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# Local protests against small school closures in Austria – preconditions and outcomes

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## Abstract

### Problem

In Austria, 227 small schools were closed down between 2001 and 2014. These closures of rural elementary schools which were attended by pupils aged 6 to 10 were in many cases accompanied by protests of affected parents and other inhabitants of the villages. This was not only because of the schools educational purposes, but also because of its role as a stable social institution in community life.

The closure of a local village school cuts deep into the social life of the local population: the interactions between the villagers around daily school life, the interactions between villagers and persons from outside who come to the school for teaching or to engage in other activities, the celebration of festivities in the course of the school year, the socialisation of the population in ‘their’ school – everything stops if the village school closes. Therefore it is quite understandable that communities very often react with anger and protest when the closure of the local school is at stake.

### Questions

This talk will address the questions of what are the preconditions and outcomes for local protests. In this respect particular attention is paid to

- 1) how local protests are influenced by the way of communication between municipal authorities and protesters or representatives of the federal government and protesters
- 2) and what criteria contribute to the protesters’ ‘bargaining power’

### Preliminary Results

Although the research concentrated exclusively on municipalities where local protest did not succeed, some criteria could be identified which contributed to a significant protest such as a relevant size of the community in comparison to the size of the municipality, a strong sense of community identity owing to a separate history (affiliation to another parish; proximity to a larger town in the neighbouring municipality), or legal educational rights for minorities. These factors had a significant impact on the outcome of protest, often leading to the community obtaining some form of adequate compensation for the loss of the school - such as the establishment of a kindergarten.

### Methods and data sources

The results are based on 32 qualitative interviews with mayors who reported an elementary school closure in Austria between 2001 and 2014. To make sure to get the broadest picture possible of circumstances in which the closures occurred, we shared the 32 interviews

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proportionally, according to the number of closures in each federal state. We also took into consideration the following aspects: the number of pupils at the time of closure, the year of closure, the distance to the next school, the remaining number of schools in the community, the size of the community and the region it was in.

**Keywords:** School closure, elementary school, local protest, Austria