1. On the potential of immigration for the remote areas of Europe: an introduction

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REFRAMING MIGRATION

Migration to Europe tends to be fundamentally misconstrued and misrepresented, both in numbers and in relation to its core dynamics and asserted implications for European economies and societies (Ardittis 2017; Laine 2020a; Laine, Moyo and Nshimbi 2020). European public opinion significantly overestimates the number of non-EU immigrants: most of the 19 European Union (EU) Member States’ citizens perceive the proportion of immigrants to be at least twice the actual figure (Eurobarometer 469). As the statistics clearly indicate, migration – both regular and irregular – is a global rather than a European phenomenon. While Europe has been and increasingly continues to be a popular migrant destination the numbers appear less momentous in a global assessment. This becomes especially evident when refugees are considered, 83 per cent of whom are hosted in low- and middle-income countries, and 72 per cent in their respective neighbouring countries (UNHCR 2021). Turkey hosts the largest number of refugees, at 3.8 million people, significantly outnumbering all the EU countries. Germany currently tops the EU ranking as the largest refugee-hosting country, with 1.3 million refugees. When considering refugees as a proportion of the total population, Sweden’s enduring and generous refugee policy tops the EU ranking at 2.6 per cent, far behind Lebanon (19.8 per cent) and Jordan (10.4 per cent). Russia’s unprovoked aggression against Ukraine has forced millions to flee their homes, leading to major displacement crises, but note this is beyond this book’s scope because the data collection was largely concluded before the war’s onset.

Overall global migration is grossly exaggerated. The international migrant total currently comprises 3.6 per cent of the global population (IOM 2022; UN DESA 2022). The vast majority of the global population – around 96.4
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per cent – therefore live in the country in which they were born. Compared to 2.4 per cent in 1960 and 2.8 per cent in 2000, the overall estimated number of international migrants has indisputably increased in recent decades, but only moderately (Laine, forthcoming). Indeed, by far the most striking increase has been in the number of those forcibly displaced by war, persecution, and other violence: more than 100 million people are forcibly displaced within or across borders (UNHCR 2021). The share of migrants in the EU climbed from 2.8 per cent in 1960 to 12.2 per cent in 2020, yet much of this can be explained by increased intraregional mobility, which has for decades constituted one of the key cornerstones of European integration. According to Eurostat and United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) data, 5.1 per cent (23 million people) of the 447.3 million people living in the EU were non-EU citizens in 2020, and almost 8.3 per cent (37 million people) of all EU inhabitants were born outside the EU. However, there are considerable differences between the Member States, although all their shares are remarkably lower than in most high-income countries. The share of third-country nationals (TCNs) in the EU ten years ago was 4.6 per cent (20.2 million people). The growth here can be considered quite modest – perhaps even too modest – as the immigration rate is no longer enough to balance out the negative natural population demographic caused by low birth rates and ageing pollutions (Laine, forthcoming). The EU population’s natural change remained positive in 2011 but has since been negative. The subsequent total change remained positive due to net migration until 2020, when it also took a negative turn because of reduced immigration during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Migration is an inevitable part of development and transition. Migrants can be agents of development, contribute to economic growth, sustain jobs, and improve rural livelihoods. Exploring local partnerships in rural areas, in turn, is a core element in the development and implementation of inclusion and integration policy. Given rural areas’ critical importance for the EU’s transition to an environmentally sustainable society and to food security, migrants in rural areas deserve special attention when designing policies, practices, and strategies to promote stronger, connected, resilient, and prosperous rural areas and communities amidst broad social and economic changes such as globalization and urbanization. The inclusion and integration of migrants and refugees in rural areas has gained strong political support through the EU Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion (European Commission 2020) and the EU’s Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (European Commission 2021). While the former focuses on enhancing migrant participation, ensuring inclusion for all, mainstreaming gender, and emphasizing the need for long-term integration, the latter has created new momentum for rural areas by considering their role beyond agriculture and giving rural citizens more agency in the green, digital, and demographic transitions. Orderly, safe, and regular migration of people
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underpins the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations 2015).

Rural areas represent 83 per cent of the total EU area. According to World Bank statistics the European Union’s rural population’s share has decreased consistently, even during the COVID-19 era, from 41 per cent in 1960 to 21 per cent in 2021. The only notable exception at the country level is Austria, where the share of the rural population increased from 35 per cent in 1981 to 43 per cent in 2012, before beginning to decrease slowly (to 41 per cent in 2021).1 The Eurostat statistics show that rural and remote areas have the lowest shares of the EU’s population in age groups below 50, the percentage of the population at risk of poverty and social exclusion is higher in rural areas, and the average road distance to essential services is considerably longer than in urban areas. The EU employment rate is higher in rural areas than in cities, and the gender employment gap is wider. The education gap between rural areas and cities has only widened in recent years. The share of rural residents with at least basic digital skills is considerably lower than for city residents. The average GDP per capita in rural regions hovers around three quarters of the EU average (European Commission 2022; cf. Bock and Krzysztofowicz 2021).

While these numbers are telling and can clarify the scope, dynamics, and spatiality of migration, alone they say little of its various implications and impacts. Migration – and it associated commonplace fears – has effectively been politicized (Czaika and de Haas 2017, 894; Laine 2020a, 93). Especially since the 2015/2016 peak in refugee arrivals in Europe, immigration has gained momentum in both political and public debate and provoked both mounting interest in and concern about migration and its broader societal impacts. The failure to find an agreement on the distribution of asylum seekers (Mudde 2016) has given rise to an unprecedented and continuing political crisis at the EU level. The complexity of the situation itself has created a demand for simplistic explanations. Common misperceptions regarding the impact of immigration have led to political polarization in EU Member States and the rise of populist politics across Europe (Inglehart and Norris 2016; Betz 2018; Laine 2020b; Gozgor 2022).

Immigration has become an issue that sharply divides today’s European and national political arenas. Europe has not only become increasingly divided into various national agendas, but the ‘nations’ – to the extent they even exist – have also become increasingly torn (Laine 2020b). With significant variations across and within countries attention tends to focus on how to limit migration’s impact rather than on constructing governance to untap its development potential and consider immigrants as resources in destination countries and regions. It is easily forgotten in the current context that migration has been considered normal for most of history; people on the move have only recently been depicted as a major challenge (Laine 2022). It is time to reverse this perception.
and – as Shah (2020) writes – turn migration from a perceived crisis into the solution for manifold socioecological changes. As Mbembe (2019) puts it, human mobility is normal; its constructive governance is the challenge.

In the broad debate on migration, rational assessments have been overshadowed by emotional outbursts and narrow perspectives. Migration has increasingly been addressed as a challenge if not a threat to the very body of our national societies (Laine 2020b; 2021). This is fuelled by sensationalist media images and narratives, as well as alarmist and opportunistic right-wing politicians seeking to exploit the purported immigrant invasion, which is assumed to consist predominantly of those who are irregular looming at the gates of Europe and awaiting the first opportunity to cross. While we may be conditioned to think of the world as a mosaic of sovereign states, each possessing its own distinct and bordered portion of the Earth’s surface (Diener and Hagen 2023, 1), people do not live in containers (Zoomers 2022, 121). Considering people to be incontestably from certain territorially bound places and origins is far from unproblematic in today’s mobile world (Laine 2021).

WHAT IS SOCIAL IMPACT, AND WHY ASSESS IT?

In following the aims of the MATILDE project funded by the EU Horizon 2020 program and focusing on migration’s impact on the local development of rural and mountain regions, our aim is to explore these negative tendencies by examining the social impacts of migration on European rural and remote regions, many of which have witnessed a marked demographic decline and neglect of public services, with manifold consequences. In what follows we seek to introduce these regions’ perspectives to the EU migration debate and identify the key challenges and potential of innovation, redistribution, urban–rural linkages, and the promotion of socially inclusive and territorially balanced growth. This book provides an innovative assessment of the social impact of immigration to Europe, thus seeking to promote a change in the perception of migration and related policies and practices. Particular attention is paid to third-country nationals (TCNs) in Europe’s rural and remote regions.

The frame of the book considers the spaces in which TCNs settle as both the input and output of a process of collective production of places, viewing TCNs as an active element in generative processes conducive to the redefinition and renegotiation of the social space. The chapters that follow especially emphasize migrants’ agency by considering both their characteristics (legal status, education level, health, family situation, gender, and age) and the role and functions of migrant networks and organizations. Relations and networks are seen as potential pull factors towards non-urban areas with limited public services and scarce mobility opportunities, working in the sense of bypassing the urban as the first place of arrival. These networks carry and diffuse a wide
array of information and assistance, such as information on employment prospects and labour force demands in various destination countries, linkages to specific employment opportunities and accommodation, as well as feedback mechanisms about the entire migration experience (Bahna 2013; Docquier, Peri and Ruyssehn 2014). The existence of migrant networks has been found to significantly lower the direct, opportunity, and psychological cost of international migration for prospective migrants (Massey and Garcia España 1987; Epstein 2008), yet they often remain constrained and limited by other factors such as economic power or policy restrictiveness in the desired destination country (Collyer 2005).

The book pays special attention to examining how the peculiar traits of the rural and remote context interact with TCNs’ integration paths and impact. The demographic trends and socioeconomic dynamics of a specific region and its migration patterns affect policy responses and societal attitudes to TCNs, their opportunities, and perceptions of them. These in turn depend largely on different spatial characteristics within the same country: while urban contexts tend in any case to receive migration flows of a different nature (internal, forced, economic), rural and mountain areas are in many cases affected by phenomena such as depopulation dynamics, labour force shrinkage, and exposure to the increasing natural hazards resulting from climate change. The interaction between these characteristics and the processes of TCNs’ integration and settlement in rural and mountain areas has been largely ignored thus far, and this book aims to contribute to plugging this gap. It formulates empirically grounded recommendations and constructs strategies and solutions to improve the local governance of migration in light of the peculiar needs and resources of rural and remote regions, while considering them as potential new international migration destinations with specific needs that must be better understood in order to be fulfilled.

Territorial diversity and the diverse arrays of the components (i.e. human, social, institutional, natural/physical, and economic) and various drivers/pressures affecting it often result in unbalanced development, which needs to be addressed to unlock growth potential and boost sustainable transformations. An analysis of new and emerging drivers of inequality, including those created by the new socioeconomic and spatial contexts associated with the impacts of COVID-19 and/or climate change, is becoming crucial. There is a substantial lack of knowledge in migration studies that focus mostly on urban regions regarding the impact and development potential international migration brings to rural and remote regions. While contemporary migration flows are largely the result of both economic opportunities in cities and push factors from rural areas (Adger et al. 2020), new forms of economic and cultural mobility are extending outside urban areas. Part of this phenomenon can also be seen as an effect of the dispersal policies targeting asylum seekers and refugees. In
addition to the established destinations, new migration destinations encompass marginal and rural communities, resulting in an entirely new set of opportunities and challenges for these areas (McAreavey 2017).

Around Europe, especially following the ‘refugee crisis’ in 2015 and 2016, proportional schemes were adopted for relocating refugees, fuelled by researchers’ and policymakers’ growing interest in accommodating refugees in rural areas of Europe to tackle two problems simultaneously: the large influx of refugees into Europe, predominantly into cities already facing significant housing stock pressure; and the population decline in shrinking rural areas, accompanied by high vacancy rates and a loss of services and employment that poses several challenges for these thinning communities (Bloem 2014; Gløersen et al. 2016; Copus et al. 2020). While previous studies have rightly highlighted the development potential of immigration for rural and other remote areas in Europe and the aptitude of smaller municipalities to welcome, mobilize, and include newcomers in their communities (Lucas 2007; Kasimis 2010; Kordel et al. 2018; Galera et al. 2018), migration cannot be seen as a magic bullet for the multiplicity of challenges these areas face. The plain expectation that an immigrant will simply occupy regions where ‘national natives’ are unwilling or unable to live seems both naive and prejudiced. Indeed, as was seen in the aftermath of the ‘refugee crisis’ in 2015 and 2016, remote areas often appear uninviting to newcomers (Laine and Rauhut 2018) – largely for the same reason as they do for the existing local inhabitants. In the end, the interests of both the locals and newcomers are largely the same: both want a good and safe place to live in.

Yet migration can play a key role in demographic processes in rural and remote regions experiencing demographic decline (Kasimis, Papadopoulos and Pappas 2010; Scoones 2015; Scoones et al. 2018), though this seldom ensues spontaneously. Migration can play an important role for these regions by contributing to the revitalization of the local social and economic milieu, reducing territorial inequalities (Rodriguez-Pose 2018; Barca 2019), fueling social innovation, and fostering urban–rural interconnections. Migration increases diversity (i.e. socioeconomic, linguistic, cultural, religious) in rural and remote areas, creating opportunities for social innovation stemming from social rarefaction rather than agglomeration (Viazzo and Zanini 2014). It can be a crucial element to attain balanced territorial but also social and economic sustainable development goals and inclusive agriculture transformation, thus addressing the adverse drivers of migration. In seeking to escape the common challenge of overly relying on analytical frames built on dichotomous concepts such as the urban–rural, we underline the need to comprehend their interlinkage as a continuum, the patterns of which are again denied by migration. Here, migration patterns have been found to be correlated with demographic and housing changes, depending on the location on the continuum (Golding and...
Winkler 2020), yet as the chapters that follow illustrate, an attempt to reduce demographic and economic imbalances in rural areas must also focus on immaterial assets, including human and cultural capital.

Across the continuum, national development patterns and shared institutions link rural and urban areas and different sectors of the economy: rural development is affected by the linkages between urban and rural areas; the extent of these linkages depends on the proximity and connectivity of rural areas to urban centres, the levels of migration and remittances, and the distribution of resources; and these linkages foster the diversification of economic activities in rural areas, which in turn can slow out-migration from them (United Nations 2021, 12). While migrants’ employment in rural and remote areas is often marked by the seasonality, geographic concentration, and ethnic niches of employment (see Nori and Farinella 2020; Triandafyllidou and Bartolini 2020), demographic change and the development of non-agricultural activities can also open new opportunities by increasing demand for services related to tourism, construction, the food industry, and distribution, for example (Bianchi et al. 2021).

The positive aspects of rural migration are not without negative consequences (cf. Grau and Aide 2007). Population overcrowding, redundancies, social unrest, xenophobia, earning disparities, and resource depletion and environmental pollution among other issues are also at stake when the migration impact is considered. To avoid the risk that increased human settlement will exert a negative impact on environmentally but also socioeconomically fragile areas, place-based (Neumark and Simpson 2015; Barca 2019; Fioretti, Proietti and Tintori 2021) but also people-centred policies and adequate governance measures hold great potential but require careful planning. Understanding the local context is crucial, for rural and remote areas do not present a homogenous category regarding levels of development, specific challenges, or opportunities. Yet place-based policies alone risk being less effective for people in the most vulnerable conditions (e.g. transit and undocumented migrants), so a combination of the place-based approach with people-based policies must be considered to strengthen social resilience and ensure no one and nowhere will be left behind (Golding and Winkler 2020). However, such policies face many challenges in persistently lagging regions. In regions that have become economically obsolete, Schaeffer (2021) contends, place-based policies cannot be justified by appealing to economic efficiency, yet it may be possible to justify them on social or political grounds, as is the case with the EU’s cohesion policies. He has found migration as an economic adjustment mechanism to have an ambiguous effect on lagging regions because the young and skilled are most likely to find success elsewhere, causing demographic disequilibria that reduce prospects of recovery (ibid.).
As a response to growing migrant numbers, several European countries have introduced dispersal policies or relocation bans to prevent concentrations of immigrants – asylum seekers and refugees – in large cities (Brell, Dustmann and Preston 2020). On several occasions the adopted policies have resulted in their relocation to relatively disadvantaged areas where accommodation is cheaper and more available, but labour demand is weaker (Fasani, Frattini and Minale 2018). While the policies have reduced pressure on urban centres, in rural and remote areas they have not been seen in a positive light as a means of counterbalancing negative demographic trends. Rather, as the conducted MATILDE research shows, these policies have often brought an additional burden for already marginalized and economically weak territories and highlighted the challenges associated with the failure to recognize immigrants’ educational and professional qualifications despite the apparent need for such workers, forcing many into precarious positions in the job market and to be content with jobs which ‘natives’ no longer want.

Migration has the potential to trigger development in the medium and long term, especially in remote areas, where it can operate as a counter-process to depopulation and economic decline, but the trajectory is neither automated nor self-evident. The following chapters show that migration can trigger the revitalization of abandoned spaces and generate new demand and stimuli for services of general interest. To favour balanced territorial development, spatial specificities must be considered in integration and migration governance. Meanwhile, the arrival and settling of TCNs should be acknowledged in development strategies for rural areas at the European, national, and sub-national levels. Evidence-based knowledge of migration outside urban areas is needed if migration is to be included in policies to promote balanced development planning. A further impetus for the book is the realization that the enduring COVID-19 pandemic contributes to a re-thematization of remoteness, not only in terms of social distancing but of perceptions and uses of space – at physical, symbolic, and normative levels, as a consequence of which also the relationship between ‘central places’ and ‘marginalized’ localities has become re-evaluated (Membretti, Dax and Machold 2022, 20). The spatial dimension and local contexts frame societal reproduction and change (Goffman 1974), shaping a continuous sociocultural negotiation between a variety of social structures and groups in territories and involving different groups of inhabitants: established and new; temporary and permanent; nationals and foreigners (Laine 2020b).

Instead of seeking to measure the efficiency of migration, as attempted elsewhere by Golding and Winkler (2020), for example, who pit net migration gains amidst proportionate levels of mobility, our focus is on migration’s social impact. As Gløersen, Mader and Ruoss (2016) point out, the aspiration to implement evidence-based policymaking (EBPM) has led to an increased
focus on quantitative indicators and targets defined at European level as instruments for designing policy measures and assessing their impact. This, they argue, has only constrained the debate and hindered the elaboration of a proactive European strategy for sustainable development in lagging regions. Siding with the European Commission’s (2015) acknowledgement, we see that a great deal of other information besides quantifiable causal effect is needed to assess impacts and provide findings useful for policymakers. Instead of only seeking to determine what makes a difference, we need to consider why, how, for whom, and in what conditions a set of interventions or factors produces intended or unintended effects. Such an approach does not for the most part produce a quantified estimate of the impact; it produces a narrative (ibid., 7), a discourse on change and innovation. This narrative is stronger when it is based on an understanding of issues, opportunities, challenges, and processes that are embedded in territories, as opposed to one inspired by centrally defined targets and objectives (Gløersen, Mader and Ruoss 2016).

Assessing the social impact of immigration – understood here as the changes to the social structure (demographic trends, social polarization or inclusion, civic participation, service provision, etc.) and the transformation of the ‘lifeworld’ (Habermas 1981) – the everyday world that we share with others – is much more than a step-by-step process for identifying the outcomes and fulfilment of certain legal requirements. It can be a mechanism for promoting social sustainability, as well as a tool for positive social change (Momtaz and Kabir 2018). Our assessment of social impact builds on Vanclay’s (2003) elaboration on the topic by including the processes of analysing, monitoring, and managing the intended and unintended social consequences, both positive and negative, of planned interventions (policies, programmes, plans, projects), as well as any social change processes they prompt. Such an approach allows us to target not only migrant integration but the broader social impact on the contextualized social realm and everyday life – how migration actually changes the life of people in specific territories.

A positive social impact of immigration is not the same as successful integration; nor can we assume causality between these concepts. Impact does not automatically necessitate integration; integration does not automatically imply impact (Laine 2022). This is more than just integration; it concerns a society’s functioning. A positive social impact of immigration on the host society is when a plus-sum game is achieved – for example, when immigrants and their integration add extra value to society that would not have been created without them. A negative social impact of immigration on the host society is when the opposite occurs: when a zero-sum game occurs – for example, when immigrants take resources from natives and vice versa. In both cases society and the integration of immigrants are worse off with immigrants and the integration of immigrants than without them.
Formal institutions (e.g. laws, regulations, public agencies, and organizations) facilitate immigrants’ settlement and integration, and these institutions interact with the policy process in the host country (Penninx 2003; Rauhut 2020). Laws and policies explicitly and implicitly categorize immigrants as ‘wanted’ and ‘unwanted’ or as ‘in need of integration’ and those who are ‘already integrated’ or ‘beyond integration’. Hence, the explicit integration policies not only shape an immigrant’s integration but also how policies explicitly and implicitly perceive, problematize, and categorize them (Mügge and van der Haar 2016). Various indicators have been defined to measure the level of integration (e.g. OECD/European Union 2015), with the aid of which immigrants tend to be categorized in relation to their success in achieving the predefined integration benchmarks set against a normative framework and the presumably agreed, often nationally defined, standards.

A glance at the prevailing public and political rhetoric suggests, first, that integration – understood as a sort of an ideal end state – is indeed a desirable, if unfeasible, goal, and that success in this regard is still often considered to depend more on the immigrant’s characteristics and actions than on those of the receiving society. ‘Society’ here usually refers to the ‘country’ into which immigrants are expected to incorporate themselves socioeconomically and to adapt to its sociocultural norms, values, and customs (Laine 2022, 60). Used as a yardstick, integration thus continues to be assessed predominantly with quantitative measures of migrants’ socioeconomic performance, commonly in contrast with the ‘non-migrant’, ‘native’ population (Ersanilli and Koopmans 2011; Alba and Foner 2016). Informal ties among immigrants, such as those related to religion and culture, can also determine the success of integration, and immigrant groups may become either an accepted part of society at the same level as comparable native groups, or they may isolate themselves or remain unrecognized and excluded (Penninx 2003; Garcés-Mascareñas and Penninx 2016). However, as long as being ‘native’ is understood as being indigenous to a territorially bound national polity, becoming a native thus defined becomes impossible: no matter how well integrated, an immigrant will never become ‘native’ and is thus bound to remain out of place.

Among migration-related social policies, which cover most social policy related areas, formal institutions dominate – for example, laws, regulations, public agencies, and organizations – while informal institutions – culture, attitudes, norms, or values – are scarce. The neglect of informal institutions in migration-related social policies results in misunderstandings and cultural clashes, which can be assumed to reduce immigration’s positive social impacts (Soholt et al. 2012; Tronstad 2015). Successful migration-related social policies therefore need to target all the involved actors, both immigrants and natives, as well as formal institutions (laws, rules, rights) and informal institutions (values, norms, attitudes). Lopsided migration policies for formal
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Institutions and immigrants may cause social polarization with so-called natives if they perceive that immigrants enjoy privileges they are not themselves granted. While immigrants and ‘natives’ are two potential target groups for migration-related social policies, these policies often target ‘immigrants’ in general or focus on refugees in particular. However, immigrants are far from a homogeneous group, meaning general approaches tend to obscure more than they illuminate. The same often applies to the host population, referred to here as ‘natives’. In using the word, underlining what and who constitute the host population and society to which a migrant is expected to aspire is seldom as clearcut as its usual depiction (Laine 2022). Central to the idea of a host population as a ‘norm’ is that it consists of a homogeneous group into which immigrants should integrate (Saharso 2019); that is, a nation state may be compelling but also tremendously biased, only accentuating the unfeasibility of the goal of integration by distorting the reality. The world characterized by migration and its impact can be better understood through transculturality and acknowledging the hybridization of cultures (Welsch 2001, 68).

Our aim has been to move towards an evidence-based evaluation model and use our case studies as benchmarks of good practice. The chapters in this book, all from their own complementary perspectives, argue collectively that targeted policies and migration governance play a key role in determining migrant impact. They show that more and better policy measures, including administrative and financial resources, are needed to improve migrant integration. However, as successful integration depends as much on the host society as it does on the migrant, the situation is that this is clearly easier said than done. The acknowledgement of the process’s two-wayness, though popular in both academic and policy circles because of its value in terms of checks and balances, does little to blur the social boundaries and binaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’, ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’, those who belong and those who are perceived as not to belong (Laine 2022). Klarenbeek (2019) argues that the concept of two-way integration remains underdefined, and its mere endorsement is insufficient to avoid or resolve the problems associated with one-wayness. Highlighting two-wayness thus only reconfirms the existential separation between those who are considered to constitute ‘society’ by default and those who do not, and who therefore need to ‘integrate’ further (Schinkel 2018).

A careful balancing act is needed, for many well-intentioned programmes and policies favouring migrants and refugees have also been seen as downplaying or even ignoring the needs of the local communities (cf. Islam, Rohde and Huerta 2019) in which immigrants are expected to integrate, thus nurturing the risk of complicating rather than facilitating inclusion. However, there are several illuminating differences between the various investigated regions that in turn support the book’s key premise: place matters. Rural and remote areas
have much in common, but they are not the same. That is, while the challenges
these areas face may be similar, the solutions need to be tailored to meet
specific needs. While significant differences can be observed between the
various countries, regions, and localities, our findings support the argument
that Europe’s rural and remote regions offer great potential not only for the
immigrants themselves and their respective new host societies but – above
all – for something new to be created together and shared with others in the
very process of redefining ‘we’. It is here, the book collectively suggests, the
impact lies. Immigration to rural areas provides an opportunity to revitalize
them by alleviating the common challenges confronting many of these regions:
the weakening demography and lack of labour in the troubled areas of the
local labour market and multiple side effects such as diminishing services, the
erosion of public transport options, and the general waning of social and cul-
tural capital. Participation on behalf of migrants seems a key enabler of social
inclusion, while greater awareness of migrants’ stories and experiences among
the host population is crucial to change local perceptions, often reserved by
default, of immigrants, especially refugees.

Integration remains a pivotal concept – and above all a purpose-built admin-
istrative tool used to describe how immigrants find their way in a new country
and become part of it; that is, to ease both the socioeconomic incorporation of
immigrants into the host society and their sociocultural adaptation to it. While
the various approaches to integration have proven benefits, as an analytical
concept intended as descriptive and progressive it is often used rather norma-
tively. Acknowledging that the integration perspective can be illuminating but
also obscuring, there is a need to question the very assumptions upon which the
concept rests (cf. Schinkel 2018), rather than taking them a priori. The book’s
premise is that integration serves an important purpose, but in any assessment
of integration, it is important to be specific about the purpose that is being
worked towards with its aid. The assessments and applicability of terms vary
greatly, depending on whether we understand integration as a merely admin-
istrative or bureaucratic ladder a migrant must climb to gain a certain status
and rights in their new host society, or whether we are discussing broader
wellbeing and coherence. Successful integration depends not only on the char-
acteristics and abilities of the immigrant but on those of the receiving society.
There can also be a social impact without integration.

REJUVENATING REMOTENESS

Europe’s rural and remote areas have significant value and potential, the
capitalization of which indeed requires place-sensitive sustainable approaches
and innovative governance strategies. These areas offer true opportunities of
effective migrant inclusion through, inter alia, the provision of affordable

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housing, fostering positive perception of migration (migrants as a tool for revitalization) and by ensuring inclusive and accessible host communities; yet the progress therein is not automatic. Rather than trying to implement a one-size-fits-all solution, the chapters that follow will highlight the need to assume a comprehensive approach to the issue by acknowledging both the diversity of the migrant populations and the specificities of the European rural and remote areas. At the same time, any attempt to rejuvenate remoteness must also acknowledge the impediments that remain in play for the impact of immigration to be fully grasped. Reduced public infrastructure and services (especially if migrants have specific needs), labour market constrains, the lack of migrant networks, challenges to mobility, and the diversity of migrant profiles are among the issues many regions are grappling with.

Furthermore, projecting remote areas simply in opposition to urban areas and depicting their interactions as a classic zero-sum game not only enforces the already much-critiqued binary–linear relationship of the early centre–periphery models and downplays the internal heterogeneity of these broadly defined categories, it ignores the increasingly apparent fact that globalization’s various manifestations are increasingly penetrating the remote parts of the world and profoundly affecting their use in complex ways – some of which can be seen as negative, some positive – but all making them distinctly less remote. As Kaps and Komlosy (2013) observe, adhering to the views of several post-colonial authors, the relationship between centres and peripheries has become increasingly entangled, with their interaction taking place in a multi-layered and overlapping network of polycentric relations between different spatial entities. As Zoomers argues correctly (2022, 22), discussions about how to stimulate local development usually become calls for action within fixed and confined settings, but globalization connects even distant people and places (see also Zoomers and van Westen 2011).

Few areas, be they remote or not, rely on local resources in today’s world; their livelihood opportunities are increasingly shaped by positionality, and how people are attached to and participate in trans-local and transnational networks (Zoomers 2022, 122). Instead of seeking to boost the development and standing of remote areas through independent local development and depicting them both in contrast with and automatically normatively better than development in urban or other non-remote areas, we advocate a shift of attention to the blurring of the rural–urban interface (understood as a continuum, not as a dichotomy) and multilocal development trajectories that focus on sustainable, green, inclusive, and integrated growth and development. To achieve this, remoteness and connectivity should not be considered as two independent opposite features but as constituting and conditioning each other and resulting in shifting socio-spatial constellations (Saxer and Andersson 2019, 147), the understanding of which is essential for considering the potential of even the
most isolated places. Forms of remoteness can emerge because of the privileg-
ing of certain connections, or vice versa (ibid.).

In their attempt to reframe remote places and remoteness as ‘a collective
resource and value for Europe’ Membretti, Dax and Machold (2022, 17) take
a somewhat normative stance against neoliberal globalization, projecting it as
the sole source of exploitation and socio-spatial subordination of remote places
to those considered to form the connected core. They argue that within such
an economic and political process physical space tends to be treated as a mere
support, an infrastructural platform for the development of productive and
service activities that temporarily exploit geographical positions, only soon to
abandon them and move to other locations more profitable in terms of labour
costs, producing in so doing unstable territorial hierarchies, global competition
between territories, and shifting alliances between global cities, while fuelling
the marginalization of large portions of the planet, impoverishing local econ-
omies and reducing the capacity for local communities’ self-determination
(ibid.). While their perspective has its merits, and some evidence for it can be
found, the depiction scarcely addresses the complexities of the situation fully
or impartially. Much ambiguity surrounds the causal pathways and dynamics
that mediate and determine the impact of remote places’ global connection, as
there are limitations to our current knowledge and weaknesses in our meth-
odological approaches and research practices as solutions to the perceived
challenges.

Seeking to rejuvenate the remote areas and draw attention to their untapped
potential by pitting them against an oppressive all-powerful centre is coun-
terproductive in terms of regional inequality and only fuels the emerging
Europewide political divide between cities and the countryside. Rural areas are
indeed ‘the fabric of our society and the heartbeat of our economy’, as Ursula
von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, acknowledged in pre-
paring the ground for the long-term vision for the EU’s rural areas, a European
Commission (2021) initiative to develop a common European vision for 2040,
yet neither the areas in question nor the vision designed for them work in iso-
lation. Rather, their success will depend on the broader frames of which they
are a crucial part (‘a new push for European Democracy’, the digital transition,
the European Green Deal, the recovery plan for Europe). In appreciating the
role of rural and remote regions in building Europe’s future, in particular as
anticipated by the European Vision for Rural Areas, it must be acknowledged
that several challenges also hinder their potential for sustainable cohesive
development.

For example, a recent new study reveals that people in the more rural parts
of Europe have the lowest levels of trust in their nation’s current political system,
and the growth of political disenchantment in many non-metropolitan loca-
tions across Europe provides fertile soil for nationalist and populist parties and
On the potential of immigration for the remote areas of Europe

causes (Kenny and Luca 2021), many of which translate to anti-immigration and anti-EU views and xenophobic attitudes (Laine 2020).

In contrast with the classic class-based left–right cleavages scholars have recently explained – though inconsistently – the new divisions as stemming from education and cultural attitudes (Norris and Inglehart 2019; Piketty 2018; Kenny and Luca 2021). Whether the cleavage is seen as a result of pitting ‘materialism’ against ‘post-materialism’ (Inglehart 1997), tension between globalization’s ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ (Kriesi 2010, see also Membretti, Dax and Machold 2022), or the conflict of values between ‘liberals’ and ‘conservatives, authoritarians, and/or nationalists’ (De Vries 2018; Hooghe and Marks 2018), they all point to the increasing salience of geography in relation to this new attitudinal cleavage and growing political disagreements between cosmopolitan, highly educated, and socially progressive urbanites and nationalist and socially conservative residents of ‘hinterland’ areas (Kenny and Luca 2021, 567).

The findings of Kenny and Luca (2021) point to a place-sensitive conception of political disenchantment, undermining in doing so the overly generalized characterizations of identity-driven ‘rural consciousness’ or ‘left-behind’ disillusion (Cramer 2016; Harris and Charlton 2016). They identify a rather clear gradient in political attitudes and social values, positing that their correlation with various spatial scales and kinds of community – from metropolitan centres to remoter rural areas – demands a more detailed and contextual understanding of not only the geography of discontent (Rodríguez-Pose 2018; Dijkstra, Poelman and Rodríguez-Pose 2020) but also of disillusion (Kenny and Luca 2021, 578). As disenchantment increases in Europe’s hinterlands, democratic politics risks being eroded from within (ibid.), and the European population is becoming increasingly divided (Laine 2020b). People living in places which are stagnating or facing comparative economic decline, such as peripheral towns and rural places, tend to generate a growing sense of disaffection, anxiety, and resentment, driving citizens to adopt a more protective, ‘zero-sum, “us or them” frame of mind’ (Wilkinson 2018, 5; cf. Cramer 2016).

In seeking to renegotiate remoteness, we have been inspired by Saxer and Andersson’s (2019) anthropological take on remote areas, which they depict neither simply as vestiges of a former, less connected era nor as the side effects of uneven globalization that could be taken care of by reinforcing development efforts. Rather, in building on Ardener’s (2012) observation that remoteness is less a function of ‘topographical’ than of ‘topological’ space – that is, a structural relationship of social distancing, in which those inhabiting remote areas may come to identify with their home’s peculiar ‘far-flung-ness’ and its vulnerability to external forces – they see remoteness above all as a relational category. Remoteness is thus not a static condition but something actively made and remade. Remoteness, Harms et al. (2014, 362) argue, ‘is not so
much a place as a way of being’, and only by detaching the remote ‘from its geographical moorings’ can we also understand it as a sociological rather than simply a spatial concept. While remoteness cannot be ‘fixed in place’, we agree with Saxer and Andersson (2019) that such detachment ought not to equate with emptying the notion of remote of all geographical content. The political return of remoteness with its manifold faces, its active production in the name of development, conservation, heritage, and security, is an aspect of the world’s reorganization, in which local, national, regional, and global scales interact, with unpredictable consequences. As we traverse scales and sites to explore these interactions, we not only come to terms with the local realities ensuing from partial ‘removal’; we learn how centres of power may be rethought if we analytically situate the remote as somehow central to our ‘new world disorder’ (Saxer and Andersson 2019, 152) – that is, how remoteness (as a concept and as a material reality) is, if anything, becoming increasingly relevant and more prevalent in this globalized world (see Green and Laviolette 2019).

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

The book’s content has been structured into two separate yet interconnected parts. Part I features concrete empirical evidence from the research conducted and seeks to illuminate migration’s social impact in the analysed case studies. The fieldwork in peripheral, remote, and mountainous regions on which this volume’s contributions rely elucidates challenges and problems experienced in these regions. The challenges and problems highlighted in the contributions cover issues such as housing, the labour market, and long-term social inclusion strategies, as well as aspects related to transnationalism and re/de/bordering. The contributions discuss the specificities of the regions but also usefully highlight more broadly relevant lessons learned, thus bringing added value through their contribution to the book’s collective argument. Housing is recurrently discussed in terms of social inclusion and immigrants’ integration but is also a prerequisite for staying. While the challenges in urban contexts are mostly related to shortages and segregation, peripheral, remote, and mountainous areas struggle with the scarce availability of rental apartments and overpriced accommodation during the preference for profitable second homes or high tourism intensity. The discussion in Chapter 2 on the housing policies for immigrants in Germany and Austria by Stefan Kordel, Tobias Weidinger, Ingrid Machold, and Marika Gruber concludes that housing policies differ considerably between regions, labour immigrants, and refugees regarding adequate housing, and that NGOs and private actors must ultimately support labour immigrants and refugees to obtain adequate housing in the analysed areas.
No less than housing, employment is a basic prerequisite for active participation in economic and social life. Chapter 3 discusses the demand and supply of different types of immigrant labour (labour immigrants/refugees, high- and low-skilled, etc.) in Austria and Spain. Marika Gruber, Kathrin Zupan, Nuria del Olmo-Vicén, and Raúl Lardíes-Bosque note that both countries struggle with a labour shortage in peripheral, remote, and mountainous areas. However, Austria lacks high-skilled labour; Spain lacks low-skilled labour. Despite these challenges, there are many irrationalities on the labour markets and in the legislation leading to the labour market exclusion of many immigrants. Temporary employment, mostly offered in low-paid unqualified jobs, and the tedious recognition paths of immigrants’ qualifications and job competition between natives and immigrants generate tension. A long-term, multi-stakeholder integration strategy is required. This is explicitly discussed in Chapter 4 by Ingrid Machold, Thomas Dax, and Lisa Bauchinger. Their premise is that integration processes are often blurred by the short-term orientation of local action and policy strategies. However, achieving immigrants’ successful integration in local community life requires sustained commitment from the local authorities and actors and the creation of meaningful perspectives for newcomers. Local actors usually highlight the assessment that inclusion and social mobility may be expected only for second-generation (or later) migrants. Such perspectives argue for priorities in practical efforts that lay the foundations for long-term integration. However, enhancing language acquisition and labour market integration will lead not only to social inclusion but also to the development of a sort of place attachment to the local community by immigrants, who strengthen their social ties to a specific community. However, long-term social inclusion strategies are required if this is to be achieved.

Many peripheral, remote, and mountainous areas have received unprecedented numbers of TCNs over the last ten years. This has resulted in a de-bordering process in many of these regions, leading to transnationalism and new influences. The border region in North Karelia between Finland and Russia has been transnational for the last three decades. The conclusion of Chapter 5 by Pirjo Pöllänen, Lauri Havukainen, and Olga Davydova-Minguet is that the everyday life of immigrants living in the border area is explicitly transnational through family and care relations, for example, when the everyday takes place on both sides of the border. In the case of the Russian-speaking immigrants in North Karelia border crossing becomes a crucial part of everyday life.

In Chapter 6 Anna Krasteva examines the dynamic processes of de/re/bordering of a mountain region on the borders of Bulgaria with Turkey and Greece. The findings suggest a validation and application of a new type of migration crisis and a reinvention of remoteness, borders, and bordering during three crises – post-communism, migration, and COVID-19. The aspects
of remoteness and its effect on integration is further discussed in Chapter 7, where Maria Luisa Caputo, Michele Bianchi, and Simone Baglioni contend that remoteness is a spatial concept implying ‘otherness’. This relationship between spatial and social dynamics has been widely explored in the urban space (e.g. ghettoization and segregation) but not in a ‘non-urban’ context. Remoteness is largely a physical and symbolic dimension, which is embodied in space and time and is experienced by the actors. Remoteness does affect the self-perceived identity of ‘islanders’ and ‘otherness’; in a situation in which immigrants only partly identify themselves as locals or not at all, their emotional attachment as ‘islanders’ to the remote landscapes of their everyday lives allows little anchorage of their identity to the islands.

The second part of the volume focuses on formal institutions such as laws and regulations, administrative structures, governance processes, policies, and actors involved in rural development and immigrants’ integration in peripheral, rural, and mountainous regions. The chapters here highlight that while the respective policies are often centrally planned, their implementation relies heavily on the local and regional level actors. Moreover, tangible challenges and policy problems of rural and mountainous regions, such as depopulation processes, labour shortages, social welfare services, and their (restricted) accessibility to immigrants, especially TCNs, are discussed. While most EU Member States have registered population growth in recent years, the opposite can be observed of many rural, mountainous, and peripheral regions facing an overall decline in population, especially among the young, and resulting low fertility rates (Aigner-Walder, Luger and Schomaker 2021). Raúl Lardiés-Bosque and Nuria del Olmo-Vicén examine this phenomenon in Chapter 8, discussing the impact foreign immigration may have on the revitalization of Spain’s rural areas. They highlight various positive impacts immigrants have, including their contribution to the reduction of population decline, the expansion of education and other services, and their economic activities. However, the authors do not conceal the problems associated with immigration to these regions. Many of these problems can be found in the labour market.

Despite the anticipated positive effects of TCNs migrating to rural regions, many challenges remain. This does not only concern labour market integration issues: the challenges extend to various social policy fields. In their analysis of the rural regions in two Mediterranean countries, Turkey and Spain, Pınar Uyan Semerci, Fatma Yılmaz Elmas, Raúl Lardiés-Bosque, and Nuria del Olmo-Vicén (Chapter 9) focus on immigrants’ ability to access central social welfare services amidst centralized governance structures. They underline the importance of social welfare policies for immigrants’ integration but also point to the limitations of central governance structures and a labour market-based integration model. Competition between immigrants and the local population for social services can therefore be observed in the rural regions under scrutiny.
Although Turkey adheres to a centralized governance system, a local turn in integration activities is noticeable. In Chapter 10 Ayhan Kaya discusses the integration policies and practices targeted at Syrian migrants based on the Turkish example of the province of Bursa. He stresses the role of municipalities and local NGOs in the support of migrants, while emphasizing the challenges they face – for example, in limited budgets, uncertainties about what they are legally allowed to do, and a lack of central coordination. A shift of responsibilities for integration services from national to local governance levels and actors is also noted for Austria and Sweden. Based on the governance structures of immigrant integration in both countries, in Chapter 11 Marika Gruber and Daniel Rauhut identify an increased marketization of integration services and intertwined but simultaneously fragmented responsibilities. They point out that the New Public Management orientation of integration service provision has resulted in a complex multilevel governance which ultimately makes immigrant integration processes even more difficult. They conclude that the competition generated among private providers often ends in funding uncertainties for urgently required integration services.

People living in rural, mountainous, or peripheral regions often face special challenges associated with greater distances or reduced service provision. Special challenges arise when immigrants move to such areas and demand (welfare) services, but these are not (or no longer) available, because the state has withdrawn from these regions. In Chapter 12 Susanne Stenbacka and Tina Mathisen discuss, based on the example of the rural region of Dalarna in Sweden, the governance dilemma of state withdrawal, the aims of equal accessibility to social welfare services, and rural justice in the settlement and integration of refugees. They underline the role of rural regions as integration actors and analyse how the state withdrawal and lack of essential services, for example, the reduced Swedish Public Employment Service agencies in rural regions, affect social cohesion and immigrant integration, especially in participation in the labour market and education. In Chapter 13 Ulf Hansson, Deniz Akin, Zuzana Macuchova, and Per Olav Lund focus on labour market integration in rural regions of Sweden and Norway. Like the Spanish labour market-based integration model, both Nordic countries seek fast labour market integration of immigrants to facilitate their (financial) independence. However, migrants’ labour market integration in rural regions is not only complicated by their insufficient language skills and structural deficiencies in the recognition of formal and informal skills but by the structural features of rural and peripheral areas, such as dispersed settlement, that influence migrants’ integration into the labour market. In Chapter 14, the conclusion, the editors summarize the major findings and suggest ways forward to a better acknowledgement and use of the impact of immigration in Europe’s renegotiation of remoteness.
NOTES

1. Rural population (% of total population), available at: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.RUR.TOTL.ZS.

2. The MATILDE project resulting in this publication received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 870831.

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Assessing the social impact of immigration in Europe


