

RURAL EUROPE IN COMPARISON: A SWOT PERSPECTIVE ON QUALITY OF LIFE IN THE SELECTED REGIONS

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Rural areas are diverse and different across the world, and they face numerous challenges, such as depopulation or economic and agricultural decline. The various faces of rural development describe a colourful composition of rural areas all over Europe, but according to experiences from separate research, some challenges are based on the same processes. However, the question remains whether European spatial planning policy on rural development can adopt a comparative approach in rural development, targeting the proper goals. In this paper, our aim was to evaluate the main characteristics of rural settlements in Wallonia (Belgium), Jihovýchod (the Czech Republic), Vojvodina (Serbia) and Galicia (Spain). Our goal was to find common opportunities for development by applying an assertive qualitative method, which can be used to prepare development goals. After a qualitative SWOT analysis of the common characteristics, the paper emphasises the importance of strengths and opportunities for rural development. The threats, such as climate change, increased demographic and economic decline and urban-rural polarisation, may be managed through adequate regional and rural planning.

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PRIMERJAVA PODEŽELIJ V EVROPI: SWOT-POGLED NA KAKOVOST ŽIVLJENJA V IZBRANIH REGIJAH

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Ključne besede:
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Podeželska območja so po svetu zelo raznolika in se soočajo s številnimi izzivi, kot so depopulacija ter padec gospodarskih in kmetijskih aktivnosti. Različni obrazi razvoja podeželja prikazujejo pestro podobo podeželskih območij po vsej Evropi, vendar iz izkušenj posameznih raziskav izhaja, da nekateri izzivi temeljijo na istih procesih. Kljub temu ostaja vprašanje, ali lahko evropska prostorska politika razvoja podeželja sprejme primerjalni pristop. Namen prispevka je bil ovrednotiti glavne značilnosti podeželskih naselij v Valoniji (Belgija), Jihovýchodu (Češka), Vojvodini (Srbija) in Galiciji (Španija). Cilj je bil s kvalitativnim pristopom prepoznati skupne razvojne priložnosti, ki jih je mogoče uporabiti pri oblikovanju razvojnih ciljev. Na podlagi kvalitativne SWOT analize skupnih značilnosti prispevek poudarja pomen prednosti in priložnosti za razvoj podeželja. Grožnje, kot so podnebne spremembe, demografski in gospodarski upad ter polarizacija med mestom in podeželjem, je mogoče obvladovati z ustreznim regionalnim in ruralnim načrtovanjem.

1 Introduction

There is no universally accepted definition distinguishing the term “rural” from the term “urban” (Li, Westlund & Liu, 2019). Regardless of the definition, rural decline is observable worldwide (Bubalo-Živković et al., 2024; Li, Westlund, & Liu, 2019). Rural areas have traditionally been the centres of agricultural production, where most of the population was employed in this activity. With the industrial revolution, urbanisation and technological development, rural areas no longer depended on agriculture (Kusio et al., 2022). In a society that constantly requires economic growth and progress, higher education, as well as social and spatial mobility, have become imperative. Since urban areas offer more in these terms, rural areas must adapt to the challenges of the modern world (Kusio et al., 2022; Máté, Pirisi & Trócsányi, 2024).

According to the World Bank data (World Bank, n.d.), which gathers information on rural settlements based on each country’s administrative classification, the share of the worldwide rural population has been in decline since the middle of the last century, and in the year 2024, it reached 42%. In the European Union, around 80% of the territory is comprised of rural areas, while only around 30% of the population lives in those areas (European Commission: Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development, 2023). The share of the rural population in Eastern Europe and post-socialist countries is generally higher than in Western Europe (Perpiña Castillo et al., 2018).

In this research, the authors will focus on the countries of Belgium, the Czech Republic, Serbia, and Spain, as well as their specific rural areas. The regions that were selected as rural areas at the national level exhibit significant diversity, highlighting the need for the identification of a single region based on the similarity of settlement characteristics. In Table 1, the main demographic features of the rural population are given for each country and the chosen region. The aim of this study is to compare the regions, provide a combined SWOT analysis of the main characteristics of rural settlements, and offer possible solutions to the challenges, based on successful practices in other countries. This cross-regional analysis can provide useful data for future regional rural development.

Table 1: Main characteristics of rural settlements in the selected countries and regions

	Area (km ²)	Population	Rural pop. (%)	Data year	Source
Belgium	30,688	11,584,008	1.86	2022	World Bank
Wallonia, Belgium	16,901	3,662,495	No data	2022	STATBEL
The Czech Republic	78,871	10,827,529	25	2022	World Bank
Jihovýchod, The Czech Republic	13,983	1,731,977	No data	2025	Czech Statistical Office
Serbia	88,499* 77,589**	6,647,003**	38**	2022	Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (SORS)
Vojvodina, Serbia	21,507	1,740,230	38	2022	SORS
Spain	505,978	47,786,102	18	2022	World Bank
Galicia, Spain	29,574	2,701,819	38	2020	Xunta de Galicia (2020)

Note: * - Serbia with AP Kosovo and Metohija; ** - Serbia without AP Kosovo and Metohija

There are noticeable differences between these areas, particularly in their rural settlement structures. While in Vojvodina and in Wallonia the typical village sizes are relatively big, in Jihovýchod and in Galicia settlements are small, sometimes even tiny in population (SORS, 2023; Van Hecke et al., 2000). Their economic profile differs too; the Western-European examples rather have a relatively high importance of agriculture with traditional yet efficient farming, while in Middle and Eastern Europe, the economy struggles more and loses its traditional agricultural profile (Perlín et al., 2010; Paül i Carril, V., 2018). Besides this, slight differences exist, such as the economic capital of residents, their level of mobility and other features that have an impact on their quality of life (Woods, 2010).

Despite all differences, the general characteristics of rural settlements among the countries and regions are quite similar. The main problems of the rural settlements in the Czech Republic, Serbia and Spain are demographic decline, brain drain, emigration of young and educated population, ageing population, agricultural abandonment and economic decline (Bubalo-Živković et al., 2024; Vaishar et al., 2021; Xunta de Galicia, 2020). In contrast, Belgium has less than 2% of the rural population that is densely populated and well-connected to the urban centres (Statbel, 2025). Although the countryside does not suffer from decreasing

population, the ageing of local communities creates a specific spatial type with rural features, especially in Flanders (Gruijthuijsen & Vanneste, 2020).

2 Methodology

The SWOT analysis was conducted based on the literature review of the rural settlements conducted in the aforementioned regions of Belgium (Giulia, Dupeux, 2023; Van Hecke, Meert & Christians, 2000), the Czech Republic (Pělucha, 2019; Petrović & Maturkanić, 2022), Serbia (Bubalo-Živković et al., 2024; Đerčan et al., 2017), and Spain (González-Leonardo, López-Gay & Recaño, 2019; Paül I Carril, 2018). Although these regions may have cardinal differences, we decided to conduct our research in these rural areas, as they are typical in their country. With this selection, we could ensure to find examples and practices in different types of European rural settlements that share similar trends and problems.

Another common feature is that all countries use population density to distinguish rural areas from urban landscapes, although the thresholds vary according to national characteristics. In Belgium, a municipality is considered rural if the population density is strictly less than 150 people per km² or if the population density is greater than 150 people per km² but its rural areas cover more than 80% of the total area of the statistical sector (Service public de Wallonie (SPW) - DGO3., 2013). The criterion is similar in Spain; rural municipalities are defined by a population density of less than 100 people per km² (Spain, 2007). In the Czech Republic, the municipalities with more than 3000 inhabitants may obtain the status of a town (The Czech Republic, 2000). On the other hand, the criterion in Serbia is of an administrative-legal background, with all settlements being divided into urban and other settlements (Bubalo-Živković et al., 2024). Since 1981, censuses have simply used these two categories without any statistical basis, but certain researchers have tried to establish a methodology to create complex statistical evaluation methods to define rural dimensions in Serbia (Bogdanov et al., 2008).

In our research, we chose SWOT analysis as our primary method (Knierim & Nowicki, 2010). As we highlighted earlier, the research field includes rural areas with various features. A SWOT analysis can effectively address these differences by also focusing on similar problems. During our research phase, we conducted a literature review to identify all strengths and weaknesses, as well as opportunities and threats.

In the evaluation and selection of secondary data, we set a list of aspects to fulfil a comparative study: population dynamics; infrastructure with a special focus on institutional coverage; economic potential, especially agricultural features; marginalisation processes and their specific effects on rural societies. The qualitative evaluation of the literature based on the selected rural landscapes enabled a comparative approach to our research.

3 Results and conclusions

Based on Table 1, the compared regions consisted of relatively large areas; the smallest one evaluated was Jihovýchod in the Czech Republic, with an area of almost 14,000 km², while the largest was Galicia in Spain, with an area of almost 30,000 km². Essentially, these areas encompass cities, towns, larger and smaller villages, as well as agricultural disperses and farms. On the other hand, the population ratios of these regions compared to the country's total are usually lower than the proportions of the areas in their respective countries. This reinforces their rural value, as the average population density is below 150 people per km², except for Wallonia, where this value is around 200 people per km². In the case of Vojvodina in Serbia and Galicia in Spain, the population density is below 100, while in the Jihovýchod region it is around 120 residents per unit. In the case of Wallonia, the generally densely populated countries of BeNeLux have a higher average density than the European average –for the three states, the average value is 385 people per km² (World Population Review, n.d.). In such an urban environment, 200 people per km² is considered rather rural.

The main findings of the analysis are summarised through a SWOT framework. The results are presented in Table 2, which outlines the key strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats identified in rural areas across all studied regions.

Although rural areas and settlements offer numerous characteristics that improve the quality of life, such as a healthy environment, safety and lower costs of living, their demographic and economic parameters are consistently in decline. Unemployment and inequalities related to accessible transportation, education, the internet, and, mainly, almost every basic urban function are more prominent in rural areas. The threats regarding rural settlements are mostly related to the increasing

rates of demographic decline, polarisation, urbanisation, environmental problems and climate change, which all influence the quality of life.

Table 2: Summarising SWOT analysis of the four research areas.

STRENGHTS	WEAKNESSES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Sense of community and strong local society; – Pristine nature, no pollution and original natural environments; – Availability of agricultural land; – Lower cost of living; – Inclusive and safe social environment with high levels of trust and social capital. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Demographical decline; – Insufficient public services, lack of access to basic services. – Remoteness and reduced access to public infrastructure, including telecommunication services; – Gender inequality in access to education, employment, and healthcare; – Higher unemployment rates, often due to the decreasing opportunities for education and the closure of rural schools; – Persistent poverty and a deprived population living in marginalised social and physical spaces.
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Sustainable development of agriculture, biotechnologies, organic production; – Development of rural tourism, including attractions based on rural cultural heritage sights; – Keeping local traditional crafts and heritage by empowering workshops; – Enhancing the infrastructure and attracting digital nomads; – Enhancing immigration by offering houses and plots to educated young couples, also providing them with local jobs; – Renewable energy development; – Mobility such as 'MaaS (Mobility as a Service)' in Belgium. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Increasing demographic shrinking processes jeopardise local communities by ageing and selective demographic erosion. – Expanding rural tourism can threaten the rural features and traditional heritage of local communities. – Uneven regional development and overwhelming promotion of urban areas. – Urbanisation, urban sprawl and industrialisation. – Climate change poses risks for rural environments, wildfires, heatwaves, floods and other escalating climate events, which decrease the recreational values of rural areas. – Environmental issues, such as soil erosion, water pollution, and deforestation. – Political marginalisation and weak rural voice in policy making.

Regarding population and society, according to our findings, there is a general perspective that strong local communities have great potential and strength in all rural areas, especially when focusing on the weaknesses and also the threats like depopulation and the consequences of demographic decline. Thus, we can conclude that the major strength of rural areas in Europe is the local society and its integrity;

however, as a result, the biggest threat is the loss of people. Three regions out of four have already been suffering from the effects of shrinking; the exception is Wallonia, where the only demographic challenge seems to be ageing.

As people are the most important resource for future development in rural Europe, one of the main tasks is to reduce rural poverty and decrease marginalisation processes with regional development. Marginalised communities have no access to jobs, they lack good income opportunities, and they struggle to reach amenities and services. These circumstances not only decrease the quality of life of rural residents, but also make rural settlement unattractive to potential new residents, like young educated people. Marginalisation became a common threat across the European countryside, which demands a more sensitive policy and best practices to reduce the negative effects of this social and spatial inequality.

In the case of the local economy, the literature clearly emphasises two main resources: agriculture, representing the traditional means of production, and tourism, especially based on rural heritage. Although the conditions for agroeconomic expansion are not present in many cases (see, for instance, selective demographic erosion and the loss of human resources), traditional agriculture, ecological production, and bio-food are creating opportunities for these rural communities. In terms of tourism, there is a high potential for increasing the number of visitors and offering sights and attractions based on local resources. According to our perspective, tourism can usually reach a successful economic output only at higher scales. If the aim is to protect traditional local heritage, rural tourism should be kept on a small-scale basis, as mass tourism expands the number of guests, services, infrastructure, and other elements, which can simply transform rural areas into merchandised global places or products. Thus, tourism in rural areas is considered to be either an opportunity or a threat.

The natural environment of rural areas in Europe is considered one of the most important terroirs for recreation, green and sustainable lifestyles and environmentally friendly futures. The challenges of climate change are also affecting rural environments, creating a considerable threat to these areas. Protecting the rural environment, on the one hand, is a common task for all European rural regions. As such, it has become essential to establish and develop circumstances that can

mitigate the negative effects of climate events, creating a significant demand for effective regional development policies, including resources.

Despite numerous negative factors, there are many opportunities for the development of rural settlements. By applying positive principles from different countries, such as good public transportation systems in Belgium and the Czech Republic, or the modernisation of agricultural production, rural settlements may become a new ideal living environment. Furthermore, urban pressure and urban sprawl are significant issues in countries like Belgium, where the majority of the population resides in rural areas. Promoting the strengths and opportunities of rural areas, as well as implementing the right measures, is crucial for achieving even regional development.

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