

Counter-Urbanisation as Refuge During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case Study from Turkey

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Migration still plays an important role today and can occur between countries and settlements for different reasons. One of the types of migration is counter-urbanisation. This study examines the impact of COVID-19 on the commu-

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nal needs and physical structure of the countryside, focusing on counter-urbanisation. In this context, semi-structured interviews were conducted in 17 villages in Turkey, and the observation method was utilised. Results show a trend of retirees participating in counter-urbanisation activities during the pandemic by focusing on the countryside's survival function. In the post-pandemic period, refuge qualities emerged due to their tendency to return. With this counter-urbanisation, the increase in the population of rural areas renders the existing organisational structures inadequate in terms of communal services and brings new needs to the agenda.

Keywords: counter-urbanisation, urban tension, city-countryside interaction, COVID-19, Turkey

1. Introduction¹

The first settlements were established in the areas we define as rural today. In the long following process, some of these rural areas became urban. Cities have also created a new reality of life compared to the countryside. In this context, the opportunities offered by the municipalities mobilised the population in rural areas, leading to rural-urban migration. On the other hand, various push and (rural) pull situations ensued, e.g. staying away from the land (Chen, Clarke, & Hracns, 2022), experiencing nature, being in nature, returning to roots (Mitchell, 2008; Rojo-Mendoza, 2022; Simon, 2014; Nefedova & Pokrovsky, 2018; Hoppstadius & Akerlund, 2022); economic crises (Andersen et al., 2022; Anthopoulou, Partalidou & Kourachanis, 2019; Emmanouil-Stylianou, 2019); housing shortages and rising costs (Aberg & Tondelli, 2021; Karsten, 2020); COVID-19 (Rowe et al., 2023; Aberg & Tondelli, 2021; Pileva & Markov, 2021; Hansen et al., 2022; Chen, Clarke & Hracns, 2022; Gonzalez-Leonardo, Rowe & Fresolone-Caparrós, 2022; Fielding & Ishikuwa, 2021; Sood & Bala, 2022), rural enterprise opportunities (Bosworth & Finke, 2019; Mitchell & Madden, 2014; Usui, Funck & Adewumi, 2021; Feihan et al., 2021),

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and the infrastructure and support provided by the state in rural areas (Chen, Clarke & Hrac, 2022, p. 407) in turn led to migration from cities to rural or smaller-scale settlements. One of the critical developments that brought the shift from urban to rural areas to the agenda was the COVID-19 pandemic. This population mobility, while raising some problems (Löffler & Steinicke, 2006, pp. 64–70) and new needs (FAO, 2021), has also led to the transformation of the countryside and offered new opportunities contributing to its sustainable development (see Feihan et al., 2021; Bosworth & Finke, 2019).

Different concepts in different contexts characterise the phenomenon of migration from urban to rural areas. While the concepts of return migration (King & Kuschminder, 2022; Bilgili, van der Linden & Peters, 2022; Kang & Latoja, 2022) and reverse migration (Wang & Bao, 2015; Sood & Bala, 2022; Georgiev, 2020) are more prominent on a cross-country scale; counter-urbanisation (Mitchell & Madden, 2014), commercial counter-urbanisation (Bosworth & Finke, 2019), de-urbanisation, de-metropolisation (Emmanouil-Stylianou, 2019), return migration (Rajan & Pattath, 2022), crisis counter-urbanisation (Anthopoulou, Partalidou & Kourachanis, 2019), rural-urban mobilities (Öztürk et al., 2018), liquid migration, seasonal counter-urbanisation (Nefedova & Pokrovsky, 2018), lifestyle migration (Kızıltepe, 2020), urban exodus (Rowe et al., 2023; Kato & Takizawa, 2022; Gonzalez-Leonardo, Rowe & Fresolone-Caparros, 2022) represent the underlying reasons for migration within a country.

This study focuses on counter-urbanisation based on the assumption that urban characteristics are relevant to population mobility from urban to rural areas. Counter-urbanisation is the population movement from a metropolitan area to the countryside (Andersen et al., 2022) or to lower-tier settlements (Korkmaz, 2022, p. 63). Defining counter-urbanisation is challenging due to the dynamic relationship between rural and urban areas and their increasing interconnectedness (Nefedova & Pokrovsky, 2018; Delgado-Vinas & Gomez-Moreno, 2022). Within the abovementioned context, this study highlights the concept of “counter-urbanisation as a refuge”, which reflects a type of counter-urbanisation and has gained importance with the pandemic. This concept corresponds to a new situation of counter-urbanisation as a refuge, which Karsten (2020, p. 431) introduced to the discourse focusing on work that will cover one’s entire lifespan. Population movement between urban and rural areas occurs during both stable and unstable periods. It can even be an instantaneous reaction (panic mobility/reaction-driven motivation for rural in-migration,

see Aberg & Tondelli, 2021, cited in Colomb & Gallent, 2022, p. 625). Therefore, there is a population flow between urban and rural areas.

Few studies in Turkey have examined the impact of COVID-19 on counter-urbanisation (Hovardaoğlu & Çalışır-Hovardaoğlu, 2022). Counter-urbanisation in this context lacks sufficient research of its processes and effects (Korkmaz & Meşhur, 2022). An examination of counter-urbanisation studies conducted in Turkey before and after the pandemic shows that disciplines such as urban and regional planning, geography, sociology, and agricultural economics come to the forefront. This study focuses on the quality rather than the quantity of counter-urbanisation from the perspective of local governments. This field study aims to answer the following question: What impact did the counter-urbanisation that emerged during the pandemic have on the shaping of rural space and the demand for typical services, and what will be the future reflections of this impact?

2. Research Field

According to data of the Turkish Statistical Institute (TURKSTAT) (2022), Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir receive the highest number of migrants in terms of inter-provincial migration. The main reason for migration between these provinces is tertiary education. While the present research study delves into counter-urbanisation in Turkey, there is no official data on this matter. Furthermore, while some inter-provincial migration data is available, it does not apply. Unfortunately, this issue is also prevalent in other nations, as Rowe and colleagues (2023) noted.

Nevertheless, counter-urbanisation has been identified in academic studies that rely on field research, local authorities' feedback, and big data analysis (Rowe et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2022). According to TURKSTAT data (2022), Turkey's prominent metropolitan cities, such as Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir, are among the cities that receive the most migration and the cities that give the most migration. While a significant portion of this migration is toward cities, some is toward rural areas. Against this backdrop, our research field is Giresun Province in the Eastern Black Sea Region, one of Turkey's 81 provinces.

Giresun was chosen as the research location due to significant migration towards urban centres like Istanbul, Kocaeli, and Bursa. This trend has been apparent since the World War II, with these cities now known for their industrial activities. At this point, according to TURKSTAT (2021)

data, there are 391,912 *Giresunlu*² (according to population records) in Giresun province, while 494,160 *Giresunlu* live in Istanbul province. Furthermore, immigrants keep their connections with the place they migrated from post-migration.

The province of Giresun consists of 16 districts, with only eight having a coastline. The coastal areas are home to roughly 80% of the population. Our research focused on three districts - Merkez (Center), Bulancak, and Görele – chosen for their significant population size. The goal was to interview residents in ten different villages across each district. However, residents of some villages could not be interviewed due to various reasons, as identified during preliminary interviews with the *muhtars*³ (e.g., lack of migrant population in the village during the pandemic, unavailability of interviewees, or refusal to participate in the interview). As a result, interviews were carried out in 17 villages across three districts.

3. Research Methodology

Previous research on reverse migration reveals that quantitative studies apply statistical methods based on population data (Korkmaz, 2022, p. 64). However, there is a lack of variety in studies utilising quantitative methods (Özyakışır, 2012; Altunok, 2021), as well as a lack of research using qualitative methods, including interviews and focus group discussions (Bulut & Dinçmen, 2020; Kara & Gökburun, 2018; Baş, 2019; Bodur, 2019; İnan, 2019; Sunata, 2014; Ramon & James, 2021; Pileva & Markov, 2021; Aberg & Tondelli, 2021; Öztürk et al., 2018; Simon, 2014) and mixed methods (Korkmaz, 2022, p. 66; Usui, Funck & Adewumi, 2021).

The methodology chosen for this study is primarily based on the case study approach, which enables an investigation into the “how” and “why” of a situation within its natural environment using multiple data sources. This approach is beneficial when the case boundaries are not clearly defined beforehand (Yin, 2003). Various tools, such as interviews, observations, and document analysis, were utilised to gather qualitative data (Yin, 2003, p. 86; Patton, 2014). This study used semi-structured interviews and participant observation techniques, with questions designed to cover the periods before, during, and after the pandemic (Patton, 2014). The

² People from Giresun.

³ Local authorities at the village level.

participant observation method was used to support the interview findings as part of the research process. During the interviews, the researchers noted the participants' present and future involvement in rural areas, such as construction and agricultural production. These notes were then used to present the findings and form the discussion and conclusion sections of the research report. Participants were selected using the snowball sampling method, and the questionnaire was piloted with three individuals, with their feedback used to refine and finalise the questionnaire. Following this, the researchers contacted the village *muhtars* (headmen) to obtain information on individuals who stayed in the village during the pandemic. When necessary, the researchers also attempted to recruit participants in person.

The number of participants interviewed in qualitative research varies. In this context, studies covering counter-urbanisation show that the number dramatically depends on the context, such as 4-81 people (Korkmaz, 2022, p. 73); 30 people, (Rojo-Mendoza, 2022, p. 2); five people (Anthopoulou, Partalidou & Kourachanis, 2019, p. 237); 50 people (Sood & Bala, 2022); 45 families (Hoppstadius & Akerlund, 2022). In addition to demographic variables, the participants were asked 18 questions based on the questions developed by Phillipson and colleagues (2020, p. 3973), covering the pre-, during, and post-pandemic periods. Three researchers conducted the interviews. One of the researchers asked the questions, and the other recorded the answers. While initially intended, voice recorders were not utilised in the interviews. This decision was made by the researchers with careful consideration of "ethics in practice" (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p. 262): the researchers opted to follow the principles of beneficence and respect for persons as it became evident in the field that the participants were not comfortable with having themselves recorded. Thus, we solved this ethical dilemma by carefully considering the participants' needs and interests and creating a system of three researchers per interview, with two researchers taking notes as the third conducted the interview. The interviews were conducted in September 2021 across 17 villages. The research team approached 87 people who had experienced counter-urbanisation in their respective villages, as recommended by the *muhtars*. However, eight people were found unsuitable for the research, whereas 18 could not be reached at their addresses. Furthermore, four individuals refused interviews. As a result, a total of 57 people were interviewed. The research team also contacted and interviewed additional 27 participants. In total, 84 people were interviewed, which took 22 hours and 37 minutes. The interviewees are listed below as C01 to C83, with

C denoting “Citizen”. In addition, the researchers had the opportunity to make relevant field observations. These observations played an essential part in contextualising participants’ answers. The participant observation method was carried out in a supportive/complementary manner to the interview findings. In this context, during the process of interviews, the researchers took notes that would reveal the participants’ current and future connection with the countryside (construction, agricultural production, etc.). These notes were used to convey the findings and create the discussion and conclusion section.

We utilised the content analysis method to analyse the data, a reliable and consistent technique for drawing meaningful conclusions from texts and comparable sources. The coding process plays an instrumental role in this approach, through which we can decode and examine the themes and codes generated to gain insight into the subject under scrutiny (Krippendorff, 2004, pp. 18, 83). The data obtained was analysed using the MAXQDA-20 software, which generated 1,471 codes. These codes were then organised chronologically, focusing on the periods before, during, and after the pandemic. Additionally, the codes were classified based on different districts. The research team prepared various visuals through descriptive, comparative, and relational analyses based on the code system.

4. Findings of the Study

4.1. Participant Demographics

Based on the findings in Table 1, most of those interviewed were men who were married and residing with their spouses in the village. Although the interviews were primarily conducted with men, their partners also participated in responding to questions. The age bracket of those involved in the study was mainly between 55 and 74, with a considerable percentage of them having retired. Most participants had completed their primary or secondary education, with only a small number having tertiary education. The study revealed that many participants were originally from the village and later experienced counter-urbanisation. Before relocating to the village, they had resided in Istanbul, Turkey’s bustling metropolis.

Table 1: *General information about the participants*

	Variables	Central	Görece	Bulancağ	Total	
Gender	Male	20	29	19	68	84
	Female	7	6	3	16	
Age	25-34	-	-	1	1	84
	35-44	-	-	2	2	
	45-54	5	2	1	8	
	55-64	10	14	10	34	
	65-74	11	12	5	28	
	75-84	1	6	3	10	
	85 +	-	1	-	1	
Marital status	Married	25	32	19	76	84
	Single	2	3	3	8	
Job	Retired	25	33	18	76	84
	Self-employed	2	-	4	6	
	Not working	-	2	-	2	
Education	No	2	2	2	6	84
	Primary school	12	19	12	43	
	Middle school	3	6	4	13	
	High school	5	5	1	11	
	Bachelor	2	2	2	6	
	Vocational school	3	1	1	5	
Place of birth	This village	19	29	15	63	84
	District centre of the village	6	1	1	8	
	The other village of the district to which the village is connected	1	-	-	1	
	Other counties in the district	1	5	5	11	
	Out of Country	-	-	1	1	

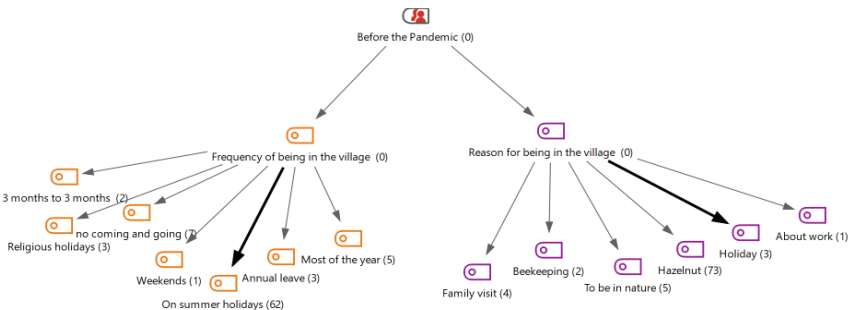
Place of residence before coming to the village	Istanbul	13	33	19	65	84
	District of the village	10	-	2	12	
	Kocaeli	-	2	1	3	
	Izmir	1	-	-	1	
	Zonguldak	1	-	-	1	
	Bursa	1	-	-	1	
	Samsun	1	-	-	1	

Source: Authors.

4.2. Relations with the Countryside/Village Before the Pandemic

Figure 1 below presents the codes produced and demonstrates that summer is the most favoured time for people to visit the village. The statistical trend can be attributed to the fact that summer holidays coincide with a break from formal education and training activities in Turkey, providing parents with the opportunity to spend time in the countryside. Furthermore, the hazelnut harvest, the primary agricultural production in the region where the study was conducted, usually takes place in August, further contributing to the summer season’s popularity. It is worth mentioning that although not everyone visits the village, some individuals spend considerable time there during retirement, visit during holidays or other times throughout the year, or come and go for shorter periods. Some even visit the district centre on weekends.

Figure 1: Hierarchical code-subcode model for the frequency of being in the village and the reason for being in the village before the pandemic



Source: Authors, based on MAXQDA.

Upon closer examination of the reasons for residing in a village during ordinary times, it is evident that proximity to nature, tending to familial obligations, engaging in beekeeping and other agricultural tasks, and taking leisurely vacations are equally significant as reaping the harvest.

4.3. Relations with the Countryside/Village During the Pandemic

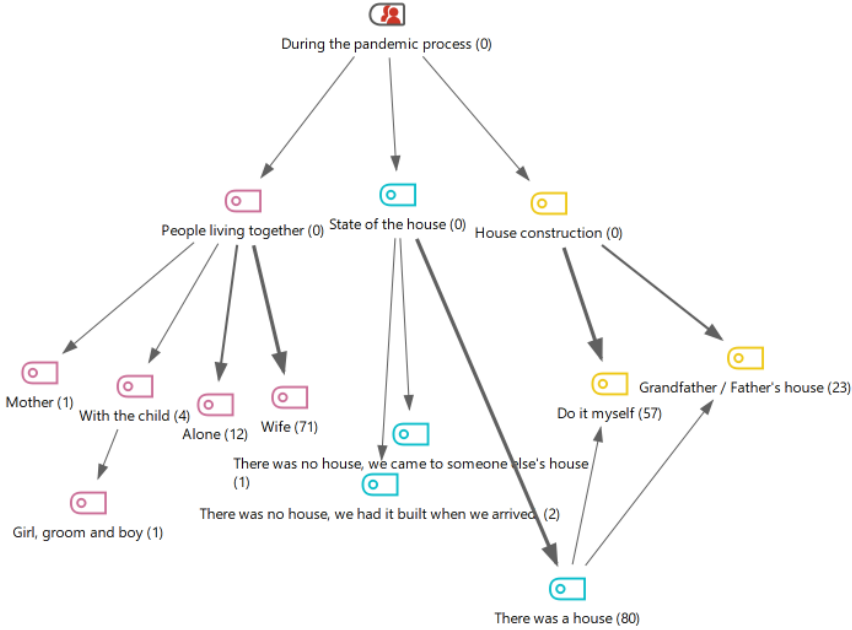
The first COVID-19 case in Turkey was identified on March 11, 2020. After this date, its impact increased, and to create a new norm of societal order and coexistence, methods such as distance education and remote working were utilised. Restrictions and closures were imposed from time to time. Mobility towards rural areas started with these developments. Only one of the interviewees stated that he was in the village when the first case was detected, while the other participants indicated that they came to the village (2020) after the first case was detected. Various decisions were taken to reduce the spread of the epidemic in the urban area.

Figure 2 shows that most participants stated that their living arrangements in the village comprised their spouse and/or family, typically consisting of their parents but not their children. It was also noted that living alone was the second most common arrangement. However, some families still reside in the village with their children and even their children's spouses. Notably, one participant still lives in the village with their mother.

Our research on housing in the village revealed that most participants reside in pre-existing homes, as illustrated in Figure 2. Current residents primarily constructed these homes within the last decade before the pandemic. Nonetheless, we did observe a small number of homes built in response to the pandemic or renovations of existing structures. Many participants also inherited their homes from their fathers or grandfathers.

Interestingly, participant observation notes showed little enthusiasm for the traditional architecture of the grandfather/father's homes (participant observation notes). This lack of enthusiasm is mainly due to inheritance laws and concerns about the financial burden of repairs and upgrades to these structures. Nevertheless, some initiatives are in place to preserve these old homes, even though they may not be as popular as other options.

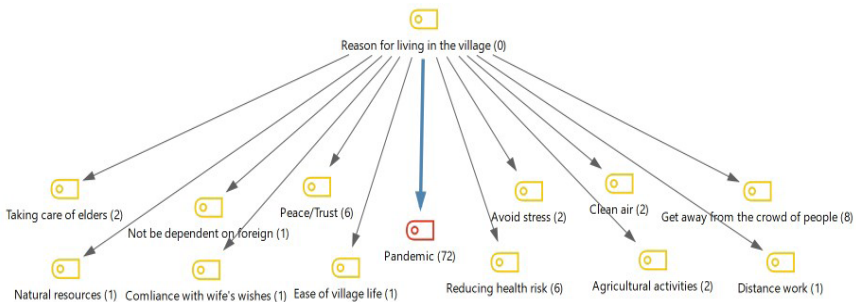
Figure 2: Hierarchical code-subcode model and the relationship between codes regarding the cohabitants in the village, the existence of the house, and the construction of the house during the pandemic



Source: Authors, based on MAXQDA.

Data presented in Figure 3 illustrates the pandemic as the primary factor cited for choosing village life. Less frequently mentioned reasons, unrela-

Figure 3: Hierarchical code-subcode model according to the reason for living in the village during the pandemic



Source: Authors, based on MAXQDA.

ted to the pandemic, include seeking solitude, cultivating trust and serenity, minimising health risks, caring for elderly loved ones, avoiding stress, engaging in agriculture, enjoying natural resources and fresh air, and achieving independence from external resources. Upon examination of these less common motivations, it becomes apparent that the challenges commonly faced in urban areas - such as congestion, stress, and adverse environmental factors – can be circumvented by returning to village life.

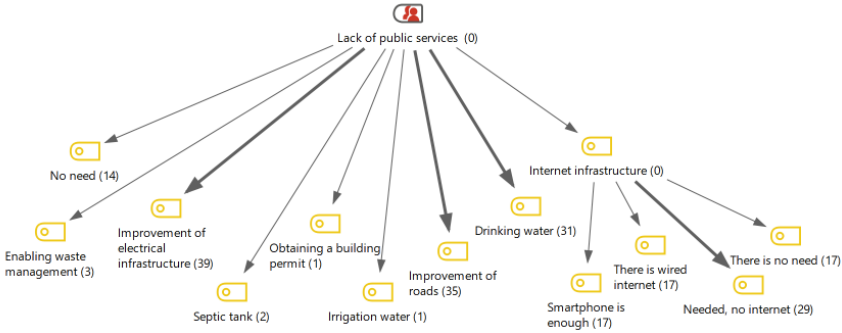
The vitality of rural communities hinges on the presence of dependable public services that cater to their daily needs. Hindrances in providing these services can pose issues and impede the smooth functioning of rural life. Commonly cited services include access to electricity, improved road infrastructure, and clean drinking water (as evidenced in Figure 4). Our research indicates that electricity services are often disrupted in the studied settlements, particularly during severe weather conditions such as heavy snow, due to outdated infrastructure established in the 1980s.

One of the critical issues in terms of local public services is road maintenance. Participants frequently stated their frustration regarding the poor quality and lack of roads. Moreover, the closure of roads, especially after snowfall, was emphasised. These problems are found among all the villages surveyed.

Access to clean water is essential to maintaining public health and sustaining life. Despite the region where the study was conducted receiving ample annual rainfall, the growing population could lead to challenges in accessing drinking water, particularly when there is a lack of established infrastructure or during periods of drought. Issues related to water infrastructure and sources are common, but individuals are addressing these problems.

While Figure 4 highlights several issues, it is important to note that some participants did not report any problems. Additional service provision issues that require attention include waste management, septic tanks, irrigation water, and building permits. The surge in population in rural areas has resulted in problems with solid and liquid waste, with particular concerns surrounding the collection and disposal of waste. Currently, the provincial administration collects solid waste weekly or bi-weekly, but it is necessary to increase the collection interval to enhance waste management. Conversely, areas with high building density and limited geography encounter issues with domestic liquid waste. Typically, villages in the research region have low population density, making it possible to dispose of liquid waste in the natural environment without causing harm. However,

Figure 4: Hierarchical code-subcode model for the lack of public services during the pandemic⁴



Source: Authors, based on MAXQDA.

the increased population density highlights the need for infrastructure development in rural areas (participant observation notes).

Based on feedback from research participants, accessing particular services like irrigation water and building permits can be quite difficult in rural areas. This lack of access can pose a significant challenge, particularly during the summer when irrigation water is essential for growing crops. Unfortunately, the inadequate potable water supply makes it harder to meet this need. Obtaining building permits can also be challenging when constructing new homes in rural areas. In the areas studied, village *muh-tars* were responsible for granting building permits after 2017, which were subsequently presented to the provincial special administration. Nevertheless, some individuals may view the need to adhere to the protocols outlined by the provincial special administration as a challenge.

Despite these challenges, the internet has proven to be a crucial tool in mitigating the effects of social isolation during the pandemic. It has enabled remote business, education, and training activities to continue, ensuring that life continues despite adversity. While respondents have consistently emphasised the importance of an internet connection, they have lamented the lack of proper provision in rural areas (see Figure 4). Although some participants mentioned the availability of dial-up internet or their

⁴ “There is no need” implies that internet was not a necessity, while “Needed, no internet” indicates a necessity for the internet but the unavailability of alternate means such as mobile data or dial-up internet.

reliance on smartphones, reliable internet connectivity is essential for sustaining life in rural areas, particularly for remote education and work.

4.4. Relations with the Countryside/Village After the Pandemic

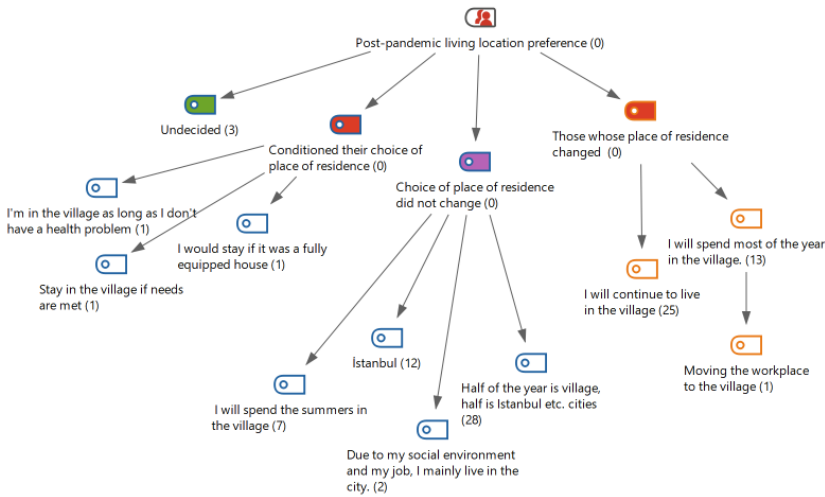
With the impact of the pandemic beginning to abate in early 2022, a critical issue becomes how rural life practices during the pandemic will affect the post-pandemic period. The focus is on participants' preferred location after the pandemic. Based on their answers, coding is categorised into four themes: those who stayed in their residences, those with specific conditions for their choice of residence, those whose place of residence changed, and those undecided. An analysis of the themes reveals that participants who spent approximately 1–1.5 years in the village during the pandemic frequently desire to return to the relationship they established with the village after the pandemic. One notable code under this theme is those who spend half the year in the village (especially during summer) and the other half in the city. Another code that emerged within this theme was the frequency of having Istanbul as the previous place of residence. This code's comments were clustered around "spending summers in the "village" and "maintaining life in the city due to its social aspect". In the context of the codes, these statements indicate that the village is understood as a place of refuge during the pandemic. Thus, this situation perception led to the concept of "counter-urbanisation as a refuge". One participant stated that the village is "always a safe zone" (C-C01).

One of the prominent themes for the post-pandemic period is those who changed their place of residence. Unlike the pre-pandemic period, the statements from those who will continue to live in the village stand out. The following statements stand out in this context: "I plan to continue living here. Maybe I will go to the city to get my son married, but then I plan to come to the village. The city is too crowded" (C-C1). In addition, the code regarding those who will spend most, if not all, of the year in the village also stands out under this theme: "We usually live mainly in the village, but we go back and forth to visit our children" (G-C45). Even the plan to move the workplace to the village is included under this theme.

Various factors come into play regarding people's post-pandemic location preferences. Certain individuals have specific criteria that inform their choice, such as "I would consider staying in the countryside during the winter if a furnished house is available" (B-C66) or "I would gladly stay

here if the issues are addressed, even my son wants to join me” (G-C46). Meanwhile, others remain uncertain about their desired place of residence following the pandemic. These scenarios represent distinct themes. Within the given context, another participant articulated, “If we like it, we will continue like this, maybe we can go back if there are problems with my daughter’s classes” (C-C27).

Figure 5: Hierarchical code-subcode model for post-pandemic place of residence preference



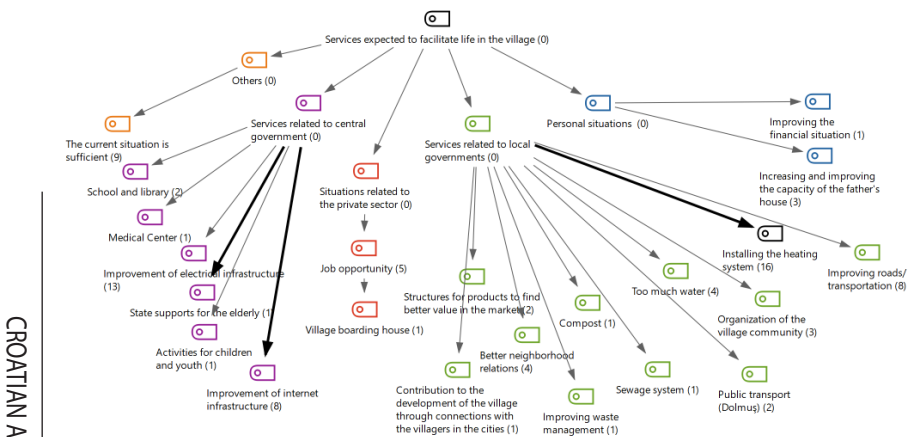
Source: Authors, based on MAXQDA.

Throughout the study, participants expressed their aspirations for making village life more manageable, particularly during the post-pandemic period (Figure 6). The study classified the codes derived from these statements into five overarching themes: services associated with the central government, services related to local governments, personal circumstances, situations related to the private sector, and other reasons. According to the study, the participants mentioned services related to local governments most frequently. The most popular services included enhancements to the heating system, roads/transportation, water resources, neighbourly relations, composting, sewage system, village community organisation, waste management, establishing connections with villagers in cities, and product evaluation structures in the market. These expectations primarily centre around environmental, organisational, and production-related issues.

Improvement of the power infrastructure is the most frequent code among the issues brought up within the realm of responsibility of the central government. Another code in this context is the improvement of internet infrastructure. Apart from these, the codes relating to schools and libraries, health centres, activities for children and young people, and state support for the elderly gain importance under this theme.

Job opportunities become salient under the theme of situations related to the private sector. The following statements stand out in this context: “If there were jobs here, children would come and stay” (G-C30). “If there were jobs, young people would stay; there are no job opportunities” (G-C38).

Figure 6: Hierarchical code-subcode model for services expected to facilitate life in the village



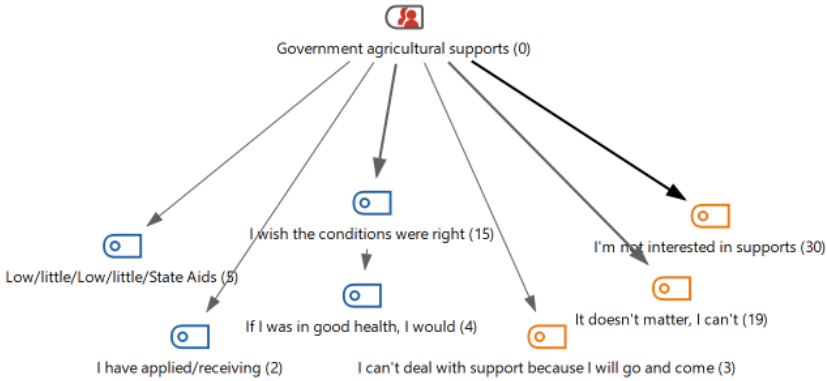
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Source: Authors, based on MAXQDA.

Under the theme of personal circumstances, the codes relating to increasing and improving the capacity of the existing/inherited family home and improving one’s financial situation become salient.

The research emphasises the importance of the government’s role in supporting agriculture. Yıldırım (2022), Nerse (2021), and Keleş and Mengi (2022) highlight the significance of state support in overcoming the challenges faced by rural areas, increasing production, and ensuring that the products reach the market at their full value. However, some participants are not taking advantage of such support, as indicated by recurring responses such as “I am not interested in government support”, “It is not

Figure 7: Hierarchical code-subcode model for government support for agricultural activities



Source: Authors, based on MAXQDA.

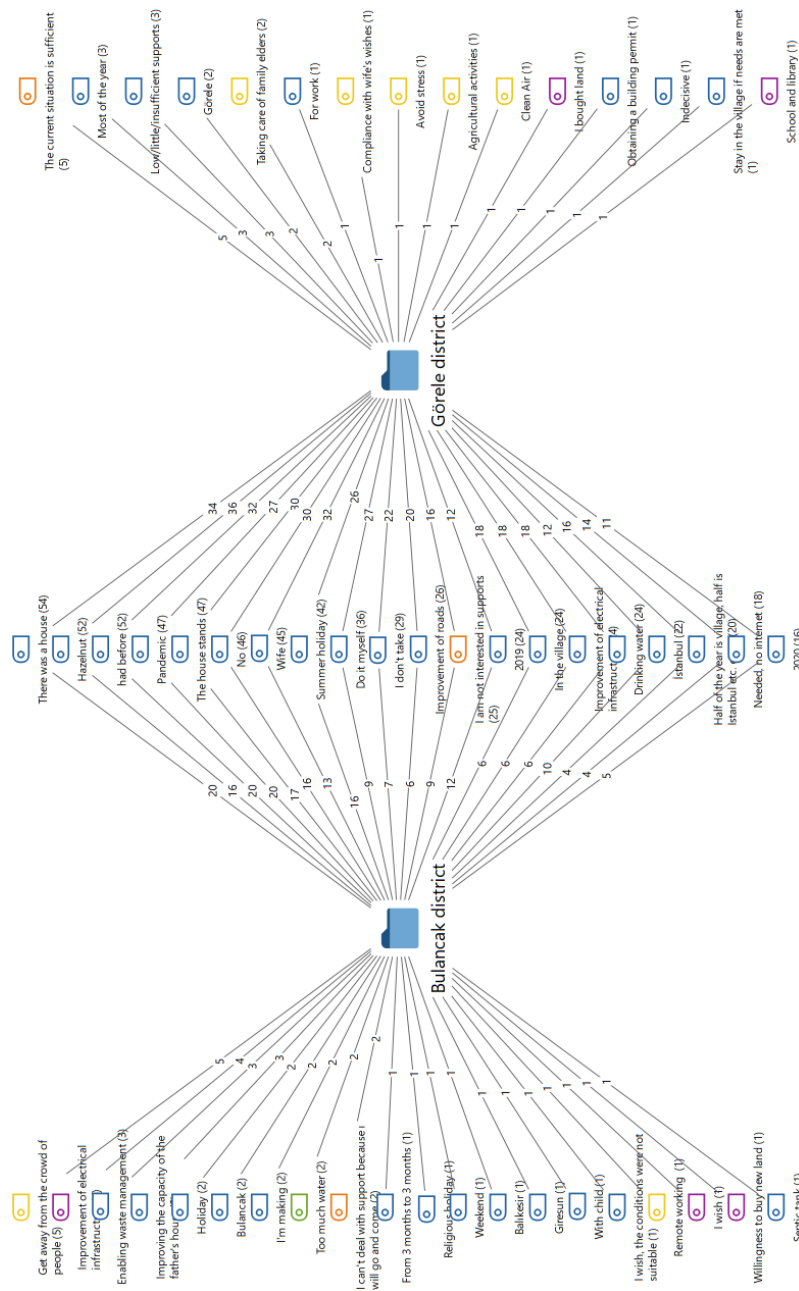
important”, and “I cannot deal with it” (see Figure 7). On the other hand, some participants benefit from state support when the conditions are favourable despite facing physical limitations. Nonetheless, inadequate support is frequently mentioned, and it is understood that participants make applications and utilise the support, albeit at a limited level.

4.5. Similarities and Differences Between Settlements

The field research of this study was conducted in three different districts of Giresun province. At this point, we turn to the similarities and differences between the districts. When combining the codes from both case models, recurring codes were found between districts (refer to Figure 8 and Figure 9). In this context, when the two case models created between the districts are analysed, the following stand out as the most recurring codes: “There was a house”, “spouse”, “had before”, “pandemic”, “hazelnut”, “no”, “do it myself”, “summer vacation”, “2020”, and so on.

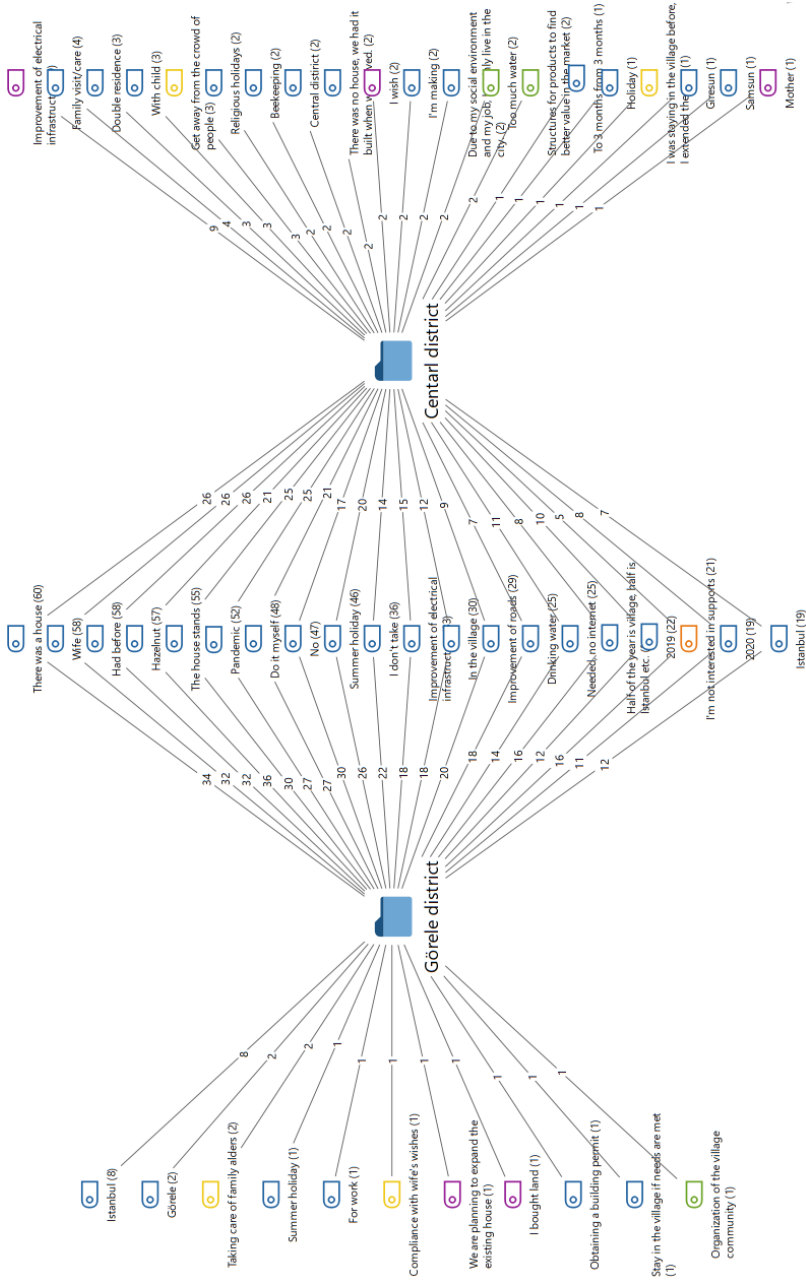
Figure 10 represents the closeness of the codes in the same document organised as the maximum distance “10”. In this context, in terms of proximity, it is seen that the codes “summer vacation”, “pandemic”, “there was a house”, “the house is still there”, “hazelnut”, “spouse”, and “having it done myself” stand out.

Figure 8: Two case models in the context of Bulancak and Görele districts



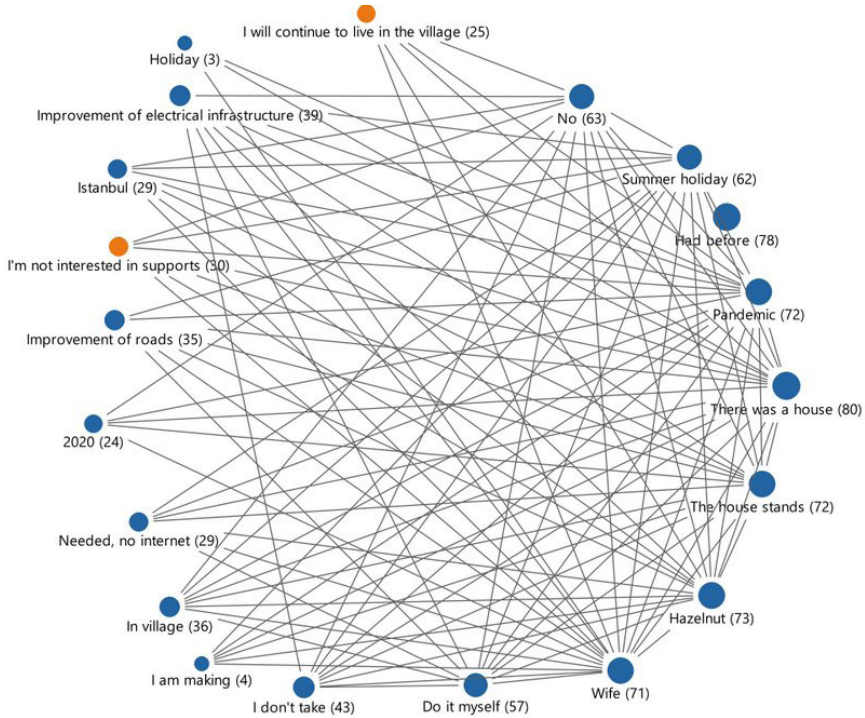
Source: Authors, based on MAXQDA.

Figure 9: Two case models in the context of Görele and Central districts



Source: Authors, based on MAXQDA.

Figure 10: Code map



Source: Authors, based on MAXQDA.

According to Table 2, the majority of coding pertained to the “lack of services” category. The second most common reason was “reasons for living in the village”, followed by “choice of location after the pandemic” in third place. The category “performance of the village administration” had the fewest codes. Overall, it is clear that the participants’ reasons for living in the village were closely followed by expectations for services that would improve their daily lives. The code “expectations that will make life easier” was more prevalent in the Bulancak and Central districts than in the Görele district. Conversely, the code “lack of services” was more prevalent in the Görele district than in the Bulancak and Merkez districts.

Table 2: Cross tabulations according to the districts where the villages are located

	Görele District	Bulanak District	Central District	TOTAL
BEFORE PANDEMIC				
Frequency of being in the village	5.6%	5.5%	5.2%	5.4%
Reason for being in the village	6.8%	5.0%	5.8%	6.0%
DURING PANDEMIC				
Time to come to the village	3.9%	4.5%	3.8%	4.0%
The place of residence	5.5%	5.2%	5.2%	5.3%
Those who are together in the village	5.8%	5.8%	6.6%	6.1%
Existence of the house	5.8%	5.2%	5.8%	5.7%
Construction of the house	5.6%	5.0%	5.6%	5.4%
Reason for living in the village	6.3%	7.9%	7.6%	7.2%
New home constructio plan	6.0%	5.8%	5.6%	5.8%
Link to previous placement	5.3%	5.8%	5.4%	5.4%
Presence of land in the village	5.8%	5.5%	5.4%	5.6%
Willingness to buy new land	4.8%	4.5%	4.8%	4.7%
Lack of services	10.8%	6.8%	7.4%	8.6%
Village management performance	1.0%	1.6%	2.2%	1.6%
Internet infrastructure	5.1%	6.0%	5.4%	5.4%
AFTER PANDEMIC				
Location preference after the pandemic	6.5%	7.1%	5.8%	6.4%
Expectations that make life easier in the village	3.9%	7.1%	7.6%	6.0%
Government support for agricultural activities	5.5%	5.8%	5.0%	5.4%
TOPLAM				
	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00
N = Documents	34 (40.5%)	22 (26.2%)	28 (33.3%)	84 (100%)

Source: Authors, based on MAXQDA.

Table 3 shows code density according to the participants' districts. Among the codes included in the code system, "problems with service provision", "reason for living in the village", and "preference for post-pandemic location" stood out the most, respectively. All of the participants' answers were clustered around these codes the most. When analysed at the district level, we observe that most of the coding came from the participants in the villages of Görele district. It was determined that the most frequent code was "lack of services" in the Görele district.

Table 3: *Density distribution table of codes according to the districts where the villages are located*

	Bulancak district	Görele district	Central district
BEFORE PANDEMIC			
> Frequency of being in the village	●	●	●
> Reason for being in the village	●	●	●
DURING PANDEMIC			
> Time to come to the village	●	●	●
> The place of residence	●	●	●
> Those who are together in the vill	●	●	●
> Existence of the house	●	●	●
> Construction of the house	●	●	●
> Reason for living in the village	●	●	●
> New home construction plan	●	●	●
> Link to previous placement	●	●	●
> Presence of land in the village	●	●	●
> Willingness to buy new land	●	●	●
> Lack of services	●	●	●
> Village management performance	●	●	●
> Internet infrastructure	●	●	●
AFTER PANDEMIC			
> Location preference after the pan	●	●	●
> Expectations that make life easier	●	●	●
> Government support for agricultur	●	●	●

Source: Authors, based on MAXQDA.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in an urban crisis in Turkey, prompting a significant number of citizens to relocate to rural areas and villages. Although the precise figure of individuals making this transition is unknown, numerous studies have documented the migration from urban to rural regions. This phenomenon is evident in many countries, and its duration remains unclear. However, if the younger generation can secure job prospects in or near their hometowns, they may be less inclined to return to the cities. This could facilitate greater stability in this alternative lifestyle (Kentel, 2017, p. 71).

According to a study carried out in Osaka, Japan, there was a surge in the number of people relocating from urban to rural regions during the pandemic. Nevertheless, this trend appears to have been short-lived, as the rural population began to decline again in the autumn of 2020 (Kato

& Takizawa, 2022). Based on these findings, the present study suggests that individuals who moved to rural areas during the pandemic will probably revert to their previous way of life after the pandemic subsides. Consequently, the study introduces the notion of “counter-urbanisation-as-refuge”.

It is generally accepted that the number of people involved in counter-urbanisation varies according to the urban challenges and needs encountered. This study showed that those who participated in reverse migration during the pandemic were mainly retirees and the elderly. The situation is similar to that of Turkey regarding the pre-pandemic (Tekeli, 2016, p. 139). Currently, 30.1% of the 65 and over age group live in rural areas, 55.3% in dense cities, and 14.6% in medium-dense cities (TURKSTAT, 2023). It is observed that young people and those who have a job have a limited tendency to move to the village. It is determined that the following issues are important among the main motivations of retirees in counter-urbanisation during the pandemic: worry/fear of loneliness during a possible quarantine, getting away from the crowd, concern about a potential food shortage, looking for a more natural or healthy place, getting away from the high-rises in the big city (Hovardaoğlu & Calisir-Hovardaoğlu, 2022). A similar situation found in Turkey through retirees is also observed in a study conducted in Czechia (Simon, 2014). However, a study conducted in Sweden found that counter-urbanisation occurs until the age of 60, while retirees take part in counter-urbanisation less (Andersen et al., 2022). Considering the practices of different countries covering the pre-pandemic period, the actors of counter-urbanisation are members of the upper class, self-employed, part-time rural dwellers, those with secondary residences in rural areas (Halfacree, 2008, p. 480), the elderly and retirees (Yuan, Beard & Johnson, 2021; Hovardaoğlu & Calisir-Hovardaoğlu, 2022; Kentel, 2017; Altunok, 2021; Simon, 2014; Öztürk et al., 2018; Bodur, 2019), families with children (Karsten, 2020), those who can work remotely (Pileva & Markov, 2021), those with a rural background through their family (Anthopoulou, Partalidou & Kourachanis, 2019). It is emphasised that secondary home ownership is an important part of counter-urbanisation in rural areas (Adamiak, Pitkanen & Lehtonen, 2017, p. 1046; Anthopoulou, Partalidou & Kourachanis, 2019, pp. 244–245). It is pointed out that the upper class and capital owners’ turn towards rural areas has brought the phenomenon of rural gentrification to attention (Yuan, Beard & Johnson, 2021; Aberg & Tondelli, 2021). As the findings of this study show, unlike other countries, the main actors of counter-urbanisation in Turkey are retired people. These people come

to the houses they had previously built in rural areas or their inherited fathers'/grandfathers' houses. During the pandemic, various efforts were spent to improve existing houses or increase their capacity, and no new houses were built. However, observations show that the physical structure of the countryside has been transformed with new buildings (participant observation notes). This situation leads to transformation by damaging the existing value structure of the countryside. At this point, Korkmaz (2022, p. 63) emphasises that counter-urbanisation brings some obligations to the countryside and argues that those who want to get away from the limitations of the city transform the countryside of their choosing (which is usually where they or their families come from) into a city. This situation reveals isolation and segregation in the rural area. New policies are needed to avoid these problems.

Retirees often relocate between urban and rural areas for various reasons throughout the year. One of the primary factors is the influence of family members who typically reside in urban areas. Additionally, living in rural areas can present challenges, particularly during winter when heating, roads, and power supply issues can arise. These factors contribute to significant population mobility among retired individuals.

A study conducted in Turkey revealed that elderly individuals who participate in counter-urbanisation activities tend to prefer living in rural areas for extended periods. However, they often return to urban areas due to the lack of health services, specifically periodic health checks (Hovardaoğlu & Calisir-Hovardaoğlu, 2022). Conversely, retirees often prefer settling in rural areas and embracing a natural lifestyle (Tekeli, 2016, p. 139), which increases the demand for local public provisions in the village.

For this reason, most coding in this research study clustered under the category of lack of services. This research highlights three basic needs at the local public provisions level. These are electricity, improvement of roads, and potable water. In addition to the needs mentioned above, the improvement of the heating system, especially in the winter season, is emphasised for these retired people to sustain their lives in rural areas. At this point, Hovardaoğlu and Calisir-Hovardaoğlu's study (2022) highlights the main problems/needs of the retirees who have taken on counter-urbanisation activities as the lack of pharmacies and difficulties in obtaining routine medicines, overcrowding of pharmacies, boredom stemming from being isolated from their ordinary daily routines, being outside the coverage area of the national cargo network, and so on. A study conducted in Bulgaria determined that people with the potential to realize counter-urbanisation care about the following services in rural areas: cable TV

and internet providers, a health centre and market, and other services that sustain communal living. In the same study, when asked under which circumstances they would be likely to live in the village, the answers were “telecommuting, the proximity of the village to the city, having an income or not working” (Pileva & Markov, 2021 p. 548; 550). The internet, which has an essential place in rural life in general, also gains importance in the production function of rural areas. Therefore, there is a need to improve the internet infrastructure in rural areas.

Conducted in Turkey, Kentel’s study (2017, p. 74) found that only 17% of rural retirees who moved to urban areas returned to agriculture, confirming their low contribution to rural production. However, the pandemic has again shown the importance of countries’ agricultural production capacities (Yıldırım, 2022). Therefore, there is a need to develop policies to increase productivity and meet the everyday needs of rural life. As found in the study (as is the case in various greenhouse projects), it is understood that direct or indirect support from the state (central and local governments) is essential in overcoming the limitations of rural areas, especially in terms of production (Yıldırım, 2022). In addition, cooperatives established outside the state provisions can also play an essential role in better utilisation of the produce. It is possible to see developments in this context in rural areas in western Turkey (Yıldırım, 2022).

On the other hand, the new situation in rural areas due to the pandemic has led to the development of new policies by the central government. At this point, the new situation of the population in rural areas and its difficulties in terms of food products bring new regulations to the agenda for the central government to cover rural areas with their social dimensions. There is a plan to reactivate idle village schools as “village life centres” in cooperation with four different ministries (the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, the Ministry of Youth and Sports, the Ministry of Environment, Urbanisation and Climate Change, and the Ministry of National Education), the opening of kindergartens and primary schools in village schools will be facilitated (the previous 10-child requirement for pre-school has been reduced to five), agriculture and animal husbandry training will be provided for villagers, together with improving human capital and increasing rural production.⁵

The pandemic has emphasised the survival function within rural areas. In this context, the new population has increased the problems and needs of

⁵ <https://www.meb.gov.tr/koy-yasam-merkezleri-ile-koy-okullari-aktif-egitim-birimleri-olarak-to-use/news/26105/en>

rural areas. As it stands, the current administrative structures need to be revised to meet the emerging needs. Thus, there is a need for new administrative arrangements to increase the efficiency of local standard services. The first regulation for villages in Turkey is the Village Law, enacted in 1924. This law is still valid today. The law presents unique qualities in terms of both the practice of democracy (with the structure of the Village Association) and the fulfilment of public needs through the provision of services (with the methods of *salma* and *imece*)⁶ (Kavruk et al., 2012, p. 2; Eryılmaz, 2016, p. 219). However, its current form must be well-established to meet today's needs. Therefore, to meet the needs arising in rural areas within the framework of the “decentralization” approach, there is a need to establish village administrations with strong operational capacity covering the life and production function of rural areas, either individually or in the form of cooperation/partnership, while preserving their original essence and form. With the new structure established within the specified framework, it will be possible to make rural areas productive by moving them beyond the “subsistence economy”, while making the provision of services more efficient (Mutlu, 2022, p. 343).

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⁶ “Salma” and “imece” constitute the traditional methods utilised by village management structures when providing their services. *Salma* refers to the lump sum approved by the village council, crowdfunded by village residents. *İmece* is the collective work done by village residents to perform any necessary work in the village. (Definitions adapted from Genel Türkçe Sözlük, <https://sozluk.gov.tr/>)

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COUNTER-URBANISATION AS REFUGE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A CASE STUDY FROM TURKEY

Summary

Migration is one of the most fundamental features of human history. Migration still plays an important role today and can occur between countries and settlements for different reasons. Migration activities bring various problems and needs regarding the everyday components of life. In this context, one of the types of migration is counter-urbanisation. Counter-urbanisation refers to moving from the city to the countryside or small settlements with predominantly rural characteristics. Urban areas maintain their attractiveness for individuals and organisations. However, living conditions and the city's structure bring ruralisation to the agenda. This study focuses on counter-urbanisation, a phenomenon that has been reshaped with the COVID-19 pandemic. It examines the impact of this counter-urbanisation on transforming the countryside's communal needs and physical structure. In this context, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 84 people in 17 villages of three districts in Giresun province located in the Black Sea Region of Turkey, and the observation method was utilised. According to the research findings, retirees carry out counter-urbanisation. However, the tendencies of these people covering the pandemic bring on the concept of counter-urbanisation as a refuge. Counter-urbanisation renders the existing organisational structures inadequate regarding communal services and brings new needs to the agenda. On the other hand, efforts to improve existing housing and create new housing bring new situations to the agenda for villages. With policies that will overcome the limitations of these new situations, it will be possible to support the elderly policies carried out by the country and contribute to sustainable development goals by supporting the production in rural areas. This potential calls for regulations and holistic policies that consider life and production functions in rural areas.

Keywords: counter-urbanisation, urban tension, city-countryside interaction, COVID-19, Turkey

KONTRAURBANIZACIJA KAO UTOČIŠTE TIJEKOM PANDEMIJE BOLESTI COVID-19: STUDIJA SLUČAJA IZ TURSKE

Sažetak

Migracije su jedno od temeljnih obilježja ljudske povijesti. One i danas imaju važnu ulogu i događaju se između naselja i zemalja iz različitih razloga. Migracijske aktivnosti sa sobom donose različite probleme i potrebe koje se tiču svakidašnjih aspekata života. U tom kontekstu, jedan od tipova migracija jest i kontraurbanizacija. Taj proces označava selidbu iz gradova u manja naselja u njihovoj okolini, pretežito ruralnog karaktera. Iako gradovi i dalje zadržavaju svoju privlačnost za pojedince i organizacije, životni uvjeti u gradovima i njihova struktura doprinose ruralizaciji. Ova se studija bavi pojavom kontraurbanizacije kao fenomenom koji je preoblikovan tijekom pandemije bolesti COVID-19. Ona ispituje utjecaj kontraurbanizacije na transformaciju ruralne okolice gradova, njihove komunalne potrebe i prirodnu strukturu. U tu svrhu, provedena su 84 polustrukturirana intervjua s ljudima iz 17 različitih naselja u provinciji Giresun u crnomorskoj regiji Turske, pri čemu je korištena metoda opservacije. Prema nalazima istraživanja, umirovljenici predvode kontraurbanizaciju. Ovaj proces čini postojeće organizacijske strukture za komunalne i druge javne službe nedostatnima i donosi nove potrebe. S druge strane, napori da se poboljšaju uvjeti i kapaciteti stanovanja predstavljaju nove okolnosti u agendama seoskih naselja. S politikama koje će prevladati ograničenja ovih novih situacija, bit će moguće provoditi i nadograditi politike za starije osobe koje provodi država i doprinijeti ciljevima održivog razvoja podupiranjem proizvodnje u ruralnim područjima. Zbog toga su potrebni novi propisi i holističke politike koje uzimaju u obzir životnu i proizvodnu funkciju ruralnih područja. Ključne riječi: kontraurbanizacija, urbane napetosti, interakcija grada i okoline, COVID-19, Turska