

From Traps to Transformations

MARGISTAR WG2 Final Report

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1. Introduction

Envisioning a desirable and achievable vision for rural and mountain areas in Europe is no easy task when regional disparities and ‘peripheral traps’ cloud the horizon. This is no coincidence; there are deep-rooted structural barriers. Although these territories are strategically essential for sustainable development—delivering critical ecosystem services such as water resources, renewable energy, and food security, alongside preserving unique socio-ecological landscapes—they face compounding systemic challenges conceptualised in MARGISTAR as polytraps. Interacting demographic, economic, environmental, and institutional pressures systematically exacerbate territorial inequalities, and create self-reinforcing lock-inns that are difficult to escape. For example, the negative feedback loops generated by aging populations, outmigration, land abandonment, severe connectivity constraints, the contraction of public service provision, and diminished local administrative capacities deeply impact these areas, leading to spiral of decline, referred also as rural shrinkage. While these interconnected dynamics constantly result in classification of remote mountainous regions as left behind zones, such label oversimplifies highly complex territorial realities. The challenge is multiplied when we consider that, all too often, policymakers fail to comprehend the complexity of these compounding problems or act with the urgency that the local realities demand, given the specific features of their territorial context (Melnykovych et al. 2026). This wide territorial diversity is examined in depth across two forthcoming special issues in peer reviewed journals: 1) Mountain Research and Development (2026) and 2) Sustainability Science (2027). In the present report, we do not cite individual papers from these special issues but provide a general knowledge synthesis of the MARGISTAR findings.

In addressing this complexity, MARGISTAR Working Group 2 (WG2) focused on three key contributions: 1) introduced and elaborated concept of polytraps to capture the compounding problems and their diverse manifestations, 2) identified desirable future visions by participatory methods with mountainous communities in four locations, and 3) outlined transformation strategies and innovation processes for territorial revitalization, and post-marginalization. This report starts with the desirable future visions, setting a co-created normative yardstick towards which to proceed. It continues with an examination of interconnected problems conceptualized as polytraps that are often block the realization of these desirable futures. It ends by identifying strategies across individual, local, and national and EU policy levels that can help escape the traps and catalyse post-marginalization. The configuration of these themes goes beyond the academic perspective. WG2 has operated as a dynamic space dedicated to bridging science, policy, and society, actively facilitating the exchange and co-production of knowledge. Rather than focusing only on generating knowledge for policymakers, this approach also emphasises collaborative problem-solving. This report therefore draws on the results of the tools used throughout MARGISTAR: a catalogue of 25 case studies; a three-round Delphi panel involving MARGISTAR experts; workshops and questionnaires with experts from the MARGISTAR network; and specific workshops on visions and pathways held with local stakeholders in four locations.

2. MARGISTAR WG 2 Framework: Visions, Traps, and Pathways

To synthesize knowledge gained with these tools, the WG2 framework is structured across three continuous, interconnected phases: knowledge co-creation, synthesis, and brokering (see Figure 1). First, the diverse data generated from the workshops, case studies, and expert panels are systematically fed into an iterative knowledge synthesis. Within this loop, the consortium collaboratively analyses current polytraps, defines shared visions of post-marginalization, and outlines actionable transformation pathways. Ultimately, this synthesized evidence is translated into a novel knowledge brokering strategy aimed at pinching policymakers which establishes a new approach to science-policy-practice interfacing and capacity building; ensuring that these insights are translated into actionable, collaborative strategies for mountain revitalization.

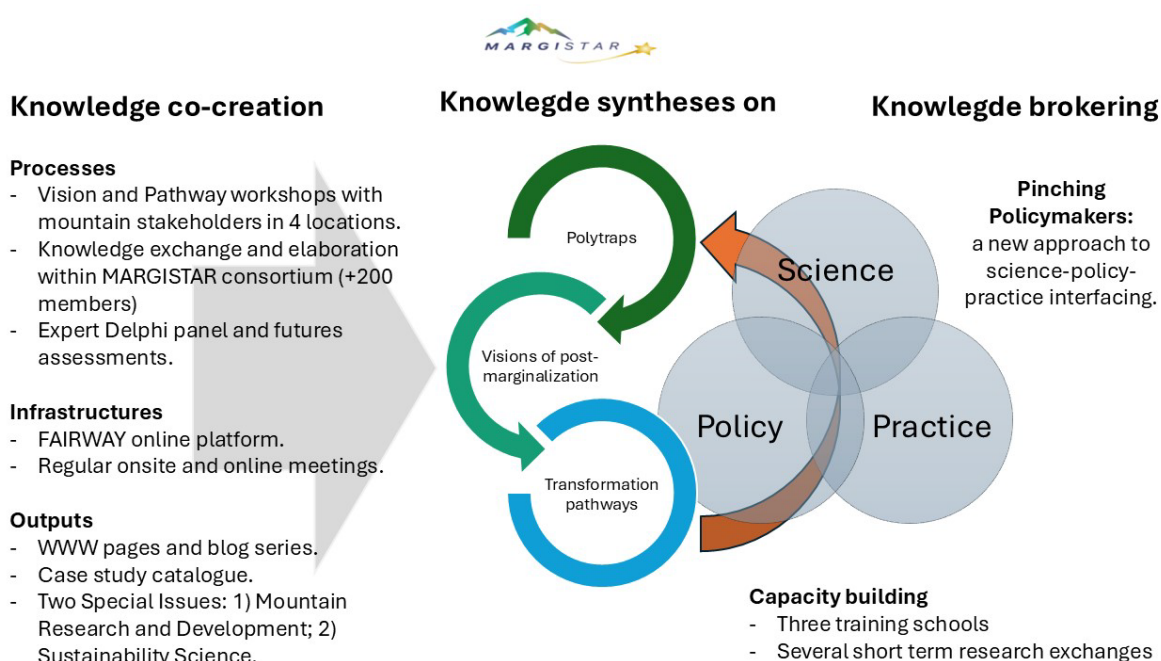


Figure 1. MARGISTAR WG2 framework.

Beyond traditional data collection, MARGISTAR prioritised situated research. The methodology integrated continuous in-situ working meetings, which always included a field trip day and meetings with local people. Through this approach, MARGISTAR was able to reflect and refine its findings with mountain experts and stakeholders, which was further supported by blogs and stories compiled during the visits to various regions of Europe.



Figure 2. MARGISTAR members meet the Karlobag Municipality tourist board in Baške Oštarije during 7th Management in Gospić.



Figure 3. Father and son farmers explain to MARGISTAR members the traditions and challenges of viticulture in the region of Axarquía, Málaga, Spain.

3. Visions: Desirable and Achievable Futures for Remote Mountainous Regions

Thus, over the last four years, MARGISTAR has worked closely with stakeholders from different geographical areas to understand the challenges they are facing, to gather their visions for revitalisation, and to identify ways forward. Along the way, we discovered that having a vision for the territory is uneven. Some local leaders know exactly what kind of future they want to build, while others, have fewer clear ideas on what their region could become in the future.

To capture these diverse realities, the Case Study Catalogue on Marginalised Mountain Areas in Europe compiles a collection of 25 local examples covering from Lapland to the Mediterranean, and from the Carpathians to the Iberian Peninsula. By exploring the specific challenges and opportunities of these areas, the catalogue provides a comparative perspective on how different regions approach modernization, conservation, and resilience-building. Below are some of the key stakeholders' visions for revitalizing the mountainous regions presented in the case study catalogue (Ficko et al., 2026):

- **Vorarlberg, Austria (1):** The vision is that these communities should create inclusive spaces for social engagement between migrants and locals to foster a sense of belonging and well-being.
- **Risovac, Bosnia and Hercegovina (2):** Residents do not believe in the rapid revitalization of the area. Over the years, they have experienced a loss of faith in the potential for the area.
- **Northern Finland, Finland (6):** Reindeer herders report a feeling that, after overcoming one crisis, another awaits them. The dream of reindeer herders is to ensure continuance of the traditional nature-based livelihood for future generations.
- **Piltown and Fiddown, Ireland (7):** The community envisions a future where delivering future-proof, high-speed broadband is the best investment. Some local experiences demonstrate how community-led efforts can address critical infrastructure gaps, offering a blueprint for other rural areas facing similar digital challenges.
- **Camonica Valley, Italy (9):** Although not yet formalized, stakeholders envision a resilient and sustainable future through climate adaptation, nature-based solutions, eco-friendly economies, and strong community cohesion.
- **Karst region, Turkey (23):** The vision highlights the need for proactive management of soil health and ecosystem services. Stakeholders emphasize integrating climate change considerations to develop adaptive frameworks that address future risks.

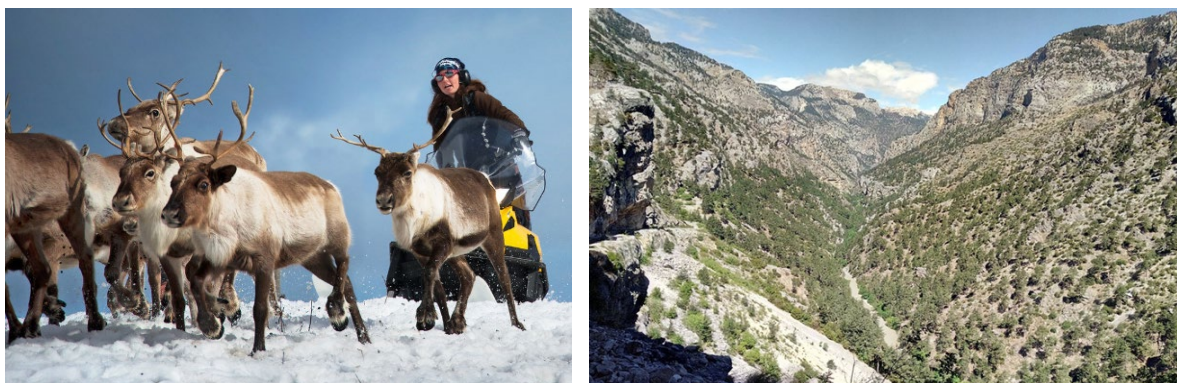


Figure 4. Reindeer herding, Women of the Polar Circle (Source: Annica Länta – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0). Taurus Mountains, Türkiye.

To systematically capture and shape such diverse territorial visions, dedicated participatory tools are essential. In this context, Lynn et al. (2026a) highlight the vital role of participatory visioning in empowering mountain communities to articulate shared aspirations and co-create desirable rural futures. When explicitly justice oriented and collaborative, this visioning process serves as a key element for sustainable rural transformation. To pursue this, Lynn et al., (forthcoming-a) introduced the Vision Workshop (VW), a structured facilitation tool designed to guide communities from voicing concerns to actively shaping their vision through a organise, metaphor-driven process that balances imagination with everyday pragmatism .

Applying this tool on the ground allowed MARGISTAR to capture the full scope and complexity of interconnected local traps. As evidenced by the territorial data gathered during these workshops, problems do not occur in isolation; rather, they mutually reinforce each other across highly specific local contexts. The VW was piloted in four different European contexts: Gospic', Croatia; Faraján, Spain, Ireland; and the Deatnu Watershed at the border of Finland and Norway. Below are the main challenges identified by stakeholders in mountain areas in three of the four case studies, which illustrate these interrelated realities in Europe's mountain regions (Lynn et al., forthcoming-a):

- In **Gospić, Lika-Senj, Croatia**, the key problems are depopulation, weak development strategies, limited civic engagement, and inadequate housing and social services. The vision for the area is affordable housing and diversified economies anchored in clean industries and sustainable tourism.
- While **Faraján, Málaga, Spain**, also faces depopulation problems, weak infrastructure, limited services, and bureaucratic hurdles, their vision is to have inclusive governance mechanisms and administrative simplification.
- Another example is the **Deatnu/Tana/Teno Watershed, Finland/Norway**, where its two major problems are the disruption of livelihoods and cultural practices due to salmon fishing restrictions, and the tension between majority-language economic priorities and Indigenous rights-based claims. Its vision is also based on inclusive governance mechanisms and administrative simplification.
- In **Castleisland, Ireland** challenges included aging demographics, infrastructural deficits, and limited opportunities for youth. Castleisland participants articulated immediate and pragmatic needs, such as service provision and facilities, rather than systemic institutional innovations. Vision statements emphasized the importance of retaining young people through improved amenities, training opportunities, and diversified livelihoods.

4. POLYTRAPS: COMPOUNDED, SELF-REINFORCING ENTRAPMENT

While these visions clearly illustrate where stakeholders want to go, achieving them requires understanding the complex barriers that explain why they cannot currently get there. In order for decision-makers to understand the urgency of taking action, we initially need to explain how the problem works and truly comprehend the complexity of the challenges facing mountainous areas. Based on collaborative analysis with experts within MARGISTAR, we confirmed that the classic concept of the ‘development trap’ is insufficient to explain the reality of European mountains. Our findings changed our perspective, as we discovered that the problem is not driven by separate challenges (e.g. institutional rigidity, sectoral lock ins, climate change, economic disparity, outmigration) but emerges as messy knot, where solutions to one aspect of the problem may intensify others. The territorial reality in Europe is characterised by ‘*polytraps*’ (Sarkki et al., 2025).

The polytrap definition was elaborated within the MARGISTAR consortium. Building on that work, within Special Issue 2 it was reviewed MARGISTAR expert definitions of polytraps and revealed four conceptual framings of polytraps: (1) as socio-economic conditions; (2) management and decision-making situations; (3) sets of challenges, and (4) self-reinforcing cycles. The most preferred definition describes polytraps as “a set of interconnected socio-economic, environmental, and institutional challenges that reinforce cycles of disadvantage and limit access

to resources, technology, and participation in mainstream development processes” (MARGISTAR Special issue 2).

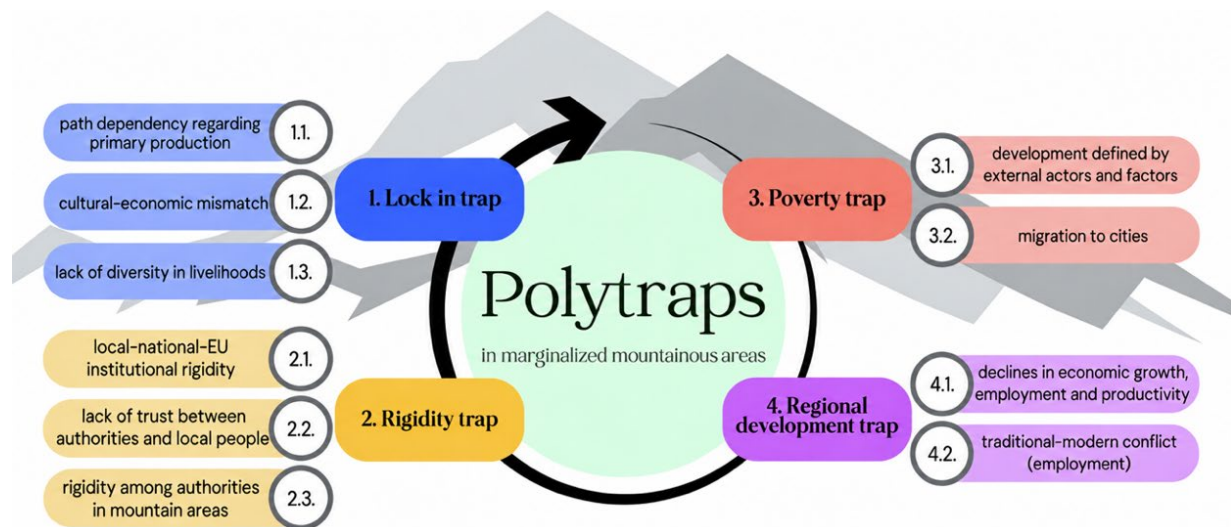


Figure 5. The four dimensions of Polytraps. Source: Sarkki et al, 2025.

What does this mean in practice? It implies that regions are trapped in a mutually reinforcing cycle of interconnected adverse dynamics. As evidenced by experts across 31 countries, these traps come bundled. On the one hand, dynamics such as poverty, economic lock-in and regional stagnation collide, exacerbating inequality. Specifically, marginalized territories are caught simultaneously in four dimensions: a rigidity trap (institutional inertia), a poverty trap (lack of opportunities for people), a lock-in trap (sectoral path-dependency), and a regional development trap (declining geography). (Sarkki et al. 2025). Apart from that, a study conducted by Lynn et al. (2026b - Special Issue 2) reveal that a strong reliance on digital solutions for creating novel opportunities for mountainous regions may also lead to a new trap. Digitalization and connectivity without the capacity to take advantage of related opportunities can lead to the entrapment of those without digital skills and motivation to use digital solutions.

Perhaps the most critical finding is that these traps are sustained by the system’s own inertia. Current political and economic systems strongly resist transformative change, block innovations generated at the local level and limit local opportunities. In fact, MARGISTAR evidence shows that policy itself is often part of the trap. Rigid, vertically connected institutions tend to generate mistrust, and isolated, sector-by-sector instruments (such as certain applications of the CAP and Cohesion funds) frequently overlook mountain-specific realities, leading to a ‘bouncing back’ to a status quo that no longer works. Consequently, maladaptation becomes rational; choices that make perfect economic sense for individuals—young people outmigration or prioritisation of short-term resource extraction—collectively strip these regions of services, jobs, and landscapes. This dynamic drives depopulation, which 82% of MARGISTAR experts rank as the number one challenge (Lynn et al., 2026a).

This lack of progress, which is evident at all levels and frustrates both the potential of individuals and that of institutions, leads to a key conclusion, the complexity of the problem lies in its interconnectedness. In tackling mountain development, we are not facing a single problem, but multiple traps; therefore, poverty cannot be eradicated without breaking down institutional rigidity, because all these traps occur simultaneously. Fixing one at a time simply does not work. Although these areas are caught in the same interconnected cycle of polytraps, such as lock-in, institutional rigidity, poverty, and regional development traps, the solutions cannot be standardised as polytraps manifest in diverse ways across the European mountainous regions. Accordingly, policymakers must territorialise their initiatives to dismantle the specific traps constraining their local context.

The results of a group of experts on European mountain and remote rural areas from eighteen European countries who were asked seven structured questions about the next 10-20 years, share common understandings of the future of rural and mountainous areas:

"The greatest risk is not that a single problem will arise, but that these regions enter a 'vicious circle' in which several crises feed off one another - a decline in both economic production and ecological resilience; a 'vacuum' where neither food can be produced nor nature protected, leaving only elderly and isolated communities behind."

"If things go badly, we face multiple simultaneous crises: a distorted housing market, wildlife-human conflicts, and more and more emergencies after large extreme-weather events - windthrow and bark-beetle outbreaks with no sanitation felling, because forest roads are badly maintained and there is no workforce."

"An important but often overlooked issue is the gradual loss of traditional land-use practices, such as seasonal transhumance, which leads to the decline of mountain cultural landscapes and their associated biodiversity."

Source: Lynn et al., 2026a

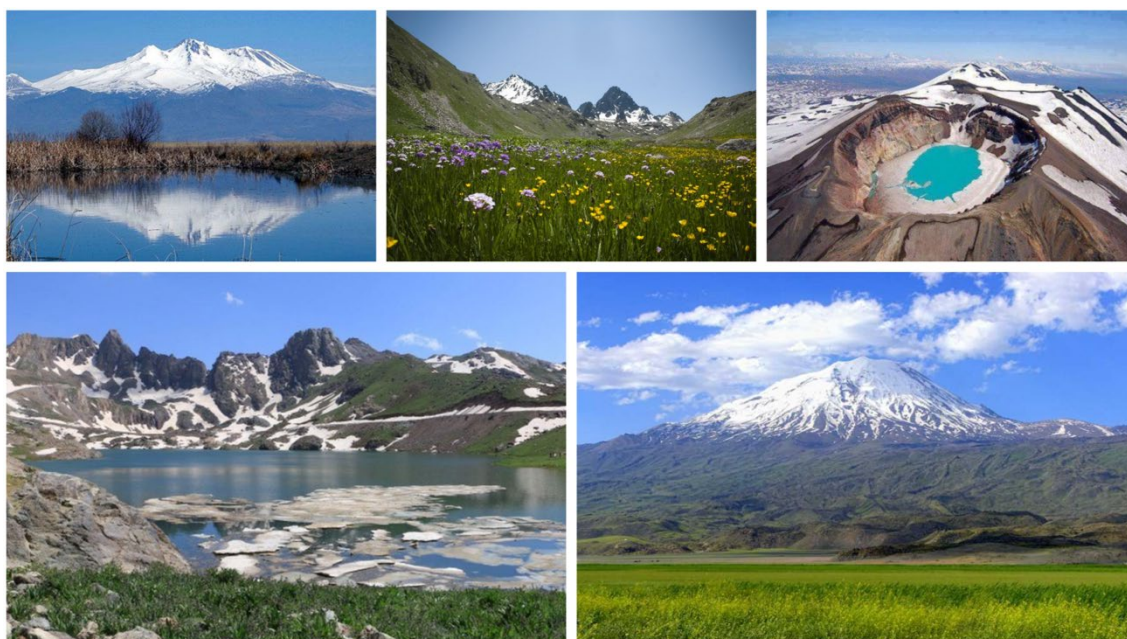


Figure 6. Clockwise beginning from the top left: Ağrı Mountain, Cilo Mountain, Süphan Mountain, Kaçkar Mountains, Erciyes Mountain.

These traps are the result of several interacting drivers. To better understand these dynamics, the drivers were assessed using an online Delphi panel conducted by Lynn et al (forthcoming-b). The central output of this process is an impact-uncertainty matrix. Using the agreed classification, the preliminary results of the Delphi panel show five critical uncertainties with high impact and high uncertainty: mismatch between climate change speed and local adaptive capacity; biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation; climate change adaptation; overdependence on tourism; and water scarcity. Additionally, twenty-two important future drivers with high impact but lower uncertainty. These remain central to any view of the region's future, but they read as expected directions of travel rather than open uncertainties. The strongest on impact are climate change effects and increasing natural hazards (e.g. floods, wildfires, storms), outmigration and depopulation.

5. Pathways to Escape Polytraps

The realities of mountainous regions are complex, and local stakeholders are continuously navigating this multidimensional landscape to foster regional resilience. Todorova et al. (2026 - Special Issue 2) show that “Although the analysis revealed a highly reactive system where threshold variables such as climate change, forest, and depopulation exert extremely strong pressure, the adaptive variables (tourism, agriculture, business capacity) have the potential to reinforce the adaptive capacity of the system, especially if policies and institutional responses adequately support this process.” Such an assessment provides hope that there are ways to escape polytraps. To facilitate this process and provide actionable guidance, specific transition pathways have been identified. Thus, based on the MARGISTAR case study catalogue we outline below the primary pathways proposed to effectively address the challenges in marginalized mountain areas. To structure these responses effectively, the pathways are organised into three distinct yet interconnected typologies:

1. Individual choices

At the micro-level, transition pathways begin with the difficult decisions made by residents every day. These include the dilemma between outmigration and land abandonment on the one hand, and the proactive choice to stay, adapt, and develop new livelihoods on the other. Within the framework of MARGISTAR, research by Sarkki et al. (2025) reveals that while depopulation manifests as an individual choice, it ultimately lies at the centre of rural shrinkage processes. Reflecting this finding, Figure 7 outlines depopulation in mountainous areas as the central challenge, connects it to a set of other challenges in mountainous regions, and presents some ideas on how it could be addressed.

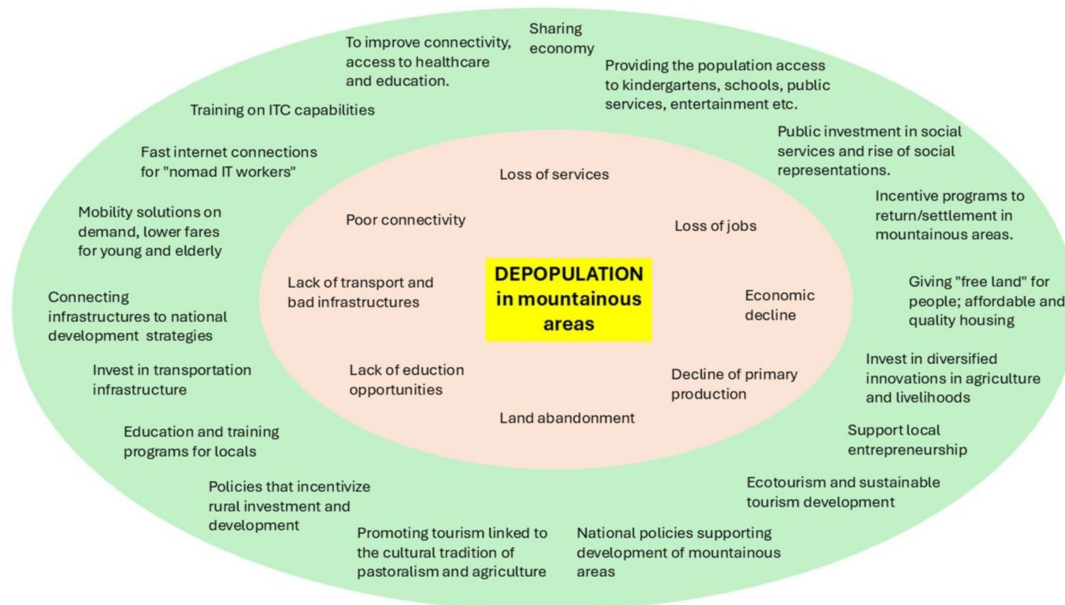


Figure 7. Depopulation in mountainous regions as a complex challenge. Issues within the orange circle represent challenges driving depopulation, while issues in the green circle identify plausible solutions to address the complex challenge manifested as individual choices having collective and long-term implications for mountainous development (Source: Sarkki et al., 2025).

2. Place-based solutions

To encourage positive individual decisions and counteract outmigration, it is essential to foster localised, grassroots strategies. Building from the participatory Vision Workshops (Lynn et al., forthcoming-b) and the MARGISTAR Case Study Catalogue (Ficko et al., 2026), this synthesis groups together the main grassroots initiatives designed to empower mountain communities. Below is a brief description of each alternative:

- **Community engagement and social innovation:** Regions promoted volunteerism (e.g., Austria) and collaborative projects for social integration. Community-driven broadband (e.g., Ireland) improved connectivity, while local traditions drove tourism-based development (e.g., Croatia, Italy, Montenegro).
- **Economic development and entrepreneurship:** Strategies include business incubation and financial incentives for local producers (e.g., Portugal, Slovakia). However, success requires a minimum level of financial and human capital, as workforce shortages have hindered viability elsewhere (e.g., Czech Republic, Croatia).
- **Infrastructure and digital solutions:** Bottom-up connectivity initiatives, like community-led broadband (e.g., Ireland), proved decisive. Conversely, top-down infrastructure investments often struggled to succeed due to underlying regional economic constraints (e.g., Slovakia, Czech Republic).
- **Research-informed development strategies:** Collaborating with academic stakeholders provides vital expertise and funding. Proposed research fields to support communities

include social integration, sustainable tourism, climate resilience, governance development, and digital innovation.

3. Policy solutions

Finally, individual and local initiatives cannot survive in isolation; they must be supported by structural changes at higher levels of governance as is explained below:

- **National policy and governance interventions:** Solutions involve regulatory adjustments (e.g., Ukraine), public-private partnerships (e.g., Slovakia, Norway), and multi-stakeholder ecosystem governance (e.g., Spain, Turkey). Surprisingly, EU agricultural and cohesion policies were not cited as primary leverage factors (Ficko et al., 2026).
Regional and cross-border solutions: Addressing complex socioecological challenges requires cross-border solutions that foster cooperation among mountain programmes and are grounded in place-based policies, adaptative governance and stronger science-policy-practices, highlighted especially in Special Issue 1. A documented experience whiting MARGISTAR work are the Carpathian Mountains including the Skolivski Beskydy mountain range in western Ukraine, the Tatra Mountains (the highest peaks of the Carpathians), and Vlad Crişan's case study in the Romanian Western Carpathians (Ficko et al., 2026).
- **EU level solutions:** At this level, interventions focus directly on European policies, which might fundamentally improve their priorities, funding, design, and implementation. To achieve this, MARGISTAR actively addresses European decision-making by applying the “Pinching Policymakers” approach, which translates consortium research into direct policy solutions. Through this framework, MARGISTAR synthesised 10 key policy problems into “pinches”, crisp messages specifically designed to awaken the interest of policymakers by evoking the normative tension between current policies and their intended objectives. Complementing this work MARGISTAR has also published a new *Issues Paper, Escaping the Periphery Trap: Voices on the futures of Europe’s remote rural and mountain regions* (Lynn et al., 2026a) which explore the challenges and possible futures over the next 10-20 years to create more resilient mountain regions. The key messages is the need to reframe this narrative: European remote rural and mountain areas are not passive, disadvantaged regions requiring compensatory aid, but rather fundamental pillars for ensuring the continent’s climate resilience, energy security, food systems and biodiversity.

4. Solutions at science-policy interface

Under the MARGISTAR framework, solutions at the science-policy interface are driven by the novel “pinching policymakers” approach, which fosters transformative governance across mountainous regions. Unlike conventional models, this method introduces an explicitly normative, tensional dynamic that uses playful yet constructive moral discomfort to open safe

deliberative spaces. By confronting policymakers with the impacts of existing agendas, it makes complex territorial challenges tangible, relatable, and impossible to ignore while simultaneously pointing toward actionable solutions (Sarkki et al., 2026b).

6. Key Take-Away Messages

Synthesizing the collective evidence and transition pathways developed across MARGISTAR, the following key takeaways highlight the core priorities needed to foster resilient mountain futures:

- **The capacity to escape polytraps is uneven: There is no one-size-fits-all vision for mountain regions, there are a diversity of insights.** There is an uneven development potential across mountain regions.
- **We are facing interconnected traps, not isolated problems:** Mountain regions are often caught in polytraps, mutually reinforcing cycles of adverse dynamics. Overcoming this is difficult because current political and economic systems heavily resist transformative change, often block grassroots innovation and limiting local opportunities. Action must be taken simultaneously across all sectors and levels of governance so that regions can overcome the four dimensions of the polytraps.
- **Solutions must be deeply territorialised through a paradigm shift:** Fund places, not sectors. Given that these complex polytraps manifest differently on the ground, generic policies will remain insufficient. Policymakers must territorialise their initiatives, tailoring their strategies to dismantle the specific barriers constraining each unique local context. Specifically, the European Commission and Parliament must add a mountain-specific, place-based strand to post-2027 Cohesion Policy and CAP that finances local self-organisation directly (e.g., rural hubs, co-management, and livelihood diversification).
- **Climate and demography will dictate the future:** The expert Delphi panels identified five critical uncertainties that will make or break mountain areas, mismatch between climate change speed and local adaptive capacity; biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation; climate change adaptation; overdependence on tourism.
- **Authorities must ensure that staying in mountainous and rural areas is a viable option:** Issues like severe natural hazards (wildfires, floods), outmigration, and depopulation are no longer uncertainties, they are the expected. National and regional governments can only reverse this perception by ensuring access to basic services, connectivity, housing, and education, and by bringing local stakeholders into the co-management of their territories to rebuild trust.

7. References

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Reference note:

This report is grounded in the collective research and co-creation activities conducted within the MARGISTAR consortium and its Working Group 2 (WG2). Specifically, the synthesis is based on the aforementioned research alongside several project resources: a catalogue of 26 diverse European case studies led by Ficko et al. (forthcoming), the participatory Vision Workshops developed by Lynn et al. (forthcoming-a), whose structured facilitation guide is publicly accessible via the FAIRWAY online platform, and a three-round Delphi panel involving MARGISTAR experts (Lynn et al., forthcoming-b).

Additional scientific findings, in-depth case analyses, and theoretical advancements developed within the MARGISTAR framework are currently in progress across two forthcoming special issues, encompassing approximately 15 peer-reviewed papers:

- Mountain Research and Development (MRD): Special Issue entitled “Governance Pathways for Reviving Left-Behind Mountain Regions” (Vol. 46, No. 3, in progress). Guest Editors: Stanislava Brnkalakova, Ana Margarida Silva, Yaşar Selman Gültekin, Simo Sarkki, and Mariana Melnykovich.
- Sustainability Science: Special Feature entitled “Polytraps in European Mountainous Regions”. Guest Editors: Simo Sarkki, Antonio T. Monteiro, and Mahsa Motlagh.

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