



Article

Grounded Youth - Building spatial futures in declining European regions

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Abstract

Across Europe, economically and demographically declining regions offer limited educational and occupational opportunities for young people. These opportunities are often restricted further for those in vulnerable life situations, as vulnerabilities are connected to and impacted by limited resources and capacities. While many young Europeans move from declining to more thriving regions in search of better educational and labour market opportunities, some choose—or are forced by their circumstances—to stay. We focus on this latter group of “grounded” youth, their agency, opportunities, and capabilities to build futures in declining regions across Europe. Based on socio-economic, demographic, and educational data from the statistical office of the European Union, we selected Gabrovo (Bulgaria), Halle (Saale) (Germany), Kainuu (Finland), and Tâmega e Sousa (Portugal) for a comparative analysis.

This article investigates the reasons and reasonings behind young people’s immobility. We use narrative biographical interviews with young adults (age 18–30; N=35) living in declining European regions to



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examine how young Europeans construct their life courses in the context of limited opportunity structures, educational spaces, and social circumstances. The interviews were conducted in 2024. We use a spatial justice approach to address the effects of limited opportunity structures paired with intersecting vulnerabilities on young people's agency, perceptions of space, and strategies to adapt. The results show that staying in declining regions is not a homogeneous condition, with localised social relationships helping to explain how diverse approaches of staying grounded—firmly, passively, conditionally—are enabled and sustained.

Keywords: young people, declining regions, vulnerabilities, spatial justice, opportunity structures

Introduction

The word grounded has a double meaning: for children and youth, the phrase “getting grounded” has a negative connotation, as one is not permitted to leave the house or room as a form of punishment, which greatly limits the ability to act freely. At the same time, “to be grounded” can also have a positive meaning, as having your roots firmly planted in familiar soil. For young adults living and being educated in economically and demographically declining regions that offer comparatively fewer and more limited educational and employment opportunities, being grounded can imply serious long-term ramifications for being an agent of one's own life course. Particularly young people in vulnerable positions experience limited opportunities, as vulnerabilities are often connected to and impacted by scarcer resources and functional capacities. Yet, while many young people move from declining to more thriving regions in search for better and more versatile life opportunities, others remain stationary either by choice or by force of their circumstances. We focus on this stationary group we term grounded youth, their agency, perceptions of opportunities, and capabilities to build their futures.

Based on research of the Horizon Europe project *Constructing Learning Outcomes in Europe: A multi-level analysis of (under)achievement in the life course* (CLEAR), we selected the cases of four declining NUTS3 regions from different European countries: Gabrovo in Bulgaria, Halle (Saale) in Germany, Kainuu in Finland, and Tâmega e Sousa in Portugal. Drawing on information provided by the statistical office of the European Union (Eurostat), diverse aspects of regional decline were taken into account in the selection by combining socio-economic data regarding regional gross domestic product (GDP) and the at risk of poverty or social exclusion index with educational data on young people neither in employment, education or training (NEET), on educational attainment, and on early leavers from education and training (Eurostat, 2025a; 2025b; 2025c; 2025d; 2025e).

Following the call of this Special Issue, this article examines the relation between space and agency from the perspective of European young adults. We aim to answer the following research questions focusing on young people in vulnerable positions grounded in declining regions: What are the rationales and reasons

behind young people's decision making on spatial life course construction? How do they experience, interpret, and frame their learning outcomes as part of their own life trajectories in a spatial context?

Theoretical framework

For analysing young adults' decision-making processes to stay grounded within their respective region, the study used a multi-lensed framing that combines the theoretical perspectives of Opportunity Structures (Merton, 1968; Parreira do Amaral & Tikkanen, 2022; Rinne & Parreira do Amaral, 2015; Roberts, 2009) and Spatial Justice (Israel & Frenkel, 2018; Marcuse, 2010; Soja, 2010; Williams, 2013) in exploring the complex relationship between young people's agency, educational and occupational opportunities, and local space(s). The article provides insight on grounded youth in vulnerable positions (based on, e.g., gender, disability, ethnicity, and migrant background), by examining how grounded young Europeans with limited resources build their futures in declining regions.

We perceive space not as a background for social relations to play out in the presence of people, but as an actor that projects, mediates, and exerts power (Augé, 2011, p. 110) through its physical existence, geographical location, and socio-political function, thus, impacting cultural-historical narratives of young adults, their sense of social belonging (Cuervo & Wyn, 2017), and the formation of interpersonal relations (Johansson, 2017; Massey, 2005). Previous research has hinted at the impact of living and learning environments on spatial mobility (Bæck, 2019; Kiilakoski, 2016) and career development (Alexander, 2023), making space a fruitful starting point for research in the field of lifelong learning (Zelinka & Parreira do Amaral, 2026). Therefore, this study explores perceptions of young adults on their immediate spatial surroundings and its effects on their ability to formulate and follow educational and career plans.

We utilise the concept of opportunity structures. In doing so, we scrutinise the relationship between agency and spatiality. While opportunity structures encompass institutional opportunities on the macro-level as well as discursive and relational opportunities on the micro-level (Benasso et al., 2022; Parreira do Amaral & Tikkanen, 2022; Rinne & Parreira do Amaral, 2015), they are primarily perceived by young people as spatial conditions that inadvertently shape their life courses. Individual place attachment and social networks further influence people's assessment of locally available opportunities and, thus, their ability to select and formulate meaningful educational decisions (White & Green, 2011; 2015). It is space through which young people experience the world, a starting point from which they—physically and mentally—venture forth throughout their life, e.g., their homes, the surrounding blocks, schools, nearby parks and malls. Space is the realm through which young people perceive, construct, and evaluate their educational and career trajectories, their decision-making ability (Rönnlund et al., 2018), and their perception of their capacities and chances (Hitlin & Johnson, 2015).

In order to understand how young people construct learning outcomes within the spatial context of declining European regions, we draw from their biographical experiences in the past, their reflection on the present situation, and their decisions for the future (see Elder et al., 2015; Heinz et al., 2009). These dimensions interact to influence individual living and learning situation as a whole and demonstrate the cumulative nature of life course development. We explore young people's passing through different stages of the formal education system and their experiences of non-formal and informal learning as influenced by spatially differentiated opportunities. Thus, we expand on the concept of learning outcomes to also include informal and non-formal skills that are an integral part of young people's living and learning experiences. In this perspective, individuals are seen not only as limited by the available opportunity structures but also as agents who actively respond to the economic, political, and social conditions in their regions and who act to change them (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Hitlin & Johnson, 2015).

Methodological approach

Interviewee selection and data collection

The data of this study consist of narrative biographical interviews conducted with young people in vulnerable positions (age 18–30; N=35). As the strategy for interviewee recruitment started from the premise that vulnerable positions may take different forms in different national/local contexts, the specific types of vulnerabilities of young people to be invited to an interview were not predetermined. Instead, the aim was to give voice to young people with multiple disadvantages that constrained their learning and life trajectories. We contacted different organisations within the respective regions that have direct contact with young people in various vulnerable positions (youth centres, welfare/migration services, second chance schools, etc.), explaining our goals and ethical guidelines. The selection aimed to achieve a balanced gender profile and the inclusion of various vulnerable living and learning conditions that were most relevant for the studied regions (ethnic minority background, low socio-economic background, health issues, special educational needs, etc.). In this study, vulnerability is not seen as a natural feature of certain individuals or groups but as constructed, relational, and multidimensional (Brown, 2017; Parreira do Amaral & Zelinka, 2021). It is the contextual social and institutional factors that contribute to the production of vulnerability.

Table 1. Interviewees

Region	Number of Interviewees	Number of Selected Interviewees
Gabrovo	10	8
Halle (Saale)	11	11
Kainuu	11	10
Tâmega e Sousa	10	6
Total	42	35

The semi-structured interview guide covered three broad themes: educational paths and experiences, current life situation, and future prospects. Each theme started with open-ended questions to prompt interviewees to give spontaneous narratives, followed by more specific questions to probe on supplementary aspects of relevance. The interviews lasted 45–90 minutes; all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed into text. The total number of interviews carried out in the four regions was 42; after excluding those interviewees who had definite plans and ability to leave the region in the foreseeable future (i.e., those not “grounded”), the number of interviews included in the analysis was 35 (Table 1).

Selection of regions

Gabrovo in Bulgaria, Halle (Saale) in Germany, Kainuu in Finland, and Tâmega e Sousa in Portugal represent declining regions in eastern, central, northern, and southwestern Europe. They reflect distinct contexts of spatial opportunity structures and vulnerabilities, which enabled us to compare the impact of different declining contexts based on the personal experiences of European youth, their decision-making process, and their ability to be sovereign agents of their life courses. The selected regions corresponded to the NUTS3 classification of Eurostat; however, the interviewed young people referred mostly to their home localities.

The Gabrovo region in Bulgaria was chosen to represent a declining social locality due to the region’s lowest population density and highest ageing rate in the country (Institute for the Market Economy, 2023). It is a mountainous region with low GDP per capita and a high at-risk-of-poverty rate. The economic activity of the population and the general employment rate are lower and youth unemployment is higher than the country average. The region has lost 20 percent of its population in the past ten years. The greatest challenge for the regional youth policy is to prevent young adults from leaving the region.

The Halle (Salle) region in Germany was selected based on socio-economic and educational factors. Compared to other German regions, Halle (Saale) has the highest rate of young people leaving school

without qualification at 13 percent and one of Germany's highest unemployment rates at 9.8 percent (Statistische Ämter des Bundes und der Länder, 2023), with a high household debt rate that pressures young people to quickly transition from school/training into the workforce. The resulting outmigration of young adults to more thriving urban centres makes Halle (Saale) a representative case to study the experiences and agency of young people in vulnerable situations living and learning in a declining region of Germany.

Kainuu was selected as a declining Finnish region, on account of its demographic and socio-economic profile. It is a sparsely populated, mostly rural/remote region, with a declining population (70,521 inhabitants in 2022, -1.0% year-on-year) and the highest dependency ratio (77.7) and share of over-64-year-olds (30.4%). Regional GDP is low (81.1, national average = 100), while both overall and youth unemployment rates are the high (9.9% and 13.9%, respectively) in the national context. With no universities and only a single university of applied sciences as well as employment prospects that are mostly limited to a few key areas, educational and employment opportunities remain scarce, frequently forcing young people to leave their home municipalities in search of further education or work.

The Tâmega e Sousa region in Portugal was chosen due to a combination of school and socio-economic indicators that place it in the lowest quintile of the Regional Development Synthetic Index nationally, alongside low rates of secondary (84.5%) and higher education completion (5.6%). It is an essentially rural region with 408,674 inhabitants, with just three higher education institutions. Notably, despite a comparatively low youth unemployment rate (6.3%, ages 25–34), the NUTS3 region of Tâmega e Sousa shows the smallest disparity in average monthly earnings between qualification levels (17.9%). This suggests that educational attainment translates into weaker labour market returns in Tâmega e Sousa than in the metropolitan core, making the region a particularly relevant case for examining how young people navigate opportunity structures shaped by both territorial and educational disadvantage.

Method of analysis

The analysis was carried out in three steps: 1) multiple readings of the interview transcripts by a native speaker of the respective language and writing a short biographical summary (2–3 pages) of each interview in English, 2) conducting a qualitative content analysis of the interview data, and 3) a theoretical interpretation for the results of the thematic coding juxtaposing it with the perspectives of Life Course Research, Intersectionality, Spatial Justice and Opportunity Structures. This combined a predominantly inductive, data-driven identification of themes with a subsequent deductive interpretation against the study's theoretical framework. Moreover, when presenting and discussing the results, we juxtapose young people's views and experiences with recent research findings on the related perceptions and

understandings of European education and employment experts (Rambla et al., 2024) to further illustrate the relevance of our findings.

In the analysis, we paid particular attention to years lived in the region, educational and employment pathways and their disruptions, framings of learning outcomes as part of life trajectories, reasons for wanting or having to stay in the region, displayed agency in the narratives regarding adapting to regional conditions, and perceived personal relevance of available regional educational and occupational opportunities. The cross-regional/cross-national analysis reveals how young Europeans make biographical sense of the opportunity structures that surround them, and how they exercise agency to navigate educational and labour market trajectories to build futures in challenging spatial conditions.

Ethical considerations

Our ethics assessment strategy was fully in accordance with the National Data Protection Requirements in each country. The qualitative research was planned and conducted so that it did not cause any physical or psycho-emotional damage or harm to participants. All measures were taken to ensure respondents' dignity, respect, confidentiality, and fairness throughout the research process. Before conducting interviews, informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were fully informed about the study's purpose and their voluntary participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained by assigning pseudonyms and removing all identifiable information from data analysis to protect participants from harm and social stigma.

Analysis and results

The three categories presented below are the result of our qualitative analysis of the interview data (Table 2). After a careful consideration regarding Spatial Justice and Opportunity Structures, we formulated a set of key features to categorise different types of groundedness: expressed intentions to leave/stay, appreciation and personal relevance of available regional opportunity structures, personal attachment to the region/its people, and the degree of agency expressed in the narratives. Throughout the results, "region" refers to the locality as experienced and delimited by interviewees themselves, rather than to fixed administrative boundaries.

Table 2. Categories of groundedness

Category	Key Features
Firmly Grounded	Strong intention/determination to stay in the region Strong appreciation of regional/local opportunity structures Strong personal attachment to the region/locality Typically, high degree of agency to utilise regional/local opportunities
Passively Grounded	Low personal attachment to the region/locality Low degree of agency to utilise regional/local opportunities No particular plans and/or ability to leave the region
Conditionally Grounded	High degree of agency Formulated plans and conditions to leave (conditional leavers) or stay (conditional stayers) based on available opportunities

Firmly grounded youth demonstrated a strong intention and determination to stay in their declining region and often actively sought out and utilised local opportunity structures. They appreciated the (limited) regional/local opportunities and the quality of life available to them, expressing forms of personal attachment to the region or its smaller locality. *Passively grounded* young people demonstrated only a vague intention to leave or stay in the declining region. They either had low agency or could not act on it, due to limited resources or poor (formal) learning outcomes. They were either not willing or able to actively seek out or utilise local opportunity structures, expressing no plans for their future or attachment to the region. *Conditionally grounded* youths expressed certain conditions either to leave or stay in the region. *Conditional leavers* preferred or perceived it likely that they will move away within the next three years in case they do not find the specific educational or occupational opportunities they desired in the declining region. *Conditional stayers* preferred or perceived it likely that they will stay in the declining region or move back there if it turned out to be necessary to, for example, study elsewhere to obtain certain qualifications or new skills. They expressed a clear preference to stay and would only consider moving elsewhere if they do not find suitable educational/employment opportunities despite efforts.

Firmly grounded

Regarding the category of firmly grounded youth, the study identified three primary strands of reasonings in young people's narratives: a) limited but personally meaningful local opportunity structures, b) established forms of local support, and c) personal connection to the region and its people.

The first reoccurring reason of firmly grounded youth centred around the perception of opportunity structures to build their life courses with the tools available to them. For those willing to remain stationary,

the region became a resource for educational and/or personal growth, and those who perceived the region as a resource were more willing to stay. One noteworthy example was Diana, a 25-year-old woman with a migration background. After migrating to Germany, she successfully integrated into the education system, working part-time after school while visiting a local second-chance programme. To her, the region offered sufficient opportunities for young people: “I think Halle is very big, many opportunities, I find the city very beautiful”. Similarly, Hristo, a 20-year-old man from Gabrovo, who grew up in a state home and was a university student and worked as a sales assistant at the time of the interview, considered that, even though there were more opportunities in the bigger cities, there were still enough opportunities for work in Gabrovo:

It’s not the coolest place, because it’s a very small town and there are some people who just spoil it... [refers to drug sellers and addicts]. It’s okay in terms of career development—you can work... and not only meet your minimum needs. In Sofia, you will work only to pay for rent and food. There are many opportunities [in Gabrovo] and you can combine several at the same time. (Hristo, Gabrovo)

Many firmly grounded interviewees argued that regional advantages were accessible for those who were ready to invest time and effort to achieve their goals. In contrast to Hristo, the case of Diana suggests that differences of decline exist within/across EU countries and regions, each providing opportunities alongside limitations on the institutional, structural, and spatial level.

The second reason expressed by the firmly grounded youth shed some necessary light on the perceived impact of locally available support for life course construction. For young adults in vulnerable positions, local networks and other forms of support were seen as crucial, as the availability of different types of socio-economic backing became a deciding factor on whether they wanted or were able to leave to find more suitable opportunities elsewhere. Asen, a 27-years-old Roma from Gabrovo, who worked in construction sites without a legal contract, explained his decision to stay based on his short-term emigration experience:

Cos I know a lot of people here from whom I can borrow today 20 leva. I know a lot of people like that... they help me when I get like this... I borrow money and I pay them back. If I’m... for example in... Sofia, let’s say—who do you know there, if you don’t have money... In Germany they pay more but... It’s better, I tell you, to be next to my family... Today I may have earned 50 leva only, but to be with my family, not to worry about them and so on... (Asen, Gabrovo)

Asen’s case illustrated how ethnicity, socio-economic precarity, and informal labour intersect to shape distinct experiences of groundedness, in line with an intersectional understanding of vulnerability (Crenshaw, 1989).

With many interviewees having a migration background or limited language skills, various forms of support demonstrated to impact young people’s perception of their own agency. In the case of Halle (Saale), interviewees highlighted the importance of local projects to attain formal qualifications and the significance

of personal support. Sharlize, a 22-year-old woman, who, despite being forcibly grounded within the region due to her refugee status, had successfully rooted herself, explained the variety of local support available to young adults in vulnerable positions:

[...] for example, the [anonymised]-Project here, I went to some... welcome meetings a few times. Yes. Also, I wrote my applications and brought them here, and they checked them if everything is alright, and grammatical errors, and the like. So, there are a lot, like [anonymised], they also helped. There is a project called [anonymised] here in Halle, they also like to help. They help those who got in trouble with the police, or, for example, we don't get appointments for the foreigners' authority very well. [...] (Sharlize, Halle (Saale))

Finally, the third and by far most prevalent reason withing the discourse of firmly grounded youth for all four selected regions, was a feeling of personal attachment to the region and its people. In the case of Kainuu, the region was seen as a good place to recover from vulnerabilities and previous trauma to (re)build agency, and to explore one's aspirations and capabilities. As enduring vulnerabilities took up much of their (mental) resources, the safety and familiarity of the region became very important to young adults, as to them, the region impacted their personal well-being and learning outcomes:

Yes, I will stay in [the region's capital]. I have no reason to leave. My life got broken because people didn't let me to grow roots anywhere. So, I will make my own decisions. If I have to, I will abandon everything, the name I was given at birth, everything. So that I can make sure that I get to keep the roots that I want to keep. (Sasaki, Kainuu)

The most dominant narrative about staying firmly grounded was the local presence of close social ties. Family, friends, partners, classmates, teachers, neighbours, and support groups were perceived as a relational resource. The reasons for this were manifold: familiarity with the region created a feeling of security that seemingly provided psychological groundedness, which enabled young adults to focus on personal goals. While personal support played into this, forms of institutional and structural decline on the local level were somewhat compensated through social ties. To many interviewees, the feeling of being *at home* meant to know the locals and having friendly relationships. Constança, a 27-year-old woman living in Tâmega e Sousa, served as a prime example of a firmly grounded young adult that felt deeply rooted to her hometown:

I wouldn't leave. I can't leave [anonymised]. There's no point because it's my hometown, and I don't think I can do it. If I had to, maybe, but things are tough out there too, not just here. (Constança, Tâmega e Sousa)

Many of the firmly grounded youth utilised the limited opportunities locally available to them to their benefit, building individual life courses that fit in with the region they felt connected to. While most interviewees within this category demonstrated an awareness that moving to a more thriving region would increase their chance to find long-term employment, locally built social ties seemed to be of equal or even greater importance. While young people's assessments of declining regions' training and career opportunities were in line with the views of local-level educational stakeholders across Europe, most experts' perception of spatiality primarily revolves around institutional opportunity structures (Rambla et

al., 2024), overlooking the importance of social ties as a factor enhancing the region's attractiveness to young adults. This discrepancy between institutional and lived perceptions of opportunity illustrates a core tension of spatial justice (Israel & Frenkel, 2018; Soja, 2010): the region's value is defined differently depending on whether it is assessed through policy-driven metrics or through young people's own relational experiences.

Passively grounded

Regarding the category of passively grounded youth, the study identified two primary strands of reasons: a) limited options and feelings of being stuck, alongside b) limited agency and a mode of primarily reacting to local circumstances.

The first reoccurring reason of passively grounded young adults centred around a perceived limitation of options and the subsequent feeling of being stuck and helplessly grounded. Especially those coming from disadvantaged ethnic minorities felt an overpowering force of external barriers that constrained their range of options for learning and working. This was particularly palpable in the story of Nikol, a 26-year-old woman from Gabrovo. Her stepparents forced her to stop studying at the age of 15 to marry, following the cultural norm for Roma women despite that she enjoyed going to school. When asked how she chose to stay at home rather than go to work after dropping out of education, she replied: "No, no, I didn't have that choice. To this day, there is not much choice". The paternalistic control over her decisions, now by her parents-in-law, prevented her to emigrate abroad with her family. Additionally, structural restrictions placed upon young people living in remote or rural regions were identified as serious long-term detriments on the construction of both learning outcomes and life course trajectories, especially in the case of educational and vocational opportunities in Gabrovo. As Isabela, a 27-year-old woman contemplated:

There are schools here that... years ago were at a fairly high level, but not any longer and at the moment very few students graduate from them and just drop out... perhaps the problem is that even if they acquire some competences, there are already fewer places to apply them... (Isabela, Gabrovo)

However, our comparison of socio-economically declining regions from the selected European countries showed different reasons for similar behaviours of young adults such as passively staying grounded. In Tâmega e Sousa, emotional attachment to the place of familiar origin was one of the main reasons for young adults to stay grounded. Unlike the previously discussed social ties related to firmly grounded youth, said bonds were described by some of the interviewees as taking away their agency of mobility. For those who stayed put, there was an uncertainty about the future that manifested itself in the need to live in the present and find a job—any job—to earn an income to cover their expenses.

[About job opportunities] It's mostly based on minimum wages. I see it for myself. Two people starting their life together—I'm trying to build a house, but at the end of the month, it's like, 'And money?' There's never much

left to put aside because you have to pay rent, electricity, household expenses, food, and in the end, your money never really stretches far. So, it's not easy at all. (Madalena, Tâmega e Sousa)

The second reoccurring reason of passively grounded youths centred around their own limited agency, resulting in a mode of primarily re-acting to local contexts or circumstances, with either no real plan to move/stay or no expressed personal attachment to their regional surroundings. As a result, a waiting approach to life was common even among young adults with university degrees like Isabela and Anita from Gabrovo. Despite having managed to achieve integration into the regional labour market, they quickly became dissatisfied with their low-skill jobs, which lead to still unfulfilled dreams about further studies and more challenging work. Yet, neither one was taking any steps to change their current situation due to their responsibilities as caregivers at home. Thus, they had left the pursuit of their aspirations for an indefinite future in the region. Unlike the passive lack of choice stance of Nikol, the two women shared the belief that personal efforts were the way out of their adverse circumstances, with Anita stating that:

Sometimes life is complicated and a person feels he... wanders in a labyrinth, in a circle, but there is always a light, and he can come out if he wants to. And not only as long as he wants to, but if he makes an attempt, tries hard, because if a person just waits..., he does not get anywhere... (Anita, Gabrovo)

While, for some, limited agency was a result of limited regionally available opportunity structures, some of the interviewees talked about having given neither their learning outcomes nor educational life course much or even any serious thought, often attributing this to mental health related issues:

That is the main thing [finding a job]. Last week I was at the mental health policlinic, talking there. And when the person asked if I have any expectations and like that. Like if I'd gotten a job and then an apartment and then I could have thought about everything else. But I haven't found a job, so everything is like stuck in one place, so I haven't thought about the other stuff. (Tommi, Kainuu)

In short, passive groundedness did not necessarily stem from low personal determination or the lack of a plan to construct one's life course. Alongside limited educational, vocational training, and career opportunities, socio-cultural factors such as obligations to one's family and/or heritage were identified to limit or take away young adult's agency during a crucial time of educational and personal growth, resulting in a forced passivity to stay spatially and biographically put. Although local-level educational stakeholders are mostly aware of the difficult situations of young Europeans, their perception of mobility revolves around comparisons between their region/city and the more thriving metropolitan regions, demonstrating a binary thinking of mobility (Rambla et al., 2024), where passivity revolves mostly around a personal lack of attitude to act or a dead-end passivity of those that are socio-economically trapped.

Conditionally grounded

Regarding conditionally grounded youth, we identified three strands of reasons in young people's

narratives: a) personal dreams/experiences, b) job/career opportunities, and c) mental peace/social ties. Furthermore, there was a difference between conditionally stayers in the case of Kainuu and conditionally leavers in the cases of Gabrovo, Halle (Saale), and Tâmega e Sousa, meaning that the Finnish youth in this category showed a tendency to prefer to stay within their region, considering leaving only in case certain conditions were not met in the region. In the other cases, young adults were inclined to leave their region and only stay in case certain conditions were to be met locally or they could not find (employment) opportunities elsewhere. This divergence reflects how young people's decisions were shaped not only by present circumstances but by their positioning within a broader life course trajectory (Elder et al., 2015; Heinz et al., 2009) in which conditions for staying or leaving were continuously re-evaluated against imagined futures.

The first reoccurring reason expressed by the conditionally grounded youths centred around personal dreams and experiences that influenced their decisions, preferences or tentative plans to either remain stationary or to leave the region. For interviewees who wished to leave but remained out of options, the region neither offered jobs nor a safe space for social relationships. This was most strongly expressed by Taimur, a 21-year-old male migrant, who had lived in Halle (Saale) for the last eight years:

Better not come here. Here it's shit. The worst people here are people that... that..., there are shitty people among us foreigners. I'm a foreigner and I don't accept any foreigners here. They don't want you to reach the top. They don't want you to have a good graduation. [...]. Here in Halle. I describe Halle like this, that I would leave this city immediately, because it isn't good. (Taimur, Halle (Saale))

In his case, the absence of locally available social relations cushioning the impact of limited opportunity structures or vulnerabilities, strengthened his desire to move. Without support on the interpersonal level, the region's restrictions became more difficult to tackle, as one's economic, social, and cultural capital was seen by young adults to be a crucial factor to formulate and follow plans.

In some cases, family support enabled redefining their educational path. Mariana's case from Tâmega e Sousa illustrated this, as she came from a family with highly educated parents and a favourable economic situation. Despite facing psychological challenges and bullying, she found support from teachers, which positively impacted her learning outcomes and enabled her to secure a job that allowed her to pursue her studies while still living with her family:

My parents, and I as well, realised that [anonymized] secondary school was not the ideal place for me. And it wasn't because, well, they are completely different environments (...) with very different age groups. It really wasn't a beneficial environment for me, so I decided to move to [anonymised]. (...) There, I met incredible people. Although that was when I started experiencing self-harm and everything else, it was a place where I always had support. (Mariana, Tâmega e Sousa)

The second reoccurring reason of conditionally grounded youths was based on the accessibility of job/career opportunities. Again, we identified a different narrative between the interviewees from Kainuu

compared to Gabrovo, Halle (Saale), and Tâmega e Sousa. Luwi, a 27-year-old man with migrant background, who had previously left the region to find work, had returned to complete his vocational training:

Yes [I would like to stay in Halle], because I have been away from Halle for two years, and there I did work. Also is in Lower-Saxony, but I didn't want to stay there. Thus, I returned back here to Halle. (Luwi, Halle (Saale))

This exemplifies a spatial perception of opportunity structures, typically held by local education stakeholders, that young adults actively compare their life course experiences in the context of regional differences, most notably living expenses, training opportunities, and job markets (Rambla et al., 2024). As a result, if the region of residence was perceived to provide better opportunities or offers already established social ties, it became a sort of back-up plan, if the initial strategy of leaving was deemed a failure.

Manuel started secondary education in Economics but realised that it was not the right field for him. At the time of the interview, he was still in training but in his hometown, where he lives with his parents. He hoped to work and live in Porto which offers many opportunities:

Well, I have imagined myself living outside Portugal, especially about a year and a half or two years ago. I had a conversation with my parents about it, but they always encouraged me to try to find something here first and only consider leaving if no opportunities came up. It would have to be a well-thought-out decision, wouldn't it? But regarding the reality of where I live, I honestly don't see myself spending my whole life here in [anonymised]. I truly feel that, in the near future, I will have to look for a job and, who knows, maybe even move to a big city—perhaps Porto. (Manuel, Tâmega e Sousa)

Those interviewees with less severe vulnerabilities and more resources at their disposal mentioned similar pull factors and expressed their preference of staying in the region as they enjoyed their surroundings and found their social ties to be of great importance. Those with more resources also displayed greater agency, which was shown in the deliberate choices they had made at the transition from training to work, and the ways they planned to increase their chances to find employment. One example was Niko, a 26-year-old man living in Kainuu:

I would like to find a job [in assisting tasks in a field of social work] without a related degree, but if this does not work out, then I'll study a degree [in social work], especially if I also don't find a job from the field where I got my current degree. (Niko, Kainuu)

For many young adults from Kainuu, the search for employment was the deciding factor to formulate conditions to leave, meaning that while they had decided to stay in the region, they could consider moving away for better job opportunities if their efforts were not going to yield results within a set time. Notably, most interviewees from Kainuu demonstrated a keen awareness of local conditions and opportunities, and how they impact their life course formation. While interviewees expressed that the region's capital had good vocational education and training opportunities, job opportunities for young people were found to be

much scarcer.

The interviews suggest that young adults in vulnerable situations are not as likely to aspire higher education or even consider it as an option for themselves than more affluent youths. Those whose plans matched with locally available opportunities, chose to stay. One notable example of the latter is Piia from Kainuu, a 23-year-old woman with plans to attend university, expressing that the available educational opportunities in the region were not relevant to her and that her decision to move away was out of necessity. Yet, she also found it likely to return to the region after completing her university degree. Strikingly, her plan to temporarily leave a region was a rare exception among all interviewees. Most interviewees stated to either stay or leave without plans to return.

The third reoccurring reason of conditional groundedness in young people's narratives centred around mental peace and social ties, which was most closely related to personal fears and mental health issues but also, for some, the tranquillity of the surrounding nature. Many interviewees emphasised their local social ties, family or friends, but in some cases also specific experts they had encountered as part of youth support measures. The peacefulness of the region and the closeness of the surrounding nature were mentioned by many as a positive aspect especially in Kainuu. Yet, for those forced to stay, living in a declining region felt like a detriment to their well-being. For Halle (Saale), where all except one interviewee had a migration background and poor/limited German language skills, not having an established social network greatly reduced the region's attractiveness.

Most of the conditionally grounded youth demonstrated their ability to be agents of their life courses. They created plans and formulated conditions that took local opportunity structures and social networks into account. They acted as interregional comparers of space, considering available training and career opportunities but also preferences regarding population density, travelling-distances, leisure activities, nature, and safety.

Table 3 shows the distribution of grounded youth based on the outlined categories of groundedness within the four selected declining European regions.

Table 3. Grounded youth in declining European regions

Region	Firmly Grounded	Passively Grounded	Conditionally Grounded
Gabrovo	3	2	3
Halle (Saale)	5	2	4
Kainuu	4	1	5
Tâmega e Sousa	4	1	1
Total	16	6	13

Discussion

Despite some similarities of spatial decline, such as a continuous out-migration due to limited job/career opportunities, the selected European regions showed some notable differences between them. In Gabrovo, some young women are still inclined to settle down locally and abandon their education due to cultural expectations. In Kainuu, young people's employment prospects are still limited, while the region also suffers from shortages of skilled labour. In Halle (Saale), poor language skills paired with interrupted educational histories greatly limit young adults' agency. In Tâmega e Sousa, locally available job opportunities are often mismatch with young people's qualifications and aspirations.

In all four regions, interviewees see out-migration as a viable option. However, the study also identified *staying put* as a conscious or forced choice in the life plans of youths in vulnerable positions. In Kainuu and Halle (Saale), interviewees appreciated different kinds of support, suggesting that the imperative of mobility, the out-migration of young adults (Corbett, 2007; Farrugia, 2016; Kiilakoski, 2016) from declining regions, is—at least temporarily—counteracted by considerations of personal attachment (Evans, 2015; White & Green, 2011; 2015), and a sense of (spatial) belonging (Alexander, 2023; Cuervo & Wyn, 2017). This study found evidence that social networks combined with personal attachment strongly impacts young people's decision-making process to stay grounded, not wanting to leave behind locally anchored social capital (see Bæck, 2019) that might take years to rebuild.

The suggested categories of groundedness helped to answer our first research question. For the category of *firmly grounded*, we detected a shared narrative of social capital, with strong emphasis on family (Gabrovo, Tâmega e Sousa, and Kainuu), and on friends, teachers or tutors (Halle (Saale) and Kainuu). Thus, to many young people, being grounded means knowing both people and places, a personal relationship with the region on the individual level, with most young adults capable to differentiate between their personal feelings for the region and its structural drawbacks.

For the category of *passively grounded*, we found shared positive reasonings regarding the region, but some notable differences concerning the motives to stay. Passively grounded youths from Halle (Saale) and Kainuu felt forced to choose from available opportunities. In Gabrovo and Tâmega e Sousa, the emotional attachment of young adults to their family or place of origin was particularly strong, as they struggled between the wish to stay grounded with the prospect of raising a family close to their (grand-)parents on the one hand, and a perceived necessity to strive for better learning outcomes, a higher qualification and well-paid jobs elsewhere on the other.

For the category of *conditionally grounded*, we identified the reasons and reasonings given by young adults to decide when and why to leave or stay. To this group, the potential act of moving was part of a plan to achieve long-term goals. While in the case of Kainuu, young adults formulated conditions to leave while planning to stay, it was the opposite for the interviewees in Gabrovo, Halle (Saale), and Tâmega e Sousa, stating conditions to stay while planning to leave.

The second research question focussed on the aspect of spatial agency. Interviewees tied their agency and learning outcomes closely to their biographies, emphasising the importance of significant others and key moments of experiencing personal success and failure. European youth generally seemed to follow public discourse regarding the concept of quantifiable learning outcomes, framing qualifications as necessary steps to secure employment, although some interviewees' statements hinted at the growing importance of informal skills and personal growth as part of their learning outcomes (see Tikkanen et al., 2026).

In the context of agency, many of the firmly grounded young adults built upon their achievements in education and training to make the best use of existing local opportunities. Passively grounded youths considered their learning outcomes typically as low but the best they could achieve in the region, and they did not strive to improve them. Conditionally grounded youths wished to keep their future open, either to see how the region develops before making the final decision or to see how their region fairs by comparison, including learning outcomes as part of their educational biographies into their life course assessments and plans.

Regarding vulnerabilities, they were mostly referred to as an unchangeable part of one's biography, something that realises itself continuously throughout the life course: in Gabrovo, ethnic minorities felt overpowered by external constraints, resulting in interviewees giving up their attempts to actively shape their life course. In Halle (Saale) and Kainuu, young people in vulnerable positions benefitted from local projects and social networks as part of their life course construction. In Tâmega e Sousa and Kainuu, the family's economic, social and/or cultural capital greatly impacted learning outcomes and life trajectories.

In summary, the study indicates that staying in declining regions is not a homogeneous condition, but that

young adults take different approaches—staying firmly, passively, or conditionally grounded—to build futures in declining regions that offer fewer and more limited educational, vocational and career opportunities. We identified recurring narratives and perceived challenges of young adults to stay grounded within the selected four European NUTS3 regions that represent unique cases of regional decline. Young people living in vulnerable positions in these regions did not emerge as a unified group of disillusioned and discouraged low-achievers but instead followed diverse trajectories pursuing different life projects and dreams despite challenging conditions. Their non-linear or interrupted educational pathways attested to young European’s resilience vis-à-vis limited spatial opportunity structures and an unjust distribution of economic, political, and educational resources. To compensate, grounded youth relied upon the support of significant others, encompassing social relationships as well as institutional networks that allowed them to plant roots and achieve personal growth, a factor crucially overlooked by most local educational stakeholders (Rambla et al., 2024). By incorporating the voices of young people, our analysis contributes to the wider understanding of local (educational) spaces (Amos et al., 2016) and confirms the need to design policies and spaces that empower diverse groups in the process of negotiating and realising spatial justice (Soja, 2010). Future research could examine how intersecting vulnerabilities (Crenshaw, 1989) shape unequal access to these infrastructures across declining regions, and how life course trajectories (Heinz et al., 2009) evolve as young people’s relationship to place changes over time.

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