

Beauty Is in the Eye of the Beholder: An Account of Place Attractivity in a Romanian Left-behind Area

Todo es según el color del cristal con que se mira:
un relato de la atracción de lugares en un territorio
olvidado en Rumanía

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During the COVID-19 pandemic, in-migration to rural areas increased. Mobility and socialization restrictions led many people to seek larger houses and green spaces in rural areas, perceived as safer. In these flows, privileged destinations tend to be near large urban areas or scenic landscapes. However, much less is known about place attractivity in less popular, peripheral areas. A country with large rural-urban disparities, Romania also has diverse rural contexts with unequal development trajectories. Drawing on 34 interviews with people having different (im)mobility experiences in a peripheral area, this paper asks what makes the area attractive to residents. Using thematic analysis, we show that place attractivity is constructed at the intersection of physical place features, material conditions, symbolic ties, and everyday practices, counterbalancing perceptions of peripherality, and transforming peripherality into welcoming places.



Abstract

Durante la pandemia de COVID-19, la migración hacia zonas rurales aumentó. Las restricciones de movilidad y socialización llevaron a muchas personas a buscar casas más grandes y espacios verdes en zonas rurales, percibidas como más seguras. En estos flujos, los destinos privilegiados suelen estar cerca de grandes áreas urbanas o paisajes escénicos. Sin embargo, se sabe mucho menos sobre la atracción de lugares en zonas periféricas menos populares. Rumanía, un país con grandes disparidades entre zonas rurales y urbanas, también cuenta con contextos rurales diversos y trayectorias de desarrollo desiguales. Basándose en 34 entrevistas con personas que han tenido diferentes experiencias de (in)movilidad en una zona periférica, este artículo pregunta

qué hace atractiva a la zona para los residentes. Mediante análisis temáticos, mostramos que la atracción de lugares se construye en la intersección de las características físicas del lugar, las condiciones materiales, los lazos simbólicos y las prácticas cotidianas, contrarrestando las percepciones de la periferia y transformando la periferia en lugares acogedores.

Place attractiveness; left-behind area; return motivations; staying motivations

Atractividad del lugar; territorio olvidado; motivaciones de retorno; motivaciones para la permanencia



Key words

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1. Introduction

Peripheral or “left-behind” areas are characterized by shrinking populations, high out-migration, and population aging (MacKinnon et al., 2024). From a strictly economic perspective, they tend to sit at the lower end of the place attractiveness spectrum, with poor job prospects and infrastructure, and limited services (Velthuis et al., 2025). However, this perspective overlooks the fact that peripheral areas are places of contrast. While outmigration is in the spotlight, peripheral areas often have a sizeable population of stayers, and they are destinations for returnees and, in some cases, in-migrants (Stockdale, 2016). Moreover, alternative development perspectives such as endogenous (emphasizing the role of the local resources) and neo-endogenous (considering both local and external resources) underscore the variety and uniqueness of peripheral areas features, starting from “people’s visions, values, and potentials” (Rist et al., 2011, p. 120). Local characteristics can constitute sources of place attractiveness and a basis for alternative local development processes (MacKinnon et al., 2022; Wirth et al., 2016). Generally seen as places of departure (Thissen et al., 2010), left-behind areas have rarely been considered as places where people stay or return, and the motivations of these groups have rarely been investigated. This article addresses the gap by bringing residents’ perspectives on place attractiveness into the discussion on rural left-behind areas, to understand what it is and what role it plays in the mix of reasons for staying and returning to a place.

Thus, this article argues that left-behind areas are not unidimensional but nuanced contexts of belonging. To develop this argument, we use qualitative empirical data from a rural area in Romania: a commune (the smallest administrative unit in rural Romania) located in the South of the country that, based on established development criteria, could be classified as left behind, and which lacks conventionally attractive characteristics (e.g., touristic landmarks, scenic landscapes, large festivals). We identify and describe features that residents construct as attractive and that are so understood that they keep stayers and attract new residents/former out-migrants. Our aim is twofold. First, we intend to contribute to the literature on motives for return migration and staying in peripheral areas by examining the content and role of place attractiveness in this context. Second, we go beyond the one-sided relationship between place attractiveness and migration summarised as “attractive features of places act as pull factors for migrants,” by looking at how migration has changed, if at all, non-migrants’ and returnees’ perceptions of the place of origin.

The article begins with a theoretical overview of reasons for return migration and for staying in place, particularly in rural areas, which is then narrowed to motivations connected to return/stay in less popular places, linked to a brief discussion of place attractiveness. An account of the local context is followed by the methodology description. We then examine the relationship between (im)mobility and narratives of place attractiveness, disentangling these links in our case study area. This discussion is followed by a closer look at comparison frameworks from the interviews and how they are used as a rhetorical device to render the place of residence attractive. Finally, before drawing the main conclusions, we also show that characteristics of places, such as the environment and dwellings, are subjectively transformed into beautiful features in accounts of everyday experiences.

2. Theoretical Background

The scholarship on left-behind areas has grown in recent years, and the main studies on the topic come from a development theory perspective (Pieterse, 2010). The current paradigm follows a neo-endogenous development approach, emphasizing quality of life and well-being and supporting this through policies that combine local characteristics, resources, and residents' perspectives with external resources (MacKinnon et al., 2022).

Peripheral or "left-behind" areas denote a variety of contexts, including places in persistent decline for long periods of time, places that suffered a decline in recent years, or places with improving economic conditions but that remain relatively underdeveloped (for example, Lagendijk & Lorentzen, 2007, discuss how improving transport and communication infrastructure is not the same as improving power relations between places). While drawing on the literature on left-behindness (e.g., MacKinnon et al., 2024), we use the terms "peripheral" and "left-behind" interchangeably.

Left-behind areas are seen mainly as places of departure (Thissen et al., 2010). As such, the motivations that drive people to stay in peripheral areas and to return/come to these places have rarely been explored. Therefore, to understand them, we start from the established literature on general migration/stay motivations and from a brief discussion of place attractiveness and migration from less popular areas. The first category of motivations assessed here is motivations for return migration, particularly in rural areas.

International return migration used to be seen as the final stage in a linear migration process, following a migration experience planned for a limited time (including also retirement return), until a purpose (economic capital, education etc.) was fulfilled or, conversely, when, due to a miscalculation, the stay abroad did not pay off (Cassarino, 2004; Cerase, 1974; Vlase, 2011). However, in recent decades, particularly following the development of transnationalism literature (Carling & Pettersen, 2014; Levitt & Schiller, 2004), return has increasingly been seen as a potentially intermediary stage in a prolonged migration process. Moreover, EU freedom of movement encourages risk taking in the decision to return, having open the option of "double return" (White, 2014).

Migration flows are highly diverse, and consequently, there are a variety of reasons for return that depend on contexts abroad and at home, life stage, and migrant characteristics (White, 2022). Fulfilled plans and unsuccessful migration experiences remain valid return reasons, but at least for Central and Eastern European countries, the most common return reasons are family-related: being close to one's family, educating children in the home country, and caring

for children/older relatives (Nonchev & Hristova, 2018; Barcevičius et al., 2012). Moreover, Romanian migration scholarship has often highlighted the importance of local contexts, but most often in relation to migration effects and local development (Toma & Fosztó, 2018), and considering specific migration flows defined by ethnicity and social status (Anghel, 2016), gender and age (Șerban et al., 2022), or outcomes, such as returnee entrepreneurs (Croitoru, 2019).

Moving the lens on internal migration, returning to rural areas is often part of a complex network of internal migration flows. For one, there are counterurbanization flows, which include returnees at various stages of the life course (Stockdale, 2016), but also include retirement migration or migration of people close to retirement age (Lundholm, 2012). This type of migration would favor motivations related to lifestyle and consumption (as opposed to labor-market outcomes), which, in turn, are connected to place characteristics such as access to services and an appealing natural landscape. Then, there is a lateral migration flow (rural to rural), where, again, retirement and return migration seem to be important strands, but which has been shown to involve a wider range of motivations, including potentially stronger economic motivations and an interest in affordable housing (Stockdale, 2016). Adding to the complexity, these flows are directed to a heterogeneous rural area (Farrell et al., 2012), where, for instance, periurban areas are more attractive than remote rural areas (Hjort & Malmberg, 2006). Throughout, just as in the case of international migration, family reasons are an essential part of internal return migration narratives (Farrell et al., 2012).

The second category of motivations investigated here is motivations to stay in place. These types of motivations were at first construed as barriers to migration (see, for instance, the aspiration-ability model (Carling, 2002)). However, more recent studies (including updated versions of the aspiration-ability/capability model (Carling & Schewel, 2018; Schewel, 2020)) acknowledge the “mobility bias” of migration studies and recognize staying as a conscious choice relying on agency and resources (Stockdale & Haartsen, 2018). In this context, motivations to stay are related to individual (life stage and personal characteristics), family, and place characteristics. According to Hofstede and colleagues, place-related motivations to stay derive from two types of factors: material and symbolic. While material factors concern the environment, labor market, services, and housing in a place, symbolic factors consist of bonds between people and places, through social relations and feelings of belonging and place attachment (Hofstede et al., 2022).

The overview of motivations to stay/return suggests that place attractiveness, as place-related motives, is generated at the interface between place characteristics, on the one hand, and individual characteristics, on the other. With respect to place characteristics, attractiveness is characterized by imaginaries surrounding rural areas, or the so-called “rural idyll” (Elshof et al., 2017), but also by rural amenities such as accessibility and environmental features (Argent et al., 2014). This “rural idyll” concept refers to an image of rural life as “simple, innocent and virtuous as part of a pastoral myth of a lost Eden,” but which ignores the often-difficult life conditions that they hide (Shucksmith, 2018, p. 163). Guided by a quest for scenic beauty in rural areas, people seek quietness, green spaces, and diverse landscapes (Elshof et al., 2017).

Place attractivity also depends on individuals’ needs, demands, and preferences, which, in turn, are influenced by life stage, resources, and constraints (Niedomysl, 2010). Thus, different place characteristics appeal to different categories of people. A set of studies from the Netherlands, for instance, argues that rural places considered attractive are appealing to highly educated, high-income individuals, while migration to less popular rural areas is motivated

by a more diverse mix of reasons (family-related reasons, low house prices, moving in with a partner) (e.g., Bijker et al., 2012; Bijker & Haartsen, 2012).

At the same time, the relation between people and places can be characterized as being dynamic, multistranded, and ambivalent. First, both motivations to migrate/return and motivations to stay differ by people's socio-economic characteristics and life stage. Rural areas are a destination for retirees, while families with children might choose to stay until their children leave home for stability reasons (Haartsen & Stockdale, 2018). Second, places are rarely completely attractive or completely unattractive. For instance, return migration to peripheral areas for affective reasons is often associated with difficulties integrating into the local labor market (White, 2022). Finally, some material factors can play an ambiguous role in motivations to stay in/return to rural areas, such as housing. While lower housing prices are an attractive feature (Elshof et al., 2017), there may also be limited housing options (Stockdale & Ferguson, 2020).

The relationship between migration experience and place attractiveness is thus nuanced, and so far, there are only limited insights into how it plays out in left-behind areas in post-communist settings. This article adds to the discussion in two main ways: by identifying and describing reasons to stay/return in a rural left-behind area in Romania, and by discussing the subjective construction of place attractivity by stayers and returnees in this area. Moreover, by taking a "place-based" approach (Wyss et al., 2023), this article contributes to bridging the "gap" between internal and international migration (King & Skeldon, 2010) and to challenging the "mobility bias" in migration studies (Schewel, 2020).

3. Context and Community

Romania is at once one of the EU's most important countries of emigration, with an estimated 3.1 million citizens living in other EU countries in 2024 (Eurostat, 2025a, based on available data), and a country with significant regional economic inequalities (Sandu, 2022). In 2023, the GDP/capita of the capital city, Bucharest, was seven times higher than that of the least economically developed county (Eurostat, 2025b). Inequalities persist when we consider a more comprehensive development measure, such as the Regional Human Development Index (Sandu, 2024a) for NUTS3 regions or the Local Human Development Index (Sandu, 2024b) for localities. In the last few years, after the COVID-19 pandemic, in-migration to predominantly rural areas surpassed out-migration in some Eastern European countries, including Romania, breaking a long line of negative net migration rates (Eurostat, 2025c). Even in Romanian rural areas, following the national classification of residence areas, the migration balance¹ was positive for the first time since 1990 in 2020, and again in 2024 (NIS, 2026). The imposed mobility restrictions during the pandemic, the desire to avoid crowded places, and the increasing possibility of working from home at the time led many people to look for larger houses and green spaces in rural areas.

The commune, with three villages and marked by religious and ethnic homogeneity (Romanian Orthodox), is located in a poor area of Romania. Like many other rural communities in

1 The data refers to changes in residence.

Romania, it has experienced demographic decline over the last few decades, driven by out-migration and low birth rates, and now has around 2,300 inhabitants.

Based on popularity criteria such as inflows of people and house prices (Bijker & Haartsen, 2012), the locality does not exert much attraction. Census data suggests that in general the rural area of the reference county does not attract many people and the majority of those who move here come from the same county. Out of all the people residing in Romania at the last census (2021) who changed their locality of residence at least once in their lifetime to move to (other) rural areas, around 2% lived in our reference county at the time of the census (values across rural areas of counties range from a minimum of 0.9% to a maximum of 6.4%; median = 1.9; mean = 2.4). Moreover, among those who had moved at least once during their lifetime and were now living in our county of reference, the majority (66%) had come from the same county, only 4% having previously lived in another country (RPL 2021, Table 4.3).

The commune is typical for a rural locality situated in the plains, with small valleys and maximum heights of less than 200 meters and has no significant tourist attractions. The three component villages are near one another; there are schools and kindergartens in the commune, a pharmacy, a few shops with tables outside for beverage consumption scattered throughout the villages, and a supermarket. There is no access to natural gas distribution systems, but there is running water and a sewerage system in two of the three villages, which, along with the pavement of roads during the last decades, are valued by the locals. In terms of leisure options available locally, the situation is gender-sensitive: the research has revealed that the bars in the commune are considered appropriate gathering places for men but not for women. This contributes to gendered experiences of the locale, with men having more leisure options and more available social space than women.

While the availability of transportation (a county-level transportation company offers hourly bus rides to the county capital) contributed to the expansion of commuting to the city for work in the industrial sector, agriculture remains the dominant sector of activity (farming, animal husbandry, and household subsistence agriculture). Apart from work in agriculture, there are only a few employment opportunities in the commune's service sector. The lack of local jobs is perceived by area residents as one of the area's main challenges.

In this context, out-migration has become common, either directed towards other localities in Romania or towards destinations abroad (seasonal migration to various destinations such as Germany, Spain, or the UK; long-term migration mainly towards Spain and Italy). Money earned abroad is used to improve living conditions in migrant households, sometimes making up for what is not provided at the community level, such as gas. International return is also evident: numerous people return to the commune after long periods abroad, as well as seasonal migrants between contracts. Internal migrants are typically persons either retired or close to retirement, usually internal returnees, and women who married men from the commune and moved into their in-laws' households.

4. Methodology

This article is based on data collected in April-August 2025 within the framework of the Horizon Europe project Re-Place - Reframing Non-Metropolitan Left Behind Places Through Mobility and Alternative Development, and consists of in-depth interviews conducted with non-migrants (stayers) and in-migrants (including internal and international return migrants)

in a commune in one of the poorest counties in Southern Romania, an area identified as left behind in the context of the country. The interview guide was mainly focused on place-based experiences and perceptions. Its thematic structure contained sections on place attachment and identity, household living strategies, future mobility intentions, and impacts of migration.

The current analysis is based on 34 interviews with respondents who lived there at the time of the research. The sampling strategy focused on capturing the perspectives of individuals employing different (im)mobility strategies: non-migrants (10), international returnees (12), internal returnees (9), and internal in-migrants (3). Although the recruitment strategy was largely based on recommendations from local stakeholders (school teachers, priests, and local administration) and other interviewees, it also involved approaching locals at random. The sample consisted of 24 women and 10 men, aged 24 to 77 years, with the majority having secondary education. A relatively high number of interviewees were retired (15), 8 were employed, and only one was a business owner. The others were mostly working in their own households, with a few taking day labor jobs and one serving as a caretaker for a family member. The interviews ranged from 31 to 127 minutes, with a mean duration of 73 minutes. The research was conducted with the approval of the Research Institute for Quality of Life (ICCV) Ethics Committee.

The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, coded in NVivo using a combination of bottom-up and top-down coding, and analyzed thematically. Place attractiveness has been coded as a combination of attitudes towards the place (including cognitive aspects, such as perceptions about the development of the place and its future, and behavioral aspects related to reasons for (im)mobility and future intentions), place attachment, feelings of home, and home-making activities, comparisons between the locality and other places in Romania and abroad.

5. Results

5.1. Local narratives of place attractiveness and the role of im(mobility). What connects people to a left-behind area?

Maria² is a 64-year-old woman born in the community who left for high school, then moved to a nearby city, where she married. While her mother was alive, she cared for her and spent her free time mostly at home. Now retired, she returned to the community while keeping her apartment in the city. She takes pride in the fact that she organizes her time as she pleases, without having any constraint to be in one place or another—for instance, going to the city for groceries and staying there as much as she feels like. She perceives living in the countryside, in a house “on the ground,” as a marker of freedom, unlike living in an apartment, where activities are limited. She is involved in the life of the community: she goes to Church every Sunday and on religious holidays; she drives and has her own car; and she helps her neighbors and friends in the commune by giving them rides whenever needed. She says she has the same

2 To preserve anonymity, we use pseudonyms.

comfort and utilities as in the city, and that if you know how to manage your livelihood and household, you can live a carefree life wherever, whether in a city or a village.

Vasile was also born in the commune and is slightly younger than Maria (born in 1967). He has been retired since 1994 due to health problems. He receives a pension that is insufficient for daily expenses, and he supplements his income as a day laborer, but this is complicated because of his health. He is a caregiver for his brother, who lives with him. His attachment to the place is rooted in familiarity: he does not have significant experiences of living elsewhere, though he benefits from rehabilitation/therapeutic holidays every year, based on his condition. At the beginning of the interview, he says he would not want to live anywhere else and has never considered moving. However, later on, he recounts his trip to Italy to visit a nephew and the lost opportunity to remain there, where he would have had secure employment and a safety net of extended family. While he considered staying there, he decided to return to Romania to care for his elderly mother. Although he likes this area the most, enjoys the traditions (especially as they used to be), and does not feel like leaving, he is also aware of the role of his care responsibilities in staying, and he identifies some local sources of dissatisfaction.

The stories of Maria and Vasile illustrate some of the main points tackled in this section and suggest that place attractivity is a complex concept, not without its inner tensions. The main sources of place attractiveness identified in the interviews are symbolic (family connections, place attachment, and a sense of belonging), but they can have contrasting meanings. For instance, proximity to family can be at once a source of happiness and an inescapable responsibility. Alongside the symbolic dimension of attractive place features, material motivations (such as the public infrastructure or economic security brought by the existence of familial networks) also play an important role in staying/returning to the area, while some motivations, such as household related reasons have a double connotation: symbolic (through place-making) and material (living conditions, the possibility to engage in small scale agriculture for personal consumption).

As both stories suggest, family is one of the most common themes across the interviews, associated with mobility or staying strategies. Family relations are embedded in place and are commonly a major component of place attractiveness. Most often, family motivations are part of the decisions to remain in or return to the area, in order to provide care to those in need, but also of decisions to go abroad to gain access to resources that would enable respondents to build a better life for themselves and their families—a life that is clearly located at the origin. In this sense, temporary migration abroad is an option that allows families to remain in their community of origin in the long run: houses are built, amenities are upgraded as investments in a precisely situated future. The adaptation of mobility strategies to contextual family realities appears to be an individual response to situational constraints arising from care duties for family members. In both internal migrants and international returnees, the changing health status of parents seems to trigger efforts to reduce the distance between family members. In some instances, there can also be a confluence of multiple family-related aspects that motivate mobility from one area to another:

My father passed away. My mother was left alone. And yes, like any parent, she had animals, birds. The boy got married—well, he had found a partner there [in the city]. And since we didn't have anything there, my brother, my sister, and I agreed that I would take this place here, so we could leave that one to him. At the time, I had a car. I commuted back and forth. (Man in his 60s, internal returnee)

While some of the non-migrants have thought about what it would be like if they went abroad (but ultimately decided against it, choosing family over financial gain, as someone put it), remaining/staying in the community of origin was more a given than an actual choice or something that was debated, a result of traditional intergenerational solidarity. In some cases, this was explicitly cultivated/imposed by parents, and in others, it was the result of an individual's or partner's decision. For women, this constrained immobility seems to stand out: for them, the decision is not whether to go abroad, but whether it is possible at all to seek employment outside the household and reorganize the fulfillment of their care duties. In other words, mobility across short distances, such as commuting to work or simply leaving the household to reach the workplace, is sometimes dismissed as incompatible with proper care provision within the family. The compliance with this traditional gender role early in life leads to continued compliance later on, when age also influences what is considered acceptable:

Well, that's how it was. I ended up not going away for work. I had my father-in-law. He was old, and I had to take care of him. I had both of my parents, too, and I had to look after them as well... What could I do? That's life. If you don't manage to leave when you're young, later on, once you reach a certain age, you just don't feel like leaving anymore. (Woman in her late 50s, non-migrant)

For some stayers who were young adults during socialism, not migrating is also a decision linked to the behavioral repertoire available to their generation. As one non-migrant puts it, when she was young, "there wasn't [this thing] with going abroad." And, as mentioned above, having stayed in the past (whether or not a decision was taken in this respect) is linked to current stay decisions. This mirrors the common finding in the literature that prior migration experience increases the likelihood of future migration (e.g., Bernard & Perales, 2021).

In some cases, the motivation to stay/return is embedded in an attachment to the community that is both deeply rooted and (at least partially) beyond reasonable/rational explanations. The place of birth and the place where people grew up seem to have an ontological advantage over other places, both internal and international. In such narratives, return is the only possible outcome, based on the personal history of respondents, which makes them unable to live elsewhere (it is just how they are):

I don't know, maybe because I was born here, I grew up here, I went to school here... I don't know... That's how I've always felt, that even if I left and went somewhere else, I always felt the need to come back home. I don't know, maybe I'm just the kind of person who can't live anywhere else. (Woman in her 50s, international returnee)

For internal migrants, going back and forth between nearby localities in a relatively small area is common. This fluidity of routines between the origin and the destination (for example, mobility for participating in agricultural work, or on weekends and holidays) contributes to strengthening everyday ties to the place (to the extended family/household) or, prior to returning to the community, maintaining ties with their family residence. In this sense, the community seems to be a location that affords life between places and small area migration as the current practice. In such situations, the choice of residence had limited effects on the lives of internal in-migrants and returnees, and allowed them to enjoy the freedom that comes with living in the countryside, with all the activities that are possible there, but impossible in the city, where living arrangements usually come with space constraints (living in an apartment in the city, compared to living in a house, with a yard, in the countryside).

Although only briefly touched upon by Maria's story, which includes an experience of internal migration to a nearby city, migration in various forms (internal and international long-term out-migration/return, and international seasonal migration) is common in the area, and migration experience can change perceptions of place attractiveness.

First, at the individual level, it can prompt reflection on the characteristics of the originating community. The quote below illustrates the experience of a return migrant who spent six years in Spain and remembers equating return to the origin with a return in time that he needed to reprocess. He reframes his perception of a certain backwardness of the place, suggested by the noise made by horses and carriages at the market, as a positive, rather than a negative. For this, he used narratives attributed to foreigners who, he thought, appreciated the experiences of traditional rural life. This reinterpretation appeared in several interviews, in connection with comparisons between the community and other places, most often abroad: what can and is usually considered an indicator of lack of development or lack of modern ways of acting or of working becomes a marker of authenticity and traditions that are kept alive, of a life lived closer to nature.

You could tell a bit that I stayed abroad for a while, when I came back and slept in my little house ... Being a rural area, I could hear in the morning when they passed ... I live close to the market there—people, citizens, with carts, horses and the trampling ... Hearing [that] again I said, God, it seems... It was a step back in time. Although many times it may be more pleasant, even if we are a little more like this... Because I noticed, even those from abroad, that they covet our life and our lands more virgin, more... and a community with peasants, with a more... let's say, not that primitive living environment, but somehow, you know, I don't know. (Man in his 50s, international returnee)

Second, at the community level, migration experience seems to play a complex, ambivalent role in the attractiveness of the place of origin. On the one hand, it makes it possible for people to invest in their homes at the origin, a widely documented process (for example, in Smith & Mazzucato, 2009; Alexandru, 2012; Jacob, 2015). On the other hand, it leads to selective depopulation, as previous studies show (World Bank, 2020; Horváth & Kiss, 2015). While the first quote exemplifies the positive impact of migration at the community level, contributing to the attractiveness of the place, the second quote below shows that depopulation is not only about shrinking or aging populations but also about difficulties in accessing services in the local area following the out-migration of qualified people.

[Out-migration is] good for the community ... 'cause each of us, when we left [abroad], that's why we left. To make houses, to make fences, to paint houses, so that it's beautiful. (Woman in her 50s, international returnee)

We no longer have craftsmen, shoemakers... You want to repair a shoe, there's no one to repair it; a tailor, I've never heard of anyone going to one... to patch their pants or whatever. No, already... You bought them wide, you just wear them like this, that's it, it's over. (Man in his 60s, internal in-migrant)

5.2. Putting place attractiveness in context

With few exceptions, respondents were satisfied with their lives in the area and intended to stay. The characteristics of the place that make it appealing to residents are constructed in a series of comparisons: with the same locality in the past (prompted by the interviewer), with

neighboring rural areas, and with the city (spontaneous in conversation). The positive aspects that stand out in these comparative narratives are the improved living conditions in the commune, the appeal of the rural landscape and the feeling of freedom it generates, and the honest human relations. On the contrary, the still-deficient infrastructure, limited leisure facilities, and the shrinking population of the commune are some of the challenges of living in a peripheral area.

The unanimous view was that, compared with the commune's material situation a few years ago, significant improvements are evident, particularly in infrastructure. Although there is still no gas distribution infrastructure and some parts of the commune are not covered by the sewerage system, people tend to appreciate recent developments, and most consider they have "all the conditions" for a comfortable life. As the quote below suggests, the favorable assessment of the living conditions in this context is also justified by experiences of relatively recent times when the most basic infrastructure, such as paved streets, was missing:

So, compared to previous years, well, you couldn't even go by cart, they were clunking and we were in a terr[ible state]... Now, all the hills, all the streets are paved. Schools have minibuses at their disposal to take children from here to there, to the [school in the] centre. (Woman in her 60s, international returnee)

When the discussion turns to comparisons with neighboring rural areas, opinions are divided. Many consider that their commune is better off than the localities in the vicinity and living here is preferable despite some signs of discontent over specific issues (e.g., how public works were carried out near someone's house). For example, an international returnee in her 30s, considers that "the mayor for so many years has tried to create conditions for us, water, sewerage, I don't know, good conditions anyway. Because there are others who don't have our conditions." Few, particularly the young, have a more ambivalent attitude. While acknowledging the favorable comparison with some localities in the region, they argue that infrastructure investments should also consider the aesthetics of public spaces and that more attention should be paid to creating recreational spaces. These differences can also be interpreted as stemming from the different needs and preferences of people at different life stages. While youth who spend more time with peers in public spaces would value more opportunities for leisure and social interaction, people from older generations tend to be more pragmatic and appreciate recent infrastructure improvements that might be taken for granted and are still missing in other localities.

Yes, well, in some localities it looks worse than here, but looking at the surrounding communes, [name of commune] looks worse than other communes... For example, the streets are all paved, concrete ditches—we struggled here to make a ditch. And [it's] different, the commune looks more beautiful, they have even more places where you can go out, spend your time. Here you can't really... (Woman in her 20s, internal migrant)

The comparison that yields the most favorable outcome for the commune, however, is with urban areas. Here, the frame of comparison changes. When contrasting the commune with other rural localities, respondents emphasized the presence of infrastructure, but when comparing it with the city, elements akin to the "rural idyll" emerge. Alongside a few comments about the attractiveness of the rural landscape, often emphasized are the village's quietness compared to the city's noise and the sense of freedom it offers, particularly within one's own

household. One respondent, born in another rural area (similar plain relief but a flatter landscape), who had come here to her husband's origin locality many years ago, is among the few cases that highlight the beauty of the physical landscape. Along with other respondents, she believes the rural area is a very good environment for raising children, allowing them to enjoy their childhood, as the following quote illustrates:

When I saw these hills, I liked it very much. And I still like it now. We, there, where we live, behind the house we have only hills. My grandson is the child of the hills, that's what I call him, the child of the hills. He also has a passion for his insects and all that. And you can imagine, they come from school, throw away their backpacks, eat a little and go straight up the hill to look for a bug. [...] It's fresh air, it's good. They are happy children compared to those in the city. (Woman in her 50s, international returnee)

A more frequent type of rural-urban comparison that is advantageous to the local community than one concerning the landscape is that of human relations. People in the locality, and by extension those in rural areas, are perceived as more honest and helpful than those in cities. On the downside, interviewees also complain that the population is shrinking with fewer people and more empty houses in the area ("for instance, where I live, one house is inhabited, two or three empty"), which means that in many situations it is difficult to find someone to give a hand in emergency situations.

Quietness, this clean air and people are purer in spirit in the countryside than in the city. [People are] more low-minded in [the city]... Here too there is some gossiping, because this is how people are used to running their mouth a little... so-and-so came, so-and-so left, this and that. But still the village world is purer in spirit, more honest and more willing to help than in the city. (Woman in her 70s, non-migrant)

The construction of place attractiveness, even with the few ingredients at hand (incomplete infrastructure and public services, natural landscape without conventionally attractive features or tourist attractions, good proximity to amenities but fewer neighbors), is nevertheless sufficiently strong to counterbalance the positive views of life abroad. Apart from the long, hard working hours, most assessments of life abroad are positive on account of better service provision (health, transportation, social protection, etc.), better institutional organization and less bureaucracy, more respectful relations between people and public authorities, and more environmentally friendly attitudes. Our findings suggest that circumstantial rather than intrinsic characteristics of the peripheral area, such as proximity to family and place of birth, are the factors that tip the balance towards the peripheral area.

5.3. Homemaking and the aesthetics of everyday life as sources of place attractivity

Regarding place attractiveness, there are place characteristics perceived as specific to the area as a whole, but there are also differentiations within the area, the most notable of which is between the private and public spheres. The previous section outlined sources of place attractiveness related to the environment, the public sphere (such as investments in material infrastructure), and social relations. This section focuses on sources of place attractivity in the private sphere, namely home and home-making, as well as on place attractivity features that bond the public and the private sphere, such as traditions.

Home is a multidimensional concept that can be understood as having multiple meanings, from one grounded in materiality, represented by a certain built space (a house, for example), to meanings that are rather immaterial and emotional. When people say they made all the conditions for a comfortable life, they seem to point to these different meanings. First, they are proud of the material amenities related to the size of the house (often in contrast with the small and precarious houses of previous generations), including a bathroom inside the house,³ running water, sewerage/septic tanks, heating, and gas. Some of these are provided by the local authorities, but where the public infrastructure has not arrived, people make their own private investments. Related, a natural extension of the home in the countryside is the vegetable garden, the yard for animals, and the courtyard, which often has trees and/or flowers. The entire design of the household seems to be both a way to increase quality of life and a way for people to be self-sufficient (“you have to organize yourself so that you’ve got everything you need at home”), potentially also as insurance against unexpected emergencies. And this is linked to the second point related to the affective dimension of the house.

Place attachment is described by some interviewees as “love for the commune” or for the place of birth, but the most nuanced descriptions of place attachment, which also emphasize elements of place attractivity (e.g., natural elements like blossoming trees), concern the attachment to the home and its extensions that form the private space. And they are often elicited by reflections on the unwanted possibility of living in the city. For instance, elderly people fearing they won’t be able to look after themselves anymore hope they will not have to abandon their home and move in with their caretakers in the city, as we see from the quote below:

And I pray to God to keep me, not to be forced... to take me to the apartment [in the city]. And she told me, “mommy, come to the apartment during the winter, you don’t have to make the fire,”⁴ [but] I don’t like it. ... If I tell you how much I love spring when trees bloom and I hear the chickens singing and I go to pick up... and when I see chicks in the yard, extraordinarily ... and when this garden was full of those lilies, it looked so beautiful, like milk. (Woman in her 70s, non-migrant)

Place attractivity is also revealed in accounts of everyday experiences, which are described in a manner that is suggestive of rituals (some even including elements from religious Orthodox rituals, such as taking the holy bread and water after the morning prayer). The attractiveness of the place is again made by the individuals (“I made all the conditions for myself”), and its maintenance requires work, as well as strong commitment and consistency (not least because other beings, the chicken and pigs, depend on it). There is also a certain tension between the place’s attractivity resulting from combining the individual’s agency with the natural environment, and the commitment required of the individual to maintain this attractivity. The quote below describes free time more as an exception and something that also has to be actively claimed from daily work.

When I have free time, I take my book, I sit in bed, for example, I made food, I cleaned the kitchen, I put my dishes in the washing machine... so I made all the conditions for myself, not to stay like this ... I go to the garden, I take the hoe, I dig the onion, the

3 As opposed to having the bathroom outside, potentially at a couple of meters from the house, which can still be found in rural areas.

4 Here, the respondent’s daughter was referring to using tiled stoves and firewood to heat the house.

garlic, or I go to the greenhouse ... So, no, here, only when you said: I don't want to do anything anymore. Only then, but no, here you don't stay for a moment, since you wake up. I wake up at six, six and half, quarter to seven, I say my morning prayer, I go take my *anafura* [holy bread], my *aghiazma* [holy water], like this and I go outside. I calm everything down [feeding the birds and the pig], and after an hour or so, I come to the house, prepare something to eat... (Woman in her 60s, international returnee)

Other interviewees mentioned that this kind of labor makes proximity to home a requirement, and it is very difficult to find someone to take care of the household to afford absences.

The discursive divide between private and public spheres, with one of its clearest expressions in a non-migrant's quote, "So I am satisfied in my house but not in the commune ... because in the commune I had many expectations from the city hall," is bridged on occasions through practices associated with (remnants of) traditions. Events such as the performance of the traditional dance "Căluș,"⁵ the Easter community meal,⁶ or like the one described in the quote below regarding a family tradition, blur the distinction between private and public, including the community.

I have a monument there. The land is donated by my grandfather and is made for those of the Second World War ... On Heroes' Day, on Ascension Day, service is held at that monument. Here I set up a table with the priests, with those from the city hall, with neighbours and that. I like it so much and even though it's tiring and I can't anymore. And my daughter says "give up, give up, that it can't be done anymore," [but] everything has a purpose. I can't give up, because my mother left this tradition, for people to gather here. And this atmosphere... (Woman in her 70s, non-migrant)

On these occasions, the beauty usually reserved for descriptions of the private sphere seems to encompass at least parts of the local area. These practices and the memories of their enactments in the past reinforce the bonds with the local community and the symbolic meaning of material objects such as the monument in the quote above. However, these events have fewer participants (e.g., fewer children who learn the traditional dance) or few prospects for continuation in the future, as in the example above, the respondent's daughter, who lives in the city, is not too keen to continue their family tradition.

6. Conclusions

The main aims of this paper were to uncover the meanings attributed to place attractiveness in a left-behind area in Romania that is ethnically and religiously homogeneous and lacks conventionally attractive features, and to understand how place attractiveness is constructed in relation to prior migration or stay experiences. To inform our understanding of the relationship between migration and place attractiveness, we drew on the literature on left-behind ar-

⁵ This is a traditional ritual dance that is still performed by a group of men on the Ascension Day.

⁶ One of the local churches continues a tradition of gathering the villagers for a community meal to celebrate Easter, although fewer people attend nowadays.

reas, return motivations more generally, migration/return to rural areas, and staying motivations.

Complementing previous research on return migration motivations (White, 2022), this article foregrounds the subjective construction of place attractivity where the place is a site of interaction between different mobility flows and immobility. The use of the place attractivity concept moves the focus away from (push/pull) economic motivations for staying/migrating, and integrates family and social network reasons into a more complex strand of motivations that also include childhood memories and everyday life experiences, traditions, and rituals. All these motivations are grafted on the existence of a minimum local infrastructure, and are reflexively assessed using several frames of comparison, where tensions are not absent. Moreover, the case study in Southern Romania helped us emphasize a series of mechanisms for the construction of place attractivity as a relational and dynamic concept. First, it emphasized the agency of both staying and mobile individuals through their investment of emotions, meanings, and material resources in places. Second, it underscored the influence of places without conventional attractions in this process, as part of life experiences (in place or translocal), or in confronting and integrating frames of comparison obtained through mobility.

Place attractiveness draws on actual or imagined characteristics of places, which can be intrinsic (landscape) or circumstantial (family living in the area). Individuals assess place attractiveness based on their own needs, preferences, and constraints, and this in turn is linked to their decision to move/return to a place or stay in place. Amenities - material (house on the ground, infrastructure), economic (housing affordability), social (community around the church and vicinities, local traditions), and symbolic factors (feeling of independence and freedom, social connections, feeling of belonging) are all elements used by residents to construct the attractiveness of the place they live in. Alongside these, family-related reasons and life stage (periods associated with different care responsibilities and retirement) are the most common core drivers of staying or moving to the area.

Acknowledging both attractive and unattractive features of the commune, the place's attractiveness is actively negotiated and constructed by putting things into a broader perspective and by including comparisons with other places they are familiar with. The simple use of the place attractiveness concept suggests that places are either uniformly attractive or unattractive, or at least that the attractive aspects outweigh the less popular ones. However, just as "ambivalences in the attachment to place" are linked to both positive and negative meanings of places (Carrasco-Cruz & Cruz-Souza, 2025), our study shows that there is also an ambivalence in perceptions of place attractiveness. Similarly to the young returnees in Spain (idem), in our case study, positive connotations of the commune, such as context of childhood, local traditions, honest and helpful people, are linked to place attractiveness, and negative connotations like gaps in public infrastructure coverage, difficulty in finding work, and depopulation make aspects of the place less attractive. However, in the mix of perceptions, people living in peripheral areas draw on resources such as personal relations, memories, and the familiarity of everyday practices to construct place attractiveness, with the household often the focal point.

Part of the symbolic sources of place attractivity, our findings suggest a prominent role for homemaking in processes of belonging to the place. What seems specific to left-behind areas with limited infrastructure is the increased room for agency and the intensive effort required for "making all the conditions." In addition, compared to urban areas, rurality is associated with larger private spaces, which foster freedom and the aesthetics of everyday practices, such as gardening.

Familial ties constitute more than factors making a certain place more attractive—they appear to introduce conditionalities shaping the mobility trajectories of individuals. Remaining in the community of birth, especially as an only child or the youngest, to support elderly parents; being groomed into this role through parental decisions regarding one's profession; or connecting the decision to return to care obligations were situations encountered in the research.

Comparisons appear to be the discursive mechanisms at work when respondents want to make a point about the commune's characteristics or their decision to live there. They ground individual behavior in hard, factual truths about the development of the last few decades, including local infrastructure and the advantages of living in a rural area compared to an urban one.

In the vein of Bijker & Haartsen (2012), the data show that different groups of people understand place attractivity and peripherality differently. There are some differences between international returnees, internal in-migrants/returnees, and stayers. For the first group, homesickness and rational calculations are part of the motivations for returning. The second group is associated with repeated movements within a small area, characterized by fluidity, blurred borders between in-migration and out-migration, and livelihoods unfolding across places. For them, the area serves as an anchor in difficult times, and they are often nostalgic about the time they spent there as youth. Staying has sometimes been a constrained choice, most often due to family obligations or restrictions, but also because the option to leave was not as common in the repertoire of behaviors for older generations as it is now. But for some, staying was a choice rooted in place attachment, comfort, and an image of the self that is intimately connected to the place from which one cannot separate. For both stayers and returnees, a high degree of comfort in navigating space is noticeable, or, as McKinlay & McVittie (2007) put it, in “doing being local.” In turn, this is a feature of people-place relations that increases places' attractiveness.

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