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Negotiating "Left-Behindness" and Migration-Related Diversity in (New) Arrival Spaces

Hannah Brill [1], Norma Schemschat [2], Heike Hanhörster [3], Nils Hans [1], Lara Hartig [3], and Isabel Ramos Lobato [1]

[1] Research Institute for Regional and Urban Studies, Germany
[2] Institute for Migration Research and Intercultural Studies, Osnabrück University, Germany
[3] Institute of Urban and Regional Planning, Technische Universität Berlin, Germany

Correspondence: Heike Hanhörster (h.hanhoerster@tu-berlin.de)

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Abstract

Places "left behind" often face socio-economic downturn, demographic decline, and marginalisation resulting from uneven development. Yet these places are no longer only points of departure; they increasingly function as arrival areas for international migrants. Building on growing work on migrant settlement patterns away from large cities, this article investigates arrival neighbourhoods across Germany through the lens of "left-behindness." Based on 90 interviews from eight German neighbourhoods, we analyse how "left-behindness" shapes and intersects with migrant arrival in everyday life and local governance. Using "left-behindness" as an analytical lens, we explore three interconnected arenas: (1) managing arrival under conditions of scarcity, (2) making sense of place through interpretations of migration and decline, and (3) everyday coexistence and contestation. We show how structural constraints, symbolic representations, and social dynamics reinforce each other, shaping both challenges and possibilities of arrival. The article argues that "left-behindness" is best understood not as a spatial category but as a relational and processual condition highlighting uneven development and how challenges of migration-related diversity are locally negotiated and contested.

Keywords

arrival neighbourhoods; international migration; left-behind places; non-traditional arrival spaces; peripheral places; urban migration

1. Introduction

The literature on "left-behind" places (Pike et al., 2024; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018) highlights the socio-economic and emotional effects of territorial inequality, leading to them being perceived as places of departure where structural challenges and territorial stigma drive out-migration. However, places deemed "left behind" are increasingly emerging as places of arrival for international migrants. The differentiation of arrival geographies has sparked academic interest in reception experiences in newer arrival neighbourhoods beyond major urban centres. This simultaneous perception of a neighbourhood as "left behind" and as an arrival space raises important questions about how territorial inequality and migration become intertwined. It draws attention to access to housing, services and opportunities, justifiable allocation of scarce resources, and how residents and institutions negotiate belonging and responsibility under conditions of structural constraints. Emerging research therefore calls for exploring migration in its geographical diversity (see, for example, Doomernik & Glorius, 2016; Herslund, 2021; Jonitz et al., 2024; Kreichauf, 2023), with previous work showing that local conditions and contestations of "left-behindness" can shape arrival and inclusion (Egea & Kreichauf, 2025; Schemschat, 2021). In dialogue with this literature, we use "left-behindness" as a lens for analysing arrival neighbourhoods across Germany.

In academic literature, "left-behind" places are broadly defined as geographical areas facing long-term socio-economic decline, depopulation, and political and/or cultural marginalisation, often as a result of uneven socio-spatial development and globalisation processes (Pike et al., 2024; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). They are characterised by both objective indicators—such as employment or population decline—as well as by subjective experiences of neglect, disconnection, and harmful discourses portraying them as disconnected and dependent (Kühn & Weck, 2012). "Left-behindness" is understood as relational and processual, shaped by multi-scalar economic, political, symbolic, and governance dynamics (Fiorentino et al., 2024; Gansauer, 2025).

We argue that local expressions of "left-behindness"—and the narratives and practices emerging from them—shape arrival and settlement. Specifically, we ask how structural conditions, symbolic framings, and everyday social practices interact in places considered "left behind," and how this intersection shapes the arrival, settlement, and perception of newcomers. We treat migration and "left-behindness" here as mutually shaping frames through which actors interpret local change. Understanding "left-behindness" as an analytical lens on socio-spatial inequality rather than a fixed territorial label, we analyse the interplay of migration and "left-behindness" across eight German municipalities, using three analytical dimensions to structure our findings. First, we examine structural fragilities and governance arrangements shaping the management of arrival, including infrastructural decline, fragmentation, and fiscal scarcity. Second, we analyse interpretive frames through which actors narrate or contest migration in "left-behind" areas, including poverty-driven migration, peripherality stigma, and temporal instability. Third, we explore how these conditions are manifested in everyday social interactions, including routines of coexistence, competition over scarce resources, perceptions of disorder or threat, and local strategies to stabilise social relations.

Our focus responds first to calls for gaining a better understanding of how dominant discourses shape arrival processes in places considered "left behind." Prior research shows that territorial stigma is contested and sometimes redirected towards vulnerable groups, including migrants (Pinkster et al., 2020; Schemschat, 2021). Second, increased arrival rates since 2015—when refugee migration to Germany intensified—have

highlighted municipal strategies and local conditions in German migration debates, raising questions about how "left-behind" arrival neighbourhoods fare in integrating newcomers. Policy framings addressing social inequalities can shape the social positioning of individuals at local level, potentially influencing everyday bordering practices (Bürkner, 2018). By centring migration in various "left-behind" contexts, we highlight how both new and long-established arrival dynamics intersect with uneven development, contributing to the (re)scaling (Baberis & Pavolini, 2015) of socio-spatial hierarchies. The following sections discuss our theoretical framework, methodology, empirical findings, and implications.

2. Theoretical Framework: Intersections of "Left-Behindness" and Migration Dynamics

This section outlines the conceptual foundations of the study, drawing on two key strands of literature: research on so-called "left-behind" places and scholarship on migration-driven spatial (re)configurations examining settlement dynamics in such contexts.

2.1. Introducing the Concept of "Left-Behind" Places

The term "left behind" belongs to the terminology used to describe regional disparities (Fiorentino et al., 2024; Pike et al., 2024; Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2023; Tomaney et al., 2024; Velthuis et al., 2025). Reflecting the struggles of areas negatively affected by austerity measures, globalisation, or economic and technological transformations (Pike et al., 2024), it can be used as both a term to describe territorial discrepancies and as a spatial imaginary of places and their residents, i.e., as both a condition and a process. "Left-behind" places face several often interconnected economic, social, and political challenges, including economic downturn and lower levels of productivity, education, skills, and wages compared to national averages, as well as higher unemployment rates. These socio-economic characteristics can have negative demographic and social consequences, including high levels of deprivation, selective out-migration, ageing, demographic decline, and high poverty rates.

Similar to other concepts such as "peripheralisation" (Kühn & Weck, 2012), the concept of "left-behindness" underlines the emotional and political dimensions of unequal development, while emphasising more strongly the political consequences of places being "left-behind," as demonstrated by the literature on Brexit (Sobolewska & Ford, 2020) or the electoral success of Donald Trump (Fiorentino et al., 2024). According to this literature, residents in "left-behind" places may suffer from feelings of systemic abandonment and marginalisation, with political discontent and disengagement as possible consequences (see Fiorentino et al., 2024; Pike et al., 2024). The ballot-box manifestations are closely linked to subjective experiences of neglect, disconnection, and harmful discourses portraying "left-behind" places and people as disconnected and dependent (Kühn & Weck, 2012).

The term has shifted attention to how stakeholders talk about places and how such language can reinforce or challenge ideas of "development." While the term has been criticised for implying the possibility of "catching up," thereby shifting responsibility to regions and their inhabitants, some authors employ it precisely to call for a more critical engagement with the often-stigmatising labelling of individuals and/or regions as perpetually "left behind" (Pike et al., 2024). O'Neill (2011) highlights the role of language in conceptualising inequality, with examples like Brexitland (Sobolewska & Ford, 2020), *la France périphérique* ("peripheral France"; Guilluy, 2014), and *abgehängte Regionen* ("lagging regions") in Germany (Deppisch &

Klärner, 2021) illustrating its stigmatising potential. The term's core strength lies in its relational conceptualisation that understands "certain types of people and/or places [to be] in some way disconnected and 'left behind' by other actors, relations, and processes in the dominant and/or 'successful' economy, society, and polity" (Pike et al., 2024, p. 1171). Such an "agency-sensitive understanding of geographically uneven development" (Pike et al., 2024, p. 1168) highlights the persistent and complex nature of spatial inequalities (Pike et al., 2024). Any analysis of the political consequences of territorial inequalities includes notions of being "left behind" by a "globalized political-economic system" (Pike et al., 2024, p. 1170) perceived by some as being run by disconnected elites who neglect "left-behind" places.

The characteristics of "left-behindness" are manifested differently depending on local and temporal configurations (Martin et al., 2021). Indeed, places do not necessarily remain in a state of "left-behindness." Rural regions, post-industrial areas, small towns, and marginalised neighbourhoods experiencing demographic decline, the lack of skilled workforce, and economic struggles can all be and frequently are labelled as "left behind" (Pike et al., 2024; see also Velthuis et al., 2025). This calls for a historically and geographically sensitive analysis of economic and demographic trajectories to grasp both the varieties and complexities of how the phenomenon unfolds (Pike et al., 2024).

As many such regions have also become new immigrant destinations, questions emerge about how narratives of decline interact with migration and shape socio-spatial configurations. The following section reviews the literature on migration to "left-behind" places.

2.2. Migration to "Left-Behind" Places

In light of diversifying migration patterns, research in the European context has begun to focus on "non-traditional migration destinations" (Brill et al., 2025; McAreavey & Argent, 2018; Winders, 2018). While the term captures the spatial shift away from established "immigrant gateway cities" (Ley & Murphy, 2001), they encompass a wide range of settings, including "left-behind," peripheral, post-industrial, or rural regions (El-Kayed et al., 2020; Gerten et al., 2023; Meijer et al., 2023). Some areas have only recently become arrival spaces, while others have long migration histories shaped by industrial labour flows, agricultural work, and more recent refugee movements.

Migrant arrival in "left-behind" places raises questions about access to resources and generates new demands on infrastructures, services, and governance. Migration is both shaped by the spatial context in which it occurs and holds transformative potential for neighbourhoods where migrants can catalyse institutional and social innovation (Çağlar & Schiller, 2011). According to these two authors, the effects of migration must be understood in relation to the "systematic variation in migrants' relationship to cities as these are shaped by the positionality of cities within economic, political and cultural fields of power" (Çağlar & Schiller, 2011, p. 3). This calls for an "embeddedness" perspective (Castles, 2010), viewing migration as deeply interwoven with broader social and economic restructuring. The incorporation of newcomers into local labour markets, institutional frameworks, and communities is linked to historical trajectories of industrial development and class mobility (Baberis & Pavolini, 2015). Urban scale is not static but shaped by capital flows, commuting patterns, and labour centralisation—dynamics that migration actively (re)shapes. Thus, migration into structurally weak regions is not merely a demographic or social event, but part of broader (re)scaling processes.

Understanding why migrants settle in "left-behind" areas is key to grasping their dual role as both a challenge for and driver of transformation. The literature highlights several important factors. First, the availability of affordable housing is crucial. Displacement from gentrified inner-city areas and housing shortages in major cities have made less attractive regions with vacant housing stock accessible destinations or stopovers for migrants (El-Kayed & Keskinkılıc, 2023; Wiedner & Schaeffer, 2025). Second, social networks facilitate settlements. "Chain migration" (Alonso-Pardo et al., 2023), understood as mobility facilitated through existing family and social ties, is increasingly shaping mobility, even in non-traditional arrival areas (Alonso-Pardo et al., 2023; Hierro & Maza, 2024). Third, labour market conditions attract newcomers. In some "left-behind" areas, the presence of job vacancies—particularly in low-wage sectors such as agriculture, care, or logistics—combined with favourable business rents creates opportunities for both employment and self-employment (Bianchi et al., 2023; Cabral & Swerts, 2021). Lastly, policy-driven distribution systems allocate migrants to peripheral regions through quotas aiming to "share the burden" of integration efforts evenly (Fourot et al., 2020).

Initial studies of migration in Europe's so-called "left-behind" places paint an ambivalent picture (Cappati & Alonso-Fradejas, 2024; Schemschat, 2024). While migration can revitalise local dynamics, structural constraints continue to shape everyday arrival experiences. A first set of challenges concerns social (arrival) infrastructures. Peripheral or shrinking regions are often characterised by limited resources, whether infrastructure, administrative capacity, or services (Scarpa, 2015). Fiscal pressures resulting from population decline hinder the maintenance of existing facilities and construction of new social infrastructure (Schemschat, 2021). Some areas experience the reduced availability or closure of schools, libraries, and cultural spaces (Meijer et al., 2023), while others rely on unstable DIY or volunteer-based solutions (Cremaschi et al., 2020). Spatial configurations such as monofunctional housing estates may further limit arrival infrastructures (El-Kayed & Keskinkılıc, 2023).

Local governance responses play a decisive mediating role in how local dynamics unfold. The concept of "receptivity" (Glorius et al., 2021) highlights how institutional capacities, social openness, and accessible infrastructures shape whether migration contributes to stabilisation or exacerbates precarity. Some municipalities develop coordinated approaches—such as low-threshold support services, cross-departmental cooperation, or inclusive communication—able to mitigate pressures and foster more inclusive everyday relations (Räuchle & Schmiz, 2019; Sampedro & Camarero, 2018). Others do not, resulting in fragmented governance, overburdened administrations, and increased tensions (Schammann et al., 2024). In such cases, structural deficits and negative narratives become mutually reinforcing, producing feedback loops that deepen marginalisation (Steigemann, 2019).

These structural conditions intersect with local narratives and social dynamics. Ageing populations shape how newcomers are perceived, adding a generational dimension to migration-related tensions (Enßle-Reinhardt et al., 2022). In some municipalities, migrants are framed as "strangers" (Schneider, 2024) and face exclusion, stigmatisation, racism, or anti-migration mobilisation (Garner, 2013). Such narratives can significantly influence social cohesion and community relations.

Taken together, the literature on "left-behindness" and migration to "left-behind" places highlights the deep interlinkage between the two phenomena. Processes of socio-economic decline, peripheralisation, and territorial stigma shape the institutional capacities, infrastructures, and opportunity structures encountered

by newcomers upon arrival. At the same time, migration can alter these very dynamics, stabilise populations and create new forms of social organisation, or, by contrast, amplify existing inequalities and tensions where capacities are lacking. It is this intersection that shapes the analytical lens we use in our empirical analysis (following the presentation of our methodological approach).

3. Methodology and Case Study Selection

This section outlines the methodological approach and situates the selected neighbourhoods—our case studies—within broader patterns of migration-related settlement in Germany. We start by describing the research design, data collection, and analytical strategy (Section 3.1). We go on to provide a concise overview of the national context of migration and territorial inequality, explaining how our case studies are embedded in these dynamics (Section 3.2).

3.1. Research Design, Data Collection, and Analysis

The article is based on a qualitative, multi-site case study approach, conducted between June 2024 and March 2025. It forms part of a broader transformation project (2023–2026) on migration-related change and local governance in 12 German neighbourhoods. Case study selection drew on a prior questionnaire survey of 470 municipalities (17.2% response rate), which provided a nationwide overview of migration-related developments and informed the qualitative site selection. Alongside analytical objectives, practical factors—such as access to interview partners, data availability, and municipal willingness to engage (Krehl & Weck, 2020)—also shaped the selection.

Given the project's transformative and practice-oriented nature, active municipal participation was crucial, with interest often arising from neighbourhoods facing socio-spatial marginalisation. We prioritised municipalities experiencing new or evolving migration-related dynamics, including longstanding and more recent contexts, while ensuring representation across Germany's federal states. This article focuses on eight case studies characterised by features commonly associated with "left-behindness."

Empirical data was gathered through 90 semi-structured interviews with people from three main groups: (1) municipal officials, (2) civil-society and welfare actors, and (3) residents with migration biographies, including newly arrived persons and longer-settled migrants (see Supplementary File). Interview topics covered migration-related challenges, (arrival) infrastructures, social cohesion, and governance. Two workshops with municipal representatives complemented the interviews and allowed joint reflection on findings and local challenges. These groups offered insight into local narratives and how they reinforce or challenge interpretations at the intersection of migration and "left-behindness." We highlight contextual and actor-specific differences where they meaningfully shape narratives or practices.

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed through inductive, reflexive thematic analysis (Ahmed et al., 2025; Braun & Clarke, 2021). Multiple coding rounds identified recurring themes and site-specific particularities related to marginalisation, local governance, and migration-related change. To ensure analytical rigour, preliminary codes were collaboratively reviewed and refined. Workshop protocols were incorporated to triangulate and validate findings. Rather than adopting a structured comparison, we used a multi-site approach (Falzon, 2009) to identify themes across locations while

acknowledging context-specific particularities. This reflects the need for flexible, context-sensitive comparative approaches, especially in spatially and institutionally diverse settings (Krehl & Weck, 2020).

3.2. Contextualisation and Case Study Selection

In Germany, broader European dynamics of migrant settlement in "left-behind" regions are particularly visible. Migrants and refugees disproportionately settle in disadvantaged areas—especially in eastern, northern, and northwestern Germany—where low rents and high vacancy rates coincide with weak labour markets and limited services (Jähnen & Helbig, 2024; Wiedner & Schaeffer, 2025). These conditions have contributed to a concentration of new arrivals in peripheral and post-industrial areas, many of which are emblematic of Germany's *abgehängte Regionen* (see Section 2.1). "Left-behindness" in Germany is frequently framed through East–West disparities rooted in uneven post-reunification development (Deppisch & Klärner, 2021; Royer & Leibert, 2024). Public debates tend to frame peripheralisation as the legacy of out-migration from the former GDR and the socio-economic disruptions of deindustrialisation, while giving less attention to how in-migration reshapes these regions (Habersack & Wegscheider, 2024; Lang et al., 2024). A rural–urban divide further structures discourses on uneven development, with rural areas portrayed as "left behind" and cities as prosperous and culturally vibrant (Deppisch & Klärner, 2021). Scholars also note that feelings of marginalisation stem from varied narratives—such as infrastructural decline or cultural change—that intersect with migration (Deppisch et al., 2023).

The neighbourhoods examined in this study illustrate how these national dynamics materialise locally. They span varied socio-spatial settings, from growing metropolitan regions to shrinking, structurally disadvantaged cities (see Table 1). All are urban yet embedded in different regional trajectories: some in dynamic city-regions, others in peripheral or post-industrial areas facing long-term decline. Despite differences, they share characteristics associated with "left-behindness" described earlier. Many have experienced population growth through international migration, particularly since 2015, though migration histories differ: some feature longstanding diversity, while others have become home to more recent arrivals, driven by official (refugee) distribution policies and/or the availability of affordable housing. Spatial structures also differ—from inner-city districts to large housing estates or former military bases—shaping everyday experiences and local governance capacities. Politically, several sites display low electoral participation and varying degrees of support for the far-right AfD, reflecting broader patterns of disaffection in marginalised regions.

Because many contexts are socio-economically disadvantaged and subject to stigmatising media narratives, all neighbourhoods were anonymised to avoid boosting stigma and to protect participants.

Table 1. Case study characteristics.

Case study	City characteristics (Typology German context: Bundesinstitut für Bau-, Stadt- und Raumforschung, n.d.)	Characteristics of the case study neighbourhood
A	Large City (≈ 500,000), slightly growing; structural & post-industrial transformation	• Population ~ 21,500 • Peripheral, self-contained district • Working-class, mixed housing stock in a poor condition • Very high migration share (~ 80%); diverse origins

Table 1. (Cont.) Case study characteristics.

Case study	City characteristics (Typology German context: Bundesinstitut für Bau-, Stadt- und Raumforschung, n.d.)	Characteristics of the case study neighbourhood
B	Medium-sized city (≈ 35,000) slightly growing; structural & post-industrial transformation	• Population ~ 2,500 • Close to city centre • Mixed housing along a main road, some in a poor condition • Longstanding but small-scale migration; arrivals since 2015
C	Large city (≈ 105,000), slightly growing; structural transition	• Population ~ 46,000 • Inner-city district within a fragmented, polycentric city • Post-war planned area with mixed housing, significant vacancy rate before 2015 • Longstanding migration; increased arrivals since 2015
D	Large city (≈ 100,000), slightly growing, structural & post-industrial transition	• Population ~ 9,000 • Near centre but physically cut off and fragmented • Mixed housing in a poor condition • Longstanding migration; increased arrivals since 2015 • High right-wing populist support (> 30%)
E	Large city (≈ 115,000), slightly growing, structural & post-industrial transition	• Population ~ 8,500 • Close to city centre • Working-class district with high vacancy rate and poor housing • Long-standing diversity; new arrivals since 2015
F	Medium-sized city (≈ 30,000) structurally weak area; shrinking; socio-economic challenges	• Population ~ 1,200 • Peripheral neighbourhood • Former military area with industrial surroundings and poor housing • Historically low but diversifying migration; increased migration since 2015 • High right-wing populist support (> 30%)
G	Large city (≈ 3,755,000), rapidly growing; undergoing dynamic structural development	• Population ~ 282,000 • Peripheral inner-suburban district • Large prefabricated housing blocks • Migration and diversity especially since 2015 • High right-wing populist support (> 30%)
H	Large city (≈ 210,000), growing, structural transition with socio-economic challenges	• Population ~ 22,500 • Peripheral, physically cut-off neighbourhood • Large prefabricated housing blocks • Rising migration; shares above city average • High right-wing populist support (> 30%)

4. Findings: Dynamics of Arrival in "Left-Behind" Neighbourhoods

This section examines how structural fragilities and governance arrangements (4.1), interpretive frames (4.2), and everyday social practices (4.3) intersect in the neighbourhoods we studied. Together, the three sections illustrate how "left-behindness" and migration mutually shape one another across institutional, discursive, and social domains.

4.1. Governing Arrival Under Conditions of Scarcity

To understand how migration and "left-behindness" become mutually shaping frames, we first examine the material and institutional conditions that form the backdrop against which local actors make sense of and negotiate diversity and spatial disadvantage.

Across the cases, interviewees describe local governance as shaped by longstanding structural fragility predating recent migration and continuing to define arrival conditions. Schools, childcare centres, youth services, healthcare, and social work all operate under chronic shortages, with many institutions weakened by demographic decline, austerity policies, and privatisation even before migration became a prominent public issue. Newcomers thus enter systems already overstretched. Practitioners highlight the everyday consequences of this fragility: overcrowded schools lacking classrooms, doctors no longer accepting patients, youth facilities unable to meet growing and diversifying needs. At the same time, these pressures are not uniform across our case studies. Some municipalities face acute and comprehensive shortages, while others retain selected areas of robust infrastructure or have benefitted from targeted investments, resulting in a differentiated landscape of local capacities. Housing conditions show similar patterns: migrants often end up in overcrowded and poorly maintained units where rubbish piles up, utilities get cut off, or repairs are ignored. In some cases, these conditions are described as "inhumane" (D13). While the severity of the problems varies, the underlying structures—limited regulation, high residential vacancy rates, speculative ownership—produce similar vulnerabilities across sites.

The local governance structures handling these challenges are marked by fragmentation. Responsibilities for housing, welfare, education, migration, and child protection are dispersed among different departments, often with little coordination. As one official put it, "Jeder möchte sein eigenes Süppchen kochen" ("Everyone wants to do his own thing") (C6). Staff shortages compound these deficits: unfilled positions—sometimes for years—leading to heavy workloads, the departure of long-term employees leading to the loss of expertise and reduced continuity. Frontline staff describe being pulled into crisis management, with little time for preventive or community-oriented work. Voluntary engagement, once key to local support, has declined since 2015. Many longstanding volunteers have stepped back due to burnout or frustration, leaving overstretched municipalities without a buffer. Fiscal constraints remain a persistent challenge. Integration work, being non-mandatory, is often hit by budget cuts, while many services depend on temporary project funding, generating discontinuity and staff turnover. Across sites, local actors therefore navigate scarcity by combining formal structures with ad-hoc solutions, creating governance arrangements that are fragile but adaptable.

At the same time, local governance cultures diverge. Some administrations rely heavily on formal procedures, leading to slow responses and rigid departmental boundaries. Others demonstrate flexibility, adjusting

opening hours, reaching out in everyday spaces, or simplifying bureaucratic requirements. These variations help explain why, despite structural limitations, many interviewees emphasise that everyday life continues to function more effectively than public debates suggest. Practitioners, for example, stress that "a lot of things do work…and in the public debate we too often focus on the bad things…not on everyday life where things work" (D7). (Informal) cooperation often bridges fragmented structures: in some municipalities, short communication channels mean that "everyone knows whom to call" (D5). New services—multilingual counselling, neighbourhood-based support structures, youth projects—have emerged since 2015, frequently supported by committed individuals or the creative use of short-term funding. Municipalities experiment with low-threshold formats, co-design programmes with residents, and build partnerships with associations, foundations, and local businesses. These practices show that governance is shaped not only by scarcity but also by improvisation, innovation, and discretionary labour.

Overall, these accounts demonstrate that "left-behindness" becomes meaningful in the institutional domain as a way of describing the tension between structural fragility and the ongoing work of managing arrival. Local governance operates at the intersection of long-term disinvestment, organisational fragmentation, and the emotional weight of feeling overwhelmed (Schammann et al., 2024). While structural constraints are widely shared, municipalities differ in how they respond—through cooperation, flexibility, creativity, or, at times, resignation. Rather than viewing these neighbourhoods as administrative failures, the findings show a local governance structure marked by both vulnerability and ingenuity, in which actors negotiate daily how to maintain stability under structurally difficult conditions.

4.2. Making Sense of Place: Interpreting Migration and "Left-Behindness"

Building on the structural conditions outlined above, this section focuses on the interpretive and symbolic dimensions of "left-behindness" and migration, using the narratives used to describe place, decline, peripherality, and arrival. Across the case studies, interviewees describe "left-behindness" not simply as a backdrop but as a meaningful frame shaping how migration is understood.

Neighbourhoods become arrival spaces precisely because they offer a combination of affordable housing, high vacancy rates, and landlords willing to accept tenants with an insecure status. As one social worker put it: "The housing companies themselves advertised the housing stock. They realised: wow, a lot of people need a flat right now. They made sure that they [newcomers] came here" (C9). While newcomers are described as being drawn by affordability and availability, their arrival is simultaneously interpreted as a sign of an area's marginality. For many local actors, this link is captured in the notion of "poverty-driven migration," associating newcomers with complex social and economic difficulties such as debt, lack of insurance, or unstable employment. As one interviewee summarised: "The proportion of people with a migrant background is relatively high there, and the neighbourhood has actually undergone a process of socio-economic marginalisation over the last 10 to 20 years. Socio-economically stronger groups have moved away, and weaker ones have moved in" (B1). Locally, migration has become intertwined with urban decline, "migranticising" (Dahinden, 2025) structural disadvantage.

These interpretations are embedded in broader narratives of overstretch and saturation, in which local capacities are portrayed as exhausted. Municipal officials describe reaching or surpassing their limits or being overwhelmed: "It's simply the masses that then spill over onto you…you're overwhelmed because you

don't have the staff, the money, the space or the facilities to manage it" (C6). In some municipalities, this discourse was explicit, as witnessed by official requests to stop the influx of refugees or by statements about "being full." In others, it was more discrete, disguised in concerns about educational standards dropping or discomfort about demographic change. Worries were also articulated that a neighbourhood felt "saturated," that oversight was insufficient, and that local "standards" were being lost.

Spatial and symbolic peripherality further shapes interpretations of decline. While the physical isolation of some neighbourhoods is structural, what concerns actors are the associated meanings. Civil-society organisations describe areas with "a strong dormitory character" or with "very few public spaces" (H2). Residents complain that "you have to go to the city centre for almost everything" (D1), while others portray their area as "on the other side of the U-Bahn line…with few local businesses" (G5). These conditions are interpreted as signs of marginality, reinforcing a sense of being "far from the centre" both physically and symbolically.

These representations are often boosted by long-term territorial stigma which emerged as a consequence of the aforementioned structural conditions (see Section 4.1). Labels such as "problem area," "no-go zone," or "Germany's poorest district" circulate in the media and administrative discourse, negatively affecting everyday life. One district manager recalled that suppliers "didn't want to deliver because of the area's bad reputation" (D5). Residents describe a "postcode penalty" in which their address shapes access to housing, employment, and even deliveries. Peripherality is thus not only spatial but emotional: one respondent described their town as "basically at the very end: East German and rural" (F1), highlighting how peripherality intersects with historical and symbolic marginalisation. Such ascriptions foster feelings of neglect or exclusion, as expressed by one resident who noted that "[s]ome people would like to build a wall around the neighbourhood" (F11).

Temporalities of migration add another layer to perceived peripherality. In several municipalities, newcomers—especially intra-EU migrants—are seen as inherently mobile populations who "come to try things out, with only a few staying on" (B5). High population turnover, short leases, and circular labour migration fuel feelings of instability. As one teacher observed: "Families are there for six months, then gone again. It's hard to integrate a group that knows it won't stay" (C7). One welfare worker similarly noted that "when people get a better job or a driver's licence, they move away" (D1), reinforcing a sense of social fragility. Frustrations over instability coexist with experiences of discrimination. One social worker described the cumulative nature of these dynamics: "We already have this fluctuation cycle in our structurally weak region…and now on top of that we are faced with xenophobia and racism" (F3). These dynamics differ across cases, with some neighbourhoods experiencing extremely rapid demographic change and others seeing longer-term settlement even in temporary housing.

In light of widespread territorial stigma, actors across municipalities were found to produce counter-narratives highlighting a sense of belonging, value, and everyday normality. Some residents reinterpret remoteness as tranquillity, greenery, or affordability: "I thought it was temporary. It's green, quiet, affordable. I'll stay" (G8). Others express pride and attachment: "People talk badly about [the neighbourhood], but for me, it's home" (A1). Many families choose to stay precisely because of social networks, family proximity, or trust in local institutions: "Many want to stay exactly here because the family ties are here" (E6). Others describe gradual anchoring through everyday routines: "My child is happy here in

the kindergarten, and we know our neighbours now. We'll stay for the moment" (G15). The internal and external views of neighbourhoods often diverge sharply. While many actors from outside describe certain areas as hotspots of conflict or cultural incompatibility, residents and frontline workers frequently emphasise ordinary, undramatic coexistence. One resident succinctly summarised this everyday reality: "We live here, we work here, we belong here just like everyone else" (G15). Such claims of belonging are important counterweights to external narratives of disorder and can be found across municipalities, though their strength varies. In some places, strong family networks or long-term neighbourly relations create a sense of stability; in others, repeated moves, poor housing conditions, or fragmented social structures weaken the foundations for mutual trust. This resonates with the differentiation proposed by Friedrich and Rößler (2026, this issue), who show that long-established residents, socio-economically marginalised groups, and refugees attach different meanings to their neighbourhoods based on distinct life situations and temporal horizons.

Together, these narratives show how symbolic and structural dimensions of "left-behindness" become intertwined. Structural fragilities—weak infrastructures, poor housing quality, limited services—shape the conditions of arrival. But it is through interpretive frames that these conditions get translated into narratives of decline, saturation, or instability. Territorial stigma not only devalues a neighbourhood but also influences investment decisions, housing allocations, and settlement expectations. Counter-narratives of belonging, value, and normality complicate these symbolic–material loops, influencing how coexistence unfolds.

4.3. Everyday Coexistence and Contestation

Across the case studies, everyday social life in the neighbourhoods is described as a mix of routine coexistence, limited interaction, and episodes of tension. Most interviewees emphasise that overt conflict is rare; instead, relations between long-term residents and newcomers are marked by subtle distancing, pragmatic accommodation, and often a quiet acceptance of difference. As one stakeholder put it, "[p]eople simply avoid each other. It's not as if the conflict line runs through the streets every day. There are practically no open conflicts" (B1). This form of "non-conflictual distance" is a common feature across municipalities, albeit with different intensities and meanings. In some places, avoidance serves as a strategy to manage limited resources or cope with language barriers; in others, it reflects deeper feelings of insecurity or distrust that accumulate over time.

Despite the relative absence of overt conflict, concerns about social cohesion are widespread. Negative perceptions of newcomers circulate frequently and tend to bundle perceived everyday nuisances—noise, rubbish, groups of young people hanging around, different parenting practices or gender norms—into moralising narratives. These interpretations often draw on broader public discourses rather than concrete incidents. As one practitioner observed: "I keep hearing that some people feel unsafe when large groups gather on the street, speaking another language. Often, it's men drinking alcohol which creates this sense of threat—and that can quickly lead to assumptions about criminality and reinforce stereotypes" (E4). Such assumptions vary with local history, political climate, and group composition. In some neighbourhoods, particular groups (e.g., Roma families, young men, specific nationalities) become the focus of gendered and racist anxieties; in others, concerns remain diffuse, centred on perceived disorder or unfamiliar practices.

Competition over scarce resources intensifies these perceptions. Residents frequently frame inequalities—real or perceived—in terms of access to childcare, welfare benefits, social housing, or integration

programmes. Across the case studies, interviewees describe a pervasive sense of "social envy" (G2) or fear of loss, articulated by one respondent as worries "about what is there, about the things that somehow have to be shared […], about structures" (C3). For long-term residents facing economic insecurity, the perception that newcomers receive more attention or support is common and can exacerbate feelings of abandonment. Conversely, but in the same vein, recent arrivals express frustration—about bureaucratic hurdles, limited access to services, or discrimination—sometimes believing that other migrant groups receive preferential treatment. These layered grievances show how competition and precarity shape relations between locals and migrants, and between different groups of migrants. In this sense, everyday social life reflects the combined effects of the structural constraints described in Section 4.1 and the interpretive frames outlined in Section 4.2: perceptions of peripherality, stigma, and temporariness fuel social comparison and moralising narratives, shaping how residents interpret nuisances and allocate blame.

Moreover, broader political dynamics increasingly shape everyday interactions. Interviewees in several neighbourhoods report a "hardening of attitudes," the normalisation of xenophobic remarks in public spaces or during administrative encounters, and a growing sense of insecurity among residents with migration backgrounds. Graffiti expressing far-right sympathies—such as "I love AfD" or "fuck Antifa"—are cited as signals that some residents interpret as threats. One resident explained: "I look like an immigrant, and they would hate me just for appearing here" (G8). Electoral gains of the AfD are perceived by some local actors as indicators of the political climate: "The election results have shown that in the districts in question…the AfD received over 28 percent of the vote. This partly reflects the 'welcoming' culture in these districts, so to speak" (H1). While "left-behindness" is manifested differently in the electoral behaviour of residents across municipalities, reflecting local histories, socio-economic profiles, and political cultures, it shows how political debates permeate daily life in nuanced ways.

At the same time, movements fighting against the hardening political climate exist. In several areas, civil society groups, youth workers, or individual residents are mobilising against right-wing narratives, challenging discriminatory remarks or attempting to foster everyday solidarity. However, some municipalities avoid polarising symbols and language in public communications to maintain broad acceptance of local initiatives, with some actors stressing the tension between inclusivity and inadvertently legitimising exclusionary positions emerging from that. Efforts to strengthen migrants' political participation, expand low-threshold advisory services, or build trust in local institutions are seen as crucial strategies for maintaining social cohesion, even under difficult structural conditions.

While many neighbourhoods lack established interaction spaces, local actors are acutely aware of the importance of fostering contact and mutual understanding. Across municipalities, outreach workers, youth teams, and civil society organisations describe efforts to create moments of encounter: shared barbecues, street festivals, sports activities, language cafés, or informal counselling in parks and housing estates. These initiatives differ in scale and intensity depending on local resources. In some cases, street workers actively mediate between groups, address conflicts informally, and try to counter negative portrayals through everyday presence. Elsewhere, attempts to build inclusive spaces face structural hurdles—lack of venues, limited funding, or low participation from residents with little connection to neighbourhood institutions.

In sum, everyday social life in the neighbourhoods studied is best understood not through the lens of conflict or cohesion alone but through the interplay of structural constraints and meaningful practices.

Residents navigate a complex environment shaped by resource scarcity, territorial stigma and political polarisation, yet also by pragmatic routines, quiet solidarity and moments of togetherness. Similar patterns appear across municipalities but in different constellations depending on local political climates, service landscapes, and histories of migration, illustrating that social cohesion is not set in concrete but locally conditioned and negotiated, shaped by how actors interpret difference, navigate precarity, and draw on—or retreat from—local infrastructures. Our analysis thus reveals how "left-behindness" and migration intertwine in the social fabric of everyday life, producing both vulnerabilities and possibilities for belonging.

5. Discussion

This article has examined how migration and "left-behindness" intersect in neighbourhoods marked by long-term socio-economic decline, weak infrastructures, and territorial stigmatisation. Our findings confirm that "left-behindness" is not a fixed descriptor of disadvantaged places but a relational and processual condition (Fiorentino et al., 2024; Pike et al., 2024) produced through the interplay of structural inequalities, symbolic representations, and everyday social practices. In all case studies, migration became part of these dynamics: newcomers arrived in contexts shaped by demographic shrinkage and disinvestment, with their presence becoming entangled with existing narratives of marginality. These dual dynamics reveal what we conceptualise as arrival shaped by marginality, rather than migration "causing" decline. Across the three analytical dimensions, several recurrent mechanisms emerged. First, structural fragility created the conditions directing newcomers towards these neighbourhoods. This aligns with research on arrival spaces and infrastructures which emphasises how bureaucratic systems, housing markets, and welfare institutions jointly structure settlement pathways (Brill et al., 2025; Meeus et al., 2019; Wiedner & Schaeffer, 2025). These infrastructures nonetheless varied across municipalities, with some demonstrating flexibility and others struggling with rigid procedures or fiscal constraints. These variations show that "left-behindness" is shaped not only by structural inequalities but also by institutional cultures and discretionary governance practices. Second, our findings underscore the central role of symbolic place narratives. Territorial stigma (Pinkster et al., 2020; Wacquant, 2007) was pervasive across sites. Labels such as "problem district" or "no-go area" did not merely describe local realities but actively shaped them, influencing investment decisions, municipal attention, and residents' opportunities. In several neighbourhoods, longstanding socio-economic difficulties were reframed through a migration lens, "migranticising" structural problems and reinforcing feelings of saturation or overstretch. Yet stigma was contested: many residents, practitioners, and newcomers came up with counter-narratives emphasising ordinariness, stability, and belonging, echoing findings that stigmatised places can also foster positive identifications and local attachment (Schemschat, 2021) or provide access to resources (Hanhörster & Wessendorf, 2020). The contribution by Friedrich and Rößler (2026, this issue) underscores this point by showing that positive perceptions can be cultivated through spatial atmospheres and everyday encounters, even in stigmatised urban peripheries. Third, everyday social relations were characterised by ambivalence: pragmatic coexistence, selective interaction, and subtle avoidance. Competition over scarce resources intersected with symbolic hierarchies and emotional geographies of abandonment (Tomaney et al., 2024). While overt conflict was rare, insecurity and perceived threats shaped how conflicts were interpreted and attributed. These dynamics were further conditioned by broader political trends, including growing support for right-wing populist parties in some areas and the everyday normalisation of exclusionary discourse—patterns consistent with recent work linking feelings of neglect, local decline, and political alienation (Deppisch et al., 2023; Hannemann et al., 2024; Meijers & van Slageren, 2025).

Taken together, the findings show that the intersection of migration and "left-behindness" produces a configuration of marginality in which symbolic processes and material conditions interact and are mediated by local governance structures. Governance shapes how symbolic valuations translate into material outcomes and how material constraints, in turn, inform local interpretations of place. Within this mediated relationship, everyday practices both respond to and reshape symbolic and material conditions. They can reinforce cycles of marginalisation but also challenge or redirect them, highlighting that these dynamics are not predetermined. Understanding these feedback loops is crucial for explaining how "left-behindness" and migration become mutually shaping processes. Our multi-site design reveals recurring mechanisms across diverse contexts, while also showing how demographic trajectories, political climates, and governance capacities produce distinct local configurations. This approach offers pattern recognition rather than causal attribution, identifying relational dynamics that recur across sites while leaving room for more fine-grained historical and ethnographic work.

Finally, the study underscores the conceptual ambivalence of the term "left behind." While analytically useful for capturing interlocking forms of socio-spatial inequality, it can also reproduce the very stigma it seeks to explain. Our findings therefore call for a reflexive application of the concept (Rhodes et al., 2019), treating "left-behindness" as an emergent, negotiated status rather than a fixed territorial label.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how "left-behindness" is articulated, negotiated, and lived in neighbourhoods shaped by international migration. By tracing intersections of structural constraints, symbolic narratives, and everyday relations, we show that areas labelled as "left behind" are not only sites of out-migration and decline but also key arrival spaces shaped by housing markets, governance capacities, and (refugee) distribution policies. This challenges dominant assumptions about "left-behind" places being static or in decline, revealing instead their role within broader spatial and migration systems.

Our findings demonstrate that "left-behindness" is a relational and contested condition produced through the intersection of territorial stigma, structural disinvestment, and limited institutional capacities. Migration shapes this dynamic in two ways: first, through these very conditions, and second, through how marginality is understood and regulated. In several neighbourhoods, arrival contributed to local stabilisation through demographic renewal, the use of vacant housing, and the revitalisation of everyday infrastructures. The study also highlights the importance of governance: municipalities featuring structured collaboration between local administrations and civil society, institutional openness, and active engagement—supported by city leadership that shapes local discourse—were better positioned to manage pressures and foster more inclusive environments. This suggests that responses to arrival are shaped as much by political and organisational choices as by socio-economic structures. At the same time, the term "left-behindness" remains conceptually ambivalent. While it provides a useful analytical lens for examining uneven development and the conditions shaping arrival, it risks reinforcing territorial stigma if applied without due care. We therefore argue for a reflexive, process-oriented use of the term, highlighting relational mechanisms rather than fixed territorial categories.

Future research should further investigate the historical and institutional trajectories of these neighbourhoods, as well as the governance cultures that sustain or mitigate their marginalisation. Attention

to migrants' longer-term settlement trajectories—whether these neighbourhoods function as temporary stepping stones or places where people choose to stay, shaped by experiences of exclusion or by local solidarities and positive neighbourhood relations—remains crucial for understanding how "left-behind" places and arrival dynamics unfold over time. These questions grow increasingly urgent as demographic change, political polarisation, and uneven development continue to reshape local conditions.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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About the Authors

Hannah Brill is a social geographer and research associate at the ILS—Research Institute for Regional and Urban Development in Dortmund. Her research interests include migration, housing, and socio-spatial inequalities, with a particular focus on how different urban and regional contexts influence processes of arrival, settlement, and social in- or exclusion.

Norma Schemschat is a social geographer and postdoctoral researcher at the University of Amsterdam. She recently joined the Institute for Migration Research and Intercultural Studies (IMIS) as senior research fellow within the research area Futures of Migration (FuturMig). Her work examines international migration through the lens of spatial dynamics and inequality, and focuses on peripheralisation processes, "left-behind" places, and the embodied experiences of space.

Heike Hanhörster is junior professor and head of the chair "Social Cohesion, Diversity and Migration in Urban Planning" at the Institute of Urban and Regional Planning (ISR), Technische Universität Berlin. Her research interests include place-based processes of social inclusion and exclusion and people's encounters with difference. Her recent research focuses on newcomers' access to societal resources such as housing and education, on social networks in low-income neighbourhoods, and on institutional discrimination in the housing market.

Nils Hans is a research associate at the ILS—Research Institute for Regional and Urban Development, focusing on socio-spatial inequalities, migration, and integration. His PhD examined arrival neighbourhoods' role in immigrant integration. Currently, he researches conditions and mechanisms of arrival in "new" arrival neighbourhoods using ethnographic methods.

Lara Hartig is an urbanist and works as a research associate at the Technical University of Berlin and the Research Institute for Regional and Urban Development in Dortmund. Her research focuses on issues between urban and (post-)migration studies on social and spatial inequalities.

Isabel Ramos Lobato is a senior researcher at the Research Institute for Regional and Urban Development (ILS). Her main research interests are inclusion and exclusion in education and housing. Current projects focus on arrival neighbourhoods, access to social housing, and the role of private housing companies in sustainable neighbourhood development.