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**EXIT**  
Exploring sustainable  
strategies to counteract  
territorial inequalities  
from an intersectional  
approach

Working Paper

# Unpacking Left-Behindness: A Comparative Study on Territorial Inequalities in Europe

April 2025

[www.exit-project.eu](http://www.exit-project.eu)

—— Publication

**Authors:**

Giorgio Pirina

Fabio Perocco

*Università Ca' Foscari Venezia*

**Review and edition:**

Olga Jubany

Malin Roiha

*Universitat de Barcelona*

**Date of publication:** April 2025.



This working paper is an output produced by the EXIT project – Exploring sustainable strategies to counteract territorial inequalities from an intersectional approach – (2022-2025).

### **EXIT Coordinator**

Universitat de Barcelona

### **EXIT Partners**

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**Funded by  
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The project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under grant agreement no 101061122.

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# 1. Introduction

The concept of “left-behind places” is fundamentally tied to territorial inequalities. These are regions or areas that have been excluded from national progress due to economic stagnation, infrastructural deficiencies, and socio-political neglect (Pike et al., 2023).

Previous findings from the EXIT project<sup>1</sup> underscore the multi-dimensional character of left-behind places. While this concept gained particular popularity in the United Kingdom following the Brexit election results, the approach and the discourse about it differs across Europe. For example, in France and Italy, the predominant discourse focuses on the geographical dimension of the phenomenon, using terms such as “La France périphérique” and “Aree Interne” (inner areas) respectively. Meanwhile, in Germany emphasis is given to the lack of growth, using the term “abgehängte Regionen” (suspended regions), whereas in Spain the emphasis is on depopulation processes with the term “España vaciada” (emptied Spain). “Kimpgebieden”, which means “decreasing area”, is used in the Netherlands, and in the United States “legacy cities” and “rustbelt regions” are used with different connotations in each case. Against this background, the specific condition of left-behindness can be understood “as a form of territorial inequality that emerges as a dialectic relationship between a peripheral experience in concrete locations on the one hand and political discourses as well as the place-specific indicators and employment of policy instruments on the other” (Karasz et al, 2025: 5).

## 2. Left-behind places as a form of territorial inequality

The academic literature on territorial inequalities and “left-behind” places has gained increasing attention due to its socio-political and economic implications (Bez & Virgillito, 2022). Territorial inequality refers to the unequal distribution of resources, opportunities and public services across different regions within and between countries. This often intensifies the divide between prosperous urban centres and disadvantaged peripheral areas. This concept has become a key focus in discussions on regional development and social justice, particularly in light of the challenges posed by globalisation and economic restructuring in Europe. The decline of traditional industries, such as manufacturing and agriculture, has resulted in economic stagnation and limited employment opportunities in many regions. At the same time, the process of peripheralisation, whereby certain regions are systematically deprived of investment, infrastructure and policy support, has the dual effect of undermining local economies and deepening social inequalities. This can lead to feelings of abandonment and disenfranchisement.

In this context, the concept of left-behind places provides a valuable analytical framework for understanding the experiences of residents and stakeholders. The term left-behind encapsulates

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<sup>1</sup> See e.g., Karasz et al (2025); Jubany et al (2025).

not only the economic decline but also the socio-cultural dislocation experienced by communities that feel excluded from the benefits of national progress. These areas frequently contend with elevated rates of unemployment, depopulation, and a decline in infrastructure, accompanied by a reduction in the availability of essential services. The outmigration of younger, educated individuals serves to further weaken these regions, creating a challenging cycle of decline that is difficult to reverse.

In comparative analyses of territorial inequalities, it is essential to consider each country's starting level in terms of service access. This analysis, when considered alongside the insights gained from residents and stakeholders, reveals the specific impacts of declining service quality and availability. These perspectives provide valuable insight into the experiences of communities facing challenges related to infrastructure, public services, and access to healthcare, education, and employment opportunities.

### **3. Methodological note: Territorial inequality through six dimensions of analysis**

This paper draws on ethnographic research conducted across 17 areas<sup>2</sup> in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Greece, Italy, Serbia, Spain, and the United Kingdom, between February and September 2024. The 17 sites, comprising three in Spain and two in the other countries, were selected based on the criteria identified in the EXIT project's previous activities, specifically the heuristic model and criteria reflected in Karasz et al (2025).

Data collection included 508 in-depth and walking interviews with residents and stakeholders (538 participants), participant observations and 21 focus groups (80 participants). An intersectional lens guided sampling and analysis, incorporating gender, ethnicity, age, class, and disability to map compounded vulnerabilities.

The methodology employed facilitated an in-depth analysis of the experiences and perceptions of territorial inequalities, with the research focused around seven guiding themes: 1. Social services and health; 2. Formal and informal education; 3. Employment and professional life; 4. Community; 5. Housing, environment, and regeneration; 6. Mobility and immobility; 7. Digital inclusiveness. These thematic indicators provided a framework for examining the ways in which territorial inequalities manifest on the ground and for understanding the perceptions and lived experiences of residents and stakeholders.

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<sup>2</sup> An overview of the 17 areas can be found at <https://www.exit-project.eu/interactive-map/>

## **4. Key findings: The multifaceted nature of territorial inequalities in European left-behind places**

The comparative analysis across Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Greece, Italy, Serbia, Spain, and the United Kingdom reveals the multifaceted nature of territorial inequalities, as experienced by residents in urban, rural, and post-industrial contexts. Fieldwork demonstrates that these inequalities are shaped by distinct national and regional circumstances, particularly when examined through the EXIT guiding themes or analytical dimensions: social services and health, formal and informal education, employment and professional life, community and social life, housing environment and regeneration, mobility and immobility, digital inclusiveness. Critically, these dimensions are neither self-explanatory nor isolated but interconnected. For example, access to healthcare or education is contingent on mobility infrastructure, while digital exclusion exacerbates gaps in service provision. Similarly, access to educational and employment opportunities – which may be limited in less developed areas – becomes increasingly challenging in contexts with high car dependency and insufficient public transport, leading to prolonged travel times. As demonstrated by the Italian context, this interconnectedness of territorial inequalities necessitates a place-based approach founded on the premise that the knowledge and competences fostering innovation and territorial development are embedded in the territories and held by the people residing in them (Carrosio, 2020).

The analysis further situates these inequalities within long-term socio-economic shifts, notably the impact of neoliberal policies (Harvey, 2007; Brenner et al. 2010) on the evolution and contraction of public policies pertaining to social services and health, education, employment and mobility, with far-reaching consequences for everyday life.

### **4.1. Geographical gaps in service provision**

One of the most striking patterns across case studies is the discrepancy in service provision between urban centres and rural or peripheral areas. Urban centres typically benefit from concentrated resources, including access to quality healthcare, education, public transportation and digital infrastructure. Conversely, rural or peripheral areas frequently experience chronic underinvestment and neglect.

The concept of “España vaciada” (“emptied Spain”) succinctly encapsulates the socio-economic and demographic challenges faced by rural regions like the Catalan Pyrenees, where depopulation and a lack of basic services force residents to relocate to urban areas. This phenomenon is extensively explored by Camarero and Oliva (2021), who present a compelling argument that mobility deficits and structural neglect deepen rural inequalities, reinforcing cycles of outmigration. Furthermore, Del Molino (2021) emphasises the cultural and political aspects of this issue, portraying España vaciada as illustrative of a broader failure to address rural development in a comprehensive manner. Similarly, marginalised areas in Italy, such as the Gennargentu-Mandrolisai inner area, face significant barriers due to their remote location, with residents

experiencing lengthy travel times to access healthcare and educational facilities (Lucatelli et al., 2022).

These discrepancies result in concrete disparities in life outcomes. Rural areas frequently lack the specialised medical services, educational opportunities and employment prospects that are necessary to support the local population, which in turn leads to an increase in outmigration and a decline in the area. For instance, the Morsø area in rural Denmark is experiencing a decline in population as younger, educated residents relocate to urban centres, leaving behind an ageing population that is increasingly reliant on inadequate services.

Centralised policies contribute to the exacerbation of these issues, as there is a tendency for resource allocation to favour urban areas. This territorial inequality reinforces the "urban bias" (Lipton, 1977) in policy-making, whereby urban centres are given priority due to their perceived economic and political importance. Berdegué, Escobal, and Bebbington (2015) update the urban bias thesis, emphasising how spatial inequalities in infrastructure and services create persistent disadvantages for rural regions, even in contemporary development frameworks.

## **4.2. Unequal resource allocation between urban and rural areas**

The imbalance in resource allocation between urban and rural regions highlights a critical development challenge. Urban overdevelopment, marked by excessive resource consumption, environmental degradation, and social strain, serves as a prominent example of this inequality.

An example of this can be seen in Montcada i Reixac, Spain, which suffers from an overload of infrastructures serving the nearby metropolis Barcelona. By contrast, rural underinvestment leads to processes of neglect, with areas such as Golubac, Serbia, and Morsø, Denmark, experiencing declining public services and a lack of systemic support. These dynamics are in line with Lefebvre's (1974) critique of the capitalist production of space, which puts profit-driven urban expansion before the needs of rural and peripheral areas. Lefebvre's concept of the "urban fabric" demonstrates how centralised policies influence the unequal distribution of resources, concentrating them in urban centres at the expense of rural regions.

Pike, Rodríguez-Pose, and Tomaney (2016) contend that these imbalances stem from development strategies that unduly favour urban growth, thereby neglecting the socio-economic potential of rural areas. Dorling (2014) builds upon this critique, emphasising how housing and urban planning systems exacerbate inequalities. In order to address these disparities, it is necessary to reimagine development strategies and value the distinctive cultural and natural assets of rural areas, thereby fostering more equitable and sustainable growth.

## **4.3. Healthcare inequalities**

A recurring challenge across the countries analysed is ensuring adequate healthcare access. A common trend among the EXIT project countries is the significant deficit in the number of qualified medical personnel in remote areas, which exasperates the pressure on healthcare



services. The aforementioned deficit, when considered alongside the existence of overlapping roles in public and private healthcare, serves to further complicate access. Some healthcare professionals operate in both the public and private sectors, frequently charging high fees for private services. This creates inequality in terms of access and a quality of care based on financial means.

In Serbia's Golubac and Surdulica, economic barriers, corruption and resource mismanagement are further exacerbating existing healthcare inequalities. Similarly, residents of Belgium's Couvin emphasise a lack of general practitioners and specialists, necessitating extensive travel to urban centres for medical care. Such disparities frequently result in inferior health outcomes, including elevated rates of unmanaged chronic conditions and diminished life expectancy.

Another significant challenge is the emergence of dual-tiered healthcare systems, particularly in countries such as Austria and Greece. An increasing number of wealthy individuals are turning to private healthcare in order to avoid delays and gain access to specialised services. This is leaving low-income populations with no alternative but to rely on overstretched public facilities. In the Italian municipality of Murano, residents experience considerable delays in accessing paediatric care, which forces families to seek costly alternatives.

Mental health is another area of concern. In regions like Stoke-on-Trent, substance abuse and gambling exacerbate mental health crises, while limited funding for mental health services in Spain's San Isidro leaves residents without adequate support. Comprehensive reforms, including increased funding, decentralised healthcare systems, and targeted support for vulnerable populations, are essential to addressing these inequalities.

The inability to address basic healthcare needs contributes to the perception of neglect and abandonment, which in turn serves to reinforce the status of these regions as being “left behind”.

#### **4.4. Economic restructuring and its impacts**

The decline of traditional industries, particularly manufacturing and agriculture, has had a significant impact on the socio-economic landscape in all countries studied. This shift has resulted in increased unemployment, outmigration and economic stagnation in post-industrial regions and rural areas, which has further intensified territorial inequalities.

The cases of Stoke-on-Trent in the United Kingdom and Marchienne-au-Pont in Belgium demonstrate how the decline of traditional industries has resulted in significant job losses, community fragmentation and an increasing reliance on low-wage, insecure employment. The shift away from traditional industries frequently leaves local economies inadequately prepared to adapt, resulting in a "brain drain" as skilled and educated individuals migrate to more prosperous urban centres. Italy's Murano provides an illustrative example of how local economies can be adversely affected by the decline of a central industry. The collapse of the glassmaking industry in Murano, driven by globalisation and environmental regulations, has resulted in cultural and economic displacement (De Marchi & Grandinetti, 2014).

The growth of precarious work in left-behind areas is also a consequence of economic restructuring, with limited employment opportunities available in the form of informal, seasonal, or low-wage labour. These trends perpetuate long-term socio-economic exclusion, further positioning these regions as "losers" in the global economy (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Castel (2003) emphasises that this shift towards precariousness represents a transformation in the relationship between individuals and work, leaving many in a vulnerable and socially marginalised position. The territorial divergence caused by such restructuring often results in social discontent and frustration, which can lead to support for populist political movements.

The social impact of economic restructuring is significant and far-reaching. Communities that feel their needs are being overlooked by governments often turn to nationalist or populist agendas. The Brexit-supporting regions in the UK are a case in point. The confluence of economic decline and political discontent highlights the imperative for policies that facilitate economic diversification, investment in skill development, and the promotion of innovation in affected regions (OECD, 2023).

#### **4.5. Social fragmentation and community resilience**

A decline in the economy and the centralisation of services frequently result in social fragmentation, depopulation and a reduction in the sense of community. However, local resilience and grassroots initiatives frequently play a pivotal role in mitigating these effects.

In Morsø, Denmark, community-led volunteerism plays a vital role in maintaining essential services at a level that the state is unable to provide. Residents have stepped in to support healthcare and social programmes, ensuring the continuity of these crucial services. Similarly, in Italy's Murano, local organisations are addressing critical needs by supplying medical equipment to elderly and disabled residents. While these grassroots initiatives demonstrate the strength and adaptability of local communities, they require external investment and support to remain sustainable. Tomaney and colleagues (2024) contend that bolstering social infrastructure in under-resourced communities is pivotal for fostering resilience. Robust networks of social services and community spaces can help bridge gaps left by economic and governmental neglect.

Furthermore, social fragmentation can also result in feelings of political and cultural disenfranchisement. Many areas that have been left behind are experiencing a widening discrepancy between local realities and national priorities. This is leading to demands for greater autonomy and the rise of populist movements. For instance, rural and post-industrial regions across Europe are increasingly demanding governance structures that address their specific challenges (Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2023). Inclusive governance frameworks that prioritise local needs and foster greater representation in decision-making processes are essential to bridge the divide.

#### **4.6. Questioning representative democracy: electoral disenfranchisement**

The comparative analysis reveals a growing disillusionment with representative democracy, particularly in left-behind areas. In areas such as Rochdale and Stoke-on-Trent in the UK, electoral systems designed to aggregate broad voting blocs often fail to address the specific needs of peripheral communities. Crouch's (2020) critique of post-democracy is pertinent here, demonstrating how political systems perpetuate inequalities by failing to address the needs of geographically marginalised populations.

Standing (2011) examines how insecure employment contributes to political disenfranchisement, reducing the ability of affected communities to advocate for fair policies. This disenfranchisement results in a populist backlash and political disengagement, as evidenced in Jennersdorf, Austria, where residents increasingly feel excluded from national priorities, and in the UK case studies.

A lack of engagement with decision-making processes and mainstream socio-economic development is a common issue in regions such as Greece and Serbia, where residents often feel excluded. Wacquant (2008) characterises this as “advanced marginality”, a state of systemic neglect that perpetuates feelings of powerlessness and social isolation.

#### **4.7. Binding-mobility: the double-edged sword of connectivity**

Mobility is a crucial factor in reducing territorial inequalities, yet numerous regions encounter substantial obstacles in this domain. The lack of public transport infrastructure, high car dependency and inadequate road networks make it difficult for residents to access healthcare, education and employment opportunities (Vitale Brovarone, 2022). In light of these considerations, we put forth the concept of binding-mobility as a means of encapsulating the inherent paradox of contemporary transportation. On the one hand, urban centres flourish on the back of dense networks that facilitate economic dynamism and social mobility. Conversely, rural regions contend with exorbitant logistical costs and restricted access to essential services. Farrington (2007) highlights that poorly integrated transportation policies exacerbate the mobility divide, compounding inequalities between urban and rural areas. Similarly, Schwanen, Banister and Anable (2015) posit that restricted transport access not only constrains economic opportunities but also fosters social exclusion, eroding the social capital necessary for community cohesion. These findings reinforce the case for investing in mobility infrastructure on an equitable basis in order to bridge the urban-rural divide.

The situation in Pyrgos in Greece, Couvin in Belgium and Gennargentu-Mandrolisai in Italy demonstrates how insufficient public transport contributes to social isolation and economic stagnation in peripheral areas. In Austria's Jennersdorf and Italy's Gennargentu-Mandrolisai, the lack of reliable public transportation forces residents to rely on private vehicles, which is often unaffordable for low-income families. Similarly, in Pyrgos, Greece, poor road connectivity increases the time and cost of accessing essential services, which has a particularly adverse impact on the elderly and disabled.

Furthermore, inadequate mobility options present obstacles to regional integration and economic development. The difficulties encountered when commuting restrict access to urban job markets. Additionally, the high level of car dependency raises environmental concerns and limits equitable access to services. Car-dependency also intensifies inequalities in left-behind places, as low-income households often cannot afford private vehicles. The inability to commute restricts their access to employment, perpetuating cycles of poverty and exclusion. To effectively integrate left-behind areas into wider regional and national networks, it is crucial to address these mobility challenges

#### **4.8. Digital inclusiveness and the digital divide**

The increasing integration of digital technologies into daily life has brought the digital divide into sharp focus, with a clear distinction between connected urban areas and underserved rural or peripheral regions. While innovations such as telemedicine and online education have the potential to bridge geographic barriers, limited internet connectivity and low digital literacy in rural areas present obstacles to their effectiveness. This divide has the effect of exacerbating socio-economic inequalities, thus reinforcing patterns of exclusion and marginalisation.

The digital divide is not simply a technical issue; it is also a reflection of spatial and social inequities that privilege certain geographic and demographic groups while marginalising others (Graham, 2011). This perpetuates broader social and economic inequalities, leaving rural areas unable to harness the benefits of modern digital tools (van Dijk, 2020). For example, unreliable internet access and inadequate digital infrastructure in Greece's Pyrgos and Italy's Gennargentu-Mandrolisai restrict residents' ability to engage with telehealth services and digital education platforms. Furthermore, generational disparities in digital proficiency present an additional challenge. In Spain's San Isidro, for instance, elderly populations often struggle to adapt to digital systems, deepening generational inequalities.

These challenges highlight the necessity for targeted policies to bridge the digital divide. Infrastructure investments, such as expanding high-speed internet to underserved regions, must be complemented by digital literacy initiatives tailored to the needs of diverse demographics. In this regard, Helsper (2021) asserts that addressing digital exclusion requires not only infrastructural development but also the fostering of the skills and confidence necessary for individuals to engage meaningfully with digital technologies.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the urgency of addressing digital inclusiveness. As societies increasingly rely on telemedicine, remote work, and online learning, the divide between digitally connected and disconnected communities has become more pronounced. Closing the digital gap is essential for fostering economic resilience, ensuring equitable access to services, and reinforcing community identity and pride in the digital age.

## **4.9. Intertwined vulnerabilities**

The intersection of age, gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status has a significant impact on territorial inequalities. It is often the case that women, ethnic minorities and low-income populations face multiple layers of disadvantage, which in turn limits their access to healthcare, education and employment opportunities.

To illustrate, Roma communities in Spain and Greece are subject to systemic discrimination that restricts their access to basic services. Similarly, women in Serbia and Italy are burdened with a disproportionate share of caregiving responsibilities, which limits their participation in education and professional life. The ageing population in remote areas, such as Austria's Jennersdorf, is facing isolation and inadequate service provision, which is further deepening inequalities.

An intersectional approach is essential to addressing these compounded disadvantages, with policies tailored to the specific needs of marginalised groups.

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