

Empowering the periphery: regional planning perspective to left-behind places

Sıla Ceren Varış Husar

Postdoctoral researcher and Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellow, Spatial Planning Department, Slovak University of Technology in Bratislava

DOI: 10.37199/o41009102

Abstract- *Left-behind places, characterized by population decline, economic stagnation, and social decay, present complex challenges that demand regional and place-based planning solutions. Distinguishing the importance of peripheral areas in this perspective is highly crucial, despite their absence from decision-makers' political agendas as in the case of neglecting them due to physical or mental barriers prolongs these disparities. This exploration underlines the regional planning perspective aimed at empowering the periphery, focusing on possible strategies to revive left-behind areas and foster local development. Providing insights from urban planning and regional development, this work discusses the dynamics of decline in the regions and unfolds key principles and approaches for regional level intervention. By emphasizing place-based strategies, this exploration offers input for policymakers, planners, and practitioners seeking to address the spatial disparities and promote different perspectives on left-behind places. There are several strategies to employ local resources, and start transformative change, consequently expected to result in advancing the agenda of regional development. Planners must prioritize social infrastructure changes to address diverse needs and promote the well-being of communities within left-behind places, ensuring inclusive local development.*

Keywords:

Left-behind places, regional planning, empowerment, population decline, planning strategies.

Acknowledgements:

This work has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 945478.

Introduction

As urban development evolves, many involved parties such as architects, planners, and decision makers play pivotal roles in shaping the cities of today and tomorrow. Through the complexities of urban developmental dynamics, several key messages emerge from the research and experiences. Interpreting the resource allocation dynamics between different levels of governance has utmost importance for local development. The decision-making power, and infrastructure development heavily rely on these interrelations between central

to regional and local governments, influencing the spatial and social framework of urban areas (Swynghedouw et al., 2002).

Moreover, demographic shifts such as aging populations and the migration of young populations pose unique challenges for local development (De Haas et al., 2019). The rise of aging populations necessitates innovative approaches to urban design and infrastructure to accommodate their needs (Van Hoof et al., 2018). On the other hand, the flood of younger generations to the vital and

diverse urban centers leads to the lack of change agency among the societies in some peripheral areas and increases the need for interventions that foster their movement in more balanced way (Carson et al., 2016; Gruber et al., 2019).

Moreover, the phenomenon of left-behind places stresses the disparities that persist within regions. These areas, often characterized by economic stagnation and social marginalization (Martin et al., 2021), demand targeted strategies to revitalize and integrate them into the broader urban fabric. Regional-level planning initiatives emerge as crucial tools in addressing the needs of these neglected communities, offering pathways for inclusive development and equitable distribution of resources (Elias, 2020).

In this piece, I try to explore the interaction between local governance structures, demographic shifts, and the imperatives of inclusive urban development. By examining the role of regional-level planning initiatives in addressing the challenges posed by aging populations, cultural heritage engagement, tourism dynamics, youth migration, and the impasse of left-behind places, I aim to expand some insights that could endorse the related research field.

Theoretical background

Dynamics between Local, Regional, and National Governments & Impact on Regional Planning and Development Perspective

Interconnected Roles and Responsibilities

Local governments act as the frontline administrators, responsible for delivering services directly to citizens and addressing immediate community needs (Helling et al., 2005). Their authority often extends to urban planning, zoning regulations, and local infrastructure development. Regional governments serve as intermediaries between local and national authorities, facilitating cooperation and coordination across various local jurisdictions (Masuda et al., 2022). They play a crucial role in harmonizing policies, allocating resources, and implementing regional development strategies that exceed municipal boundaries. National governments hold the highest level of authority and set overarching policies and regulations that shape the socio-economic topography of the entire nation. While national governments provide primary frameworks, they also delegate certain powers to local and regional entities to modify development initiatives to local contexts (Ascani et al., 2012).

Power Dynamics and Collaboration

The dynamics between these governmental levels (Fig1) are influenced by a complex relationship of political, economic, and social factors. Power imbalances often exist, with national governments exercising greater resources and authority compared to their regional and local counterparts (Hooghe & Marks, 2010). However, effective collaboration and partnership are essential for addressing regional challenges comprehensively. Collaborative mechanisms, such as intergovernmental

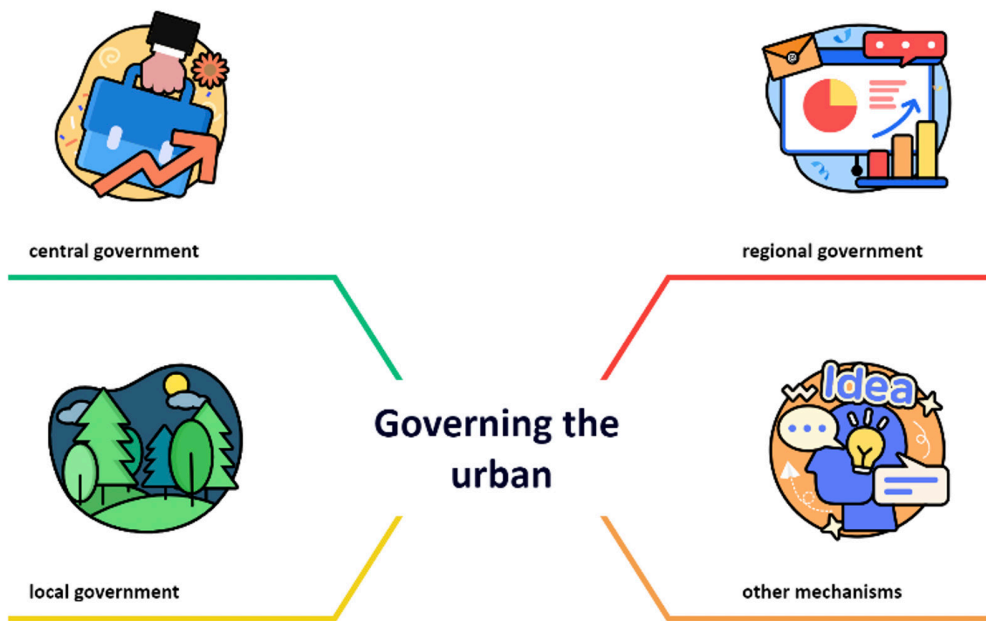


Fig1 / Basic depiction of dynamics which impact governing the urban
source / the author

forums and cooperative agreements, facilitate dialogue and decision-making processes among stakeholders at different levels of government (Bingham, 2011). Furthermore, decentralized governance models, where decision-making authority is devolved to local and regional levels, can empower communities to take ownership of their development agendas while responding more efficiently to local needs.

Impact on Regional Planning and Development

The interactions between local, regional, and national governments significantly influence regional planning and development outcomes. Coordinated planning efforts enable the orientation of infrastructure investments, land use policies, and economic development strategies to promote balanced development and sustainable growth. On the other hand, fragmented governance structures and lack of coordination may lead to inefficient resource allocation, spatial disparities, and conflicting development priorities within regions (Healey, 2006). Therefore, fostering collaborative governance frameworks and strengthening institutional capacities at all levels of government are imperative for realizing inclusive and resilient regional development (Healey, 1998).

Left behind places from demographic perspective: Aging Population & Young Population Migration

Left-behind places (Fig2), characterized by declining populations and economic

regression, often face distinct challenges stemming from demographic shifts, particularly in the context of aging populations and outmigration of younger generations. The phenomenon of an aging population is a prevalent issue in many regions worldwide, driven by a variety of factors. In left-behind places, this demographic trend exacerbates existing socio-economic pressures, as the proportion of elderly residents rises while the working-age population decreases (Davoudi et al., 2010). Consequently, these areas experience a shrinking labor force, reduced consumer demand, and strained social welfare systems, posing significant obstacles to sustainable development and community resilience (He & Ye, 2014). One of the foremost challenges confronting urban planners is the unpredictable nature of population dynamics. As urban areas expand continuously, planners must devise strategies to manage this growth sustainably and fairly, all while tackling issues like congestion, housing affordability, and infrastructural demands. On the contrary, certain regions struggle with population decline, necessitating a comprehensive approach that considers the fluctuating population dynamics from both angles (Variş Husar et al., 2023).

Simultaneously, the outmigration of younger populations aggravates the demographic imbalance in left-behind places, perpetuating a cycle of population and economic regression. Younger generations often migrate to urban centers or more prosperous regions in search of better employment opportunities, education, and quality of life.

This phenomenon, commonly referred to as youth drain, deprives left-behind areas of vital human capital and entrepreneurial talent, hindering innovation, economic diversification, and community vitality (Wieliczko et al., 2021). Moreover, the departure of young people intensifies the aging population challenge by further skewing the demographic composition towards older age cohorts, compounding the strain on local healthcare and social services infrastructure.

Addressing the demographic challenges faced by left-behind places requires multifaceted approaches that recognize the interplay between aging populations and youth migration. Strategies aimed at revitalizing these regions must prioritize initiatives to attract and retain both older and younger demographics, fostering intergenerational cohesion and inclusive community development. This entails investing in age-friendly infrastructure, healthcare services, and social amenities to support the needs of elderly residents (Fitzgerald & Caro, 2014) while simultaneously creating opportunities for youth engagement, skill development, and entrepreneurship. Moreover, policies that promote flexible working arrangements, affordable housing options, and vibrant cultural environments can enhance the attractiveness of left-behind places to a diverse range of demographic groups, laying the foundation for sustainable demographic renewal and regional revitalization.

Cultural Heritage engagement and regional level tourism strategies as a driver of development

Every city plays a crucial role in fostering economic growth within its means, all while respecting its cultural legacy and utilizing available resources (Fig3) responsibly to transmit its inherent values and elements to forthcoming generations. Each element serves as an assessment of social and cultural vitality, developmental status, and aesthetic unity (Buldaç et al., 2020). Cultural heritage engagement plays a pivotal role in regional-level tourism strategies, serving as a catalyst for economic development and community revitalization. In addition to the unique historical, architectural, and cultural assets of a region, tourism initiatives can stimulate visitor interest, generate revenue, and create employment opportunities (Ismagilova et al., 2015). Preservation and promotion of cultural heritage sites not only attract tourists but also in a sense of pride and identity among residents, fostering community

cohesion and social capital (Sanetra-Szeliga, 2022). Moreover, cultural tourism offers opportunities for authentic experiences, cultural exchange, and sustainable development, contributing to the preservation and transmission of intangible cultural heritage while supporting local artisans, craftsmen, and cultural practitioners.

Cultural heritage engagement within regional tourism strategies not only drives economic growth but also fosters sustainable development and intercultural dialogue (Loulanski & Loulanski, 2011). By demonstrating diverse cultural traditions, customs, and lifestyles, tourism initiatives promote cross-cultural understanding, tolerance, and appreciation of cultural diversity. Moreover, heritage-based tourism can serve as a vehicle for community empowerment, enabling local residents to actively participate in tourism development processes, share their cultural heritage, and benefit from tourism revenues (Nhamo & Katsamudanga, 2019). By employing the power of cultural heritage as a driver of regional development, policymakers and planners can unlock the full potential of tourism to create inclusive, resilient, and vibrant communities.

Regional-Level Planning Initiatives for Inclusive Development for Left-Behind Places

MacKinnon et al. (2022) contextualize the term "left-behind places" within the broader narrative of regional policy, which historically aimed to address geographical disparities, bridge divides, achieve catch-up growth, and spatially imbalanced development. They highlight a combination of factors, including economic disadvantage, lower living standards, population decline or stagnation, inadequate infrastructure, and political neglect, that collectively characterize these areas as "left behind." Furthermore, they stress that the challenges faced by such places extend beyond mere economic factors to include issues of social cohesion, identity loss, limited opportunities, demographic shifts, and deficiencies in connectivity and infrastructure.

Fiorentino et al. (2024) highlight a critical concern regarding "left-behind" regions, cities, or localities, noting that once these areas lose economic momentum and fall behind more prosperous counterparts, reversing their decline becomes challenging. They argue that even mainstream economists acknowledge the difficulty for such areas to attract or retain essential resources like labor and capital

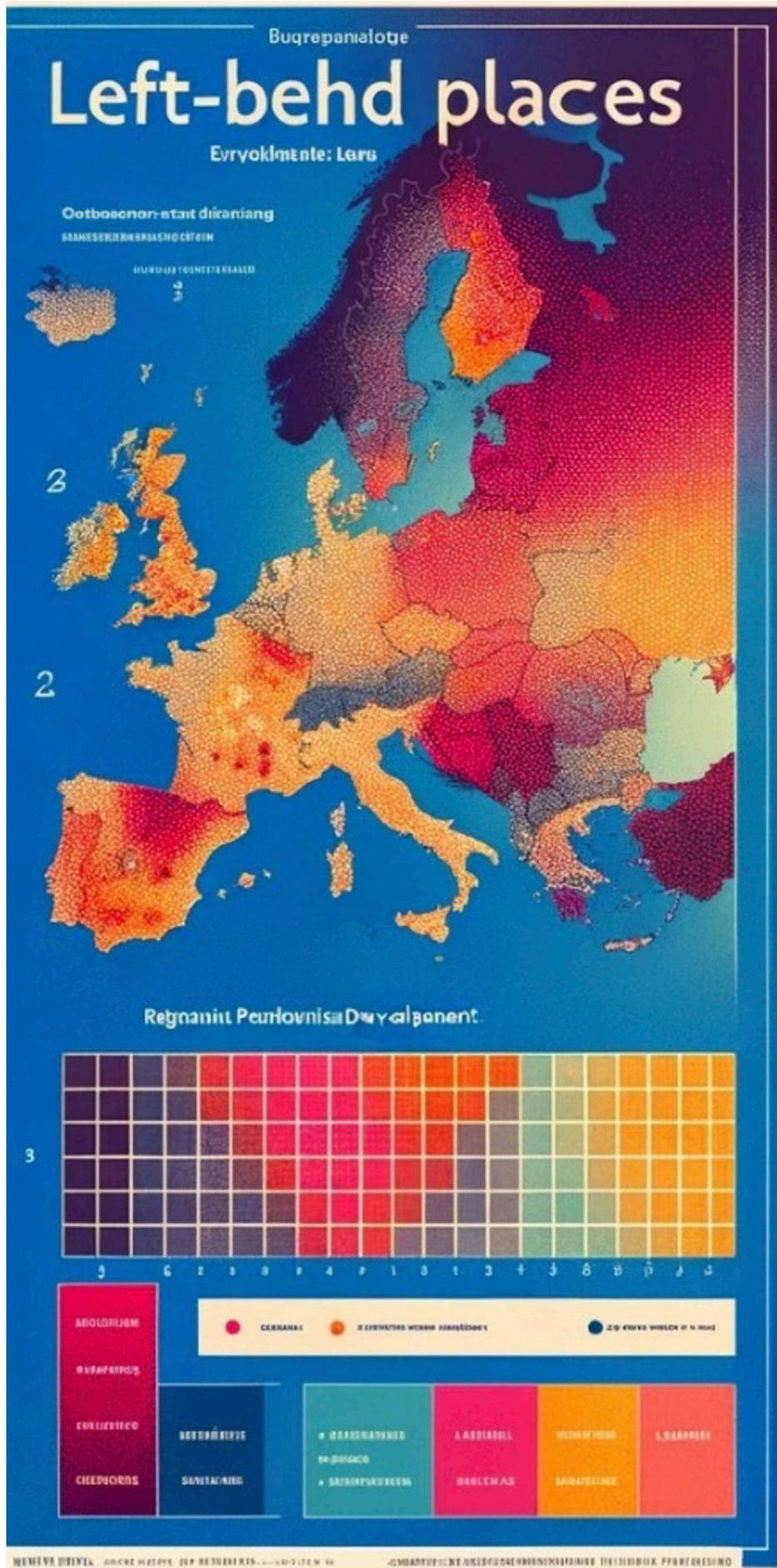


Fig2 / Visual representation of exemplary analysis for left behind places
source / DALL-E Generated Image

necessary for recovery, as these resources tend to gravitate towards faster-growing regions. This phenomenon is described as "combined and uneven geographical development," suggesting that once established, economic disparities between regions are likely to persist and even get worse over time, making them challenging to resolve. Whether viewed through the lens of endogenous growth theory or political economy, the outcome remains consistent: geographical inequalities in economic prosperity tend to be self-perpetuating, path-dependent, and difficult to reverse.

Regional development studies, so far explored how individuals and initiatives can drive change within specific regions, emphasizing the significance of local knowledge and its impact on regional growth. Innovation depends on the intensity of the exploitation of the regional knowledge base by the regional

actors. Actors can alter and improve the regional knowledge base (Ott & Rondé, 2019). Sotarauta & Grillitsch (2023) most recently argue that the goals, aspirations, and skills of prominent individuals significantly impact regional development. There are some cases and research that show the connections between regional development of peripheral areas all around the world. For example, Stratigea and Katsoni (2015) emphasize the central theme of their research, which revolves around crafting a methodological framework to steer strategic decision-making towards the sustainable advancement of peripheral small island regions. These regions represent notable instances of areas lagging on a European scale, highlighting the urgent need for tailored developmental approaches. Stratigea and Katsoni (2015) also give emphasis to the necessity of adopting an integrated development strategy

to mitigate the risks associated with unsustainable development in small island regions. This entails fostering a tourism development model with a minimal ecological impact and ensuring the tourist sector is complexly constructed into the local economic fabric to ensure equitable benefits for the community. Moreover, they advocate for a forward-looking approach that caters to the needs of both current and future generations. They stress the importance of foresight initiatives at the regional and local levels, positioning them at the forefront of decision-making processes.

Discussion

Regional policymaking relies immensely on statistical and economic classifications of regions to inform decision-making processes. These classifications help decision makers to understand the unique characteristics, strengths, and

challenges of different areas, enabling them to place-based policies that address specific needs. By analyzing data on factors such as population demographics, economic indicators, infrastructure, and social conditions, policymakers can identify regions that may require targeted interventions to stimulate growth, reduce disparities, or address pressing issues.

However, the impact of regional policies extends beyond immediate economic outcomes. They also play a crucial role in shaping the social fabric, cultural identity, and environmental sustainability of regions. Policies that promote inclusive growth, environmental conservation, and community empowerment can foster more empowered peripheries for future generations.

In conclusion, regional policymaking harnesses the power of data-driven insights to design interventions that have the potential to profoundly influence the trajectory of development in specific peripheral regions. By understanding and addressing the unique needs and challenges of each area, policymakers can work towards creating more equitable, resilient, and sustainable communities.



Fig3 / Visual representation of exemplary local resources source / DALL-E Generated Image

References

- Ascani, A., Crescenzi, R., & Iammarino, S. (2012). Regional economic development. A Review, *SEARCH WP01/03*, 2-26.
- Beer, A., McKenzie, F., Blažek, J., Sotarauta, M., & Ayres, S. (2020). Every place matters: Towards effective place-based policy. Routledge.
- Bingham, L. B. (2011). Collaborative governance. *The SAGE handbook of governance*, 386-401.
- Buldaç, M., Varış, S. C., & Karaoğlu Can, M. (2020). An Evaluation of The Symbolic Meaning of Tile Usage in The City of Kütahya. *ICONARCH International Congress of Architecture and Planning*, (Iconarch -IV Proceeding Book), 601-620. Retrieved from <https://iconarch.ktun.edu.tr/index.php/iconarch/article/view/277>
- Carson, D. B., Carson, D. A., Porter, R., Ahlin, C. Y., & Sköld, P. (2016). Decline, adaptation or transformation: new perspectives on demographic change in resource peripheries in Australia and Sweden. *Comparative Population Studies*, 41(3-4).
- Davoudi, S., Wishardt, M., & Strange, I. (2010). The ageing of Europe: Demographic scenarios of Europe's futures. *Futures*, 42(8), 794-803.
- De Haas, H., Castles, S., & Miller, M. J. (2019). *The age of migration: International population movements in the modern world*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Elias, P. (2020). Inclusive city, perspectives, challenges, and pathways. In *Sustainable cities and communities* (pp. 290-300). Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Fiorentino, S., Glasmeier, A. K., Lobao, L., Martin, R., & Tyler, P. (2024). 'Left behind places': what are they and why do they matter?. *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, 17(1), 1-16.
- Fitzgerald, K. G., & Caro, F. G. (2014). An overview of age-friendly cities and communities around the world. *Journal of aging & social policy*, 26(1-2), 1-18.
- Gruber, E., Schorn, M., & MA, B. (2019). Outmigrating youth: A threat to European peripheries?. *ÖGfE Policy Brief*, Vienna.
- He, C., & Ye, J. (2014). Lonely sunsets: impacts of rural-urban migration on the left behind elderly in rural China. *Population, Space and place*, 20(4), 352-369.
- Healey, P. (1998). Building institutional capacity through collaborative approaches to urban planning. *Environment and planning A*, 30(9), 1531-1546.
- Healey, P. (2006). Relational complexity and the imaginative power of strategic spatial planning. *European Planning Studies*, 14(4), 525-546.
- Helling, A. L., Berthet, R. S., & Warren, D. (2005). Linking community empowerment, decentralized governance, and public service provision through a local development framework (Vol. 535). Washington, DC: World Bank.
- Hooghe, L., & Marks, G. (2010). Types of multi-level governance. In *Handbook on multi-level governance*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Ismagilova, G., Safiullin, L., & Gafurov, I. (2015). Using historical heritage as a factor in tourism development. *Procedia-social and Behavioral sciences*, 188, 157-162.
- Loulanski, T., & Loulanski, V. (2011). The sustainable integration of cultural heritage and tourism: A meta-study. *Journal of sustainable tourism*, 19(7), 837-862.
- MacKinnon, D., Kempton, L., O'Brien, P., Ormerod, E., Pike, A., & Tomaney, J. (2022). Reframing urban and regional development for 'left behind' places. *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, 15(1), 39-56.
- Martin, R., Gardiner, B., Pike, A., Sunley, P., & Tyler, P. (2021). Levelling up left behind places: The scale and nature of the economic and policy challenge. Routledge.
- Masuda, H., Kawakubo, S., Okitasari, M., & Morita, K. (2022). Exploring the role of local governments as intermediaries to facilitate partnerships for the Sustainable Development Goals. *Sustainable Cities and Society*, 82, 103883.
- Nhamo, A., & Katsamudanga, S. (2019). Linking heritage preservation and community development: An assessment of grassroots heritage based projects as vehicles for socio-economic development and sustainable heritage preservation in Zimbabwe. *Conservation and Management of Archaeological Sites*, 21(1), 25-44.
- Ott, H., & Rondé, P. (2019). Inside the regional innovation system black box: Evidence from French data. *Papers in Regional Science*, 98(5), 1993-2026.
- Sanetra-Szeliga, J. (2022). Culture and heritage as a means to foster quality of life? The case of Wrocław European Capital of Culture 2016. *European Planning Studies*, 30(3), 514-533.
- Sotarauta, M., & Grillitsch, M. (2023). Studying human agency in regional development. *Regional Studies*, 57(8), 1409-1414.
- Stratigea, A., & Katsoni, V. (2015). A strategic policy scenario analysis framework for the sustainable tourist development of peripheral small island areas—the case of Lefkada-Greece Island. *European Journal of Futures Research*, 3, 1-17.
- Swyngedouw, E., Moulaert, F., & Rodriguez, A. (2002). Neoliberal urbanization in Europe: large-scale urban development projects and the new urban policy. *Antipode*, 34(3), 542-577.
- Van Hoof, J., Kazak, J. K., Perek-Białas, J. M., & Peek, S. T. (2018). The challenges of urban ageing: Making cities age-friendly in Europe. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 15(11), 2473.
- Varış Husar, S. C., Mehan, A., Erkan, R., Gall, T., Ailkja, L., Husar, M., & Hendawy, M. (2023). What's next? Some priorities for young planning scholars to tackle tomorrow's complex challenges. *European Planning Studies*, 31(11), 2368-2384.
- Wieliczko, B., Kurdyś-Kujawska, A., & Floriańczyk, Z. (2021). EU rural policy's capacity to facilitate a just sustainability transition of the rural areas. *Energies*, 14(16), 5050.