

# BEYOND 'LEFT BEHIND PLACES'

## THE CHARACTERISTICS AND TRAJECTORIES OF 'LEFT BEHIND PLACES' IN THE EU15

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## Introduction

Over the past ten years or so, concern has mounted about places in the Global North that have been 'left behind' by the growth and prosperity experienced in superstar cities and other wealthy regions. This briefing paper summarises the findings from the first stage of the [\*\*'Beyond Left Behind Places' project\*\*](#), which involved quantitative analysis of changes experienced by regions across the EU15<sup>1</sup> over the past four decades<sup>2</sup>. We use multiple indicators of regional development, including the accessibility of services, demographic trends and overall living standards, in part because recent examples of social and political discontent have emphasised the importance of different aspects of territorial cohesion and prosperity. Our results reveal the different kinds of places that can be described as 'left behind', and helps to understand how these places have ended up in their current state. Our analysis focuses on NUTS3<sup>3</sup> regions and includes four parts. First, a cluster analysis of EU15 regions aimed at uncovering the variety of both 'left behind' and more prosperous regions. Second, a more detailed examination of the various trajectories of change seen across EU15 regions from 1982 to 2017. In addition, two smaller studies cover the following

aspects of 'left-behindness': structural economic change, and regional accessibility of key services. This briefing paper summarises the key findings from the four pieces of analysis and draws out policy implications. More detailed policy recommendations are being addressed in other phases of the project.

### What are 'left behind places'?

The term 'left behind places' has in recent years emerged as a way to describe places negatively affected by austerity, globalisation, and technological change<sup>4</sup>. We use it as a shorthand for places experiencing decline or stagnation on economic, demographic and social dimensions, relative to more dynamic and prosperous places. 'Left-behindness' can therefore be understood as a multidimensional condition that affects a wide variety of places, ranging from deindustrialised cities to more peripheral and rural regions.

<sup>1</sup> Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

<sup>2</sup> More information on the project at the end of this Policy Briefing

<sup>3</sup> Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics, level 3.

<sup>4</sup> Andy Pike, Vincent Béal, Nicolas Cauchi-Duval, Rachel Franklin, Nadir Kinossian, Thilo Lang, Tim Leibert, Danny MacKinnon, Max Rousseau, Jeroen Royer, Loris Servillo, John Tomaney & Sanne Velthuis (2023) 'Left behind places': a geographical etymology, *Regional Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/00343404.2023.2167972](https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2023.2167972)

# Executive Summary

## Key findings

- There are different kinds of ‘left behind places’. Almost all ‘left behind places’ are characterised by economic decline or persistently low levels of economic development since 1991. Yet some places have experienced more depopulation, outmigration of young adults, and ageing population structures than others.
- The contrasting trajectories of regions affected by deindustrialisation during the 1980s and 1990s show how some regions were able to build on pre-existing strengths to adapt to a more service-oriented economy whereas others fell increasingly behind.
- Over the period 1982-2017, some initially lagging regions were catching-up with national levels of development. But this seems to have halted in the decade since the 2008 financial crisis, demonstrating the fragile nature of regional recovery.
- Regions in the EU15 have seen varied forms of structural economic change over the past four decades, with large-scale deindustrialisation being an important, but not the only, challenge facing disadvantaged regions.
- The accessibility to key public and private services such as supermarkets, banks and schools varies substantially between regions, with particularly large differences in rural and sparsely populated areas.
- Most of the ‘left behind’ region-types and trajectories span across multiple countries and are not confined to one or a small number of countries, although specific expressions of ‘left-behindness’ do tend to vary between countries.

## Key policy implications

- As the multiple dimensions of ‘left-behindness’ manifest in places in different ways, ‘left behind places’ need place-sensitive policies that are tailored to engage with regional assets and challenges.
- Halted progress in some regions suggests that addressing spatial inequalities requires long-term vision, sustained policy attention, and large-scale investment.
- Sectors like retail, hospitality and public services tend to represent a large share of employment in ‘left behind places’. Policies should promote good working conditions and productivity improvements in these sectors, while considering sectoral diversification where appropriate.
- Policymakers should be aware of the adverse consequences of austerity on regions dependent on public sector employment.
- Encouraging out-migration from ‘left behind’ towards more economically prosperous regions are unlikely to be an adequate or even desirable solution to lasting geographical inequalities.
- Limited public and private services in some rural and remote ‘left behind places’ affects daily living conditions and the development potential of these places. The limited availability, or difficulty in accessing such services should therefore receive more attention.
- National-level policies for the provision of social safety nets and funding for essential public services and infrastructure are important for improving living standards in ‘left behind places’.

# The diverse characteristics of ‘left behind places’

*Read more about this research [here](#)*

## Background

Despite growing concern about places that have been marginalised, peripheralised or otherwise ‘left behind’, a precise understanding of which places are ‘left behind’, and in what ways, is lacking. We therefore conducted a multidimensional cluster analysis of NUTS3 regions in the EU15 to identify regions that fit the ‘left behind’ label and, importantly, show their different characteristics.

## The study

Our analysis takes all NUTS3 in the EU15 and groups together regions based on a number of input variables, reflecting the multi-dimensional nature of the ‘left behind’ condition that spans economic, social, environmental, and other aspects. Selected input variables were chosen to represent both economic factors such as the region’s level of economic development, per capita economic growth, and employment growth, as well as demographic and social factors such as population growth, the outmigration of young people, the level of household poverty, and the accessibility of key everyday services. The economic and demographic development of regions is measured relative to the national rate of economic, employment and population growth from 1991 to 2018.

We find that EU15 regions can be divided into six clusters, as mapped in Figure 1.

Of these six clusters, the last three could be described as ‘left behind’ based on both their economic development since 1991 and several of their other characteristics. But they also display some key differences. The clusters therefore demonstrate the

heterogenous nature of ‘left behind places’, which reinforces the **need for place sensitive policies that engage with the specific assets and challenges of different regions**. Beyond this fundamental point several other observations can be made:

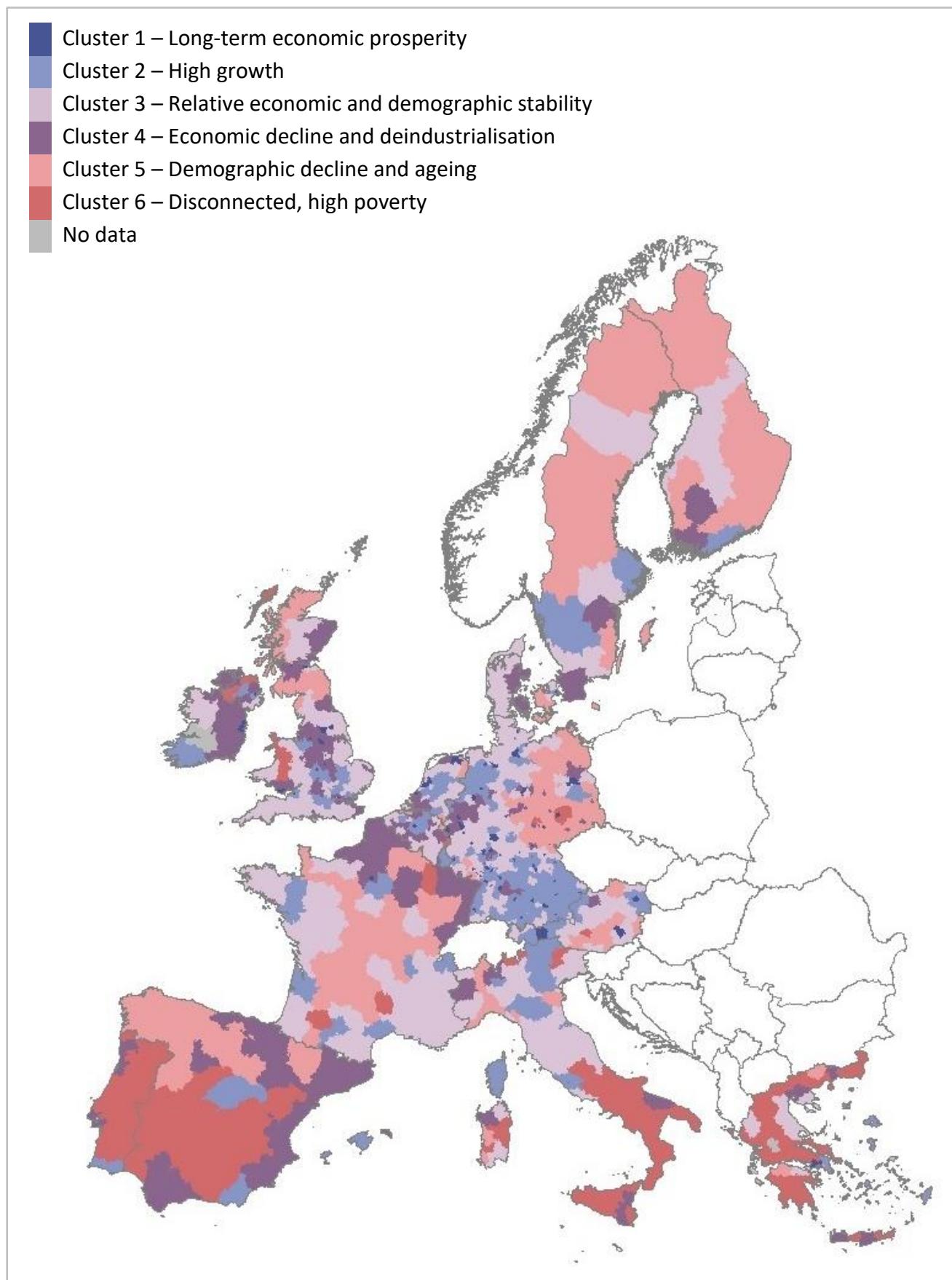
- National context matters. The most prevalent type of ‘left behind’ region in the UK is cluster 4, which is characterised by economic decline and deindustrialisation, whereas in France and Germany, the most prevalent type of ‘left behind’ region is cluster 5 (demographic decline and ageing). Yet at the same time, each cluster is represented across almost all EU15 countries, suggesting that the types of ‘left behind’ region found in one country often have similar counterparts in other member states.
- Although evidence of deindustrialisation can be found in all clusters, cluster 4 stands out for the particularly severe shrinkage of the industrial sector over the past few decades. This raises both people-based challenges such as the need to reorient workers to new occupations and a legacy of long-term health conditions, and place-based challenges such as repurposing former industrial sites and developing or attracting new sectors. Developing new sectorial specialisations may also help to restore a local sense of identity and purpose.
- Clusters 4, 5 and 6 are all characterised by a relatively low level of economic development and an inability to keep up with national rates of economic growth. But while cluster 4 has tended to see relatively stable population growth, many regions in cluster 5 and cluster 6 saw their resident populations shrink between 1991 and 2018. This depopulation

could be seen as an expected adjustment to their disadvantaged economic situation, and may even have played a role in maintaining fairly stable levels of per capita GDP<sup>5</sup>. Yet depopulation did not enable them to reduce the gap with national levels of output per capita, and the experience of population shrinkage is likely to have contributed to local populations feeling 'left behind'. **Policies encouraging out-migration from 'left behind' towards more economically prosperous regions is therefore unlikely to be a sufficient or even desirable solution.**

- Average rates of household poverty vary strongly between the three 'left behind' clusters, being generally much higher in clusters 4 and especially cluster 6 than in cluster 5, despite all three having lower-than-national levels of economic performance. This shows that very low living standards are not a necessary characteristic of economically-lagging regions. The extent of poverty in 'left behind places' appear to be in part a consequence of national welfare systems and structures, since high levels of poverty are much more prevalent in some countries (Greece, Portugal, to some extent Italy and Spain) than others. **This suggests that adequate national social safety nets and provision of public services can play a role in ameliorating living standards in 'left behind places'.**

<sup>5</sup> Barro, R. J., Sala-i-Martin, X., Blanchard, O. J., & Hall, R. E. (1991). Convergence Across States and Regions. Brookings Papers on Economic Activity, 1991(1), 107. Blanchard, O. J., & Katz, L. F. (1992). Regional evolutions. Brookings Papers on Economic Activity, 1992(1), 1–75.

Figure 1: The six clusters and their spatial distribution across the EU15



Source: Author's analysis based on ARDECO data and the European Observation Network for Territorial Development and Cohesion (ESPON). Boundaries are for NUTS3 regions from EuroGeographics.

# Trajectories of regional 'left-behindness'

*Read more about this research [here](#)*

## Background

Growing inequalities between 'left behind' and more successful places, combined with a sense of abandonment by political and economic elites, are often expressed by citizens through growing support for populist parties and movements. Beyond localised feelings of injustice and grievance, concerns voiced by inhabitants of 'left behind places' stem in part from a sense that their relative position in society has declined over time<sup>6</sup>. The rarity of such places experiencing a turnaround and escaping 'left-behindness' highlights the need to understand change over time. Yet development trajectories of such 'left behind places' have so far not been subject to much dedicated analysis.

## The study

In this research, we focus on the trajectories of NUTS3 regions in the EU15 from 1982 to 2017<sup>7</sup>. Combining demographic, economic, and sectoral indicators to reflect at least some of the multi-dimensional nature of 'left-behindness', we assess different possible short-term changes for these regions over 5-year intervals. We then analyse the sequences constituted by the successive 5-year dynamics and group together regions that experienced similar trajectories.

Seven groups of regions with similar trajectories were identified, revealing different pathways in and out of 'left-behindness'. This typology of trajectories demonstrates how some regions have increasingly or more recently 'fallen behind',

some have remained 'left behind', and others have experienced overall positive decades, at least temporarily catching-up with wealthier regions.

A mapping of each group of trajectories across the EU15 is presented in Figure 2.

Our results highlight that, among seemingly similar regions in 1982, some have rebounded and evolved differently, suggesting that particular combinations of characteristics and responses have led to forms of regional resilience or even resurgence in some cases. We therefore identify some key elements regarding trajectories of 'left-behindness' in the EU15 between 1982 and 2017:

- Urbanised and industrialised regions have rebounded differently from phases of sectoral restructuring. Regions in Group 2 are representative of forms of positive path-dependency as the result of both favourable pre-existing conditions and successful strategic adaptations. For other regions, Group 7 illustrates the process of 'falling behind' through deindustrialisation. Concepts of negative path-dependence and regional lock-in are consistent with regions in Group 7. This highlights the importance of regional particularities when considering sectoral restructuring.
- Regions in Group 3 experienced favourable growth phases during the 1980s mainly as a result of existing relative prosperity, before experiencing gradual economic decline and peripheralisation. These regions are therefore at least at risk of 'falling behind' if they have

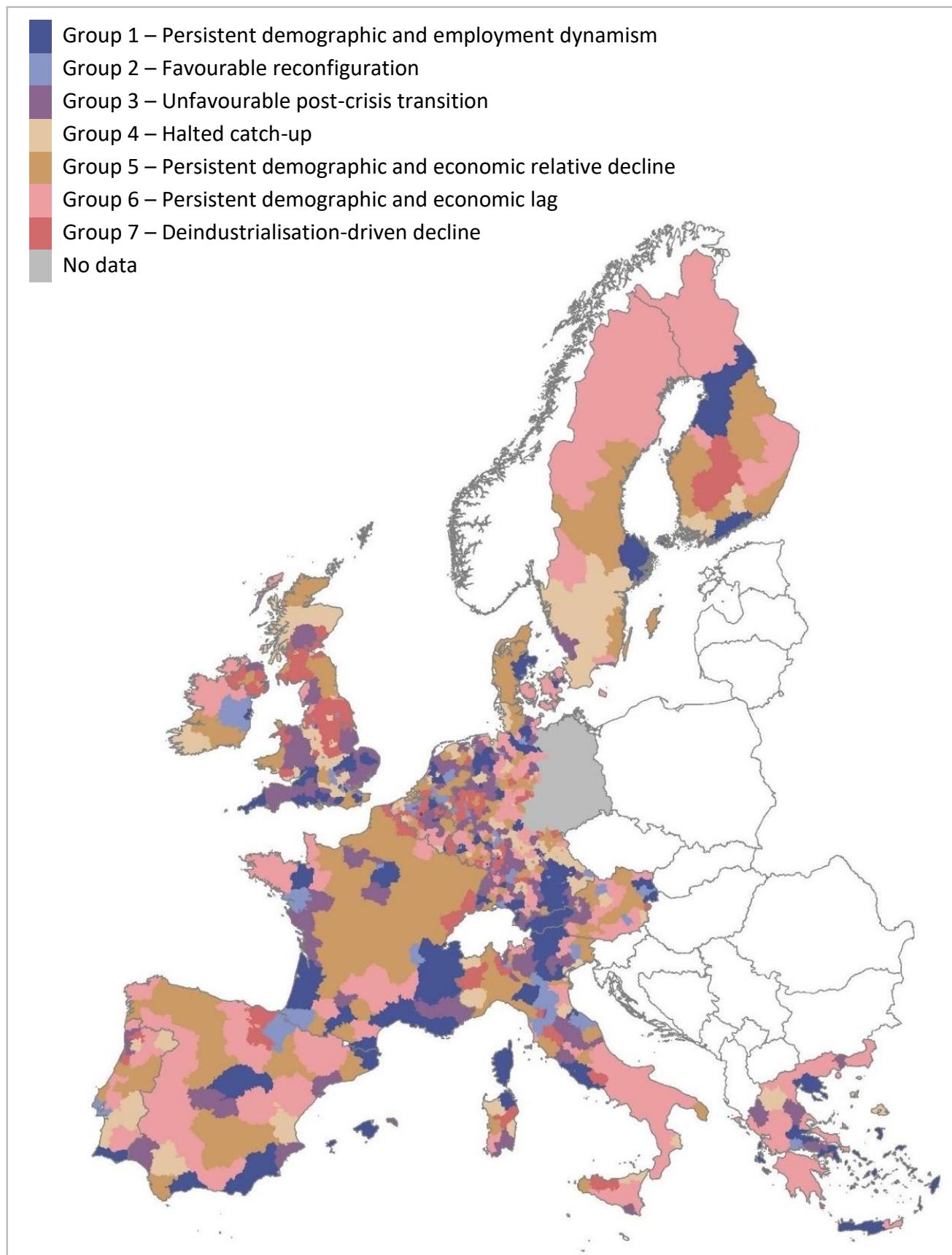
<sup>6</sup> Rodríguez-Pose, A., Lee, N., & Lipp, C. (2021). Golfing with Trump. Social capital, decline, inequality, and the rise of populism in the US. *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, 14(3), 457-481, DOI: [10.1093/cjres/rsab026](https://doi.org/10.1093/cjres/rsab026)

<sup>7</sup> Data availability led us to exclude some regions, notably the East German regions.

not already done so. **This suggests that favourable existing conditions do not remove the need for regional economic strategies aimed at sustaining prosperity across all places.**

- Group 4 refer to regions that were economically 'converging' and overcoming 'left-behindness' before being interrupted by the external shock of the 2008 financial crisis. **These halted catch-up trajectories reveal that ongoing attention and investment are required to escape 'left-behindness'.**
- A substantial number of the EU15 regions, those in groups 5 and 6, can be considered as continuously 'left behind'. This includes regions gradually suffering from a lack of attractiveness and growth or constantly lagging behind or even 'diverging'. **This confirms existing findings regarding the limited success of regional convergence policies in the EU over recent decades and the need for both long-term and place-sensitive policies to overcome the entrenched challenges of 'left-behindness' in some areas.**

Figure 2: Typology of trajectories of NUTS3 regions across the EU15



Source: Authors' analysis based on ARDECO data. Boundaries are for NUTS3 regions from EuroGeographics.

# Different forms of structural economic change

Read more about this research [here](#)

## Background

There have been fundamental changes in the economic structures of European regions over the last several decades. These shifts play an important role in debates about 'left behind' regions, with the decline of manufacturing industry and the inability of some regions to attract or generate higher value-added sectors cited as drivers of regional inequality. We therefore conducted a more detailed analysis of the different forms of structural economic change seen in EU15 regions.

## The study

We used regional data on employment by sector to measure the changing size of different sectors for NUTS3 regions in the EU15. We identified 6 groups of regions that have undergone similar processes of sectoral change over the period from 1980 to 2017, with each group characterised by a distinct pattern of structural economic change.

Of the territories exhibiting patterns of sectoral change that would be seen as unfavourable, a substantial proportion are characterised by marked deindustrialisation. This group includes many of the well-known post-industrial towns and cities often cited in discourses around 'left behind places'. But there are additional groups of regions that were not affected by large-scale industrial employment loss and nonetheless are characterised by a less advantageous sectoral composition and development. We identify two clusters that show either a high level and/or strong growth in the sector 'other

private services' which includes relatively low-wage and low-productivity sectors such as hospitality and retail. We also identify a group of regions with an overrepresentation of the public sector as a provider of employment, which is generally taken as a sign of a weaker, less competitive tradeable economy. As such, we can discern a variety of patterns of structural economic composition and change over recent decades, even among regions with a less favourable economic structure. These structural differences have important implications for the development potential of these different regions:

- The experience of recent industrial decline presents certain challenges for regions in terms of reorienting the skills structure of the local labour market as well as changing land use toward new economic activities.
- A high share of employment in low-wage sectors like retail and hospitality coupled with low growth in other, higher-wage sectors may imply lower incomes and potentially less job security for residents. **Development strategies for these regions should include efforts to improve productivity and working conditions in these sectors.**
- An over-reliance on public sector employment can mean vulnerability to reductions in national government expenditure. **Alongside maintaining the existing public sector, there is thus an argument for efforts to diversify the regional economy by developing and/or attracting new industries**, though this can be challenging in lagging regions<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> Barzotto, M., Corradini, C., Fai, F., Labory, S & Tomlinson, P. R. (2020). Smart specialisation, Industry 4.0 and lagging regions: some directions for policy. *Regional Studies, Regional Science, 7(1)*, DOI: [10.1080/21681376.2020.1803124](https://doi.org/10.1080/21681376.2020.1803124)

# Uneven access to services of general interest

*Read more about this research [here](#)*

## Background

Access to public and private services of general interest (SGI) is integral in the daily lives of the population of a region. Therefore, the provision of SGI plays an important role in the attractivity of a region. However, due to austerity measures and cuts in social services, public service provision has changed considerably resulting in geographical inequalities. In this context, understanding people's access to service infrastructure and provision is an important aspect for regional policy development to combat regions that are 'left behind'.

## The study

We construct a measure of regional service accessibility that takes into account local population distribution within the region, namely the population weighted median travel time by car to the nearest SGI. It is calculated for a number of services of general interest including supermarkets and convenience stores, hospitals, pharmacies, primary and secondary schools, based on data from the ESPON PROFECY project<sup>9</sup>.

The travel times between the different types of services varies greatly. Some services like hospitals serve in general larger areas,

therefore they have a more spread-out pattern, resulting in longer car travel times. However, there are correlations between the regional travel times to the different services, meaning that high regional travel times for one service often go together with higher regional travel times for another service.

Poor accessibility of everyday services is indicative of a more infrastructurally 'left behind' area. The regional car travel times for SGI within intermediate and predominantly rural regions<sup>10</sup> have large variations, showing a variability in service provision potentially related to peripheralisation processes<sup>11</sup>.

To conclude, the provision of different types of SGI is correlated with one another and to population density and there are clear differences between different types of regions. More rural and remote regions have in general longer car travel times than central and urban regions. However, there are large varieties in accessibility within intermediate and rural regions. This leads us to recommend that **accessibility of services should be placed higher on the policy agenda in rural and remote regions**. As part of this, policymakers should develop a better understanding of the differentiated capacity of individuals and groups to access services.

<sup>9</sup> Noguera, j et al., (2017) PROFECY – Processes, Features and Cycles of Inner Peripheries in Europe. Final Report. ESPON EGTC. <https://www.espon.eu/inner-peripheries>

<sup>10</sup> Intermediate regions and predominantly rural regions are part of Eurostat's urban-rural typology. They are NUTS level 3 regions where more than 50 % and up to 80 % of the population live in urban clusters and respectively have at least 50 % of the population living in rural grid cells. Eurostat. (2019). Methodological manual on territorial typologies 2018 edition. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

<sup>11</sup> Kühn, M. (2015) Peripheralization: Theoretical Concepts Explaining Socio-Spatial Inequalities, European Planning Studies, 23:2, 367-378, DOI: [10.1080/09654313.2013.862518](https://doi.org/10.1080/09654313.2013.862518)

## Conclusions

Our project emphasises the importance of a 'more than economic' understanding of 'left behind places', with our analysis combining multiple indicators and methods.

The different kinds of 'left behind places' and their trajectories of change over time illustrate that regions deal with different configurations of challenges and circumstances. **This means there is a need for policies that are tailored to the varying characteristics and needs of different places.** A substantial proportion of 'left behind' regions have in recent decades been affected by deindustrialisation and economic decline. **These are specific challenges that require dedicated policies, both to identify and develop new sectoral strengths, as well as to drive up productivity and working conditions in existing sectors (public and private).** Many of these regions have, however, had fairly stable or even growing populations. In other regions, demographic shrinkage is much more pressing, which poses a different set of policy questions. Should we try to reverse this shrinkage or adjust infrastructure and housing to smaller populations? What can be done to make these regions more attractive and sustainable places to live, both for the existing residents and potential in-migrants?

Taking advantage of our comparative approach, we can see examples of different kinds of 'left behind' regions across multiple countries. **This means that regional and national policymakers potentially have much to learn from looking across borders to regions in other countries that share similar characteristics to the 'left behind' regions at home.** By examining policy approaches in regions dealing with similar challenges and circumstances, whether these be at home or abroad, we may be able to develop better solutions to the problem of regional 'left-behindness'.

## About the project

The 'Beyond Left Behind Places' project aims to develop a new understanding of demographic and socio-economic change in peripheral regions, going beyond the label of 'left behind places' through in-depth investigation of their predicaments and prospects. Taking a cross-national comparative approach, it focuses on peripheral regions in France, Germany and the UK, moving beyond region and country-specific studies to uncover and theorise broader relations and processes. This deeper comparative understanding allows us to produce international evidence to support theory building and inform policy-making. As well as quantitative analysis of the characteristics and development trajectories of regions across Western Europe, the project will include more detailed exploration of the experiences and outcomes of movers and stayers in 'left behind' regions, qualitative case studies of six 'left behind' regions in France, Germany and the UK, and a review of past and current policy approaches towards regional development in peripheral and lagging regions.

For more information about the other parts of the project see:

<https://research.ncl.ac.uk/beyondleftbehindplaces/aboutourproject/workpackages/>