

POLICY BRIEF 2 · INTEGRATION & GOVERNANCE

From Attraction to Integration: Designing Sustainable Digital-Nomad Policies for Low-Density Regions

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KEY MESSAGE

The challenge for low-density regions is not attracting remote workers. It is integrating them without producing housing pressure, social fragmentation or short-term extractive mobility. Visas and marketing can bring people in; only governance, housing strategy and community mediation turn arrivals into lasting local benefit.

Why visas and marketing are not enough

The policy environment now actively encourages remote-worker mobility. Spain's 2022 Startups Law created an international-teleworker authorisation, Portugal operates a digital-nomad (D8) visa, and the European Commission's long-term vision for rural areas treats the revitalisation of low-density territories as a strategic priority (European Commission, 2021). The demographic case is strong: Joint Research Centre and Eurostat projections indicate that remote rural regions are set to lose population fastest of all territory types to 2040, while cities continue to grow (European Commission, Joint Research Centre, 2025), and the OECD has argued that remote work gives these regions a real opportunity to slow that decline (OECD, 2021).

But a visa is a permission to enter, and a campaign is an invitation. Neither determines what happens after arrival: whether a remote worker contributes to local life or simply consumes a cheaper backdrop for a few weeks, whether housing absorbs new demand or tightens around residents, whether the community feels enriched or displaced. These outcomes are decided by local governance, not by national instruments. Treating attraction as the finish line is the most common and most costly mistake in this field.

What can go wrong

The urban experience offers a clear warning. Cocola-Gant and López-Gay (2020) documented how the arrival of mobile, higher-earning newcomers can drive transnational gentrification and the formation of 'foreign-only' enclaves in which new residents live largely apart from the local population. Low-density territories are not immune; their thin housing markets can in some ways make them more sensitive, since a small number of arrivals can move prices and absorb the limited stock of habitable homes. Building on the applicant's doctoral work on socio-cultural cartography and border territorialities (Marcelino, in preparation), this brief treats digital spaces and platforms not merely as booking channels but as layers of visibility and belonging that can either connect newcomers to a place or wall them off from it.

Housing pressure. In small markets, a handful of higher-paying medium-stay tenants can raise rents and reduce the homes available to residents and local workers, the opposite of revitalisation.

Enclaves and weak integration. Without deliberate mediation, arrivals cluster socially and economically among themselves, spending within a parallel circuit and leaving little durable local value.

Extractive, short-term mobility. Very short stays extract amenity and price advantage while contributing little to community life, services or local enterprise.

Low retention and reputational cost. When the lived experience falls short of the marketed promise, stays are brief and word spreads quickly through tightly networked communities, undermining future attraction.

What the survey suggests about integration needs

Exploratory pre-registration evidence from 92 prospective remote workers (see Policy Brief 1) is encouraging on integration, with appropriate caution. Around half would stay four months or more, and a third contemplate more than six, which is long enough for integration to be both possible and worthwhile, unlike weekend tourism. A large majority are interested in a shared place to work, which can double as a point of contact with residents. And, notably, a minority raised affordability and displacement concerns without being prompted, suggesting that part of the demand actively prefers destinations that manage their impact responsibly. The orientation toward medium and long stays is precisely what makes an integration strategy feasible; it is also what makes one necessary, because medium-stay residents interact with housing markets and services in ways that short-stay tourists do not.

Five principles for sustainable attraction

- 1. Attract only after assessing local readiness.** Confirm that connectivity, housing, services and community capacity genuinely exist before promoting a destination. Readiness precedes attraction; this is developed in Policy Brief 3.
- 2. Link attraction to housing governance.** Tie any attraction effort to a deliberate housing approach (using vacant and underused stock first, monitoring local rents, and protecting residents' access) so that new demand does not crowd out the existing community.
- 3. Move from visitors to contributors.** Favour medium and long stays and design entry points (local work, volunteering, collaboration with local enterprise and culture) that let arrivals add value rather than merely consume amenity.
- 4. Use local intermediaries and community mediation.** Work through trusted local actors (municipalities, associations, cultural organisations, local action groups) to broker relationships, set expectations on both sides and prevent enclave formation.
- 5. Monitor impacts continuously.** Track effects on housing, local spending, services and community sentiment over time, and be willing to adjust or pause attraction if the evidence points to harm.

What local governments can do now

- ✓ Take stock of vacant and underused housing before promoting the destination, and prioritise bringing it into use over adding pressure to occupied stock.
- ✓ Establish a simple way to watch local rents and affordability, with a threshold that triggers review.
- ✓ Name a local point of contact or intermediary responsible for welcoming arrivals and connecting them to residents and local enterprise.
- ✓ Offer at least one structured channel for contribution, such as local collaboration, volunteering or cultural participation, rather than relying on spontaneous integration.
- ✓ Set, in advance, the indicators you will watch (housing, spending, services, sentiment) and who reviews them.
- ✓ Coordinate with regional agencies and EU rural-development frameworks so attraction is embedded in cohesion and housing policy, not run as a stand-alone campaign.
- ✓ Engage residents early and transparently, so the arrival of newcomers is understood and shaped locally rather than imposed.

Conclusion

Attraction is the easy half of the problem, and the half that national policy has already solved. The hard and decisive half is integration: ensuring that remote workers strengthen rather than strain the places that host them. That requires readiness assessed in advance, housing treated as a governance question, contribution designed into the offer, mediation by trusted local actors, and continuous monitoring. Regions that adopt this sequence can turn a mobility trend into durable local benefit; those that stop at the visa and the campaign risk importing, in miniature, the very pressures that have made larger destinations wary.

Methodological note

The dataset is exploratory by design. It does not represent the entire population of digital nomads or low-density territories. Its value lies in documenting early demand, testing conceptual assumptions, identifying preference patterns and informing the development of a territorial-readiness approach. Survey figures derive from a voluntary, self-selected pre-registration of 92 prospective remote workers and are descriptive shares; open responses are reported only in aggregate and paraphrase, never quoted, and contain no identifying information. The risks discussed draw on the published literature and are presented as cautions to anticipate, not as predictions for any specific territory. No causal claims are made.

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