Inner Areas and Territorial Marginality in Europe: Different Policy Responses to a Common Challenge

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Abstract. Territorial marginality, population decline and spatial inequalities are persistent challenges for rural and peripheral regions in Europe. This study compares the territorial policies implemented in Italy and France, which adopt proactive and reactive approaches to addressing these issues, respectively. The study adopts a qualitative comparative research design, combining document analysis with a theory-driven, case-oriented approach. A most-similar systems design (MSSD) allows for controlling structural similarities while highlighting differences in policy orientation, instruments, and territorial classification systems. The analysis was carried out at a national level, as well as through local case studies. The analysis focused particularly on the municipalities of Troina in Italy and Montargis in France. These municipalities are characterised by low population density and are experiencing depopulation. The findings reveal that, although Italy's proactive policies target high-risk areas, they are hampered by structural constraints, such as low population density, an ageing population and limited economic opportunities, which undermine their effectiveness. France's reactive policies effectively maintain demographic stability in structurally resilient municipalities but are less effective at reversing the decline in marginalised areas. The comparison highlights the importance of local context in determining policy outcomes, as well as the impact of territorial classification systems on the definition of objectives and the rationale behind interventions. It highlights the importance of a targeted, context-specific combination of proactive and reactive strategies to strengthen territorial cohesion, support demographic resilience and promote sustainable local development. It offers policymakers designing multi-level interventions in Europe's peripheral regions practical insights.

Keywords: Inner Areas · National and local territorial rebalancing policies · Italian and French experiences

1 Introduction

Among the effects of economic development that have affected Italy as a whole, particularly since the post-World War II period aspects of socio-economic and cultural imbalance have persisted and, in some cases, intensified. These are fueled by unequal

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regional competition between the North and the South, as well as by territorial disparities between urban/coastal areas and rural ones [1]. Official sources provide a highly informative breakdown of the extent of these imbalances, offering data on population, inclusion, education, employment, income, housing, buildings, real estate assets, the economy, the environment, infrastructure, and ser-vices. In particular, ISTAT's 8milaCensus platform represents material and social vulnerability through 99 indicators aggregated into 8 sections at the municipal and provincial scale. On this basis, it computes a composite index referring to the 1991, 2001, and 2011 censuses. The resulting maps clearly highlight the marginal condition of southern territories and less accessible areas. The transition from a predominantly agricultural and micro-manufacturing development model to a distinctly industrial one has reduced employment opportunities in southern and inland areas, triggering migratory movements. From the 1950s to the 1980s, this resulted in the large-scale transfer of labor both from the South to the North and from inland to urban areas. Similar phenomena have also occurred involving not only labor but also skills and, more recently, highly qualified human capital. From a macroeconomic perspective, the relocation of population leads to rising wages in depopulated areas and declining wages in destination areas. This is accompanied by a shift in demand for goods and services, rental housing, and real estate purchases. The sum of consumption and in-vestment increases in "receiving" areas to the same extent that it decreases in "sending" areas, thereby widening the socio-economic gap both between territories and across regions of the country. Territorial marginality, demographic decline, and spatial inequalities represent critical challenges for European regions, particularly in rural and peripheral areas. Both Italy and France have developed national strategies to address these challenges, yet the approaches differ significantly in orientation, scope, and implementation. These strategies exemplifies a targeted approach, aiming to preemptively support municipalities at risk of depopulation through enhanced service provision, local development initiatives, and multi-level governance. Both countries operate within similar institutional and European Union frameworks, providing an ideal context for comparative analysis. The primary research question guiding this study is, in what ways are the general European guidelines aimed at addressing the issue of territorial rebalancing implemented at the national and local levels? To answer this question, the study adopts a qualitative comparative research design, grounded in a case-oriented approach that combines document analysis with structured, theory-driven comparison. The analysis considers both national-level policy frameworks and classification systems and local-level case studies, exemplified by Troina (Italy) and Montargis (France), to explore how policy orientation translates into practice across different territorial contexts. The objective of the study is identify and compare the ways in which cohesion policies and these aimed at territorial rebalancing, as developed within the European context, are transposed and implemented at national level. By linking national policy frameworks with local outcomes, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the mechanisms through which territorial policies operate and their potential to mitigate marginality.

2 Materials

The phenomenon of abandonment and the condition of depopulation [2] have constituted major drivers of territorial fragility in many inland and marginal areas, affecting both settlement systems and local socio-economic structures [3]. On the one hand, there is a lack of resources for maintaining the building, real estate, and infrastructural capital, which progressively deteriorates; on the other, the progressive reduction of population and services weakens the capacity of local communities to maintain existing territorial capital [4].

The growing interest in the phenomenon of abandonment in inland areas is also reflected in the specialized literature, with numerous contributions attempting to reinterpret small towns through strategies capable of transforming them "from a problem into a resource" [6]. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development outlines general measures concerning less developed areas ("11.c: Support least developed countries, including through financial and technical assistance, in building sustainable and resilient buildings using local materials"), ensuring that culture and heritage are placed at the forefront across the broader debate on sustainable development [7].

In fragile territorial contexts, planning is called upon to identify and activate shared strategies for historic centers and settlement systems by introducing new models and opportunities for interaction and exchange into territories often affected by demographic decline and limited accessibility to services [8]. By identifying the specific characteristics, opportunities, and critical issues of these territories, it becomes possible to re-inhabit the built heritage and to reconstruct and revitalize the associated social fabric [9].

With regard to territorial disadvantage, the Italian policy framework for rebalancing known as the National Strategy for Inner Areas (NSIA) provides support measures for territories affected by structural processes of depopulation and abandonment [10]. In light of these considerations, the fragility of urban centers in inland areas can be assessed in terms of the gap between two primary economic-territorial categories: wealth and value. Small towns in inland areas constitute territorial units of high landscape, environmental, and cultural value which, being excluded from dominant development dynamics, are often unable to generate the flows of wealth necessary to sustain the underlying forms of territorial capital [11].

This condition has also contributed to the emergence of initiatives such as the "one-euro houses" phenomenon [1], frequently presented as tools for attracting new residents and investments into shrinking municipalities. However, these initiatives have produced heterogeneous and often limited results, while nevertheless highlighting broader conditions of demographic and economic fragility affecting local housing markets and existing building stock.

The policy guidelines for the revitalization of urban centers in inland areas outlined thus far identify the built and urban heritage as forms of capital capable of supporting broader processes of territorial regeneration and resilience.

2.1 Main Legal and Policy Instruments in Italy and France

Both countries face significant challenges in the field of territorial risk due to the presence of extensive rural and marginal areas, whose conditions of demographic, economic,

and environmental distress justify the development of policies aimed at rebalancing current disparities, as well as preventing higher levels of vulnerability affecting these fragile territories. Italy and France both adopt the guiding principles of European Union cohesion policies, yet they identify marginal territories through partially different criteria and strategic approaches.

In Italy, the transposition of EU policy frameworks culminates in the current National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) [12], which—although strongly shaped by the socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic—also emphasizes prospects for territorial rebalancing. It integrates objectives related to ecological and digital transitions, as well as environmental risk reduction, particularly through Mission 2 (M2) Green Revolution and Ecological Transition, under component M2C4 Protection of Land and Water Resources, and Mission 5 (M5) Inclusion and Cohesion, under component M5C3 Special Interventions for Territorial Cohesion. Within the latter, Reform 1—aimed at strengthening Special Economic Zones (SEZs) [13]—provides investments supporting the National Strategy for Inner Areas.

In parallel with the measures adopted during the pandemic emergency, inner areas have also been supported through public funding via the Italian Fund for Marginal Municipalities [14].

For the Italian case, the primary reference framework is the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI), developed within the national programming of European Structural and Investment Funds. According to this strategy, inner areas are defined as municipalities or clusters of municipalities significantly distant from essential service hubs, identified through accessibility indicators related to healthcare, education, and transport provision. The classification distinguishes between "poles" and peripheral areas according to travel time thresholds to essential services.

The territorial classification of municipalities generally combines accessibility indicators with indicators relating to demographic, socio-economic, environmental and institutional conditions. The network of municipalities that generate the NSIA is established by local authorities that apply to join it, based on a joint project for inter-municipal cooperation and the strengthening of local services and community infrastructure.

In France, the Revitalisation des centres-bourgs programme (Ministère de la Transition Écologique, 2014) [15] represents the first national initiative aimed at addressing the imbalances affecting small and medium-sized towns, which had previously been excluded from national urban policies primarily focused on grandes villes. Subsequently, in order to enhance the effectiveness of rebalancing policies in relation to the specific characteristics of the areas concerned, the French government introduced additional programmes, such as Action Cœur de Ville (Agence Nationale de la Cohésion des Territoires, 2018) [16], which aims to improve the living conditions of residents in medium-sized towns and to strengthen their leading role in territorial development.

In 2020, the programme Petites Villes de Demain (Agence Nationale de la Cohésion des Territoires, 2020) [17] was launched, targeting smaller towns and their surrounding areas, and supporting local communities in identifying dynamic pathways for their ecological transition. For the French case, the study relies on official programs and territorial classifications developed by national institutions, particularly the National Agency for Territorial Cohesion (ANCT) [18].

Rural and sparsely populated areas are often associated with the so-called Diagonal du vide, a macro-regional pattern characterized by low population density and structural socio-economic fragility, as documented by the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE) [19]. Key policy materials include the national programme Petites Villes de Demain, which targets small and medium-sized towns facing demographic decline and economic contraction [17].

In Italy, territorial policies aimed at revitalising marginalised areas apply to territorial units within the group of municipalities that make up the NSIA. In France, however, they apply to individual small and medium-sized towns.

3 Method

This study adopts a qualitative comparative research design to investigate differences in territorial policy approaches between Italy and France. The study follows a most-similar systems design (MSSD), as both countries share comparable institutional frameworks as European Union member states, including access to cohesion policy funding and similar multi-level governance structures.

The analysis is conducted at two levels:

1. National level, focusing on policy frameworks, classification systems, and strategic orientations;
2. Local level, through illustrative case studies that reflect the implementation of national policies in specific territorial contexts.

The empirical material consists of a qualitative dataset of official and institutional sources, selected based on their relevance, authority, and comparability. These include:

- National policy frameworks, such as the National Strategy for Inner Areas and the French programme Petites Villes de Demain;
- Territorial classification methodologies produced by Istituto Nazionale Di Statistica (ISTAT) and Institut National De La Statistique Et Des Études Économiques (INSEE);
- Reports and policy documents from national institutions, including the Department for Cohesion Policies and the National Agency for Territorial Cohesion;
- International reports, such as those published by the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, included as reference frameworks for interpreting territorial vulnerability and resilience within broader international risk reduction and territorial sustainability agendas;
- Local strategic plans and implementation documents, including area-based strategies for the selected case studies.

The selection of documents follows a purposive sampling strategy, aimed at capturing both the design and implementation dimensions of territorial policies.

A qualitative content analysis is developed on the selected documents, using a deductive coding scheme based on three main analytical dimensions:

1. Policy focus (service provision, spatial planning and regulation);
2. Policy instruments (financial incentives, regulatory tools, planning mechanisms);
3. Governance (multi-level coordination, role of local actors, degree of centralization).

**applied consistently to both national policy frameworks through three shared analytical dimensions:

1. Territorial targeting criteria (accessibility, demographic conditions, socio-economic fragility);
2. Policy instruments (financial incentives, planning mechanisms, service provision measures);
3. Governance and implementation scale (multi-level coordination, role of local actors, municipal or supra-municipal organisation).**

Each document was systematically coded to identify recurring policy patterns, priorities, and instruments. This approach allows for tracing how different policy logics are embedded within national strategies and local implementation practices.

To complement the national-level comparison, the study includes illustrative case studies (local level).

For Italy, the municipality of Troina was selected within the broader NSIA Strategic Area to illustrate the local implementation of a supra-municipal strategy in a peripheral rural context. For France, the municipality of Montargis was selected within the framework of the Petites Villes de Demain programme. The comparison does not aim to evaluate the overall effectiveness of the two national policies, nor to establish generalisable conclusions at the national scale. Instead, the selected municipalities are used as illustrative and context-specific examples intended to explore how different policy frameworks and territorial scales of intervention are translated into local implementation practices.

The cases are selected based on three criteria:

(i) inclusion in national programmes;
(ii) exposure to demographic decline or territorial marginality;
(iii) availability of official planning documents.

4 Results

In relation to policies supporting the development of inner and rural areas in Italy and France, and within the identified methodological framework, the following differences can be identified (Table 1).

In Italy, the implementation area corresponds to the NSIA Strategic Areas, which comprise several municipalities. In the French case, however, it corresponds to a single municipality.

Given that policies are adopted differently in terms of implementation areas in the two countries, in order to compare the modalities of policy implementation at the local level, one municipality within the NSIA Troina Strategic Area – namely the municipality of Troina – was selected as the Italian case, while the municipality of Montargis was chosen as the French case.

The comparison between these two cases is not intended to provide general conclusions regarding the overall effectiveness of the Italian and French policy frameworks at the national scale. Rather, the selected municipalities are used as exploratory case studies aimed at illustrating how different policy approaches and implementation scales

Table 1. Highlights the structural differences between the Italian and French approaches, particularly in terms of classification criteria and policy orientation, revealing a predominantly service-oriented and compensatory model in Italy, compared to a more anticipatory and spatially integrated approach in France.

Dimension	Italy	France
Definition of target areas	"Inner areas" (aree interne) defined within the National Strategy for Inner Areas as municipalities distant from essential service hubs	Rural and low-density territories often associated with the Diagonal du vide and small declining towns targeted by national programmes
Classification criteria	Accessibility-based: distance (travel time) from key services (healthcare, education, transport); classification into poles, intermediate, peripheral, and ultra-peripheral areas (based on Italian National Institute of Statistics methodology)	Multi-criteria: demographic density, socio-economic indicators, and functional roles (urban/rural typologies) defined by National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies
Main policy framework	Place-based strategy under EU cohesion policy (NSIA), coordinated by Department for Cohesion Policies	National territorial cohesion policies coordinated by National Agency for Territorial Cohesion
Key programmes	NSIA + local "area strategies" (e.g., Troina)	Petites Villes de Demain and other rural revitalization programmes
Policy focus	Improving access to essential services; strengthening local development (healthcare, mobility, education)	Revitalization of small towns; territorial attractiveness; economic diversification; urban regeneration
Economic instruments	EU structural funds; national co-financing; support for SMEs, local production systems	Fiscal incentives; subsidies for housing and relocation; funding for local projects and infrastructure
Social/demographic measures	Counteracting depopulation through service provision and local employment strategies	Incentives for in-migration; support for remote workers; housing policies in rural areas
Innovation and digitalization	Promotion of "smart villages", digital services, and innovation in marginal areas	Strong emphasis on telework, digital infrastructure, and rural coworking spaces

(*continued*)

Table 1. (*continued*)

Dimension	Italy	France
Risk management approach	Slightly reactive/compensatory, focused on addressing service gaps and socio-economic decline	More proactive/preventive, integrating spatial planning, land-use regulation, and risk prevention
Governance model	Multi-level (national–regional–local), with strong role of local partnerships and municipalities	Central coordination with strong technical support to municipalities (ANCT), combined with local implementation
Scale of intervention	Selected pilot areas (project-based approach)	Broad national coverage (thousands of municipalities involved in programmes)

may influence local strategies for addressing marginality, demographic decline, and spatial inequalities. The analysis therefore represents a preliminary and context-specific observation of policy implementation dynamics within two distinct territorial settings.

4.1 Montargis

The case of Montargis illustrates a comprehensive and multi-level approach to urban regeneration, primarily driven by the Action Cœur de Ville (ACV) programme [16] and complemented by additional national and local policy instruments.

Beyond initial interventions in housing rehabilitation and public space renewal, the municipality has implemented a broad set of measures targeting the urban fabric, local economy, and governance structures. In terms of real estate strategies, Montargis has launched competitive calls for projects (appels à projets) aimed at the redevelopment of entire urban blocks (îlots), encouraging mixed-use development and private sector involvement [20]. These actions are supported by tools such as local commercial property vehicles (foncières commerciales), designed to acquire vacant retail units and reintroduce them into the market, thereby addressing commercial vacancy [21]. Spatial interventions extend beyond single streets to include major public space projects such as the redevelopment of Place de la République, which involved pedestrianisation, urban design improvements, and enhanced accessibility [22]. In parallel, mobility and accessibility have been addressed through the reorganisation of pedestrian and cycling networks and the exploration of sustainable urban logistics solutions, including last-mile delivery systems and local digital marketplaces [21]. The ACV programme has also been leveraged to finance public facilities, including a large educational and childcare complex (approx. €9.5 million), sports infrastructure, and the extension of district heating networks, demonstrating a broader strategy aimed at increasing residential attractiveness [23]. Importantly, Montargis integrates these physical interventions with social and cultural policies. Initiatives such as the "Jumelage Quartiers de Culture"

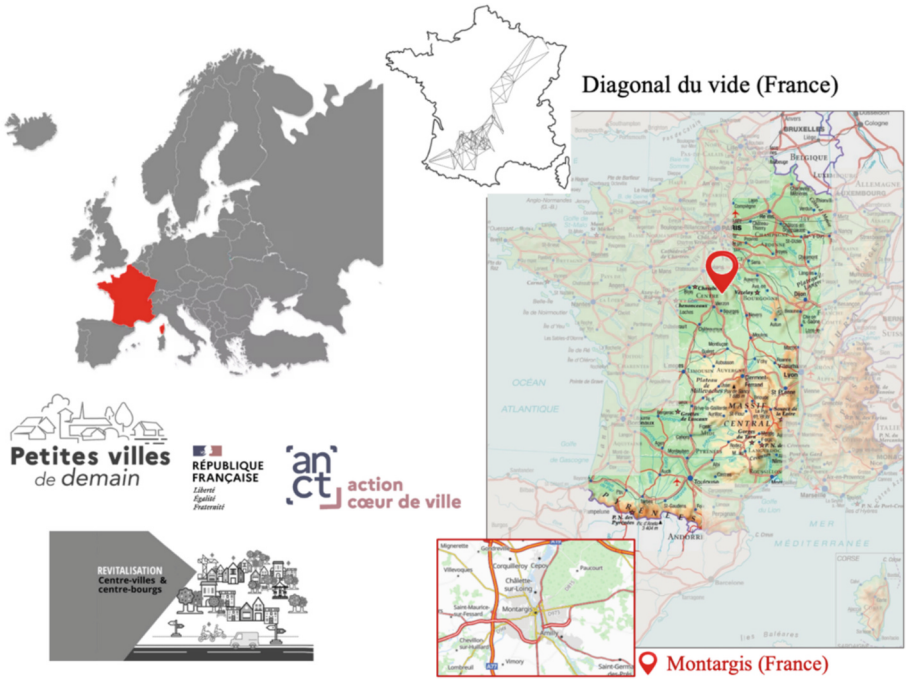

Fig. 1. Case study. French policies. Montargis, France

programme (2025–2027) promote cultural inclusion in priority neighbourhoods, while broader frameworks such as the Contrat de ville and the "Attracti'Cités" plan address social cohesion and urban inequalities [24, 25]. These actions are coordinated through the Opération de Revitalisation du Territoire (ORT), which provides a governance framework aligning multiple funding streams and policy objectives across five strategic axes: housing, commerce, mobility, public space, and services [26].

Table 2. Montargis french policies

Intervention Type	Actions Implemented	Policy Instrument	Scale	Objective	Sources
Housing & Real Estate	Rehabilitation of housing, redevelopment of urban blocks (*îlots*), calls for projects	ACV, ORT	Building / Block	Reduce vacancy, attract residents	Marchés Online; Montar
Commercial Revitalisation	Creation of commercial foncière, reuse of vacant shops	ACV	City centre	Reactivate local economy	Montar

(*continued*)

Table 2. (*continued*)

Intervention Type	Actions Implemented	Policy Instrument	Scale	Objective	Sources
Public Space	Redevelopment of Place de la République, street improvements	ACV	Urban core	Improve attractiveness, walkability	Urbicus
Mobility & Logistics	Pedestrian/cycling improvements, last-mile logistics strategies	ACV	City-wide	Accessibility, sustainable mobility	Montar
Public Facilities	School & childcare centre (€9.5 M), sports infrastructure, district heating	ACV + other funding	Neighbourhood / City	Increase residential attractiveness	Le Moniteur
Social & Cultural Policies	Cultural programmes in priority neighbourhoods	Contrat de ville, national programmes	Neighbourhood	Social inclusion	Agglomération Montargoise
Integrated Governance	Multi-sector coordination (housing, commerce, mobility, services)	ORT	Territorial	Policy integration	Ville de Montargis
Territorial Role	Coordination with surrounding small towns	ACV + indirect PVD context	Regional	Strengthen urban network	Analytical synthesis

4.2 Troina

The Inner Area of Troina represents a paradigmatic example of a place-based and multi-municipal governance model within the Italian National Strategy for Inner Areas (NSIA) [10].



Fig. 2. Case study. Italian policies. Troina, Italy

Importantly, the case does not correspond to the municipality of Troina alone, but to a wider territorial system including fourteen municipalities across the provinces of Enna and Caltanissetta, reflecting the functional rather than administrative nature of NSIA intervention areas [27, 28]. Within this framework, the strategy is structured around a dual objective: improving access to essential services – such as education, healthcare, and mobility – and fostering local development through integrated investments [10, 29]. In governance terms, the area has established forms of inter-municipal cooperation, including the creation of an Unione dei Comuni and shared administrative structures (e.g. joint planning offices, procurement units, and one-stop shops for productive activities), aimed at strengthening institutional capacity and overcoming fragmentation [30]. The strategic framework identifies five key development domains: renewable energy, natural and cultural heritage, tourism, local crafts, agro-food systems, and environmental protection [30]. Concrete interventions include investments in essential services, such as the reorganisation of school systems, enhancement of healthcare provision through innovative solutions (e.g. telemedicine and mobile diagnostics), and the development of flexible and demand-responsive transport services to improve accessibility in low-density areas [29]. Alongside these, the strategy promotes local economic development through support for agri-food supply chains, including the valorisation of traditional products, sustainable livestock systems, and innovation in production processes, as well as initiatives linked to renewable energy and circular economy practices [30]. Furthermore, the NSIA framework enables the mobilisation of multiple funding streams –national resources combined with European Structural and Investment Funds (ERDF, ESF, EAFRD)– to support integrated territorial projects [29]. Recent developments confirm the strengthening of the Troina inner area within the 2021–2027 programming cycle, with dedicated funding

aimed at infrastructure, environmental management, and service provision to counteract demographic decline and socio-economic marginalisation [31] (Table 3).

Table 3. Troina Inner Area policies

Dimension	Interventions / Actions	Policy Instrument	Scale	Objective	Sources
Territorial Structure	14 municipalities (Troina + surrounding areas)	NSIA	Inter-municipal	Functional territorial governance	Regione Siciliana; Enna Live
Governance	Union of municipalities, shared offices (planning, procurement, SUAP)	NSIA	Area-wide	Administrative capacity building	Comune di Troina
Essential Services	Schools reorganisation, healthcare (telemedicine), transport services	NSIA (national funds)	Territorial	Accessibility and quality of life	Agenzia Coesione
Mobility	Demand-responsive transport, connections to service hubs	NSIA	Area-wide	Reduce isolation	Agenzia Coesione
Local Development	Agro-food chains, local production, crafts	NSIA + EU funds	Local/regional	Economic diversification	Comune di Troina
Environment & Energy	Renewable energy, environmental protection	NSIA + EU funds	Area-wide	Sustainability	Comune di Troina
Tourism & Culture	Valorisation of natural and cultural heritage	NSIA	Territorial	Attractiveness	Comune di Troina
Funding Model	Integration of national + EU funds (FESR, FSE, FEASR)	Cohesion Policy + NSIA	Multi-level	Integrated development	OpenCoesione

While the Inner Area of Troina operates as a multi-municipal system, a focused analysis on the municipality of Troina itself is both relevant and analytically useful, as it functions as a key service and governance hub within the area. Troina plays a central role in the implementation of the National Strategy for Inner Areas (NSIA), particularly in relation to the provision and reorganisation of essential services. For instance, the municipality hosts important healthcare facilities, including specialised medical centres, which have been strengthened through NSIA-related investments and innovations such as telemedicine and integrated care models. In the field of education,

Troina acts as a central node for the reorganisation of school services across the area, helping to rationalise provision in a context of demographic decline.

At the local development level, Troina has promoted initiatives linked to agro-food production, environmental sustainability, and renewable energy, often serving as a pilot location for projects later extended to the wider area. Moreover, the municipality has been actively involved in strengthening administrative capacity through inter-municipal cooperation mechanisms, contributing to the establishment of shared governance structures and planning tools.

However, these interventions should not be interpreted as isolated municipal policies; rather, they are embedded within a broader territorial strategy, where Troina operates as a functional centre within a network of smaller municipalities. This highlights a key characteristic of NSIA: the shift from a municipality-based approach to a place-based and network-oriented model of local development (Table 4).

Table 4. Troina policies

Intervention Type	Specific Actions (Troina-focused)	Policy Instrument / Funding Source	Estimated Funding	Scale	Role of Troina	Objective
Healthcare	Strengthening local healthcare facilities; telemedicine; mobile diagnostics	NSIA + National Health Funds + ESF	~€1–3 M (service innovation projects)	Territorial	Service hub	Improve access to healthcare
Education	School network reorganisation; centralisation in key nodes	NSIA + National Education Funds	~€1–2 M	Territorial	Educational hub	Maintain services despite depopulation
Mobility	Demand-responsive transport; connections to service centres	NSIA + ERDF	~€2–4 M	Area-wide	Accessibility node	Reduce spatial isolation
Governance	Union of Municipalities; shared offices (SUAP, planning, procurement)	NSIA (capacity building)	~€0.5–1 M	Inter-municipal	Administrative centre	Strengthen institutional capacity
Agro-food	Support to local supply chains; product valorisation	EAFRD + NSIA	~€2–5 M	Local / Territorial	Pilot role	Economic diversification
Environment & Energy	Renewable energy projects; land/environmental management	ERDF + NSIA	~€3–6 M	Area-wide	Pilot territory	Sustainability transition
Cultural Heritage & Tourism	Valorisation of natural/cultural assets; slow tourism	NSIA + ERDF	~€1–3 M	Territorial	Central node	Increase attractiveness
Public Services	Strengthening administrative and social services	NSIA + national funds	~€1–2 M	Territorial	Service centre	Guarantee essential services

(*continued*)

Table 4. (*continued*)

Intervention Type	Specific Actions (Troina-focused)	Policy Instrument / Funding Source	Estimated Funding	Scale	Role of Troina	Objective
Local Development & Innovation	Circular economy, rural innovation pilots	NSIA + Cohesion Policy	~€1–3 M	Local / Area-wide	Experimental hub	Stimulate local economy

4.3 Policies Impact of Demographic's Trend

Based on the interventions identified above, the current demographic situation highlights positive impacts in some cases and unresolved issues in others.

Figure 1 shows a persistent demographic decline in Troina, from approximately 10,061 inhabitants in 2001 to 8,405 in 2023, with an average annual decrease of 1.45%. This trend reflects the town's vulnerability to outmigration and population ageing, suggesting that previous interventions under the 2014–2020 programming cycle were insufficient to halt depopulation.

The scale and pace of demographic decline indicate that policy implementation is constrained by structural and local factors, including limited economic opportunities and accessibility challenges. By contrast, Montargis maintains a relatively stable population, with minor fluctuations and a slight recovery to 14,825 inhabitants in 2023 (Table 2, Fig. 1).

Montargis' higher population density (3,392.7 vs. 49.9 inhabitants/km^2) and smaller territorial area contrast sharply with Troina's dispersed settlement pattern (Table 2). Troina's low density exacerbates challenges for delivering public services and sustaining local economies, highlighting a structural limitation that policies struggle to overcome. Italian policies are explicitly designed to target such "inner areas," yet the slow demographic recovery indicates that strategies require complementary measures in employment, mobility, and digital connectivity to be fully effective.

In Montargis, dense urban settlement facilitates access to infrastructure and public services, reducing the immediate pressure on policy interventions. Here, the French approach appears effective in maintaining baseline territorial equity, but less oriented toward actively fostering growth in lagging areas (Fig. 3), (Table 5).

Table 5. Population, age, foreigners' data

Indicator	**Troina (Italy)**	**Montargis (France)**
Area (km^2)	168.28	4.41
Resident population	8,405 (2023) (ISTAT)	14,976 (2023) (INSEE)
Population density (inhabitants/km^2)	49.9	3,392.7
Average age (years)	47.6	41.5
Average annual population change	−1.45%	+1.36%

(*continued*)

Table 5. (*continued*)

Indicator	Troina (Italy)	Montargis (France)
Percentage of foreigners	1.8%	16.5%
Population trend	**Decreasing**	**Stable / slight increase**

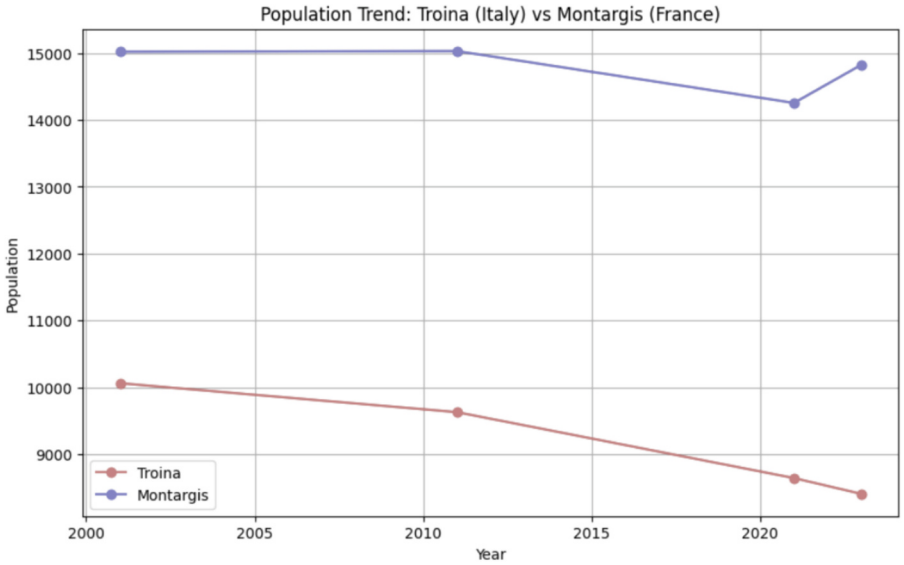

Fig. 3. Population trend

The relative demographic stability in Montargis comes from broader French territorial cohesion policies and regional development investments, which, while not highly targeted to marginal municipalities, provide infrastructural and economic support that can absorb demographic shocks. This suggests that these approaches, if properly applied, can maintain stability, though they may not actively reverse local decline in less favored areas.

Troina's population is heavily aged, with 28% over 65 and only 12% aged 0–14 (Table 2, Fig. 2). This demographic profile highlights the urgent need for structural policies to improve education, healthcare and transport links in inland areas, in order to encourage younger residents to stay. These are objectives that the NSIA has been trying to achieve, but has not yet succeeded in doing so.

Montargis exhibits a more balanced age structure, with 20% over 65 and 18% under 14. While this reflects less immediate demographic vulnerability, it also suggests that French policies benefit from pre-existing territorial advantages and are less pressured to intervene at the local scale (Fig. 4).

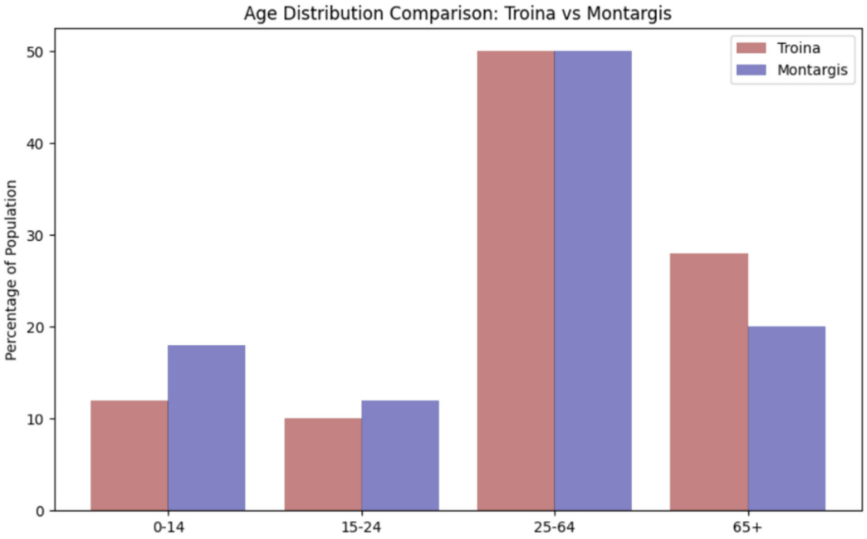

Fig. 4. Ages distribution comparison

These findings emphasise that the Italian approach is effective in areas at risk of severe depopulation. However, its success hinges on overcoming structural barriers and ensuring integrated local implementation. While the French approach maintains stability in relatively resilient municipalities, it could leave severely marginalised areas unaddressed if broader redistributive mechanisms prove insufficient.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

This study has examined differences in territorial policy orientation between Italy and France, focusing on different approaches, and has illustrated these differences through the comparative cases of Troina and Montargis.

The comparative analysis of Troina (Italy) and Montargis (France) provides significant insights into the operationalization of territorial policies and their effectiveness in addressing marginality, demographic decline, and spatial inequalities. The contrasting demographic and territorial characteristics of the two municipalities illustrate how national policy orientations interact with local conditions to shape outcomes.

Troina exemplifies a sparsely populated and aging municipality, with a population density of only 49.9 inhabitants/km^2 and an average annual population decline of -1.45%. These structural conditions highlight the inherent vulnerability of inner areas in Italy. While the Italian National Strategy for Inner Areas (NSIA) embodies an approach aimed at preemptively supporting municipalities at risk of depopulation through improved service provision, multi-level governance, and local development initiatives.

Montargis has a higher population density (3,392.7 inhabitants/km^2) and a relatively stable population, with slight growth of $+1.36\%$ annually. The municipality's demographic stability reflects the operation of France's territorial policies, which aim to maintain regional cohesion and population stability. These interventions –while not

highly targeted– provide sufficient infrastructural and economic support to buffer against demographic shocks. However, the approach does not appear designed to actively reverse decline in structurally disadvantaged or depopulating areas.

The stark contrast in population density between Troina and Montargis underscores the importance of settlement patterns in shaping policy effectiveness. Troina's low-density and dispersed population exacerbate challenges in delivering public services and sustaining local economic activity, highlighting a structural constraint that proactive policies alone may struggle to overcome. This observation suggests that successful interventions in Italian inner areas may require complementary strategies addressing employment generation, mobility infrastructure, and digital connectivity to achieve tangible demographic stabilization.

In Montargis, higher population density allows for more efficient access to public services and local infrastructure, reducing the urgency of intensive policy intervention.

The case comparison:

Italy, Troina:

- Strengths: targeted support to at-risk municipalities, anticipatory planning, emphasis on multi-level governance and local development.
- Limitations: structural constraints (low population, economic stagnation, geographic remoteness) may slow impact; implementation is resource-intensive and requires complementary measures beyond service provision.

France, Montargis:

- Strengths: effective in maintaining demographic stability and territorial cohesion where structural conditions are favorable; cost-efficient and scalable across many municipalities.
- Limitations: limited capacity to address deep-seated demographic decline or socio-economic fragility in structurally disadvantaged areas; less oriented toward transformational growth.

The analysis highlights how national regulatory frameworks interact with local structural conditions to determine both the scope and effectiveness of measures aimed at combating territorial marginalisation, demographic decline and spatial inequalities.

Political direction is important, but the local context is decisive.

Whilst Italian strategies focus on the depopulation of inland areas (NSIA), aiming to strengthen service provision, governance and local development, French strategies (Petites Villes de Demain) stabilise municipalities with relatively favourable structural conditions, but do not actively reverse the decline in heavily marginalised territories. The latter, in fact, stabilise municipalities with relatively favourable structural conditions, but do not actively reverse the decline in heavily marginalised areas.

This highlights the need to identify complementary measures regarding employment, mobility and digital connectivity to achieve tangible demographic stabilisation.

Territorial classification systems influence the definition of policy objectives.

In Italy, classifications based on accessibility focus interventions on areas distant from essential services. In France, multi-criteria classifications allow for broader coverage and stabilisation, but may overlook highly vulnerable micro-territories.

Refining territorial classification frameworks is key to ensuring that measures aimed at supporting both vulnerable and structurally stronger municipalities receive adequate attention [32].

Effective implementation requires adequate institutional capacity, including technical assistance, planning skills, and monitoring mechanisms, in order to improve policy coherence and impact. This highlights the importance of strengthening local governance and multi-level coordination in both national contexts.

Italian and French policymakers could benefit from sharing best practices: Italy can learn from France's scalable governance structures, whilst France can explore proactive, targeted measures for municipalities at risk of decline.

In this perspective, promoting the exchange of knowledge between national contexts becomes a relevant strategy to enhance policy learning and improve the adaptability of territorial interventions.

While the qualitative comparative approach enables an in-depth understanding of policy design and implementation, it presents some limitations. First, the analysis relies primarily on official documents, which may emphasize formal objectives rather than actual outcomes. Second, the case selection is illustrative rather than statistically representative. Finally, differences in administrative structures and data availability between Italy and France may affect the degree of comparability.

Despite these limitations, the study provides a structured and theory-informed comparison of territorial policies, linking classification systems, policy instruments, and governance models to broader distinctions between proactive and reactive approaches. This methodological framework enables a nuanced interpretation of how different national contexts shape responses to territorial marginality and spatial inequalities.

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