

“Left Behindness” – Is Mobility an Answer?

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1. Rising Inequalities, The Current Turn to Populism and “Left Behind” Areas as Hotspots of Discontent

Over the past two decades, every major wave of elections has drawn growing attention and concern from the Global North. A new wave of political populism is on the rise. What explains this and what can be done in relation to its causes are major concerns not only for politicians and decision makers, but also current areas of interest for academics. Recent analyses put this trend as an expression of discontent linked to specific spatial inequalities (e.g. De Ruyter et al., 2021; Dijkstra et al., 2020; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Lagging behind areas, shrinking areas, places that don't matter, left behind places or left behind areas (LBAs)¹ are all terms to designate, at different scales, places characterized by economic decline, limited wealth, lack of social or material mobility, lower educational attainment, out-migration, ageing and population shrinkage, reduced service provision and a lack of public investment that tend to fuel political discontent (Pike et al., 2024). As Gansauer (2025) writes, peripheral geographies are not only geographies of disadvantage, but of “relational dispossession” as a result of unequal flows of capital and infrastructure.

The term *left behind place* grew in use recently up to the point of being “... the leitmotif of geographical inequalities since the 2008 crisis” (Pike et al., 2024, p. 1). From a geographical perspective, the term stresses the increase in territorial inequalities and polarisation during the neoliberal phase of capitalism and the failure of associated policies to address them (Martin et al., 2022; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). With the shift from an industrial to a knowledge-based economy, people moved toward urban centres as the primary hubs of innovation-led job creation. The logic was to invest in people as they would follow jobs (Moretti, 2012). Indeed,

¹ Different terms are used to designate these places. We use here *left behind area*, just to be consistent with our project proposal. However, *left behind area* and *left behind place* will be used here interchangeably.

the growing popularity of the concept has not been matched by a comparable advancement in our understanding of the heterogeneous realities grouped under the label of *left behind areas*. There are commonalities in the “left-behind” condition, yet development trajectories and pathways leading to this are shaped by distinct histories, labour markets, institutional capacities, local assets and external relations (Gansauer & Fiorentino, 2026). Recent assessments (e.g. Pike et al., 2024) therefore call for more nuanced analyses of the resources, constraints, and development opportunities characterising these territories.

This special issue, based on recent results produced within the framework of the Horizon Europe Re-Place project, addresses these gaps from the perspective of spatial mobility and migration.² Connecting the literature on left behind areas with specific recent developments in migration studies, the special issue makes two particular contributions. First, through the specific approach to spatial mobility and migration in left behind areas implemented within the framework of Re-Place, the special issue argues for a reassessment of spatial mobility (immobility) in these areas, to capture the interconnectedness of diverse movements enmeshed in one place. This contribution is rather implicit, through the diversity of mobility and migration flows discussed in the papers here, suggesting that defining left behind areas mainly as places of out migration is rather reductionist and obscures an important potential for development of these areas. Second, the papers included in the special issue address spatial mobility and migration as a resource for the development of left behind areas in a reflective manner, highlighting their ambivalence in relation to development. The special issue also contributes to a better understanding of the diversity of left behind areas bringing in works from five European countries, from the South (Portugal, Spain, Italy), the Centre-North (Germany) and the Centre-East (Romania) of Europe.

The article is structured as follows: the next section discusses the current perspectives on spatial mobility and migration in left behind areas and proposes a more comprehensive approach based on current developments in the literature associated with migration studies. A third section presents the particular approach of the Re-Place project to spatial mobility and migration in the left behind areas or peripheral areas. Then the papers of the special issue are discussed.

2. Towards a More Nuanced Understanding of Spatial Mobility and Migration in “Left-Behind” Areas

Most of the definitions in use put left behind places as a sum of “key characteristics,” stressing their multidimensional nature (e.g. MacKinnon et al., 2022; Pike et al., 2024). Based on literature, MacKinnon et al. (2022) include in their defining list: “... relative economic under-performance and decline, expressed in below average pay, employment and productivity; lower levels of educational qualification and skills; higher levels of poverty and disadvantage (compared to national averages); *out-migration*, ageing and demographic shrinkage; poor health; limited connectivity and investment in social and economic infrastructure; reduced service

² Throughout this article, we use the term *human mobility* to refer to both spatial mobility and migration. These are overlapping concepts, as migration constitutes one form of spatial mobility. However, because migration studies and mobility studies have developed largely as distinct fields, we retain both terms throughout the text. Unless otherwise specified, references to mobility and migration include both internal and international movements.

provision; political disengagement, neglect and discontent; and a lack of civic assets and community facilities” [emphasis added] (p. 3).

If we focus specifically on the mobility-related dimension, left behind areas are places from where people leave. From a neoclassical economic interpretation, out-flows answer to the imbalances in development between regions/countries. Individuals rationally decide to move towards places offering better opportunities for extracting the maximum benefits from their human capital endowment. Large cities, metropolitan areas, successful and dynamic, as opposed to left behind places, become the destinations. Under this theoretical model, in time, migration is expected to contribute to the establishment of an equilibrium (for example, affected by diminishing labour force available, employers will tend to increase the wages in origin areas). However, to the contrary, migration tends to be selective depleting origin areas of the most educated, young and talented people, thus migration represents one of the processes contributing to the peripheralization of left behind areas (De Ruyter et al., 2021; Pike et al., 2024).

Our argument starts from the prominence given to out-migration, in its economic motivation and permanent character, as one defining characteristic of left behind areas. We argue here that this perspective oversimplifies the complexity of human mobility in left-behind areas, stressing that the *potential* diversity of migration needs to be considered in order to extensively identify resources for further development (especially from a neo-endogenous perspective). We base our arguments in recent literature, particularly in migration studies, that stresses the diversification of the forms migration currently takes and the need to integrate different fields of inquiry. When appropriate, we also add references to the articles published in this current issue.

We start by discussing three general ideas (internal - international divide; immobility - mobility divide; and migration - mobility divide) contending that, for a better understanding of LBAs, particularly from a place-based perspective, there is a need to reconsider these divides. We then bring into discussion types of spatial mobility/migration in relation to rural/peripheral or non-metropolitan areas. Thus, we argue for a more comprehensive approach to human mobility in LBAs that highlight new resources for development.

2.1. Beyond internal – international migrant divide

King & Skeldon (2010), in an article published more than 15 years ago, revisit the longstanding idea (see Zelinsky, 1971) of *integrating internal and international migration* within a single analytical framework. They begin by suggesting that the distinction between the two phenomena is, to a certain extent, artificial, as individuals often combine internal and international migration experiences throughout their life courses, while households may simultaneously rely on mobility towards both internal and international destinations as part of their livelihood strategies. Building on this insight, we show that left-behind areas constitute origins of both internal and international migration. As a result, the effects of these forms of mobility are likely to overlap and interact at the local level. Understanding the development trajectories of such places therefore requires moving beyond the conventional separation between internal and international migration and examining their combined contribution to local resources and opportunities. Blurring this divide empirically, Rodríguez Rodríguez et al. (2026) demonstrate how in a rural border area in Spain, internal migrants and international lifestyle migrants tap into the same local opportunity structure of rural tourism entrepre-

neurship. While they arrive through different routes and with different motivations, the outcome is similar with both contributing to the diversification of local livelihoods and repopulation. Moreover, beyond shared contributions to local development outcomes, Deliu and Manoilă (2026), studying a left-behind area in Romania, show how internal and in-migrants with international migration experiences share similar subjective attachments to place and local identities questioning again the assumption that these categories are necessarily analytically distinct.

2.2. Beyond Migrants – Stayers Divide

Although calls to incorporate both migrants and non-migrants into the study of migration are not new (e.g. Faist, 2000; Hammar & Tamas, 1997), it is only more recently that this perspective has started to be systematically incorporated into different works. An important contribution in this regard was Carling's aspiration/ability model (2002), later refined by Carling & Schewel (2018), which brought together migrants, voluntary non-migrants, and involuntary non-migrants within a common explanatory framework. More recently, a growing number of studies have approached migration and immobility as fluid and revisable options that individuals reassess throughout their life course (see Barcus & Werner, 2017; Erickson et al., 2018). Other scholars have further challenged the conventional dichotomy between migrants and non-migrants by highlighting the diversity and changing character of mobility experiences. Exemplifying this in this issue, Manoilă and Deliu (2026), argue that staying is not a residual category of migration but a choice based on agency and resources. Moreover, incorporating the experiences of stayers and newcomers is politically important for understanding the outcomes of migration to LBAs. Miletić et al. (2026) show that the lack of third spaces for encounter leaves a void in meaningful interaction that results in integration imposed from above rather than a process negotiated from below. Taken together, these developments suggest that understanding the role of mobility in left-behind areas requires moving beyond rigid categories and examining entire populations, paying attention to the wide range of mobility and immobility trajectories that shape local development. The divides discussed are also gendered, Gavrilă et al. (2026) find that women who return or stay in two Italian left behind areas are disproportionately responsible for the associative and entrepreneurial activity that contributes to local community life.

2.3. Beyond Spatial Mobility – Migration Divide

Traditional binary thinking between migration and mobility as separate categories of analysis and practice reflects the gap between the often-separate fields of migration and mobility studies (Bitschnau & D'Amato, 2023). Some attempts have been made to bridge that gap by focusing on the dynamic relationship between migration and mobility, given that individuals can move between categories (Montanari & Staniscia, 2016). Recently the migration-mobility nexus brings both categories into dialogue (Bitschnau & D'Amato, 2023; Piccoli et al., 2024). Rather than being neutral, Piccoli et al. (2024) argue that migration and mobility are socially and politically constructed labels that shape how movement is governed and who is considered to be legitimate. To expose or even upset the normative assumptions that are obscured within these categories, the authors present four different "interplays" between the two. First, is the idea of a continuum where movement is placed along a spectrum, instead of in a box, from immobility/staying to transient (King & Skeldon, 2010). A second interplay is the en-

abling role that different forms of mobility play to lead into others. The oft cited example of this is how tourism or short-term mobility can lead to long-term migration (Cohen et al., 2013; 2015). The third interplay is more political, acknowledging the hierarchies that exist in different mobility regimes, which privilege certain types of movers, such as relatively wealthy lifestyle or skilled migrants, and blocks others, like asylum seekers or unskilled migrants (Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013). The fourth interplay is oppositional, highlighting the friction between state institutions that use migration controls to regulate movement and migrants who use mobility as agency to resist those controls (Wyss, 2019; Piccoli et al., 2024).

Approaching human mobility in LBAs through the lens of these three principles, the perspective on population movements from and towards LBAs becomes more complicated. With these assumptions in mind, we discuss below the potential richness of human mobility by looking at left-behind areas as simultaneously areas of departure and return.

2.4. LBAs as spaces of departure

The perspective on out-migration as a dominant flow in LBAs invites further discussion of a counterflow that usually accompanies it: return migration. Research on return migration highlighted early on that, even when departures are economically motivated, return migration is driven by different motivations and meanings, often rooted in non-economic considerations (see Cassarino, 2004). Applied to the reality of LBAs, this suggests that, even though these areas may not have undergone significant development over time, return migration remains part of their story. Moreover, the tendency to return at the end of one's working life, identified long ago in the literature (see Cerase, 1974), is one form of migration that should be considered when seeking to understand the complexity of human mobility in LBAs. The role of return migration in LBAs, particularly its potential contribution to local development is explored in this issue by Staniscia et al. (2026). They show the dual role that returnees can play in promoting social innovation in Italian LBAs combining both external experiences with local legitimacy and heritage to encourage further in-migration.

In the case of emigration, many analyses stress the connections that migrants, even those who are well integrated in their destination societies, continue to maintain with their places of origin (see, for example, Carling & Pettersen, 2014). Transnationalism is considered one of the most prominent characteristics of contemporary migration, facilitated by the many features of contemporary societies that enable movement (e.g. low-cost transportation and communication).

Individuals who remain connected to their places of origin tend to remit both socially and financially, and the potential of these two types of remittances to induce and support improvements in local well-being has been documented across many contexts (De Haas, 2007; Newland, 2007 among many others). Moreover, at least in the case of international migration, the literature discusses not only individual remittances, but also collective actions oriented towards migrants' places of origin, undertaken as members of active diasporas. All these arguments support considering international migration, when present in LBAs, as an important mechanism connecting these places to the outside world, potentially including the most dynamic metropolitan areas of destination. Moreover, they highlight that the physical absence of individuals does not equate to a lack of involvement in their places of origin.

2.5. LBAs as Spaces of Arrival

The COVID-19 pandemic and the post-pandemic period have shed new light on forms of migration and mobility that are not primarily motivated by economic reasons. Movements driven by aspirations for a better quality of life, closer contact with nature, distance from the accelerated pace of urban life, and facilitated by the possibility of remote work, have given a new impetus to migration towards rural and, at times, remote places. These movements give a new boost to and put emphasis on already existing forms of mobility, such as (internal) counterurbanisation (Halfacree, 2008; Goodwin-Hawkins & Dafydd Jones, 2021) and/or lifestyle migration (Benson & O'Reilly, 2016). LBAs, often remote and frequently associated with lower housing and amenity costs, are increasingly likely destinations for such movements—with the potential not only to connect these areas to the outside world, but to actively drive their future development.

The rise in the use of foreign workers in agriculture is one of the most important drivers of new inflows to rural areas (Rye & Scott, 2018). Curci et al. (2026) document this directly: a municipality in Portugal's Lower Alentejo now depends on migrant agricultural labour, testing the capacity of frontline institutions built for a settled population to absorb what is, in practice, a temporary-labour immigration model. A second driver operates through policy rather than the labour market, recent decentralizing tendencies in refugee-flow management have directed some newly arrived individuals towards rural areas (see, for example, Glorius et al., 2020, for Germany). These drivers converge in places, Domínguez-Mujica et al. (2026), show that, rather than a single flow, the Spanish island of El Hierro on the outer periphery is a hub for several types of arrival at once, asylum seekers, lifestyle migrants, tourists and returnees constituting a "relational insularity." Such convergence does not produce uniform outcomes, Desille & McGarrigle (2026) argue that logics of rural revitalisation hinged on multiple types of migration/mobility produce distinct local migrant governance responses, which depend on local development pathways and strategies.

2.6. LBAs as arrival and departure places

Recent research on different forms of labour mobility, including mobility related to agricultural work, highlights circularity as a way of experiencing migration (see Triandafyllidou, 2023). This suggests that out-migration as a livelihood strategy does not necessarily translate into permanent or long-term departure and also indicates that incoming movements are not necessarily associated with long-term settlement. Circularity is a possible way to connect LBAs to the extensive literature on circular migration and development, with its assumptions of a *triple win* (Newland et al., 2008). Accepting the connectedness of internal and international migration, reveals another strand of recent literature on internal migration relevant for LBAs. Stockdale (2016), for example, discusses in the case of the rural UK, the importance and differences between counterurbanisation and lateral rural migration. The pendular movements as well as the small regional ones, having as departure and arrival the rural may provide other unanticipated ways of understanding LBAs areas, their dynamics and potential resources to be explored.

2.7. LBAs are Locus of Spatial Mobility

The focus on out-migration tends to marginalise other forms of spatial mobility that can have a real impact at the local level. More diverse and difficult to classify, contemporary forms of spatial mobility are probably the *de facto* means of surviving and building a livelihood in remote rural areas. Commuting short or even long distances in search of work and travelling regularly for shopping or medical services to compensate for the lack of local public services are all documented in LBAs in different regions. Moreover, beyond these instrumental mobilities, the literature points to other forms of movement associated with second-home ownership and tourism.

Taken together, these forms of mobility have important implications for how we study LBAs. Above all, they show that a segmented analysis of spatial mobility and migration (i.e. one focusing on specific flows) greatly reduces the complexity and dynamics of these processes and overlooks potential resources for development in these areas. We deliberately use the term “potential” in line with newer approaches to the migration-development nexus, which emphasise that the actual capacity of migration and mobility to induce development depends largely on the dynamics of the area of origin, independently of migration itself (De Haas, 2010). The Re-Place project was designed with these ideas in mind. The next section explains how they were operationalised in the data collection strategy.

3. The Re-Place Project: A Recent Source of Data and Its Approach to “Left Behind” Areas

Re-Place is a project focusing on left-behind, non-metropolitan areas, a Horizon Europe project, implemented by a consortium of research partners from six countries (Portugal, Spain, Italy, Germany, Latvia and Romania), during four years (2023-2027). The project starts from two recent rather opposing perspectives on left-behind areas in Europe. The first, marked by pessimism, sees these areas as hotspots of discontent, where the population feels left behind and tends to vote for populist and anti-EU parties. The second, more optimistic and boosted by population movements during the Covid-19 pandemic, positions at least some left-behind areas as destinations with the potential to attract growing numbers of individuals in search of a better quality of life—pursuing mobility/migration projects enabled by the rise of remote working, studying, and digital citizenship (McGarrigle et al., 2024). The project brings to the forefront the role that migration and spatial mobility might play in the future development of left-behind areas.

To do this, Re-Place starts from several assumptions. First, it considers flows in and out of specific LBAs as interconnected in their actual development and consequences. Stemming from this, it adopts a place-based approach based on the understanding that places are (re)produced through mobile flows that bring together different types of people and arrangements (Cresswell, 2006). These non-metro areas are relational nodes where local, national, international mobilities depart from or intersect in. As such, Charmillot & Dahinden (2021, p. 2) acknowledge the “critical embeddedness [of peripheral areas] in external dynamics within national, European and transnational orders.” Moreover, the project focuses on all individuals living in one place—whether movers or stayers—contributing to overcoming the sedentary bias in migration studies by focusing not only on migrants but on immobilities (Schewel, 2020). Second, it promotes a definition of development that surpasses narrow economic approaches,

positioning itself in a neo-endogenous perspective to LBAs treating belonging, place attachment, social infrastructures and wellbeing as central to liveability and sustainability (Tomaney et al., 2024; MacKinnon et al., 2022). Third, the project recognizes the stigmatizing potential of the “left-behind” label—withstanding the origins attributed to the term (Pike et al., 2024)—and makes a deliberate effort to unpack the prejudices already associated with these places.

Starting from these premises, Re-Place is organized around five specific objectives, aiming to advance more complex understandings of development pathways and migration and spatial mobility in LBAs, to examining the (im)mobility drivers and perpetuation of movement to and from LBAs and assessing ensuing (perceptions of) transformations, as well as investigating micro-strategies of dealing with peripherality and place-making. The project does not only stay at the research level, trying to propose concrete solutions for these areas, through co-creating place-based policies to enhance mobility benefits and alternative local development. Finally, the project aims to understand and reframe existing narratives on left behind places and new mobilities to reinforce a sense of place for residents and potential newcomers.

To achieve its complex array of objectives, the project uses multiple data sources and data collection methods (for a description see Deliu et al., 2025, also project website). In a first phase, in order to identify areas potentially left behind at the national level, using administrative data, Re-Place project produced two specific indices: Regional Human Development Index (RHDI) an index calculated at NUTS3 level for all European Union countries (see for details Sandu, 2024a) and another at local level, Local Human Development Index (LHDI) (for details see Sandu, 2024b) calculated for the six partner countries in the project. Based on these indices, in each partner country, two areas were selected as case study areas for field research. Qualitative data was collected in two-phases of fieldwork, through semi-structured interviews with local stakeholders and locals/former locals of these areas offer rich information on migration and mobility in LBAs, the determinants of staying or leaving behaviours, on micro strategies to deal with peripherality or place attachment and identity among other topics. Re-Place complements qualitative data with quantitative. A national survey in all the six countries focused on the major topics of interest for the project. The final phase of Re-Place ongoing at the time of writing, involves participatory methods. Village Labs have been organised to elicit the perspective of the inhabitants of the LBAs selected in the project on the future prospects of their areas and co-create policies to alleviate their predicaments. To this, Re-Place adds visual data collected through all phases of the project, to feed a web documentary conceived to address the stereotyping of LBAs.³

4. The Papers of this Special Issue

In this final section, we present the nine articles included in this Special Issue. Together, they offer diverse examples of left-behind areas (LBAs) across Europe, which is in itself a contribution to the definition of the concept, particularly for geographical contexts that have received less scholarly attention, such as Southern Europe and former socialist countries. All

³ Readers can gain a better sense of the visual data collected within the project by consulting the project website (<https://replace-horizon.eu/>) and Instagram channel (https://www.instagram.com/replace_euproject?stkn=MWt3YmFreG9hYWtuNA==).

nine articles engage with spatial mobility and migration in LBAs and, drawing on the Re-Place methodology, show these areas to be embedded in a complex web of migrations and spatial mobilities. The papers can be read along three lines. The first cluster directly examines the development potential that mobility and migration bring to specific LBAs, from islands and border regions to areas undergoing social innovation. A second cluster turns to questions related to meaning, identity and belonging and explore how mobility shapes place attachment, place attractiveness and gendered experiences of migration. A third cluster addresses the governance of integration, exploring how local institutions and local populations accommodate, or struggle to accommodate, newcomers under conditions of temporariness, precarity and shifting political discontent. Across these three lines, all the papers discuss cautiously the benefits that spatial mobility and migration may bring to LBAs, contributing not only to debates on development in left-behind areas, but also to broader debates on the links between migration and development.

In the first paper, Domínguez-Mujica et al. (2026) explore left-behindness in connection with islandness. El Hierro, part of the Canary Archipelago, is the focus of this inquiry. Using administrative and qualitative data, the paper shows that, through various forms of mobility and migration (lifestyle migration, tourism, return migration, internal migration, immigration), the island is beginning to overcome its isolation and homogeneity. Mobility boosts small-scale entrepreneurship, mainly associated with low-density tourism and agri-food activities. However, mobility is not associated only with positive outcomes. Rising housing prices, the reproduction of vulnerabilities, the continuing loss of qualified people to other Spanish territories, and the pronounced occupational stratification of immigrants by origin all point to the ambivalent impact of mobility on a fragile ecosystem that, in the long run, depends on “... its capacity to manage the delicate equilibrium between demographic revitalisation and the structural constraints of an insular territory” (Domínguez-Mujica et al., 2026, p. 21).

The second contribution, Rodríguez Rodríguez et al. (2026), presents an analysis of a different type of LBA, at a different scale: the border region of Sayago, Spain. Based on administrative and qualitative data, the paper approaches migration through the lens of tourism, examining how involvement in this type of economic activity influences the arrival, settlement, and integration of newcomers. The results show that small-scale tourism and the associated opportunities for self-employment attract mainly internal migrants with previous connections to the area, as well as international lifestyle migrants. The authors demonstrate that, as in the case of El Hierro, the development and innovation potential associated with mobility is constrained by factors linked to the region’s left-behindness (e.g. limitations arising from fragmented and sectoral governance). Tourism thus becomes an economic activity that “... can attract and help retain newcomers by enabling self-employment and livelihood diversification. However, it does not, on its own, reverse depopulation or deliver broad-based revitalisation under conditions of seasonality, thin markets, and limited services” (Rodríguez Rodríguez et al., 2026, p. 19).

In the third paper, Staniscia et al. (2026) present an analysis of two left-behind areas in Italy, namely in Southern Cilento and the Viù Valley. Based on 104 in-depth qualitative interviews with stakeholders, newcomers, returnees, out-migrants and long-term residents, the paper studies migration through a social innovation perspective. It examines how different mobility profiles interact with locally grounded innovative practices. The results show that mobile actors, especially returnees and newcomers, and also out-migrants, bring skills, networks and imagination that catalyse processes of collective learning, organisational experimenta-

tion, and the development of cultural festivals, heritage trails and community infrastructures. These initiatives also play a role in producing new temporary, circular and sometimes permanent mobilities toward the two areas. The authors demonstrate that social innovation is very much conditioned by the institutional context. In a well-resourced, multi-level governance setting, grassroots initiatives are able to consolidate, whereas in a more fragmented and under-resourced governance context innovation is more informal, sustained mainly by individual commitment. As the authors write “when mobility aligns with collective learning and supportive governance, it can help reconfigure the trajectories of left-behind areas, turning peripheral settings into spaces of experimentation and renewal” (Staniscia et al., 2026, p. 22). However, if supportive governance is absent, it risks reproducing existing inequalities rather than delivering a more encompassing territorial revitalisation.

Studying the same areas in Italy, Gavrilă et al. (2026) present an analysis of women’s migratory pathways. The paper adopts a gender approach, examining how women’s mobility, as newcomers, returnees, out-migrants and long-term residents, intersects with the socio-economic and cultural regeneration of marginalised territories. The results show that women’s trajectories are structured by a “tradition-innovation polarity,” in which enduring expectations tied to family care and place-bound gender roles coexist with emerging practices of economic independence, entrepreneurship and place-identity redefinition. The authors demonstrate that, while the two areas differ in configuration, with one showing a more diversified, community-oriented pattern rooted in the recovery of local traditions, and the other showing a more internally-focused pattern driven by entrepreneurial female leadership connected to EU-funded opportunities, in both cases women’s mobility is constrained by structural disadvantages linked to the regions’ left-behindness (e.g. limited services, infrastructural gaps, and persistent gender inequalities in employment and governance representation). Female mobility thus becomes a force that “can reproduce inequalities when constrained by structural disadvantages, yet it can also contribute to reversing trajectories of decline when embedded in enabling local and multilevel governance frameworks” (Gavrilă et al., 2026, p. 19).

Starting from a neo-endogenous perspective, Deliu & Manoilă (2026) explore the role of international and internal migration in shaping national and local identities, as well as place attachment, in a rural setting in Romania. Based on interviews with non-migrants, returnees and seasonal international migrants, and internal returnees and in-migrants, the paper shows no substantial differences among these categories in the way they relate to their country/region, and place of current residence. Both local and national attachments are constructed at the intersection of positive elements (pride) and negative elements (stigma and shame). The paper sheds new light on the relationship between migration and identity, questioning the general applicability of the idea of left-behind areas as places of disconnection.

Manoilă & Deliu (2026), in this Special Issue, explore a topic that has received limited attention in the literature: place attractiveness in left-behind areas. Drawing on qualitative data collected in a rural area in Romania that lacks conventionally attractive features (e.g. tourist landmarks), they investigate the meaning of place attractiveness for different categories of individuals, depending on their migration experiences (national and international) or the absence of such experiences. The authors reveal the complex set of factors that encourage people to stay in, move to, or return to specific places. A combination of intrinsic and circumstantial factors, imagined and actual attributes, and active comparisons with other familiar places all contribute to the construction of place attractiveness.

Turning to the case of a small industrial town in rural Thuringia, East Germany, in the seventh paper, Miletić et al. (2026) draw on qualitative data collected from locals and newcomers to analyse integration dynamics. Using the framework of contact theory, they examine how workplace conditions, shared spaces, and everyday encounters shape (or hinder) the social integration of newcomers. The results show that, while immigrants' material contributions, such as sustaining local housing values, schools and kindergartens, are widely acknowledged by the local population, this economic recognition does not translate easily into meaningful social inclusion. Strict, exhausting shift work leaves little time for contact and sports associations remain the only real site of face-to-face encounter. The authors demonstrate that locals and newcomers hold fundamentally different understandings of integration itself, as locals frame it as a one-way fulfilment of requirements (language, employment) that newcomers must meet, while newcomers experience it as a relational process requiring reciprocal effort and genuine belonging. Left unaddressed, this asymmetry leaves integration "imposed, rather than negotiated" (Miletić et al., 2026, abstract), producing isolation, which the authors argue can only be overcome through the deliberate creation of shared physical spaces of encounter.

Continuing the focus on integration, Curci et al. (2026) study a rural area with a growing reliance on migrant agricultural labour in Portugal's Lower Alentejo region. Based on interviews with public-sector professionals and third-sector actors, the paper approaches migration through the lens of street-level bureaucracy and everyday bordering practices, examining how frontline professionals' discretion and moral agency shape immigrants' access to reception and integration services. The authors demonstrate that, as in other new rural immigrant destinations, this exposes a deeper structural mismatch as local institutions built for a stable, permanent population are dealing with a workforce defined by temporariness and precarity. Recognising these contradictions is, in the authors' view, "the first step towards building more inclusive, fair, and sustainable integration models capable of transforming the presence of immigrants into a genuine opportunity for revitalisation" (Curci et al., 2026, p. 19).

In the last paper, Desille & McGarrigle (2026) examine how local migrant integration governance develops in two contrasting Portuguese "inner territories," one built on agro-industrial growth dependent on migrant agricultural labour, the other on place-branding and rural innovation. Based on interviews with local experts, the paper shows that integration policy is not designed on its own terms but emerges reactively, shaped by each municipality's broader development logic, treating migrants as a workforce to manage in the labour-driven case, and as newcomers to attract, but who often remain distant from local institutions, in the lifestyle-driven case. The authors trace how dependence on EU project funding produces a mode of "project-driven governance," leaving integration structures vulnerable when funding cycles end, and examine how rising political discontent, mostly tied to long-standing perceptions of neglect rather than migration itself, is reshaping the local politics of integration in both places.

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