

Digital Nomads and Low-Density Destinations: Exploratory Evidence from the NomadVillage Pre-Registration Survey

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Abstract

Low-density regions across Europe increasingly seek to attract remote workers as a response to depopulation, yet relatively little is known about what these prospective residents actually want or whether host territories are prepared to receive them. This article presents exploratory evidence from a voluntary pre-registration survey conducted by the NomadVillage platform, comprising 104 valid responses across three actor groups: 92 prospective remote workers, 9 housing providers and 3 municipalities. Treating the dataset as exploratory and self-selected rather than representative, the analysis uses simple descriptive statistics and thematic aggregation. Preliminary findings indicate a mid-career, remote-ready and near-term audience whose destination choices rest not on connectivity alone but on a bundle of housing, services, community, work infrastructure and quality-of-life factors. Interest in shared workspaces is broad, while housing-format preferences are heterogeneous. A minority of respondents spontaneously raised affordability and displacement concerns. Supply-side responses, though too few for inference, suggest early willingness oriented toward medium-length stays. Read against the literature on the spatial polarisation of remote work and on transnational gentrification, the article argues that these patterns point to territorial readiness, the compatibility between demand and local capacity, as a necessary intermediate step between attraction and sustainable local impact, and discusses implications for place-based policy.

Keywords: digital nomadism; remote work; low-density regions; territorial cohesion; rural development

1. Introduction

Across the European Union, remote work has shifted from an emergency arrangement to a durable feature of the labour market, and with it the figure of the digital nomad has moved from a cultural curiosity to a policy category. National governments have created dedicated legal pathways: Spain established an international-teleworker authorisation under its 2022 Startups Law, and Portugal introduced a remote-work (D8) residence visa in force since October 2022, both enabling the kind of medium and long stays that distinguish nomadic mobility from tourism (Assembleia da República, 2022; Jefatura del Estado, 2022). At the same time, demographic pressure on rural and peripheral regions has intensified. Projections produced by the Joint Research Centre and Eurostat indicate that remote rural regions are set to lose population faster than any other territory type to 2040, even as cities continue to grow (European Commission, Joint Research Centre, 2025).

These two trends have converged into a hopeful policy narrative: if remote workers can live anywhere, perhaps they can be persuaded to live in the places that are emptying out. The OECD has argued that remote work offers rural regions a genuine opportunity to slow or reverse decline (OECD, 2021), and the European Commission's long-term vision for rural areas places connectivity, services and economic diversification at the centre of territorial revitalisation (European Commission, 2021). Yet the narrative tends to skip two questions that determine whether attraction succeeds. First, what do prospective remote workers actually look for in a low-density destination? Second, are host territories ready to receive them in a way that benefits the existing community?

This article addresses the first question empirically and uses its findings to motivate the second. It draws on a multi-actor pre-registration survey conducted by the NomadVillage platform, a digital initiative focused on connecting remote workers with rural Iberian destinations. The dataset is exploratory and self-selected, and is treated as such throughout. Its contribution is not statistical generalisation but the documentation of early demand, the testing of conceptual assumptions, and the identification of preference patterns that can inform a territorial-readiness approach to place-based policy. The remainder of the article reviews the relevant literature and policy background, sets out a conceptual note on readiness, describes the data and method, presents the descriptive results, and discusses their implications for municipalities and regional agencies.

2. Literature and policy background

2.1 Digital nomadism and remote work

Digital nomadism resists a single definition, sitting at the intersection of mobility, lifestyle and employment (Hannonen, 2020). Early scholarship emphasised the demand side (who digital nomads are, what motivates them, and how they combine work and travel) and traced a profile of relatively educated, location-independent professionals. As the phenomenon matured, attention shifted toward its territorial effects. Hannonen, Aguiar-Quintana, and Lehto (2023) advanced a supplier-side perspective, examining how destination stakeholders perceive and accommodate

digital nomads, and proposed that, over time, communities come to read longer-staying nomads as “new locals” rather than as tourists. This reframing matters for low-density regions, because the value of a remote worker to a small community depends less on their arrival than on their gradual incorporation into local economic and social life. More recent work situates the phenomenon within wider geographies of mobility and urban change: Sciuva (2025) maps an emerging research agenda on the geographies of digital nomadism, while Sequera (2025) examines transnational teleworkers as a contemporary “creative class” operating within urban marketplaces. Most of this literature remains urban-focused; the rural and low-density variant, which is the concern of the present article, is comparatively understudied.

2.2 Remote work and territorial inequality

Whether remote work narrows or widens spatial inequality is contested. Optimistic accounts hold that location-independent work can disperse economic activity away from congested cores. The empirical record, however, is more cautious. Analysing 1.8 million remote jobs mediated by an online labour platform, Braesemann et al. (2022) found that remote work is polarised along three axes (between countries, between urban and rural areas within countries, and between skill levels), and that remote jobs are in fact pulled toward urban regions while rural areas fall behind. Their central conclusion is consequential for the present study: agglomerative forces mean that, left to the market, remote work tends to reinforce rather than dissolve the urban–rural divide, and it becomes an effective tool for rural development only when embedded in local skill-building, infrastructure and labour-market programmes. The OECD reaches a compatible view from the policy side, observing that cities hold a substantially higher share of teleworkable jobs than rural areas and that the opportunity for peripheral regions is real but conditional on local capacity (OECD, 2021, 2023). The implication is that attraction without local readiness may simply route mobile workers back toward places that already concentrate advantage.

2.3 Low-density regions, territorial cohesion and rural innovation

The European policy vocabulary frames the fate of peripheral regions through the concept of territorial cohesion, which seeks balanced development across the Union's diverse territories (Faludi, 2006; Medeiros, 2016). Allied to this is the notion of territorial capital, the stock of assets, both tangible and relational, that a place can mobilise for development (Camagni, 2009). Read together, these concepts suggest that a region's prospects depend not only on attracting external resources but on the latent capacity it can activate. Eurostat's regional analyses document the demographic stakes, with many predominantly rural regions facing ageing, a shrinking working-age population and sustained out-migration (Eurostat, 2024). The European Commission's long-term vision responds with a Rural Pact and Rural Action Plan intended to make rural areas “stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous” by 2040 (European Commission, 2021).

Within this frame, remote work appears as a potential instrument of rural innovation rather than a guaranteed outcome. Preliminary modelling suggests it could help redistribute economic activity from core to periphery, although the evidence remains early and contingent on local conditions (Kužmar, 2026). This conditional optimism aligns the territorial-cohesion literature with the polarisation findings above: the question is less whether remote work can benefit low-

density regions than under what local conditions it does so. Rural innovation, on this reading, is not the simple importation of urban workers but the activation of territorial capital (connectivity, services, housing and community) in ways that allow newcomers to contribute.

2.4 Digital platforms and territorial reputation

A growing literature treats digital platforms not as neutral intermediaries but as actors that reshape the markets and places they mediate. In the housing field, platform-based intermediation has been shown to restructure the supply of accommodation for mobile populations and to extend the reach of short- and mid-term rental markets into new areas (Cocola-Gant et al., 2021). Beyond transactions, platforms also govern visibility: rankings, reviews and listings constitute a layer of territorial reputation that influences where mobile workers go and how places are perceived. Building on the applicant's doctoral work on socio-cultural cartography and border territorialities (Marcelino, in preparation), this article treats digital space as a layer of territory itself, shaping belonging, reputation and presence as much as logistics. The practical corollary is that a place can be highly visible to mobile workers online and still be unprepared, on the ground, to host them well; reputation and readiness are not the same thing.

2.5 Housing, integration and the risks of uncoordinated attraction

A substantial body of urban research warns that mobile, higher-earning newcomers can reshape host housing markets. Cocola-Gant and López-Gay (2020) documented how the arrival of such residents in Barcelona contributed to transnational gentrification and to the formation of “foreign-only” enclaves in which newcomers live largely apart from the local population. The mechanism is not confined to large cities. In thin rural housing markets, where the stock of habitable, work-suitable homes is limited, even a small number of higher-paying medium-stay tenants can move prices and crowd out residents and local workers, so that uncoordinated attraction risks reproducing, in miniature, the pressures observed in major destinations. Platform-mediated mid-term rental markets can intensify these dynamics by channelling external demand efficiently into precisely the housing that local residents also need (Cocola-Gant et al., 2021).

Taken together, the literature implies a tension that frames this study. Remote-worker mobility may help peripheral regions, but the same flow that brings income can also generate housing pressure, social fragmentation and short-term extractive mobility if it is not governed. The polarisation findings suggest the benefit is conditional; the gentrification findings suggest the harm is real; and the cohesion literature supplies the policy language for managing both. The open question is operational: how can a low-density territory tell, in advance, whether it is positioned to capture the benefit while containing the harm?

3. Conceptual note: from attraction to territorial readiness

The literature reviewed above converges on a single gap. Attraction policy assumes that bringing remote workers in is the hard part, yet the evidence suggests that the decisive variable is what happens after arrival: whether mobile workers are absorbed into local economic and social life,

and whether host housing markets and services can accommodate them without displacing residents. This is a question of fit between external demand and local capacity, and it is not answered by visas, marketing or online visibility.

To name that fit, this article uses the concept of territorial readiness, understood as the degree to which a place can host remote workers in a way that is technically viable, locally compatible, socially integrative and protected against foreseeable harm. Readiness reverses the dominant logic of the digital-nomad market, which ranks destinations for the convenience of mobile workers; instead, it asks whether a territory is prepared, on its own terms, to convert arrivals into durable local value. Conceptually, readiness draws together the territorial-capital tradition (Camagni, 2009), the territorial-cohesion agenda (Faludi, 2006; Medeiros, 2016) and the relational view of territory as lived and symbolic space (Marcelino, in preparation). It sits as an intermediate step between attraction and sustainable impact, and the empirical findings below are read through this lens. The operational instruments through which readiness might be assessed are beyond the scope of this article and are reserved for future technical work.

4. Methodology

The data derive from a voluntary pre-registration survey administered online by the NomadVillage platform to three actor groups associated with rural Iberian destinations: prospective remote workers, housing providers and municipalities. Respondents self-selected by registering interest, and the instruments were offered in more than one language. The two demand-side forms (an English-language form and a Spanish/Portuguese-language form) were combined for analysis into a single dataset of prospective remote workers, while the two supply-side forms were analysed separately and qualitatively given their small size. Table 1 summarises the composition.

Actor group	Valid n	Analytical treatment
Prospective remote workers	92	Combined demand sample; descriptive frequencies and shares
Housing providers	9	Qualitative, illustrative only; no inferential statistics
Municipalities / villages	3	Qualitative, illustrative only; no inferential statistics
Total	104	—

Table 1. Composition of the exploratory pre-registration dataset.

Analysis was deliberately simple. For the demand sample, the study computed frequencies and shares for closed questions and grouped open responses thematically; several questions permitted multiple selections, and one factor question differed slightly in format between the two forms, so factor results are reported as the share of respondents naming each item rather than as mutually exclusive categories. No inferential or multivariate techniques were applied, and no causal claims are made. All figures are descriptive. The dataset is exploratory by design: it does not represent the entire population of digital nomads or low-density territories, and its value lies in documenting early demand, testing conceptual assumptions, identifying preference patterns and informing the development of a territorial-readiness approach.

Ethical handling followed the principle of aggregation. All responses were anonymised; no names, contact details, addresses or other identifiers are reported; and open responses are paraphrased in aggregate rather than quoted. Reporting is confined to aggregate patterns and public-policy implications. Any internal classification or decision-support instruments associated with the platform are outside the scope of this article and are not described.

5. Results

5.1 Profile of prospective remote workers

The demand sample is overwhelmingly oriented toward remote work: approximately 98% already work remotely or plan to begin soon, with only two respondents reporting no such intention. The age distribution is concentrated in mid-career bands rather than in the youngest cohort: about three quarters of respondents are aged 25–44, and respondents aged 45 and over outnumber those aged 18–24. Just over half report prior experience as a digital nomad, while most of the remainder describe themselves as interested newcomers. The profile that emerges is therefore a mixed, mid-career and remote-ready audience rather than the young, short-stay traveller of popular imagination. Table 2 summarises these characteristics.

Characteristic	Share	Note
Work remotely now or plan to soon	~98%	Currently remote ~74%
Aged 25–44	~75%	More 45+ than 18–24
Prior digital-nomad experience	~53%	Rest mostly interested newcomers

Table 2. Profile of prospective remote workers (N = 92; descriptive shares, exploratory).

5.2 Destination preferences and essential conditions

When asked what is essential when choosing a destination, respondents most frequently named a stable, high-speed internet connection, but it was cited by only about half of them (Figure 1). The remaining demand is distributed across a bundle of liveability and community factors: nature and green space, an affordable cost of living, access to basic services, a welcoming community, a pleasant climate, and, less frequently, dedicated coworking, networking and cultural activities. Considered together, the non-connectivity factors collectively outweigh internet access, which suggests that connectivity functions as a threshold condition rather than a decisive differentiator.

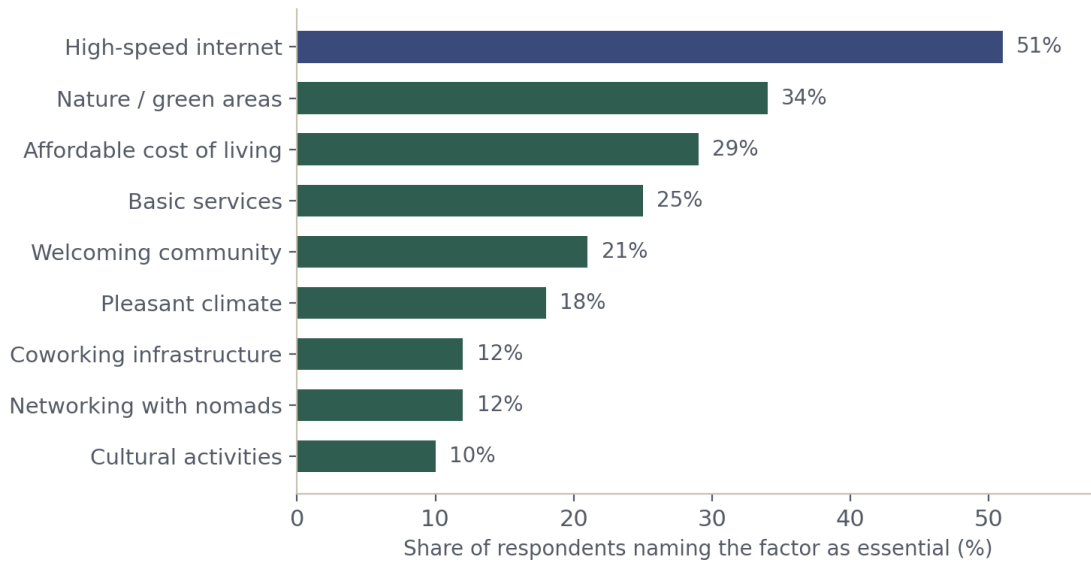


Figure 1. Most-cited essential factors when choosing a destination (N = 92; share of respondents, multiple answers allowed; exploratory).

5.3 Coworking, coliving and housing expectations

Preferences regarding shared infrastructure and housing reveal both breadth and heterogeneity (Figure 2). Interest in a village coworking space is broad: about 84% express interest (roughly 54% unconditionally and 30% conditionally), while around 16% do not consider it necessary. Interest in shared living, by contrast, is markedly divided: respondents split into roughly equal thirds between those interested, those conditionally interested, and those who prefer a private space. This heterogeneity is itself a finding. It indicates that no single housing format will satisfy the demand, and that an offer combining private accommodation with optional access to shared work and community life is more aligned with the spread of preferences than any uniform model.

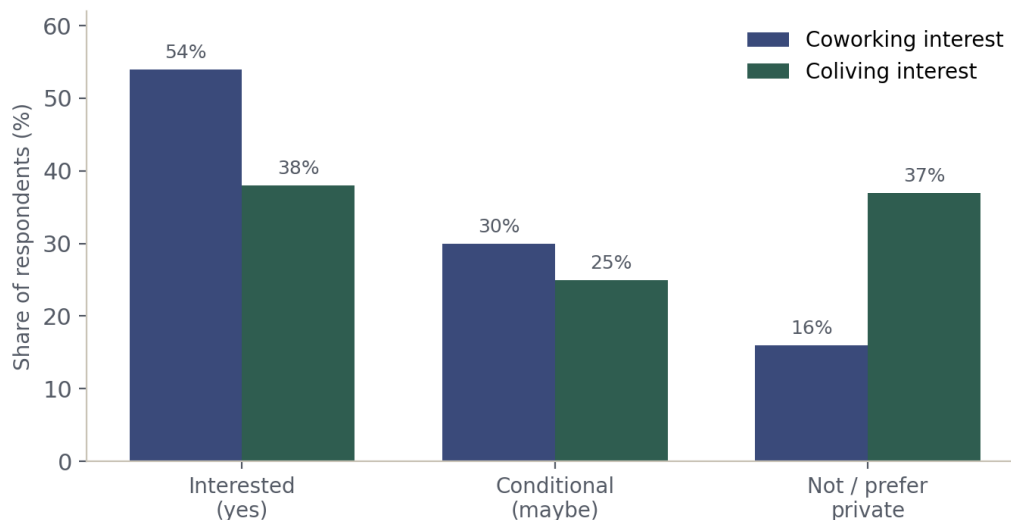


Figure 2. Interest in coworking versus coliving (N = 92; share of respondents; exploratory).

On length of stay, approximately half of respondents would remain four months or more, with about a third contemplating stays longer than six months; on timing, roughly two thirds would

like to begin within six months. Table 3 summarises these expectations. A further qualitative signal merits attention: in open responses, a minority of respondents raised, without being prompted, concerns about rental-price inflation and the effect of new arrivals on local affordability. Although too infrequent to quantify reliably, these spontaneous remarks indicate that part of the demand is reflective about its own territorial footprint and may favour destinations that visibly manage their impact.

Dimension	Exploratory pattern
Intended stay ≥ 4 months	~49% (of which longer than 6 months ~34%)
Would start within 6 months	~65% (within 3 months ~45%)

Table 3. Length-of-stay and timing expectations (N = 92; descriptive shares, exploratory).

5.4 Housing providers and supply-side readiness

The nine housing-provider responses are too few to support statistical inference and are reported only as illustrative signals. With that caveat, the responses suggest an early and willing supply oriented toward the kind of stays the demand side describes. Most providers reported fibre connectivity and a dedicated, frequently ergonomic, workspace; minimum stays clustered at one month or longer; and almost all indicated willingness to host remote workers, including in shared arrangements. Properties varied in size and rental format. These patterns are best interpreted as readiness signals to be verified rather than as evidence of established capacity.

5.5 Municipal interest and local integration

Three municipalities responded, again too few for inference. All three reported good fibre connectivity and expressed the belief that their communities would be open to receiving remote workers. Most identified public spaces that could be adapted for shared work, although at least one indicated that it would require further information before committing, and responses on existing attraction strategies were mixed. The municipal signals, like those from providers, point to latent interest and partial capacity rather than demonstrated readiness, and they underline that openness at the level of intention does not by itself guarantee the conditions for successful integration.

6. Discussion

Read together, the demand-side findings converge on a single interpretive claim: prospective remote workers approach low-density destinations as a bundle rather than as a single attribute. Connectivity is necessary but, on this evidence, insufficient to drive the decision; nature, affordability, services, community and culture matter collectively at least as much. This pattern is consistent with the supplier-side literature, which suggests that destinations succeed less by advertising a feature than by becoming places where longer-staying nomads can be incorporated as “new locals” (Hannonen, Aguiar-Quintana, & Lehto, 2023). It also resonates with the broader finding that remote work, left to market forces, gravitates toward places that already concentrate skills and amenities (Braesemann et al., 2022): a low-density destination that offers connectivity alone competes poorly against richer agglomerations, whereas one that assembles a credible

bundle of liveability and community may carve out a distinct position. The applied policy literature accompanying this series develops the practical version of this argument for municipal communication (Marcelino, 2026c).

The heterogeneity of housing preferences and the orientation toward medium and long stays carry a second implication. Stays measured in months bring remote workers into sustained contact with local housing markets and services in a way that short-stay tourism does not, which makes integration both more feasible and more necessary. Here the gentrification literature is directly relevant. Cocola-Gant and López-Gay (2020) show that mobile, higher-earning newcomers can drive transnational gentrification and enclave formation, and platform-mediated mid-term rental markets can channel external demand into exactly the housing that residents need (Cocola-Gant et al., 2021). That a minority of respondents voiced affordability and displacement concerns unprompted indicates these risks are salient even to the population being courted. The challenge, accordingly, is less about attraction than about integration without housing pressure or social fragmentation, a point the companion policy work frames in terms of housing governance and community mediation (Marcelino, 2026a).

The supply-side signals, though not generalisable, are coherent with this reading. They suggest that early willingness exists on both the provider and municipal sides, but willingness is not the same as readiness. A territory may possess connectivity and goodwill yet still lack the housing governance, intermediation and service depth needed to convert arrivals into durable value, and the polarisation evidence cautions that, absent such conditions, mobile workers may simply gravitate elsewhere (Braesemann et al., 2022). This is precisely the compatibility-between-demand-and-territorial-capacity problem that the concept of territorial readiness names, and it explains why several authors and institutions now argue for structured, explainable assessment before attraction campaigns are launched (OECD, 2023; Marcelino, 2026b). Interpreting territory as a lived and relational space, in which digital platforms form a layer of reputation and belonging rather than mere logistics (Marcelino, in preparation), reinforces the point: readiness is not only a matter of infrastructure but of the social and symbolic conditions under which newcomers can be incorporated.

7. Policy implications

Three implications follow for municipalities, regional agencies and the EU rural-development frameworks within which they operate, each stated cautiously in light of the exploratory data. First, attraction messaging should reflect the bundled nature of demand: campaigns that promise connectivity alone are likely to under-deliver against expectations that also include services, working-suitable housing, community and quality of life, and aligning the message with the full bundle and with a mid-career audience oriented to multi-month stays is more likely to attract residents who remain. Second, attraction should be coupled with housing governance and integration: because medium-stay remote workers interact directly with thin local housing markets, attraction pursued without attention to vacant-stock mobilisation, rent monitoring and resident access risks the displacement dynamics documented in urban settings, and mediation by trusted local actors can help convert visitors into contributors. Third, readiness should precede

attraction: the compatibility between what a territory offers and what prospective residents need is not guaranteed by connectivity or goodwill, and public decision-makers benefit from a structured, transparent and risk-aware way of assessing readiness before committing, with such instruments kept explainable and the decision itself left in local hands. The design and validation of such instruments is a matter for dedicated technical work and is not addressed here. Table 4 synthesises the findings, the implication each carries and the risk of ignoring it.

Finding	Policy implication	Risk if ignored
Connectivity matters but is not enough	Communicate the full liveability bundle, not internet alone	Overpromising; short, disappointed stays
Coliving preferences are divided	Offer flexible housing formats (private plus optional shared)	Excluding a large part of demand
Medium and long stays are relevant	Plan integration, services and community in advance	Pressure on housing and local services
Some respondents flag affordability	Embed housing safeguards and rent monitoring	Displacement and social conflict
Willingness is not yet readiness	Assess territorial readiness before attracting	Attraction that does not convert to local value

Table 4. Synthesis of exploratory findings, policy implications and risks.

8. Limitations

Several limitations bound these findings. The dataset is exploratory and self-selected: respondents registered interest voluntarily, so the demand sample is likely to over-represent people already favourably disposed toward rural remote work, and it cannot be treated as representative of digital nomads generally. The supply-side samples, nine providers and three municipalities, are too small for inferential analysis and are reported only as illustrative signals. The two demand forms differed slightly in the format of one question, and several questions allowed multiple answers, so factor results are expressed as shares of respondents naming each item rather than as mutually exclusive categories. The analysis is purely descriptive; no causal relationships are claimed, and no multivariate structure is inferred. Finally, the data capture stated intentions at the pre-registration stage, which may diverge from realised behaviour. These limitations are consistent with the study's purpose, which is to document early demand and motivate a readiness perspective rather than to measure a population. Future work could combine larger and more diverse samples with longitudinal follow-up of realised stays, and could test the readiness perspective against outcomes in specific pilot territories.

9. Conclusion

This article has presented exploratory evidence from a multi-actor pre-registration survey on remote-worker interest in low-density Iberian destinations. The findings indicated a mid-career, remote-ready and near-term audience whose destination decisions rest on a bundle of housing, services, community, work infrastructure and quality-of-life factors rather than on connectivity alone; whose housing-format preferences are heterogeneous; and a minority already alert to affordability and displacement risks. Supply-side responses, while not generalisable, pointed to

early willingness oriented toward medium-length stays. Read against evidence that remote work tends to polarise toward urban regions unless local conditions are actively built (Braesemann et al., 2022), and against the documented risks of transnational gentrification (Cocola-Gant & López-Gay, 2020), these patterns suggest that the decisive policy question for peripheral regions is not whether they can attract remote workers but whether they are prepared to host them in ways that strengthen, rather than strain, the communities that receive them. Establishing territorial readiness, the compatibility between demand and local capacity, as the intermediate step between attraction and sustainable impact is, on this exploratory evidence, the most consequential contribution that place-based policy can make. Confirming and operationalising that step will require further, dedicated research.

10. Peer review

This article was submitted to external peer review, by invitation, prior to publication. The final version incorporates the revisions requested by the reviewers. Responsibility for the content, the analyses and the conclusions rests solely with the author.

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