

# A Comparative Analysis of Rural–Urban Disparities in Selected Central and Eastern European Countries in the Context of Global Transformations

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p><i>Article history:</i>                      Received: January 18, 2026                      Accepted: March 30, 2026                      Published: March 31, 2026</p> <p><i>JEL Classification:</i>                      E65, F62, P25, O13, R12</p> <p><i>Keywords:</i>                      degree of urbanization; quality of life; territorial mobility; housing; life satisfaction; Central and Eastern Europe; rural–urban</p>	<p>This paper analyzes the relationship between the degree of urbanization and the main dimensions of quality of life in Central and Eastern European countries, using a set of secondary statistical indicators from the Eurostat database for the period 2021–2024. The research is based on a descriptive-analytical and comparative approach, structured according to the DEGURBA Level 2 classification, which distinguishes between municipalities, cities, and suburbs, as well as rural areas. The indicators analyzed focus on access to basic services (education), road mobility performance, housing structure, housing cost pressure, and subjective life satisfaction. The results highlight the existence of clear rural–urban gradients, particularly regarding mobility and housing typology, with high accessibility to primary education in most of the analyzed countries, but with visible differences in dispersed rural areas. The conclusions underscore the existence of relatively stable territorial patterns, marked by historical and structural characteristics common to the region, but also by internal contrasts specific to each country.</p>

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## 1. Introduction

Territorial disparities between urban and rural areas represent a central dimension of the analysis of regional development in Central and Eastern Europe, being closely linked to post-socialist transition processes, integration into the European Union, and recent economic and social transformations. Countries in this region have made significant progress in terms of economic growth and macroeconomic convergence, yet internal disparities in development and quality of life remain persistent, manifesting themselves primarily along the rural–urban gradient. In this context, the relationship between the degree of urbanization and quality of life becomes analytically relevant because the urban environment generally concentrates economic opportunities, infrastructure, and advanced public services, while rural areas are often associated with reduced accessibility, limited mobility, and socioeconomic vulnerabilities. These patterns are not uniform, and recent literature

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highlights the existence of significant internal differences within both rural and urban areas, determined by territorial structure, population density, housing traditions, and infrastructure quality.

## 2. Literature review

A comparative analysis of rural–urban disparities is more relevant in Central and Eastern Europe, where shared historical legacies, the relatively similar structure of settlement systems, and the experience of economic transition allow for the identification of recurring territorial patterns, as well as distinct national contrasts. In this region, the degree of urbanization reflects not only a functional differentiation of the territory but also a set of structural constraints that influence the population’s access to basic services, mobility, housing conditions, and subjective well-being. The study of regional disparities in Central and Eastern Europe has been an important area of analysis in economic and geographical literature, particularly following the post-socialist transition period and gradual integration into the European Union. Research highlights that economic restructuring processes, institutional changes, and regional development policies have generated both opportunities for convergence and persistent trends of spatial polarization.

Early studies on the territorial dimension of transition emphasize that the economic transformations of the 1990s had varying effects at the regional level, leading to significant disparities between developed urban centers and peripheral areas. Early analyses indicate that market liberalization, industrial restructuring, and capital mobility favored better-positioned regions, while mono-industrial or predominantly rural areas experienced difficulties in adapting (Petrakos, 1996). Subsequently, studies on the dynamics of regional disparities during the transition period showed that these differences not only persisted but, in some cases, intensified, influenced by structural and institutional factors as well as access to investment (Ezcurra, Pascual & Rapún, 2007).

Following the accession of Central and Eastern European countries to the European Union, literature began to pay increased attention to regional convergence processes. Research highlights the existence of mixed trends: on the one hand, a reduction in gaps between countries is observed, and on the other hand, the persistence or even increase of disparities at the intra-national level. Smętkowski (2013) shows that regional economic development is strongly influenced by factors such as economic structure, the level of urbanization, and the ability to attract investment. In the same vein, Egri and Lengyel (2024) analyze the processes of convergence and economic recovery across different types of regions, highlighting that metropolitan regions tend to perform better, while rural and peripheral regions remain more vulnerable.

A central theme in recent literature is the role of capital regions and major urban centers in shaping territorial disparities. These regions concentrate dynamic economic activities, modern infrastructure, and skilled human capital, generating a spatial polarization effect. Psycharis, Kallioras, and Pantazis (2019) emphasize the importance of metropolitan areas in accentuating regional differences, as they function as poles of economic growth but also as factors in the concentration of resources. At the same time, urban expansion strongly influences peri-urban areas and the urban–rural relationship, leading to functional and structural transformations of neighboring territories (Vasárus et al., 2024).

Transformations in rural areas constitute another major theme of research on regional development in Central and Eastern Europe. Economic restructuring processes have generated significant internal

differentiation within rural areas, with some areas managing to adapt through the diversification of economic activities, while others face economic and demographic decline. Bański (2019) highlights the heterogeneous nature of Eastern European rural areas and the fact that transformation processes have varied in intensity depending on the local context. Furthermore, studies show that the development of non-agricultural activities represents an important direction for the revitalization of rural areas, contributing to the creation of new economic opportunities (Hadyński, 2021). At the same time, critical approaches highlight the impact of globalization and European policies on rural areas, emphasizing the risk of increased marginalization in the absence of interventions tailored to local conditions (Swain, 2016).

Literature consistently addresses the differences between urban and rural environments in terms of quality of life, standard of living, and social inclusion. Comparative studies indicate that rural areas generally face a higher risk of poverty and have reduced access to public services, education, and employment opportunities (Macours & Swinnen, 2008). Similarly, European-level research shows that differences in quality of life between urban and rural areas reflect both economic and social disparities, influenced by infrastructure, access to services, and social capital (Shucksmith et al., 2009). Furthermore, an analysis of social exclusion in rural areas of Central and Eastern Europe highlights acute vulnerabilities stemming from depopulation, limited access to resources, and reduced economic opportunities (Spoor, Tasciotti & Peleah, 2014).

In the case of Romania, studies show that regional disparities are closely correlated with the level of social and economic development in rural areas, being particularly evident in socially disadvantaged areas characterized by limited access to services and opportunities (Mitrică et al., 2020). An important factor in maintaining these gaps is the educational disparity between rural and urban areas, which directly influences social mobility and the potential for economic development (Popescu et al., 2022).

Regional policies and institutions play a role in the evolution of territorial disparities. Research highlights that the implementation of cohesion and regional development policies has contributed to infrastructure modernization and the stimulation of investment, but their effects are uneven across regions. Downes (2013; 2019) highlights that regional policies in Central and Eastern Europe have evolved in the context of transition and European integration, marked by tensions between convergence objectives and institutional realities. Furthermore, processes of decentralization and recentralization have influenced the regions' ability to manage their own development strategies (Loewen, 2018). From the perspective of territorial equity, the concept of spatial justice has increasingly been used to analyze the distribution of resources and opportunities at the regional level. Constantin (2021) emphasizes the importance of approaching regional development not only from an economic standpoint but also from the perspective of social balance and equitable access to services. Similarly, other studies show that policies aimed at economic development must be accompanied by social measures to reduce inequalities and raise living standards (Pilipenko, 2021; Davidescu, Nae & Florescu, 2024). At the same time, sustainable rural development remains a central objective in the context of the European Union's expansion, as it is closely linked to environmental protection and the strengthening of local economies (Beckmann & Dissing, 2004). The literature highlights the fact that regional disparities in Central and Eastern Europe are the result of a complex process driven by economic, social, institutional, and territorial factors. European integration and cohesion policies have

helped to reduce some gaps, but differences between regions, as well as those between urban and rural areas, continue to pose a major challenge, and research suggests that reducing these disparities requires integrated policies tailored to local conditions and focused on both economic development and improving quality of life and social cohesion.

The article is structured as follows: the next section presents the methodological framework and the set of indicators used, followed by an analysis of the results and the conclusions section.

### 3. Data and methodology

The analysis is based on a set of secondary statistical indicators extracted from the Eurostat database, selected to capture the relationship between the degree of urbanization and the main dimensions of quality of life in Central and Eastern European countries. The dataset used includes indicators related to access to basic services, territorial mobility, housing structure, housing cost pressure, and subjective life satisfaction for the period 2021–2024. The structure of the indicators, the reference period, and the sources are summarized in Table 1.

From a spatial perspective, the analysis is based on Eurostat’s classification of the degree of urbanization (DEGURBA), level 2, which distinguishes three main types of territories: municipalities (dense urban centers), towns and suburbs (intermediate areas), and rural areas (sparsely populated areas). For some of the indicators on accessibility and mobility (2021), the data are further broken down into subcategories of rural areas: villages, scattered rural areas, and largely uninhabited rural areas, which allows for a more nuanced interpretation of territorial differences (table 1). Methodologically, the research employs a descriptive-analytical approach, focused on comparing the percentage distributions of indicators according to the degree of urbanization and on identifying rural–urban spatial gradients.

**Table 1. Indicators analyzed**

Indicator	Range	Source	Availability
Population living in rural areas within a 15-minute drive of a primary school, based on Level 2 urbanization	2021	Eurostat (2025) Urban-rural Europe - quality of life in rural areas	<a href="https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Urban-rural_Europe_-_quality_of_life_in_rural_areas">https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Urban-rural_Europe_-_quality_of_life_in_rural_areas</a>
Car travel performance, by degree of urbanization, (%)	2021	Eurostat (2025) Urban-rural Europe - quality of life in rural areas	<a href="https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Urban-rural_Europe_-_quality_of_life_in_rural_areas">https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Urban-rural_Europe_-_quality_of_life_in_rural_areas</a>
Percentage of people living in a house, by degree of urbanization,	2024	Eurostat (2025). Distribution of population by degree of urbanization, dwelling type, and income group	Eurostat <a href="https://doi.org/10.2908/ILC_LVHO01">https://doi.org/10.2908/ILC_LVHO01</a>
Distribution of the population by housing cost and degree of urbanization	2024	Eurostat (2025) Distribution of population by housing cost burden and degree of urbanization	Eurostat <a href="https://doi.org/10.2908/ILC_LVHO29">https://doi.org/10.2908/ILC_LVHO29</a>
Overall life satisfaction of the population (aged 16 and over) by degree of urbanization	2024	Eurostat (2025) Overall life satisfaction by income quintile, household composition, and degree of urbanization	Eurostat <a href="https://doi.org/10.2908/ILC_PW02">https://doi.org/10.2908/ILC_PW02</a>

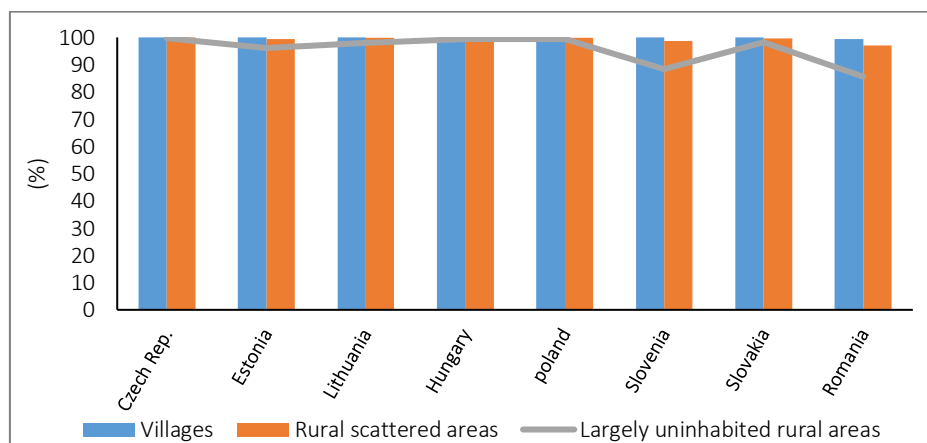
Source: Author’s processing based on Eurostat (2025).

The analysis is presented at the national level, and comparisons are made between the European Union average and a group of Central and Eastern European countries (Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Lithuania, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, and Slovakia). The choice of this geographic sample is based on the existence of comparable historical and structural features regarding the evolution of settlement systems, housing structure, and the dynamics of post-socialist socio-economic transformations, which allows for a coherent analysis of territorial convergences and divergences.

The analysis is conducted by comparing the percentage distributions and average values of the indicators across spatial types and across countries, with constant reference to the European Union average. The focus is on identifying rural–urban gradients, internal variations within rural areas, and transnational differences, rather than on estimating causal relationships.

### 3. Results and discussion

Figure 1 shows the proportion of the population living in rural areas that is within a 15-minute drive of the nearest primary school, based on Level 2 urbanization, for the year 2021, in several Central and Eastern European countries (Czech Republic, Estonia, Lithuania, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, Slovakia, and Romania). The indicator used reflects physical accessibility to primary education, considered one of the essential components of basic social infrastructure, with direct implications for territorial cohesion and equal opportunities.



**Figure 1. Population living in rural areas within a 15-minute drive of a primary school, by level 2 urbanization (2021)**

*Source: Author's processing based on Eurostat (2025).*

Overall, the distribution of values highlights a very high degree of accessibility in rural areas, with percentages approaching saturation (generally between 95% and 100%) for most of the countries and categories analyzed, which highlights the existence of a well-established territorial network of primary schools, characterized by good spatial coverage and planning that prioritizes proximity to the resident population.

However, a differentiated analysis by type of rural area reveals significant variations. In the case of villages proper and scattered rural areas, the values remain consistently at a very high level, with minimal differences between states, indicating a relative homogeneity of access that reflects the persistence of a traditional territorial model, based on the existence of the primary school as a local

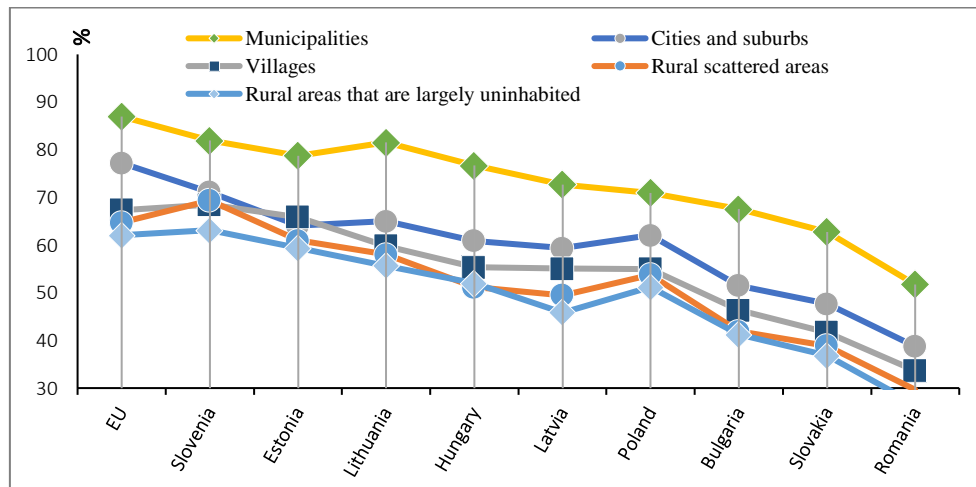
institution, integrated into the local network of settlements. The most pronounced differences appear in the category of largely uninhabited rural areas, where more noticeable declines in the proportion of the population living in proximity to a primary school are observed, with values dropping significantly in some states. This pattern highlights the direct relationship between population density, the continuity of the settlement network, and the efficiency of public service distribution. In areas characterized by high dispersion, long distances between homes and settlement centers, or natural barriers (fragmented terrain, extensive forested areas), maintaining uniform coverage becomes more difficult and entails higher logistical costs.

From a comparative perspective, countries such as the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, and Lithuania exhibit high stability of the indicator across all three rural categories, with minimal variations between territorial typologies, suggesting a functional integration of the educational network into the settlement structure, as well as an administrative tradition of balanced planning of social infrastructure. Estonia and Slovakia also follow a pattern of high accessibility, although some moderate differences are observed in areas with very low density. In contrast, Slovenia and Romania are characterized by a greater range of internal variations, particularly in the category of largely uninhabited rural areas, where values fall noticeably below the overall average. This situation can be linked to the specific characteristics of the territorial structure: the fragmented terrain, the dispersed settlement pattern, and the existence of areas with very low population density result in lower accessibility to basic educational services. In the case of Romania, the more pronounced difference between compact villages and sparsely populated areas suggests the existence of more pronounced internal territorial contrasts and a greater dependence on road infrastructure for access to services.

Analysis of the data presented in Figure 1 indicates that physical access to primary education in rural areas of the analyzed countries is, overall, very high and relatively evenly distributed. Existing disparities reflect not so much structural deficiencies in educational systems as geographical and demographic constraints. Areas with low population density, scattered settlements, or restrictive natural conditions tend to have lower levels of accessibility, even in the context of public policies aimed at territorial equity.

In this regard, Figure 1 highlights a regional model characterized by a balance between maintaining a local educational network and adapting to current demographic realities. The high level of the indicator suggests that physical access to primary education is, in most of the analyzed countries, a goal that has almost been achieved; however, differences among rural typologies underscore the persistence of vulnerabilities in sparsely populated areas. These require tailored solutions that consider territorial specifics and service costs to maintain an equitable level of access to basic educational services in the long term.

Figure 2 presents and analyses the performance of individual road transport (by car) in 2021, expressed as a percentage, according to the degree of urbanization, for the European Union (EU) and for a set of countries in Central and Eastern Europe. The indicator reflects the capacity of the road network and territorial organization to ensure efficient mobility for the population, analyzed across five spatial typologies: municipalities, cities and suburbs, villages, dispersed rural areas, and largely uninhabited rural areas.



**Figure 2. Transport performance by car, by degree of urbanization (2021)**

*Source: Author's processing based on Eurostat (2025).*

Overall, a clear gradient in transport performance is observed, correlated with the intensity of urbanization, and the highest values are consistently recorded in municipalities, where the percentages range, in most cases, between approximately 70% and 85%, both at the EU average level and in the analyzed countries. The data in Figure 2 reflect the high density of road infrastructure, good connectivity, and the concentration of economic and administrative functions, which favor fast and efficient travel by car. In cities and suburbs, transportation performance remains high, but it is consistently lower than in municipalities; this gap can be explained by the spatial expansion of peri-urban areas, where distances are greater and the road network structure is more heterogeneous. As the analysis shifts to rural areas, the indicator shows a gradual decline. In villages, values are consistently lower than in urban areas, generally ranging from 55–70% in most Central and Eastern European countries, with an EU average around the same range. This decline reflects a lower density of road infrastructure, reduced connectivity between localities, and greater dependence on major transport corridors.

The decline is more pronounced in dispersed rural areas and, especially, in largely uninhabited rural areas, where the indicator reaches its lowest values. In these areas, car transport performance is affected by the dispersion of housing, long distances between points of interest, and infrastructure limitations; this pattern highlights the direct relationship between settlement structure and mobility efficiency, confirming that road transport functions more efficiently in compact and densely populated areas.

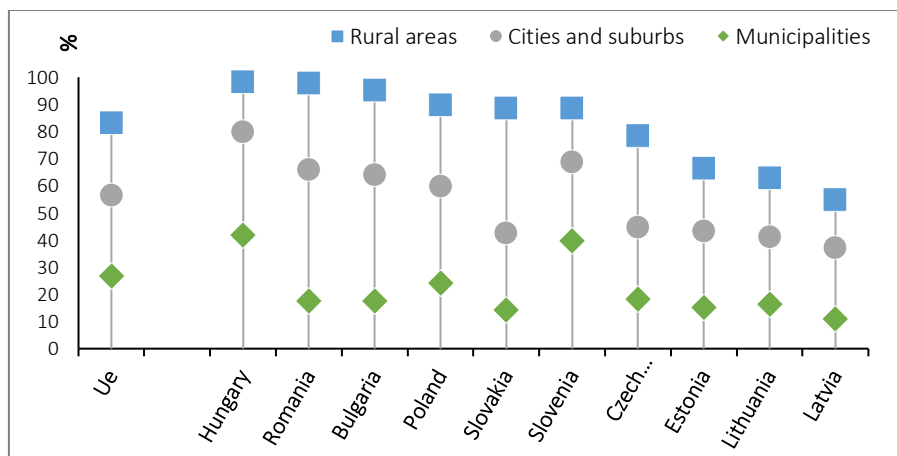
A comparative analysis across countries reveals significant territorial differences. Slovenia, Lithuania, and Estonia stand out with relatively high indicator values across all urbanization categories, suggesting a well-developed road infrastructure and good territorial integration. Hungary, Latvia, and Poland show intermediate levels, with a moderate decline in performance as one moves from urban to deeply rural areas. Bulgaria, Slovakia, and Romania fall below the regional average, with significantly lower values in all types of rural areas and even in some urban categories. In Romania's case, the decline is particularly pronounced in dispersed and sparsely populated rural areas, where the indicator drops to levels well below the EU average. This can be attributed to a less dense road infrastructure, uneven territorial connectivity, and the existence of physical and geographical barriers that affect mobility.

A comparison of national profiles thus reveals two major patterns: a model characterized by continuity and moderate variations across urbanization types (Slovenia, the Baltic states, Poland) and a model marked by stronger territorial contrasts, where transport performance drops sharply from urban to rural areas (Bulgaria, Slovakia, Romania). Transport performance is highest in compact urban areas, declines in peri-urban and rural areas, and reaches its lowest levels in sparsely populated areas—a pattern that highlights the decisive role of territorial density, infrastructure connectivity, and the spatial organization of settlements in shaping regional accessibility and mobility. Another indicator is the percentage distribution of people living in a household, by degree of urbanization. Descriptively, this indicator is consistently higher in rural areas than in urban areas for all analysed countries.

Figure 3 presents the share of people living in single-family homes (detached houses), by degree of urbanization, for the year 2024, comparing the European Union average with several countries in Central and Eastern Europe. The indicator is structured into three types of territories: rural areas, cities and suburbs, and municipalities (dense urban centers).

The EU average indicates that approximately 83% of rural residents live in single-family homes, compared to about 56% in cities and suburbs and approximately 26% in municipalities. This downward trend as the degree of urbanization increases remains consistent across all included countries.

In rural areas, the figures are very high in Hungary and Romania (approximately 100%), followed by Bulgaria (~95%) and Poland (~90–92%). Slovakia and Slovenia show similar values (~88–90%), while the Czech Republic, Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia have lower but still majority levels (~55–78%).



**Figure 3. Percentage of people living in a house, by degree of urbanization, 2024**

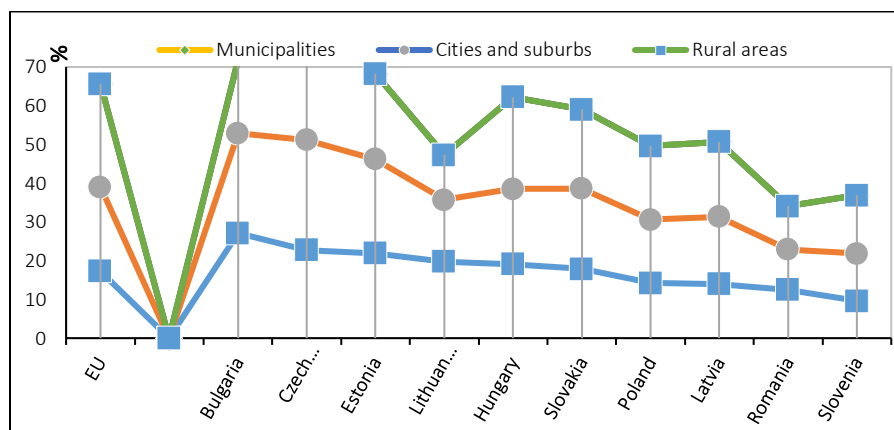
*Source: Author's processing based on Eurostat (2025).*

These differences suggest a predominance of house-dwelling in rural Eastern Europe, traditionally associated with individual ownership structures and low population densities. In cities and suburbs, the proportion of people living in single-family homes drops significantly. Hungary stands out with a high level (~80%), above the EU average, while Romania, Bulgaria, and Slovenia fall within the 64–69% range. Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and the Baltic states record lower values (~37–60%), indicating a higher proportion of collective housing in these urban areas.

In municipalities, the figures are the lowest, reflecting the predominance of apartment-style housing. Hungary (~42%) and Slovenia (~40%) have the highest proportions of single-family home occupancy in

this type of dense urban environment, while Romania and Bulgaria stand at approximately 17–18%. The lowest values are observed in Slovakia ( $\approx 14\%$ ) and Latvia ( $\approx 11\%$ ), confirming a residential structure strongly oriented toward apartment buildings in urban centers. By comparison, Romania stands out due to a strong polarization: an almost total share of single-family homes in rural areas, high values in cities and suburbs, and a sharp decline in municipalities.

Figure 4 highlights the distribution of the population in 2024 based on housing costs (the share of people in the high-cost housing category), differentiated by degree of urbanization: municipalities, cities, and suburbs, as well as rural areas.



**Figure 4. Population distribution by housing costs and degree of urbanization (2024)**  
 Source: Author's processing based on Eurostat (2025).

The indicator highlights systematic differences between residential environments, with greater financial pressure in densely populated urban areas.

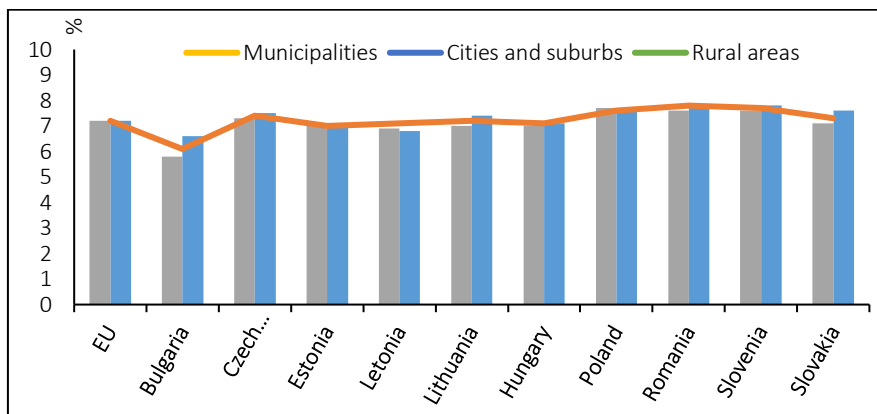
At the EU level, approximately 26–27% of the population in municipalities faces a high housing cost burden, compared to about 21–22% in cities and suburbs and approximately 17% in rural areas. This pattern indicates a direct link between urbanization and housing cost pressure, driven by higher rents, property prices, and associated expenses in major urban centers.

The Czech Republic stands out with the highest figures in municipalities ( $\approx 34\%$ ), significantly exceeding the EU average, suggesting a tight urban housing market. High figures are also observed in Hungary ( $\approx 23\text{--}24\%$ ), Slovakia ( $\approx 20\text{--}21\%$ ), Latvia, and Poland ( $\approx 19\text{--}20\%$ ). In these countries, housing costs disproportionately affect the urban population, particularly in capitals and large cities. In Bulgaria, the picture is different: the highest share is recorded in rural areas ( $\approx 27\text{--}28\%$ ), followed by cities and suburbs ( $\approx 25\text{--}26\%$ ), while municipalities show lower values ( $\approx 19\%$ ). This distribution suggests pronounced socioeconomic vulnerabilities in rural areas, where lower incomes amplify the impact of housing costs, even though these are, in absolute terms, lower than in urban areas.

Estonia presents a relatively balanced profile, with similar figures in cities and suburbs ( $\approx 24\text{--}25\%$ ) and slightly lower levels in municipalities and rural areas ( $\approx 22\text{--}23\%$ ). Lithuania presents an atypical situation, where municipalities have the lowest share ( $\approx 11\text{--}12\%$ ), and rural areas have higher values ( $\approx 20\%$ ), indicating a reversed distribution of housing cost pressure.

Romania and Slovenia are characterized by the lowest overall shares of the population affected by housing costs. In Romania, the figures are around 10–12% across all types of areas, and in Slovenia between  $\approx 10\%$  in rural areas and  $\approx 15\%$  in municipalities. These levels suggest relatively moderate housing pressure at the national level, possibly associated with high homeownership rates and lower mortgage costs.

Figure 5 below illustrates the level of overall life satisfaction (scale 0–10) for the population aged 16 and older in 2024, broken down by degree of urbanization (municipalities, cities and suburbs, rural areas) for the EU and a set of Central and Eastern European countries. The indicator shows moderate but systematic variations, both between countries and between types of areas.



**Figure 5. Overall life satisfaction among the population (aged 16 and older), by level of urbanization, (2024)**

*Source: Author's processing based on Eurostat (2025).*

At the EU level, average satisfaction is relatively high and consistent ( $\approx 7.1$ – $7.2$ ), with minimal differences between municipalities, cities/suburbs, and rural areas, suggesting a general balance in living conditions across residential environments on a European scale. In most of the countries analyzed, there is a slight tendency toward higher values in municipalities compared to rural areas, but the magnitude of the differences is small (typically less than 0.3–0.4 points). This convergence indicates that the degree of urbanization influences life satisfaction to a limited extent, compared to other structural factors (income, public services, socio-economic stability).

Bulgaria stands out for having the lowest levels of life satisfaction, particularly in rural areas ( $\approx 5.8$ ) and in cities/suburbs ( $\approx 6.1$ ), with slightly higher values in municipalities ( $\approx 6.5$ ). This profile suggests the persistence of socio-economic imbalances, which are more pronounced outside major urban centers. The Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Hungary cluster around intermediate values ( $\approx 7.0$ – $7.4$ ), with limited variations across residential environments. In these countries, rural–urban differences are minor and do not indicate a systematic disadvantage for rural areas in terms of subjective well-being.

The highest levels of life satisfaction are recorded in Romania, Slovenia, and Poland ( $\approx 7.6$ – $7.8$ ), particularly in municipalities. In these cases, dense urban areas appear to concentrate advantages related to economic opportunities and access to services, reflected in a more favorable subjective assessment of life. However, even in these countries, satisfaction in rural areas remains relatively high,

indicating a convergence in perceived quality of life. Slovakia presents a slightly atypical profile, with relatively similar values between cities/suburbs and municipalities and a somewhat lower level in rural areas ( $\approx 7.0$ ), suggesting a modest but consistent differentiation to the detriment of rural areas.

The data indicate a more pronounced transnational variation than an internal rural–urban variation. The degree of urbanization has a secondary effect on life satisfaction, while the overall level of subjective well-being can be considered to be determined predominantly by country-specific macro-structural and institutional factors.

#### 4. Conclusions

A comparative analysis of the differences between rural and urban areas in Central and Eastern European countries highlights the existence of coherent and relatively persistent territorial structures, shaped both by the legacy of post-socialist transformations and by the current characteristics of spatial organization, infrastructure, and resource distribution.

The results suggest that the degree of urbanization continues to significantly influence living conditions, though the intensity of this effect varies depending on the dimension analyzed and the specific characteristics of each national context.

Regarding access to essential services, the data indicate that primary educational infrastructure is, in most of the countries analyzed, well distributed even in rural areas, reflecting the continuity of territorial models based on proximity. The maintenance of an extensive network of primary schools, despite demographic decline and administrative reorganizations, suggests a certain institutional stability in the planning of basic services. However, the discrepancies observed in very sparsely populated or dispersed rural areas point to the existence of structural limitations associated with low population density and geographical conditions, which may restrict actual access to education in certain areas.

Regarding mobility, the differences between urban and rural areas are much more evident. High levels of road transport performance in municipalities contrast with a gradual decline in this indicator as the area becomes less urbanized, with the lowest values recorded in dispersed rural areas.

This distribution highlights the decisive role of infrastructure and the territorial organization of settlements in shaping accessibility. At the same time, variations between countries suggest the existence of distinct national models of transport network development, in which territorial contrasts are more pronounced in some contexts than in others. The structure of housing, in turn, confirms a clear spatial pattern. Single-family homes predominate in rural areas, remain common in towns and suburbs, and become a minority in dense urban centers. These differences reflect not only the dynamics of urbanization but also the historical characteristics of the housing stock and property regimes. At the same time, the burden of housing costs tends to be higher in compact urban areas, while in rural areas the financial pressure is generally lower, although certain countries highlight situations where socioeconomic vulnerabilities amplify the impact of costs even outside major cities. In contrast to these objective dimensions, the level of life satisfaction shows less pronounced variations across residential environments. Rural–urban differences are, in most cases, moderate, suggesting that perceptions of well-being are influenced to a greater extent by macroeconomic and institutional factors than by the

degree of urbanization itself. This relative closeness of values indicates a certain convergence in perceptions of quality of life, even in the presence of structural differences between types of territories.

The results show that the rural–urban relationship in Central and Eastern Europe is complex and cannot be reduced to a simple opposition between advantaged and disadvantaged areas. While some dimensions, such as access to primary education, suggest a high level of territorial balance, others, particularly mobility and connectivity, remain strongly dependent on the spatial structure and density of settlements.

These findings highlight the need for public interventions tailored to territorial specificities, capable of responding to the internal diversity of rural areas and avoiding one-size-fits-all solutions.

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