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ADMINISTRATIVELY URBAN, FUNCTIONALLY RURAL: MISCLASSIFICATION OF UKRAINE'S TERRITORIAL COMMUNITIES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR GOVERNANCE AND EU INTEGRATION

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Abstract: This article examines the functional rurality of Ukraine's territorial communities by applying European approaches to territorial classification. Specifically, it applies Eurostat- and OECD-based criteria, namely population density (the OECD threshold of 150 inhabitants per square kilometre) and the share of the rural population, to the level of local administrative units (territorial communities), drawing on pre-war 2020–2021 data. It shows that more than 90% of communities have a rural or mixed urban-rural character, encompassing over 95% of the rural population, although current administrative and statistical categories do not reflect this reality. This mismatch weakens the visibility of rural needs in local governance and complicates the targeting of rural development policy. The findings are particularly relevant in the context of Ukraine's EU integration and post-war reconstruction, where a function-based understanding of territorial communities is essential for effective governance and policy design.

Keywords: rural areas; territorial communities; local governance; rural typology; Ukraine; EU integration; rural development

Highlights:

- European methods reveal widespread functional rurality in Ukraine.
- Over 90% of communities are rural or mixed urban-rural.
- Administrative labels misclassify many functionally rural territories.
- Misclassification weakens governance and targeting rural policy.
- EU-aligned typology would support accession and reconstruction.

1. Introduction

As a result of the comprehensive reform of local self-government and the territorial organisation of power initiated in Ukraine in 2014, significant changes have occurred in governance at the local level. The reform aimed to create conditions for "the establishment and maintenance of a full-fledged living environment for citizens, the provision of high-quality and accessible public services, the development of institutions of direct democracy, the fulfilment of citizens' interests in all spheres of life within a given territory, and the harmonisation of the interests of the state and territorial communities" (Kabinet Ministriv Ukrainy, 2014). To achieve this, relevant powers and resources were transferred from state bodies to local self-government.

This reform of local self-government is regarded by government officials as one of the most successful in Ukraine (Uryadovyi Kuryer, 2024) and is positively assessed by Ukraine's international partners (Council of Europe, 2023). Many scholars also acknowledge its tangible

achievements (Arends, Brik, Herrmann, and Roesel, 2023; Patyka et al., 2023; Orel et al., 2024). At the same time, the reform has not resolved several critical issues of local development (in particular, the persistent treatment of rural development as subordinate to industrial agriculture rather than as a distinct policy domain, the absorption of villages into urban and settlement communities, and the reduced physical accessibility of local services for rural residents), some of which have become particularly acute as its outcomes have unfolded. Among these is the challenge of ensuring the comprehensive development of rural territories, taking into account their specific needs and characteristics. During the reform of local self-government, many aspects of rural development were transferred to the competence of local authorities. At the same time, numerous villages were incorporated into large urban and settlement territorial communities. In many cases, this not only failed to resolve existing issues but also generated new challenges for the development of rural areas, which, as parts of broader local communities, are often not recognised as a separate focus of state and local policies.

This article argues that the administrative status of territorial communities in Ukraine often obscures their functional rural character. As a result, a substantial share of communities that are effectively rural or mixed urban-rural are insufficiently recognised as such in governance and policy design. By applying European approaches to territorial classification at the level of territorial communities, the article shows how this mismatch affects the interpretation of local development needs and the targeting of rural policy in the context of EU integration.

An additional challenge to ensuring sustainable rural development in Ukraine lies in the country's active preparation for accession to the European Union (EU). One of the negotiation clusters between Ukraine and the EU within the framework of European integration is "Agriculture and Rural Development." Rural development constitutes a key area of policy in the EU, and its significance continues to grow, as reflected in the EU's long-term vision for rural areas to 2040 and the Rural Pact (European Commission, 2021). Ukraine must therefore adapt its national approaches to rural development to align with European standards. The success of this adaptation will largely depend on how clearly and consistently Ukraine defines rural territories in accordance with European methodologies, and on how effectively rural development policy is focused – both at the national level and, increasingly, within local self-government.

Although Ukrainian scholarship has addressed decentralisation and rural development, less attention has been paid to the discrepancy between administrative labels and the functional nature of local territories. This gap matters because territorial classification is not merely descriptive: it shapes how rural problems are identified, compared, and addressed in public policy. In this respect, the Ukrainian case is also relevant to broader European debates on rural typology, territorial governance, and place-based policy.

The need to strengthen the focus on rural development in Ukraine is also linked to the crucial role of rural areas in ensuring the state's resilience during wartime and in the forthcoming post-war reconstruction process. The escalation of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine after 24 February 2022 resulted in the forced displacement of millions of civilians, both abroad and

within the country. As of early 2025, more than one-third of the over 10 million refugees are internally displaced persons (IDPs) (UNHCR, 2025a; UNHCR, 2025b), and these movements continue. Earlier research from the period following the initial phase of Russian aggression had already shown that rural communities could play an important role in the adaptation and integration of internally displaced persons, while simultaneously facing their own local capacity constraints (Borodina, 2016).

More recent international monitoring confirms that war-related displacement has placed sustained pressure on host communities across Ukraine and has reshaped local patterns of mobility, settlement, and vulnerability (UN International Organization for Migration, 2024). These processes should also be understood through a human-rights lens, as the war has affected access to housing, livelihoods, basic services, and security, thereby altering the conditions under which local communities – including rural ones – must function and recover (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2025). A substantial share of IDPs have settled in rural areas of territories under Ukrainian control, where living conditions and opportunities for a dignified life are often far from adequate. The war has brought significant changes to the composition, size, and structure of the rural population, its spatial distribution across the country, and the formation of living environments and livelihoods for a large proportion of rural residents. These transformations present new challenges for local communities and bodies of local self-government.

This context provides an important foundation for examining developments in local governance in Ukraine in relation to transformations in the agricultural sector and rural territories. Such analysis can be effectively undertaken through the lens of European approaches to defining rural areas, recognising their public value, and identifying practical pathways for addressing rural challenges in the course of Ukraine's accession to the EU and its post-war reconstruction.

The article addresses two main questions. First, to what extent do Ukraine's territorial communities display a rural or mixed urban-rural functional character when assessed through European approaches to territorial classification? Second, what are the implications of this mismatch between administrative status and functional rurality for local governance and the targeting of rural development policy in the context of EU integration? To answer these questions, the article applies Eurostat- and OECD-based criteria to Ukrainian territorial communities and interprets the results in relation to governance and policy design.

2. Literature overview

The classification of territories as rural, urban, or intermediate is a complex task due to the diversity of criteria and approaches employed by different countries and international organisations. These variations complicate international comparisons and hinder the exchange of best practices in rural development and local governance. Among Ukrainian researchers, rural development has long been approached as a distinct social, economic, and institutional problem rather than merely as a by-product of agricultural growth. Borodina and Prokopa (2010)

emphasised the need to analyse rural development through the interaction of policy, institutions, and local practice, while the same authors later (Borodina and Prokopa, 2016) highlighted the structural vulnerability of villages and peasantry under changing agrarian and socio-economic conditions. These perspectives are important for the present study because they direct attention not only to agricultural production, but also to the territorial and governance conditions under which rural communities function.

The definition of what constitutes a "rural area" varies according to historical context, socio-economic characteristics, administrative structures, and the purpose of classification. For instance, in Poland, a study on rural development by Bartkowiak-Bakun (2025) applies a classification of LAU 2 (gmina) territorial-administrative units into urban, rural, and mixed urban-rural categories, focusing primarily on the latter two. According to the definition of the Central Statistical Office (Główny Urząd Statystyczny, 2025), rural and urban-rural gminas are distinguished by the presence of either villages alone or a combination of villages and towns within their boundaries, in contrast to urban gminas, which possess city status.

One of the primary objectives of territorial classification is its importance for policymaking at both national and local levels. For example, at the national level, Bibby and Shepherd (2004) highlighted this necessity when developing a new classification of urban and rural areas in England and Wales. Similarly, Bański and Mazur (2016) regarded territorial classification as an essential tool for shaping territorial policy when constructing a typology of rural areas in Poland. Féret et al. (2020), in their conceptualisation of rural territories in Europe, also emphasise the significance of typologies for designing targeted policy measures within the EU.

Numerous studies have addressed the criteria that should underpin territorial classification and the delineation between urban and rural areas. According to the OECD methodology, population density serves as the primary criterion (Fadic et al., 2019). The Eurostat classification (Eurostat, 2024) is based on the proportion of the rural population within the total population of a given territory. Pizzoli and Gong (2007) advocate a multidimensional approach that, in addition to population density, considers economic activity and geographical characteristics. In their territorial classification, Bański and Mazur (2016) also incorporated factors such as development dynamics, economic structure, and transport accessibility. Dijkstra and Poelman (2014) examined the use of demographic indicators. Gajić Protić, Krunić, and Protić (2024) propose a comprehensive multidimensional approach grounded in fuzzy logic for distinguishing between rural and urban areas, recognising a continuum of settlement types from rural to urban. In the European context, Féret et al. (2020) emphasise the enduring debate on defining rural areas and the diversity of typologies developed based on demographic, employment, and accessibility criteria.

Significant efforts have been devoted to developing a universal approach to territorial classification; however, numerous scholars have raised concerns about the limitations of applying a single method for different purposes. For instance, Perlín (2010) highlights the necessity of employing distinct approaches when studying the demarcation of rural and

urban municipalities and rural territories at varying spatial scales, arguing against the universal application of the current EU methodology at the national level. Conversely, Dijkstra and Poelman (2014) introduced the Degree of Urbanisation classification – a harmonised European approach for distinguishing between densely populated urban and sparsely populated rural areas – intended to enhance cross-country comparability in understanding the urban-rural continuum. Later, Dijkstra and Jacobs-Crisioni (2023) proposed a methodology for defining functional rural areas in the EU, based on rural centres and their spheres of influence, which provides a new perspective for identifying and addressing the specific needs of these territories. Simultaneously, the UN Statistical Commission endorsed a methodology for delineating cities and urban and rural areas to facilitate international and regional statistical comparisons (Eurostat, 2021). The analysis of the challenges and opportunities associated with reconciling local specificity with the need for international comparability remains ongoing. For example, Cattivelli (2024) examines the balance between local relevance and international comparability across different European methodologies.

The current discourse on rural development in Europe is strongly shaped by the *Long-Term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas until 2040* (European Commission, 2021; European Commission: Directorate-General for Communication and von der Leyen, 2020). This document stresses that rural areas constitute a fundamental part of Europe's identity and economic potential, warranting their preservation and sustained investment in their future. It highlights the necessity of a just transition that leaves no one behind and provides new impetus to rural territories by reshaping perceptions and creating fresh opportunities. Moreover, Russia's aggression against Ukraine has underscored the crucial role of rural areas in ensuring Europe's resilience, as recognised at the meeting of the Council of the European Union in November 2023 (Council of the European Union, 2023).

A further strand of the literature, less prominent in the Ukrainian debate, concerns the governance dimension of rural development and the role of local self-government in delivering it. Decentralisation made territorial communities the principal level at which rural development responsibilities are exercised, yet the capacity of communities to address rural needs depends on how those needs are recognised and classified (Patyka et al., 2023; Libanova, 2020). Where territorial classification does not reflect functional rurality, rural problems risk being rendered invisible in local strategies and in the allocation of resources, so that policy is mistargeted and peripheral settlements are underserved (Borodina, 2021). This concern connects the Ukrainian case to a wider European literature that treats typologies not as neutral descriptions but as instruments shaping policy design and the targeting of support (Féret et al., 2020; Bański and Mazur, 2016), and to studies showing that decentralisation can reconcentrate resources in administrative centres when classification and fiscal rules are misaligned (Ilyniak, 2024). Recognising functional rurality at the level of self-governing communities is therefore not only a statistical question but a precondition for effective rural development policy and governance (Perlín, 2010; Cattivelli, 2024).

3. Data and Methodology

The methodological basis of this study is the paradigm of sustainable development, which integrates key international and national strategic frameworks. In identifying rural territories, we drew upon the Guiding Principles for Sustainable Spatial Development of the European Continent (European Conference of Ministers Responsible for Regional Planning, 2000), the Eurostat methodological approach to the city-rural typology (Eurostat, 2024), and the territorial classification of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (Fadic et al., 2019). We also considered the provisions of the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas of the EU (European Commission, 2024), the Sustainable Development Goals of Ukraine (President of Ukraine, 2019), and other Ukrainian policy documents related to regional and rural development (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2015; Kabinet Ministriv Ukrainy, 2010, 2015, 2020). This comprehensive approach enabled an analysis consistent with both European standards and the Ukrainian regulatory framework.

We conducted a comparative analysis of Ukraine and several EU member states in Central and Eastern Europe using grid-level data. This comparison was motivated by the fact that Eurostat employs population data in 1 km² grid cells as the basis for developing interconnected territorial typologies – grid, local, and regional. For the analysis of EU countries, we used official Eurostat data for 2021 (Eurostat, 2024). To calculate comparable indicators for Ukraine, we relied on baseline information about the spatial distribution of population density in 2020, based on the country's total population adjusted according to UNDP estimates (WorldPop and CIESIN, 2018).

For a more detailed analysis of the degree of rurality in Ukraine and to determine the prevalence of rural territories in the pre-war period, we focused on the level of local administrative units (LAU), specifically territorial communities. To this end, a dedicated database was created containing information on each territorial community as of the beginning of 2021.

This database was compiled from publicly available information published at the time on the official portal of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine and the "Decentralization" website. It includes a list of settlements within each community, along with data on area and population (both total and rural). Based on these data, we determined the distribution of villages and the rural population across territorial communities, and calculated indicators of population density and the proportion of rural residents in the total population. These indicators were essential for identifying rural territories in accordance with Eurostat and OECD methodologies.

The use of these approaches at the level of territorial communities requires a methodological adaptation, because the Eurostat and OECD frameworks were developed primarily for grid-based and NUTS/TL regional typologies. In the Ukrainian case, however, territorial communities are the most relevant level for the analysis of local governance, service provision, and territorial development. For this reason, the article applies the logic of European classification methods to the LAU-level units that possess practical decision-making significance in Ukraine. Because territorial communities are also the level at which governance powers and rural development

responsibilities are exercised, this LAU-level application is what enables the analysis to address the second research question, namely the implications of the mismatch between administrative status and functional rurality for local governance and the targeting of rural development policy.

The analysis should therefore be interpreted as a functional approximation rather than a literal replication of Eurostat's official grid-based procedure. In particular, the lack of official Ukrainian population statistics for 1 km² grid cells requires the use of alternative spatial population data. This limitation does not invalidate the analysis, but it should be borne in mind when comparing Ukrainian estimates with officially published EU figures.

4. Results

4.1 Institutional landscape: decentralization or concentration?

In pre-war Ukraine, rural development was never regarded as a policy priority. State agrarian policy primarily focused on supporting corporate enterprises and providing subsidies to selected export-oriented producer groups.

In April 2014, the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine launched a comprehensive reform of local self-government and the territorial organisation of power. The component of the reform concerning the approval of a new administrative-territorial structure for communities was completed in 2020 and was recognised as one of the most successful elements of the process. According to the government, the main drivers of this reform were demographic shifts, internal and external migration, increasing urbanisation, population ageing, and rising administrative costs, combined with the growing use of technologies for the remote provision of public services (Serbina et al., 2019).

Before the reform, rural areas in Ukraine were home to about 14 million (in 2014) residents and were administered by approximately 12,000 village councils, ensuring a high level of physical accessibility to local self-government bodies at the place of residence. In 2021, following the completion of the reform and the government's final approval of the new composition of basic-level administrative-territorial units (ATUs), which became territorial communities (TCs), the number of such units decreased almost ninefold. As of early 2022, 1,438 TCs were operating in Ukraine (excluding the temporarily occupied Autonomous Republic of Crimea), of which 380 (26%) were classified as urban (with centres in cities), 433 (30%) as settlement (with centres in urban-type settlements), and 625 (44%) as rural (with centres in villages). Community counts are the authors' compilation from the Official Portal of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine and the "Decentralization" website; the figure of approximately 12,000 basic-level units can be cited to Kabinet Ministriv Ukrainy, 2014, while the rural population figure is attributed to the State Statistics Service of Ukraine (about 14 million in 2014, the start of the reform, declining to about 13.4 million by 2021). Government officials and some politicians subsequently began to assert that rural territories no longer existed in Ukraine, as they had been replaced by the territories of amalgamated TCs that would address local issues. In 2023, the status of urban-type settlements was abolished: all 881 such settlements were reclassified as settlements (selyshcha), a rural-type

category of populated place. (Source: Law of Ukraine No. 3285-IX of 28 July 2023 “On the procedure for resolving certain issues of the administrative and territorial structure of Ukraine”, in force from 26 January 2024).

Indeed, during the reform, numerous villages were placed under the jurisdiction of cities and urban-type settlements, with each territorial community encompassing, on average, 19 rural settlements (authors’ calculations based on the database described in Section 3). This restructuring coincided with, and in several respects accelerated, a longer-term contraction of the local service network in rural areas, although the principal driver of this contraction was demographic decline rather than amalgamation as such (Baranovskiy and Baranovska, 2017). In education, the consolidation of small rural schools into larger “hub” schools intensified over this period: the number of hub schools rose from 178 in 2017 to over 1,500 by 2023 (VoxUkraine, 2026; Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, 2024), while the rural school stock declined significantly (the number of rural schools fell from about 9,293 in 2020/2021 to about 7,439 in 2023/2024; source: Education and Science Workers’ Union of Ukraine, 2024, drawing on State Statistics Service of Ukraine data, with part of this decline falling within the war period). In rural healthcare, the “money follows the patient” financing model and the requirement that feldsher-midwife stations operate under a supervising family doctor left many such facilities financially and organisationally fragile, so that the departure of a single doctor could trigger their closure (Ministry of Health of Ukraine, Order No. 801 of 29 July 2016, Regulation on the feldsher-midwife/feldsher station). More broadly, amalgamation tended to reconcentrate resources and service provision in administrative centres, with documented cuts to social, educational, and health facilities in peripheral localities (Ilyniak, 2024). We present these processes as illustrative context rather than as outcomes measured at the community level in this study; reported improvements in service delivery, notably in digitalisation, did not always offset the increased distance between rural residents and providers, leaving many villages spatially and socially peripheral.

From the perspective of the rural population and their access to local government bodies and public services, the consequences of this decentralisation were not entirely straightforward. The situation was further complicated by the fact that, in practice, a substantial proportion of TCs encompassed a far greater number of villages than the average of 19 noted above: 5% of TCs included more than 50 rural settlements, while 18% comprised between 26 and 50 villages. TCs with a large (26–50) or very large (more than 50) number of villages were predominantly those with centres in cities and urban-type settlements. In urban TCs, the share of large and very large communities reached 36%, encompassing 71% of rural settlements and 56% of rural residents. In settlement TCs, these figures stood at 34%, 61%, and 45%, respectively. All figures in this paragraph are the authors’ calculations based on the database described in Section 3. This demonstrates that certain urban and settlement TCs are, in essence and functionally, territorial entities of a non-urban typology.

The incorporation of a large number of villages into a single TC with a city as its centre created further difficulties for residents of these rural territorial entities, as available resources were

often concentrated in the central part of the community's territory. Access to public services for rural residents often became more difficult due to their geographical distance from the administrative centre of the community, where most service providers were concentrated. This tendency of decentralisation to reconcentrate resources and services in administrative centres has been documented in the wider literature (Ilyniak, 2024); we present it here as illustrative context rather than as an effect measured at the community level in the present study.

These institutional changes demonstrate why the formal classification of communities by the status of the administrative centre is analytically insufficient, as the community-level figures reported above indicate. In many cases, communities categorised as urban or settlement units include extensive rural territories and populations whose development needs differ substantially from those of the administrative centre. This creates a strong rationale for assessing territorial communities through functional rather than purely administrative criteria.

4.2 Features of rural typology

A range of methodologies exists for classifying territorial entities according to their functional characteristics. Such classifications are typically applied to territories comparable in scale to the third level of the European Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics (NUTS 3) – that is, territorial entities with populations ranging from 150,000 to 800,000 inhabitants (corresponding to the OECD Territorial Level (TL) 3) – as well as to Local Administrative Units (LAU 2), which encompass settlements and municipalities. Ukraine's territorial communities (TCs) correspond to the LAU 2 level, although a small proportion of them – namely oblast centres and large cities with adjoining settlements – had populations exceeding 150,000 inhabitants in the pre-war period.

Numerous studies analyse the development of rural areas in Ukraine without thoroughly addressing the distinction between "rural" and "non-rural" territories. As a result, the fundamental question of which territorial units should be treated as rural often remains underdeveloped. Many studies build upon the outcomes of the administrative-territorial reform implemented in Ukraine during the second half of the 2010s (Patyka et al., 2023; Libanova, 2020; Lupenko et al., 2018; inter alia). This reform established new basic-level administrative-territorial units – territorial communities – classified as rural, settlement, or urban according to the type of settlement serving as the community's centre. During the formation of these new ATUs, rural settlements – and consequently rural areas – were also incorporated into urban communities. Therefore, it would be incorrect to regard only the territories of communities with rural centres as "rural areas".

To address this contradiction – the inaccuracy of defining "rural areas" solely as the territories of communities with rural centres, given that rural settlements are also included within TCs with urban centres – a potential solution lies in directing the focus of analysis towards rural settlements themselves (Libanova, 2020). However, such a narrow focus may prove insufficient

for examining the broader development processes of rural areas, which encompass dynamics and interactions that extend beyond the boundaries of individual settlements.

The interconnected territorial typologies applied at various levels in the EU (grid, local, and regional) are based on population statistics derived from 1 km² grid cells (Eurostat, 2024). Depending on the population of these cells, the grid typology distinguishes three types of clusters: urban centres (>1,500 inhabitants), urban clusters (300–1,500 inhabitants), and rural (<300 inhabitants) grid cells. In Ukraine, official population statistics at the 1 km² grid level are not collected. However, sufficiently reliable estimates using this approach can be produced with alternative available datasets. For illustrative and comparative purposes at the level of European countries, we used a dataset on the spatial distribution of population density in 2020 (with a resolution of approximately 1 km), based on the country's total population adjusted according to UNDP estimates (WorldPop and CIESIN, 2018) (Figure 1).

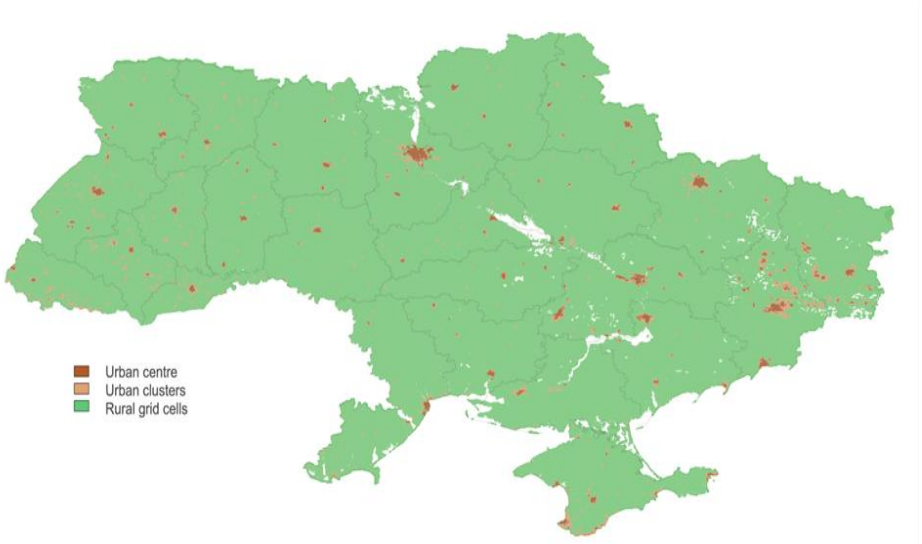


Figure 1. Grid level urbanisation in Ukraine, 2020. Source: Authors' compilation based on data on the spatial distribution of population density in 2020, which was based on the country's total population adjusted to match a corresponding UNDP estimate (WorldPop and CIESIN, 2018)

Similar to the general trend observed in EU member states, Ukraine's territory is predominantly rural, with most of its grid cells classified as such. Figure 2 presents a comparison of the shares of total area and population in rural grid cells across several Central and Eastern European EU member states and Ukraine, showing that these proportions are broadly comparable. Based on our calculations using the aforementioned approach to define rural grid cells, such cells account for approximately 96.9% of Ukraine's total area and are home to about 39.7% of its population. At the EU level, the share of territory in rural grid cells is comparable – 96.4% – while the share of the population is 29.4%. This indicates that a larger proportion of Ukraine's population resides in rural grid cells compared with the EU average, underscoring the heightened importance of rural development policies for the country. The Central and Eastern European member states shown in Figure 2 are an illustrative comparison group rather than a complete EU sample;

the EU-level shares cited here are the full-EU reference values reported by Eurostat (Eurostat, 2024). The comparison should therefore be read as indicative, and the conclusion that Ukraine is broadly comparable to the EU rests on the EU aggregate rather than on the selected sample of countries.

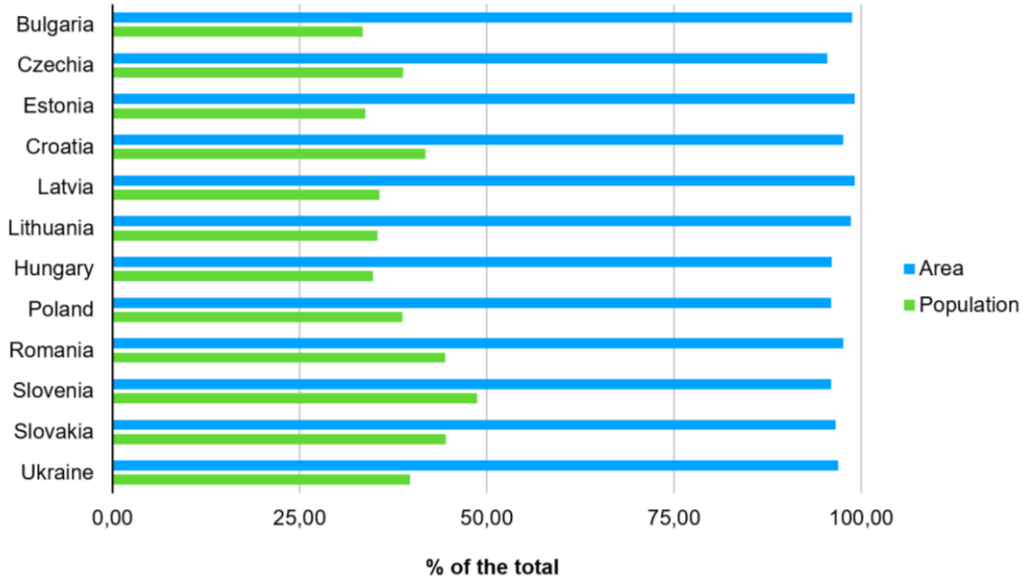


Figure 2. Comparison of area and population shares in rural grid cells between selected Central and Eastern EU member states (2021) and Ukraine (2020). Source: Authors' compilation based on Eurostat data for selected EU member states (Eurostat, 2024) and data by WorldPop and Center for International Earth Science Information Network (WorldPop and CIESIN, 2018).

Based on the share of the population living in rural grid cells, Ukraine is very similar to Poland and the Czech Republic – countries that possess well-developed and effectively structured rural development policies. This similarity is largely attributable to their efficient systems of local self-government, which play a central role in implementing these policies on the ground. To illustrate how the understanding of rurality can vary at the TC level, we prepared three maps showing the classification of TCs according to three different approaches (Figures 3a, 3b, and 3c).

Figure 3a presents the classification of TCs as urban, intermediate, or rural, depending on the status of their administrative centres – either located in urban settlements (cities or towns) or in rural settlements (villages).

Figure 3b illustrates the classification of TCs as urban or rural based on population density per 1 km². According to the OECD approach, a local administrative unit is classified as rural if its population density is below 150 inhabitants per square kilometre; if it exceeds this threshold, it is considered urban (Fadic et al., 2019). When this threshold is applied at the Local Administrative Unit (LAU 2) level in Ukraine, almost 90% of TCs exhibit a population density lower than 150 inhabitants per square kilometre. Based on this approach, the functional nature of their territories should therefore be defined as rural. Among rural TCs, 98% are characterised by a rural functional nature of territories according to this methodology, compared with 97% for settlement TCs and 67% for urban TCs.

Figure 3c shows the classification of TCs as urban, intermediate, or rural, according to the share of the rural population. This criterion underpins the EU regional typology methodologies at the NUTS 3 level, developed by both Eurostat and the OECD. Predominantly rural entities are defined as those where the share of residents in rural settlements exceeds 50%; intermediate entities have between 20% and 50% rural residents; and predominantly urban entities have less than 20% (Eurostat, 2025). Although originally developed for NUTS 3 (TL3) level regions, this approach can be applied to assess the functional nature of Ukrainian territorial communities.

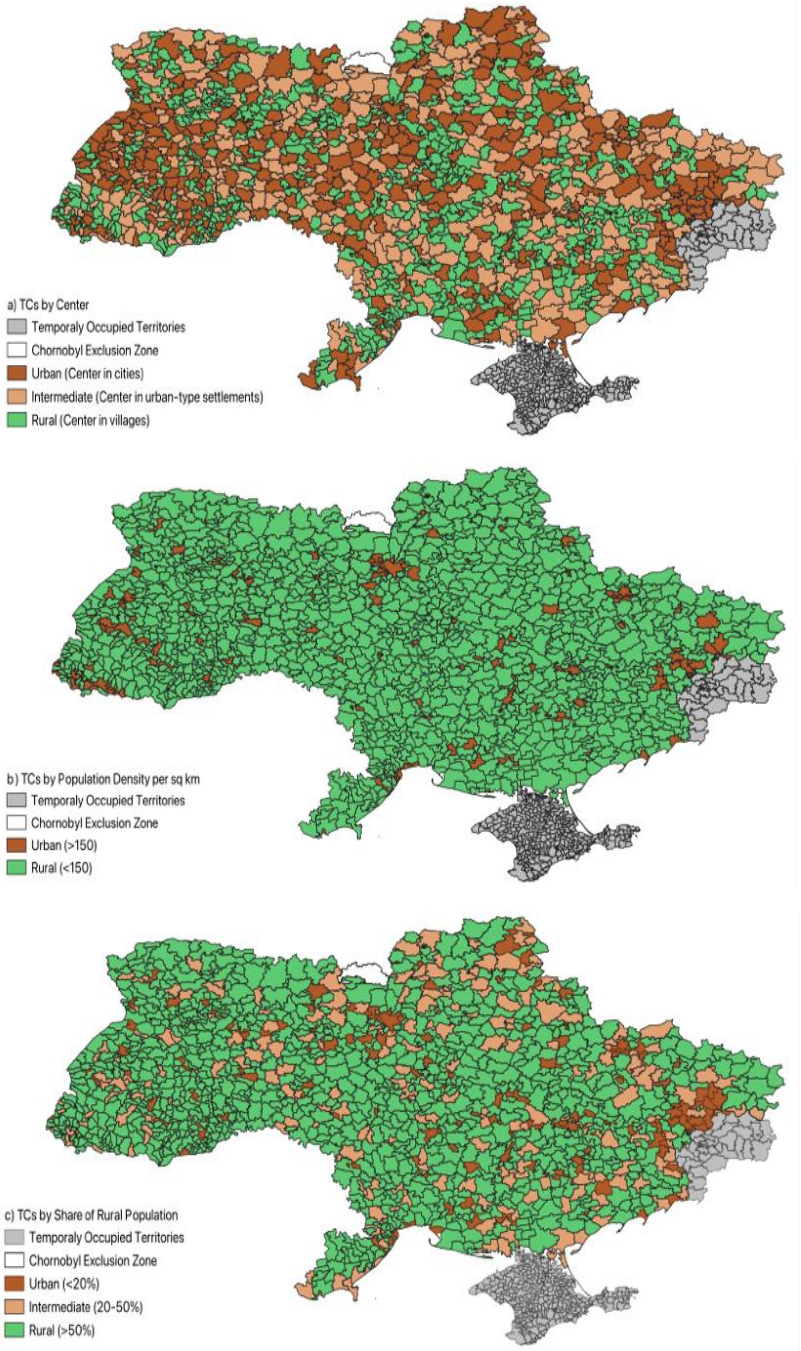


Figure 3. Classification of TCs. Source: data obtained from the Official Portal of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine and the "Decentralization" website (URL: https://decentralization.gov.ua/newgromada) compiled by authors. This map was created using QGIS (version 3.34.7). GIS shape files were sourced from the State Scientific Production Enterprise "Kartographia".

Table 1. Classification of territorial communities under alternative approaches. Source: Authors' compilation based on data from the Official Portal of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, the "Decentralization" website, and the authors' calculations using OECD- and Eurostat-based criteria

Classification approach	Category	Number of TCs	Share of TCs (%)
Administrative classification by type of centre	Urban	380	26.0
	Settlement	433	30.0
	Rural	625	44.0
Functional classification by population density	Rural (<150 inh./km²)	1,288	almost 90.0
	Urban (≥150 inh./km²)	150	approx. 10.0
Functional classification by share of rural population	Predominantly rural or intermediate	more than 1,294	more than 90.0
	Predominantly urban	fewer than 144	fewer than 10.0

Note: Approximate values are authors' calculations derived from rounded subgroup percentages reported in the text. Values for the rural-population-share classification are presented as thresholds because the manuscript reports aggregate results ("more than 90%") rather than exact counts for each category. The strength and direction of the relationship between the administrative and functional classifications are presented in Table 2.

Taken together, the three approaches show that the formal administrative status of territorial communities substantially underestimates the prevalence of functionally rural territories in Ukraine. While only 44% of communities are officially classified as rural, the application of density- and rural-population-based criteria indicates that rural or mixed urban-rural communities account for more than 90% of all territorial communities and encompass the overwhelming majority of the rural population.

To make the relationship between these classifications explicit, Table 2 cross-tabulates the administrative status of communities against their functional classification by population density. Functional rurality dominates across all administrative categories, including communities with urban or settlement centres. The cross-tabulation isolates the analytically critical group of communities that are administratively non-rural yet functionally rural: this group, comprising approximately 675 communities (about 255 urban-centred and 420 settlement-centred), accounts for nearly half of all territorial communities and is precisely where administrative labels diverge most sharply from functional reality.

Table 2. Cross-classification of territorial communities by administrative status and functional rurality (population density), 2021. Source: authors' compilation, as these are our calculations

Administrative status (type of centre)	**Functionally rural (<150 inh./km²)**	**Functionally non-rural (≥150 inh./km²)**	**Total**
Urban (city centre)	255 (67%)	125 (33%)	380
Settlement (urban-type-settlement centre)	420 (97%)	13 (3%)	433
Rural (village centre)	613 (98%)	12 (2%)	625
Total	**1,288 (≈90%)**	**150 (≈10%)**	**1,438**

Note: Approximate values are the authors' calculations, obtained by applying the density-based functional shares reported in Section 4.2 (98% of rural-centred, 97% of settlement-centred, and 67% of urban-centred communities) to the community counts in Table 1; exact cell counts should be verified against the database described in Section 3" with "exact cell counts follow from the density-based shares reported in Section 4.2.

With few exceptions, rural TCs (that is, communities with administrative centres in villages) recorded a rural population share of 100%. In contrast, officially designated urban and settlement TCs – those with centres in cities or urban-type settlements – often included substantial rural populations. When assessed using the EU methodology developed for NUTS 3 regions, these communities can be classified as predominantly urban, intermediate, or predominantly rural according to the share of rural residents in their total population. This further demonstrates that the formal administrative status of a community does not always reflect its functional territorial character.

Building on this, we propose a functional-administrative typology of Ukrainian territorial communities that is specific to the national context. The typology combines two dimensions: the administrative status of a community, defined by the type of its centre (city, urban-type settlement, or village), and its functional rurality, derived from population density and the share of the rural population. Unlike the European typologies, which were designed for regional (NUTS 3) units, this classification is constructed at the level of the hromada, the unit at which local self-government and development responsibilities are actually exercised in Ukraine, and it explicitly accommodates communities that combine an urban or settlement centre with an extensive rural settlement network.

On this basis, four types can be distinguished. Congruent rural communities are both administratively and functionally rural, so that their classification matches their character. Latent rural communities are administratively non-rural, being centred on a city or an urban-type

settlement, yet functionally rural; this is the analytically critical group of approximately 675 communities, in which an urban administrative label conceals a predominantly rural function. Mixed communities combine a substantial rural population with an urban or settlement centre without being predominantly rural by population density. Congruent urban communities are both administratively and functionally urban.

Each type carries a distinct governance implication: congruent rural communities fall within standard rural-development instruments; latent rural communities require that rural-development measures and intra-community equalisation reach them despite their urban label; mixed communities require a combination of urban and rural instruments; and congruent urban communities fall outside rural targeting. Understood in this way, the typology is the article's own contribution: rather than relabelling communities against European thresholds alone, it offers a nationally grounded classification that links the functional character of communities to the governance instruments appropriate to each type.

5. Discussion

The results demonstrate that the issue at stake is not merely terminological. When European approaches to territorial classification are applied to Ukraine's territorial communities, a substantial mismatch becomes visible between formal administrative status and functional rurality. Although only 44% of territorial communities were officially classified as rural according to the type of their administrative centre, the application of population-density and rural-population criteria shows that the prevalence of functionally rural or mixed urban-rural territories is much greater. In particular, almost 90% of territorial communities fall below the OECD threshold of 150 inhabitants per square kilometre, while more than 90% of communities display a rural or mixed urban-rural character overall. These findings indicate that the existing administrative and statistical framework does not adequately reflect the territorial realities within which local governance operates.

This finding is relevant not only for Ukraine, but also for broader European debates on rural typology and territorial policy. As noted in the literature, the classification of territories has practical significance because it shapes how policy problems are identified and how support measures are targeted (Bibby and Shepherd, 2004; Bański and Mazur, 2016; Féret et al., 2020). At the same time, European scholarship has repeatedly stressed that no single classification can be transferred mechanically across all territorial levels and national contexts (Perlín, 2010; Cattivelli, 2024). In this respect, the Ukrainian case illustrates both the value and the difficulty of adapting European methodologies to a country whose administrative structure, statistical system, and governance responsibilities differ from those of EU member states. The article therefore contributes to the ongoing discussion on how to balance international comparability with local relevance in the identification of rural territories.

From the perspective of governance, the implications of this mismatch are considerable. Where territorial communities are defined primarily by the status of their administrative centre, rural

settlements located within formally urban or settlement communities risk becoming statistically and politically secondary, even when they account for a substantial share of the territory, settlement network, and rural population. This is particularly important in the Ukrainian context, where decentralisation transferred significant responsibilities for local development to the community level, while many villages were incorporated into larger units centred on cities or urban-type settlements. Under such conditions, a function-based understanding of territorial communities is essential for the planning of services, the allocation of resources, and the formulation of local development strategies. Functional classification is therefore not merely a descriptive exercise; it is a practical tool for improving the visibility of rural needs within local governance and for strengthening the territorial targeting of rural development policy.

Recognising functional rurality is, however, a necessary but not a sufficient condition for better rural outcomes: reclassification alone does not redistribute resources, and we do not claim that it does. What a function-based typology provides is the analytical basis on which several concrete governance instruments could operate. First, it can inform the territorial targeting of rural development measures, so that support reaches functionally rural populations rather than only communities carrying a rural administrative label. Second, it offers a criterion for intra-community equalisation, directing resources from a community centre towards its peripheral villages (in Ukraine this concerns the intra-community distribution of infrastructure subventions and own revenues across constituent settlements; see Borodina, 2021, on spatial justice within communities). Third, in the context of EU accession, a function-based typology aligned with Eurostat and OECD logic would support the programming of structural funds and Common Agricultural Policy measures under the “Agriculture and Rural Development” negotiating cluster.

This also helps to reconcile an apparent tension in assessments of the reform: its widely recognised fiscal and administrative achievements and its adverse consequences for service access in rural peripheries are not contradictory but operate at different levels, and a function-based reading makes the latter visible without denying the former. More fundamentally, the reform’s headline success in administrative and fiscal consolidation rested on an amalgamation logic that prioritised the size and viability of new units over the functional character of the territories they absorbed, so that rurality was treated as a residual attribute rather than a planning category. On this reading, incorporating villages into urban- and settlement-centred communities tended to reproduce, rather than resolve, the subordinate position of rural development, which helps explain why administrative consolidation has not by itself secured comparable service access across a community’s constituent settlements (Borodina, 2021; Ilyniak, 2024).

At the same time, the findings of this study should be interpreted with due methodological caution. Unlike in the EU, Ukraine does not currently produce official population statistics for 1 km² grid cells, which limits the direct replication of Eurostat’s interconnected grid, local, and regional typologies. For this reason, the analysis relies on alternative spatial population data and adapts Eurostat- and OECD-based approaches to the level of territorial communities. This should

be understood as a functional approximation rather than a strict reproduction of official EU statistical procedures.

Moreover, the functional rurality identified here rests on two structural proxies, population density and the share of the rural population, and does not capture how communities function in terms of daily mobility, commuting, and service catchments; a fuller analysis of this kind would require travel-time and service-access data that are not currently available for Ukrainian territorial communities, which is acknowledged as a limitation. Because the grid-level figures rest on modelled population estimates (WorldPop and CIESIN, 2018) rather than on official counts, their absolute values should be treated with caution, and it is the convergence of the density-based and rural-population-based criteria, rather than any single estimate, that supports the central finding.

Nevertheless, such an adaptation is justified because territorial communities, rather than NUTS 3-level entities, constitute the principal level at which local governance powers and development responsibilities are exercised in Ukraine. It should be acknowledged, however, that the share-of-rural-population thresholds were originally calibrated for NUTS 3 regions, where aggregation over larger populations smooths local variation; applying analogous thresholds to small LAU 2 units can sharpen category boundaries, which is why convergent results under two independent criteria are reported rather than a single classification. The analysis should also be read as a pre-war baseline derived from 2020−2021 data. This is a deliberate analytical choice rather than a shortcoming: comparable official population data for the post-February 2022 period either do not exist or are restricted, and the full-scale invasion has since reshaped rural population distribution, particularly in the east and south, in ways this study does not attempt to measure. Its relevance to wartime resilience and post-war reconstruction lies not in the direct measurement of war-induced transformations, but in clarifying the territorial structure through which those challenges must be addressed. In this sense, recognising functional rurality is an important analytical precondition for the further Europeanisation of rural policy in Ukraine and for the more effective governance of local development in the years ahead.

6. Conclusions

This article has shown that the administrative and statistical classification of territorial communities in Ukraine does not adequately reflect their functional rurality. When European approaches to territorial classification are applied to the Ukrainian case, it becomes clear that a large share of communities formally classified as urban or settlement units possess a rural or mixed urban-rural character. This mismatch matters because it affects how local development problems are identified and how rural policy needs are recognised within systems of governance.

The analysis indicates that more than 90% of territorial communities in Ukraine have a rural or mixed urban-rural functional character and these communities encompass more than 95% of the rural population. It also demonstrates that the identification of rural territories cannot be

based solely on the status of the administrative centre, particularly in a context where many communities include extensive rural settlement networks and substantial rural populations.

The article also highlights the practical importance of functional classification for local governance. In the context of decentralisation, territorial communities have become the principal level at which many development responsibilities are exercised. If the rural character of these communities remains insufficiently recognised, local strategies and public interventions may fail to address the needs of peripheral villages and rural residents adequately. A function-based understanding of territorial communities is therefore essential for improving the targeting of rural development policy, strengthening service planning, and enhancing the visibility of rural needs in local decision-making.

More broadly, the study contributes to European discussions on rural typology by showing how the adaptation of European methodological approaches can help reveal territorial realities that remain obscured by administrative labels. In the Ukrainian case, this is especially important in the context of EU integration, where alignment with European approaches to rural development requires not only policy commitment but also an appropriate territorial framework for identifying and addressing rural challenges.

Recognising the functional rurality of Ukraine's territorial communities is therefore not merely a statistical exercise. It is a necessary step towards more effective local governance, more accurate rural policy targeting, and a stronger alignment of Ukrainian practice with European rural-development frameworks. In this sense, functional territorial classification should be regarded as an important analytical and practical instrument for Ukraine's long-term rural development, European integration, and post-war reconstruction.

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