, and the opportunity to tell each other's stories. However, only if these ideas can be embedded substantially in the local planning system and culture, can the door be unlocked for an open-mindedness towards an even more comprehensive transformation that is yet to come.

Last but not least, it was noticeable in the communication with the public and the events held that an individualizing logic towards frugal lifestyles and incremental transition strategies tended to come into play, associated with particular parts of the degrowth spectrum. The popular post-growth theorist Niko Paech, who was invited by the initiative and quoted several times, is often criticized in the degrowth debate for leaving out power relations, social justice, or gender issues (Dannemann & Holthaus, 2018). Wilmsen (2020, pp. 1–2) also points out that slogans such as "Liberation from Excess" (Paech, 2012) can easily be hijacked by right-wing and far-right actors and have already been appropriated, for example by the Thuringian fascist Björn Höcke under his pseudonym Landolf Ladig (Wilmsen, 2020, p. 1). However, even if the

consumer-critical, back-to-nature, and individualizing perspectives had the upper hand, guests such as Harald Welzer also critically and explicitly discussed right-wing populism on site in 2018 (Aufwind Zella-Mehlis, n.d.-b). The elaboration and dissemination of concepts such as open localism (Schneider & Nelson, 2018) could possibly provide a solution path, not only for Zella-Mehlis.

Despite the urgent need for a just socio-ecological transformation, the local political culture is increasingly influenced by the continuing rise of right-wing actors. During the ongoing research for this article, a far-right politician has won the position of a county administrator in the neighboring county (Landkreis) of Sonneberg, although precisely this party is assessed by the Thuringian Office for the Protection of the Constitution as assuredly extreme right-wing. Even if many local actors are currently turning much of their attention to the upcoming 2024 state elections, it is worth taking a look at the long-term horizon, where the combination of degrowth and shrinkage will continue to put the planning system and democracy to the test.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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