

# Spatial Segregation, Urban Inequalities, and Roma Communities: Mapping an Emerging Research Field

Kamelia Petkova<sup>1</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Sofia, Bulgaria

Corresponding author: Kamelia Petkova ([kamelia.petkova@gmail.com](mailto:kamelia.petkova@gmail.com))

## Abstract

Spatial segregation is a key characteristic of contemporary urban development and reflects deep social and economic inequalities. Roma communities are among the most vulnerable groups affected by processes of spatial isolation, often concentrated in peripheral and socio-economically disadvantaged areas. Despite the growing body of scientific research on the topic, there is a lack of a systematic overview of the development, structure, and thematic focus of the field. This study aims to present a comprehensive bibliometric analysis of scientific publications on spatial segregation in urban environments, with a focus on Roma communities, for the period 2020–2026. The analysis is based on data extracted from the Dimensions database and applies a combination of descriptive and network-based methods implemented through VOSviewer. The results indicate a growing scholarly interest in the topic, characterized by an interdisciplinary nature that brings together sociology, human geography, and urban studies. The co-occurrence analysis of terms identifies three main thematic clusters: classical studies on segregation and ethnic groups; theoretical approaches from social and urban geography; and economic and transformational processes in urban environments. Citation and co-citation analyses reveal a fragmented structure of the scientific field, characterized by the absence of a dominant theoretical framework and the presence of multiple interconnected research strands. The overlay visualization demonstrates a clear evolution in thematic focus—from earlier studies related to housing conditions and descriptive analyses to more recent research addressing spatial policies, public spaces, and institutional mechanisms, with an increasing emphasis on Roma communities. The findings confirm that spatial segregation is a multi-dimensional and dynamic process shaped by the interaction of social, economic, and spatial factors. This study contributes to the literature by systematizing the scientific field and identifying emerging research directions, thus providing a foundation for future interdisciplinary and applied research. It also advances bibliometric scholarship through a broader conceptual scope, framing spatial segregation as a multidimensional urban process.

**Key words:** Bibliometric analysis, Roma communities, social exclusion, spatial segregation, urban geography, urban inequality, VOSviewer



Subject editor: Desislava Varadzhakova

Received: 27 March 2026

Accepted: 22 April 2026

Published: 11 May 2026

Citation: Petkova K (2026) Spatial Segregation, Urban Inequalities, and Roma Communities: Mapping an Emerging Research Field. *GeoStudies* 3: 13–26, <https://doi.org/10.3897/geostudies.3.e193286>

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## Introduction

Spatial segregation represents one of the key challenges of contemporary cities, related to the uneven distribution of social groups within urban space. It results from a complex interaction of social, economic, and institutional factors and

manifests through the formation of distinct areas with limited access to resources, services, and development opportunities. In an international context, Roma communities are among the most affected by processes of spatial segregation. Their concentration in peripheral neighborhoods and ghettoized urban structures is associated with a range of issues, including poor housing conditions, limited access to education and employment, and social isolation. This makes Roma segregation not only a social issue but also a clearly defined spatial phenomenon. In recent decades, the topic of spatial segregation has attracted significant scholarly attention, with research spanning multiple disciplines—from sociology and human geography to urban studies and economics. However, there is still a lack of a systematic analysis of the development of the scientific field that synthesizes its main trends, thematic directions, and theoretical approaches. In this context, the present study aims to conduct a bibliometric analysis of scientific publications on spatial segregation in urban environments, with a focus on Roma communities in Europe. The main objectives include identifying publication dynamics, analyzing citation patterns, outlining key thematic areas, and examining the structure of the scientific field through network-based methods.

## Methodology

This study applies a bibliometric approach (Passas 2024) to analyze scientific output on spatial segregation in urban environments, with a focus on Roma communities. The data were extracted from the Dimensions database, which provides a broad coverage of scientific publications and metadata. For the purposes of the study, the following search query was used: *(Roma OR Romani OR „Roma communities“) AND („spatial segregation“ OR „residential segregation“) AND (urban OR city)*, with the following limitations applied: time period: 2020–2026; types of publications: journal articles, monographs, and book chapters; research areas: sociology and human geography.

As a result of the search, a dataset of 886 scientific publications was compiled, forming the empirical basis of the analysis. To ensure transparency and reproducibility, explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied during the data selection process. Publications were included if they: (1) were peer-reviewed scientific outputs (journal articles, monographs, or book chapters); (2) addressed spatial or residential segregation in urban environments; and (3) included a specific focus on Roma communities or ethnic segregation. Publications were excluded if they did not meet these criteria, if they lacked sufficient bibliographic metadata, or if they represented duplicate records. In addition, records not written in English or lacking abstracts were excluded to ensure consistency in the bibliometric and text-based analyses. The filtering process was conducted within the Dimensions database using the specified query and additional manual screening to refine the final dataset.

The study combines classical bibliometric indicators with network analysis. First, a descriptive analysis of publication dynamics and citation patterns was conducted. In addition, thematic directions were examined through the extraction and clustering of key terms from publication titles and abstracts.

To explore the structure of the scientific field, network-based methods implemented through VOSviewer were employed. The following types of analysis were applied: co-occurrence analysis based on titles and abstracts to identify

main thematic clusters; citation analysis (documents) to assess relationships between publications and the structure of the field; co-citation analysis (authors) to identify key theoretical directions and influential authors; and overlay visualization to examine the temporal evolution of research topics. Standard parameters were used in the network analysis, including minimum thresholds for term frequency and citations, as well as the full counting method.

### **Limitations of the study**

It should be noted that some publications do not contain complete information on author affiliations, which limits the possibilities for a detailed geographical analysis. In addition, the use of a single bibliographic database may result in a partial representation of the scientific literature. Despite these limitations, the applied approach allows for a reliable and systematic analysis of the main trends and structures in research on the spatial segregation of Roma communities.

### **Theoretical framework**

Spatial segregation is a key phenomenon in the study of urban inequalities and is understood as a process of spatial distribution and separation of social and ethnic groups within the urban structure. Classical theories of segregation emphasize the role of social stratification, economic disparities, and housing markets in shaping uneven spatial patterns (Massey and Denton 1988; 1993; van Kempen 2007). Within urban theory, segregation is linked to broader processes of social polarization and uneven urban development. Scholars such as Harvey (1973; 2006) and Lefebvre (1991) conceptualize space as a socially produced category that reflects power relations and economic structures. In this sense, segregation is not merely a spatial phenomenon but an expression of deeper social inequalities.

Contemporary research on socio-spatial inequalities highlights the dynamic nature of segregation and its connection to processes such as urbanization, globalization, and social exclusion (Cassiers and Kesteloot 2012; Sýkora 2009). These studies emphasize that segregation is a multidimensional process that extends beyond residential separation to include unequal access to services, infrastructure, and opportunities for social mobility.

In an international context, Roma communities have emerged as a key empirical example of spatial segregation. Research shows that Roma neighborhoods are often formed as a result of long-term processes of marginalization, institutional exclusion, and limited access to labor and housing markets (Powell and Lever 2017; Crețan and Powell 2018). These processes contribute to the formation of persistent patterns of spatial isolation and social peripheralization.

In the Bulgarian context, the spatial segregation of Roma communities has been the subject of in-depth research, highlighting both historical and contemporary factors behind the formation of ghettoized structures. Studies by Ilieva et al. (2024a; 2024b; 2023) conceptualize segregation as a spatial manifestation of social inequalities, while empirical analyses reveal a clear concentration of Roma populations in specific urban areas. While the bibliometric analysis by Ilieva and Varadzhakova (2024) focuses on Roma ghettoized urban structures as a specific research object, the present study expands the analytical scope by addressing spatial segregation as a broader social and urban process.

Recent studies in Bulgaria place emphasis on the spatial and morphological characteristics of Roma neighborhoods, as well as their dynamics and development. For example, the study by Ilieva et al. (2025a, 2025b) demonstrates the application of quantitative methods for measuring spatial segregation in urban environments, highlighting the role of urban structure in reproducing inequalities.

Furthermore, analyses of ghettoization processes in Bulgaria indicate that these structures result from a complex interaction of economic constraints, housing policies, and social processes, leading to persistent forms of social and spatial isolation (Ilieva et al. 2023; 2024).

In addition to these studies, research on the Bulgarian context further highlights the socio-cultural and institutional dimensions of spatial segregation. Studies by Tomova (2005; 2011) emphasize the role of demographic processes, migration, and socio-economic inequalities in shaping the living conditions of Roma communities. Anthropological perspectives (Asenov 2018) provide insights into the spatial and cultural characteristics of ghettoized environments, while foundational studies (Marushiakova and Popov 1993) outline the historical and social positioning of Roma populations in Bulgaria. These contributions demonstrate that spatial segregation is not only a product of urban structure but also of long-term social processes, institutional practices, and cultural dynamics. In this sense, spatial segregation can be understood as a multidimensional and dynamic process shaped at the intersection of social, economic, and spatial factors.

This necessitates the use of an interdisciplinary approach that combines theoretical perspectives from sociology, human geography, and urban studies, alongside empirical research within specific national contexts.

## Main results

The distribution of publications by year (Figure 1) shows a stable but uneven dynamic of scientific output. The highest research activity is observed in 2020 (69 publications) and 2021 (61 publications), which can be interpreted as a period of increased interest in the topic. In 2022, a significant decline is recorded, with 36 publications, followed by a recovery in 2023 (51 publications) and 2024 (55 publications).

In 2025, the number of publications remains relatively stable (49 publications), while in 2026 (19 publications) a lower value is observed, likely due to the incomplete publication cycle of the current year. Overall, the data indicate a stable presence of the topic in contemporary scientific debate, without sharp declines or one-time peaks, suggesting sustained research interest in the spatial dimensions of segregation.

The distribution of publications by number of citations (Figure 2) provides additional insight into the scientific impact of research in the field under study. The data show that the largest share of publications (169) falls within the 0–5 citation range, which is expected given the short time span of the analysis and the fact that a substantial portion of the publications are relatively recent.

A considerable share is also represented by publications with 6–10 citations (57), as well as those in the 11–20 (52) and 21–50 (48) ranges, indicating the presence of studies with moderate scientific impact. Highly cited publications are relatively few—10 in the 51–100 citation range and only 4 with more than 100 citations—which is typical for emerging and dynamically developing research fields.

This distribution confirms that research on the spatial segregation of Roma communities is in a stage of active accumulation of scientific impact, with a significant portion of publications yet to reach their full citation potential.

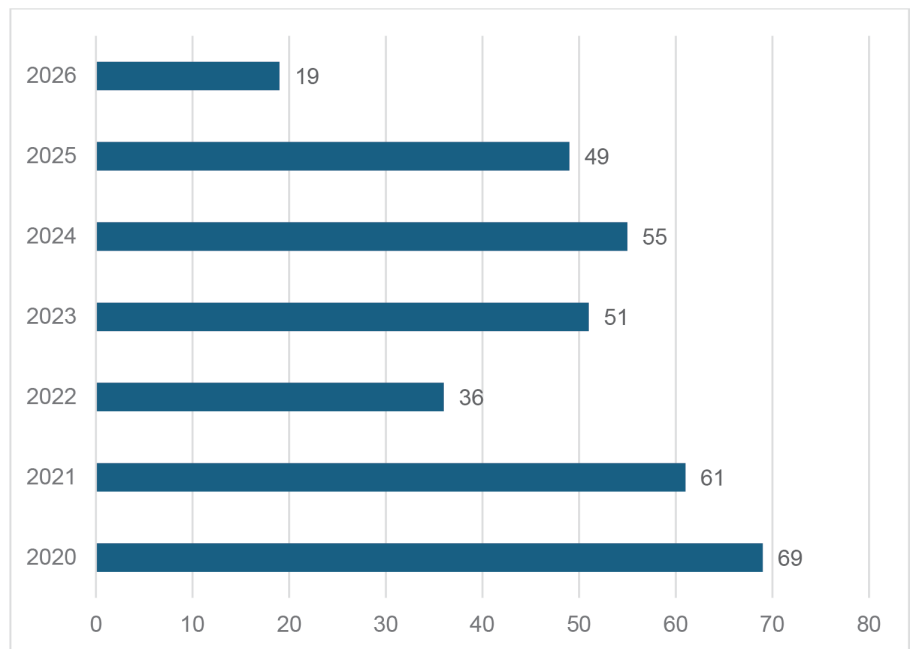


Figure 1. Distribution of publications by year.

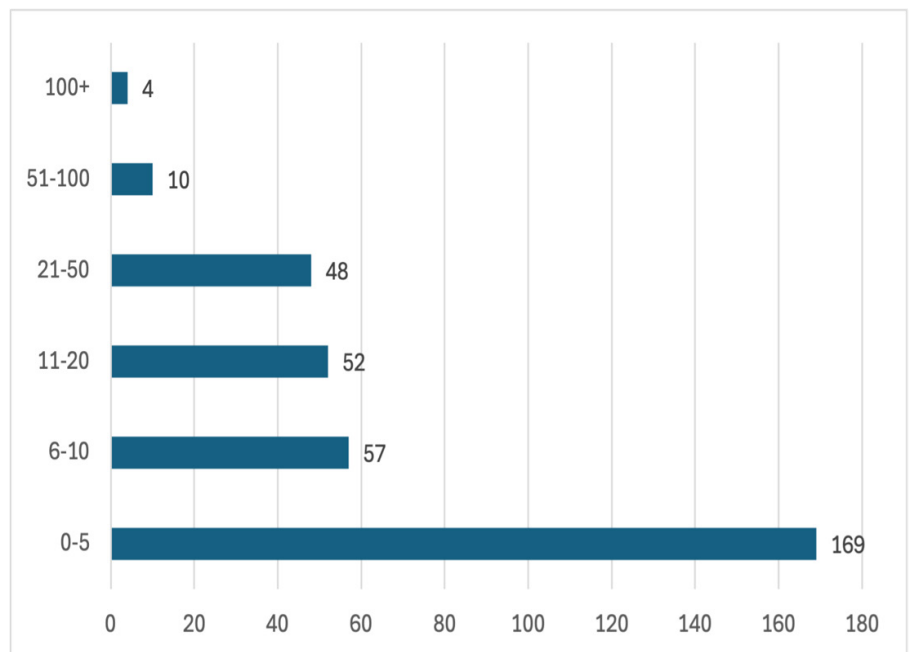


Figure 2. Distribution of publications by number of citations.

The content analysis of the publications reveals a clearly structured thematic field, dominated by studies related to urban and spatial segregation, as well as social and economic inequalities in an urban context (Table 1). The main thematic directions include:

- spatial and urban segregation as a primary analytical framework;
- social inequalities and processes of stratification;
- residential segregation and housing conditions;
- spatial organization and urban structure;
- economic dimensions of marginalization.

Particularly significant are studies focusing on Roma communities, which are examined as a specific empirical case within broader processes of spatial and social inequality. In these studies, segregation is interpreted as the result of a complex interaction between social, economic, and institutional factors.

At the same time, there is a growing interest in the role of urban spaces and peripheral neighborhoods as areas of concentrated social exclusion, as well as in the importance of public policies and urban governance in addressing segregation processes.

**Table 1.** Main thematic areas.

Nº	Thematic Area	Description
1	Urban and spatial segregation	Spatial distribution of social groups in cities
2	Social inequalities in urban environments	Social differences and stratification
3	Spatial structure of cities	Urban models and territorial organization
4	Residential segregation and housing environment	Housing conditions and access to housing
5	Roma communities and ethnic segregation	Spatial isolation of Roma populations
6	Economic dimensions of segregation	Income, employment, and economic marginalization
7	Urban spaces and marginalization	Peripheral and excluded urban areas
8	Urban studies and empirical analyses	Quantitative and qualitative approaches
9	Territorial inequalities and access to resources	Spatial inequality
10	Social exclusion and urban isolation	Processes of marginalization

The obtained results allow several key conclusions to be drawn. First, the topic of spatial segregation of Roma communities demonstrates a stable presence and dynamic development in contemporary scientific literature. Second, the distribution of citations indicates that the field is still evolving, with newer studies gradually gaining influence.

Third, the thematic analysis reveals a clear dominance of spatial and urban approaches, confirming the importance of the geographical perspective in the study of segregation processes. In this context, Roma communities are positioned not as an isolated topic, but as a key empirical example of spatial inequalities in contemporary European cities.

The analysis of the geographical distribution of scientific publications (Table 2) shows a strong concentration of research within the European context. The highest number of publications is observed in Italy (73), followed by Spain (33) and the United Kingdom (27). This highlights the leading role of Southern and Western Europe in studying spatial segregation, including that of Roma communities. Countries from Central and Eastern Europe, such as Hungary (16) and Romania (13), also make a significant contribution, which is particularly notable given the substantial Roma populations in these countries. This finding

confirms that scientific interest is closely linked to the actual spatial manifestation of segregation processes, with research often concentrated in regions characterized by pronounced socio-territorial inequalities.

The presence of countries such as Sweden, the Netherlands, and the Czech Republic (10 publications each) indicates that the issue of spatial segregation of Roma communities is not limited to traditionally “high-risk” regions, but is also examined in a broader European context, including countries with different models of social policy and urban governance. A relatively smaller but still notable share of publications originates from the United States (21), suggesting interest in the topic beyond Europe, albeit within a different social and institutional context. This further underscores the universal nature of issues related to segregation and social exclusion in urban environments.

It should be noted that a portion of the publications (n = 89) does not include information on the country of author affiliation and was therefore excluded from the geographical analysis. Nevertheless, the available data clearly indicate that research on the spatial segregation of Roma communities is strongly territorially embedded and predominantly concentrated in European countries characterized by significant social and ethnic inequalities.

**Table 2.** Number of Publications by Country.

Nº	Country	Number of Publications
1	Italy	73
2	Spain	33
3	United Kingdom	27
4	United States	21
5	Hungary	16
6	Romania	13
7	Sweden	10
8	Netherlands	10
9	Czech Republic	10

The analysis of publication sources (Table 3) reveals a clear concentration of research in journals related to urban studies, human geography, and the social sciences. The highest number of publications is found in the journal *Cities* (24), highlighting the strong focus on the urban environment as the primary context of these studies.

Among the leading sources are journals such as *Sustainability* (10), *Population, Space and Place* (9), and *Urban Studies* (8), which are well-established platforms for research on the spatial and social dimensions of urban processes. The presence of publications in journals such as *Habitat International* and *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment* further emphasizes the importance of housing conditions and urban policies in the analysis of segregation.

At the same time, the inclusion of journals such as *Identities* and *Spatial Demography* reflects the interdisciplinary nature of the research, combining social, demographic, and spatial perspectives. The results clearly demonstrate that research on the spatial segregation of Roma communities is developing at the intersection of urban studies, social geography, and inequality research.

**Table 3.** Top 10 journals by number of publications (2020–2026).

Nº	Journal	Number of Publications
1	Cities	24
2	Sustainability	10
3	Population, Space and Place	9
4	The Urban Book Series	9
5	Urban Studies	8
6	Social Sciences	7
7	Habitat International	4
8	Journal of Housing and the Built Environment	4
9	Identities	4
10	Spatial Demography	4

The analysis of the most cited publications reveals that leading research in the field of spatial segregation is strongly influenced by broader theoretical and conceptual developments in urban studies and social geography. The highest citation counts are associated with studies addressing global processes of urbanization, transformations of urban space, and social inequalities.

A key characteristic of the most cited studies is that they do not focus exclusively on specific ethnic groups but instead analyze segregation as a structural and spatial process linked to the development of contemporary cities. In this context, Roma communities are considered a specific empirical example within broader urban and social transformations.

At the same time, a significant share of the most influential publications addresses topics such as residential segregation, urban models, social stratification, and spatial inequality, confirming the interdisciplinary nature of the research field. This indicates that studies on Roma segregation are integrated into the broader scientific debate on urban transformation and social justice.

The thematic analysis conducted using VOSviewer reveals a clearly structured thematic field organized into three main clusters (Figure 3). The first cluster (red) includes terms related to spatial and residential segregation, such as “segregation,” “residential segregation,” “population,” and “ethnic group.” This cluster represents the core research domain and reflects the focus on the spatial distribution of ethnic groups in urban environments, including Roma communities.

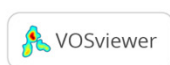
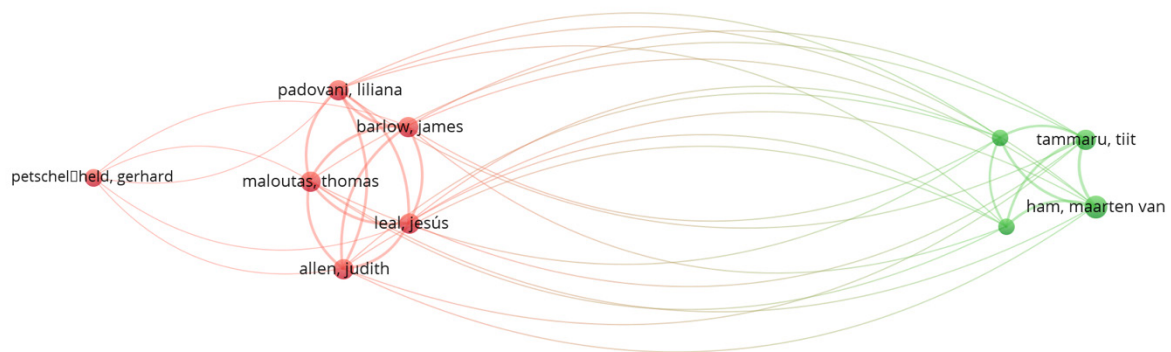
The second cluster (green) comprises concepts such as “urban,” “geography,” “policy,” and “social science,” outlining the theoretical and conceptual framework of the research. This cluster highlights the role of urban and geographical approaches in analyzing segregation processes, as well as the importance of public policies.

The third cluster (blue) brings together terms related to economic and transformation processes, such as “urbanization,” “economic development,” and “regeneration.” It reflects the link between spatial segregation and broader processes of urban development and socio-economic transformation.

The resulting network clearly demonstrates that research on the spatial segregation of Roma communities is interdisciplinary and develops at the intersection of social geography, urban studies, and economic research.



The author co-citation analysis reveals a relatively compact but clearly structured network, organized into two main clusters (Figure 5). The first cluster brings together authors such as Maloutas, Barlow, Allen, and Leal, who are associated with classical research on residential and urban segregation in the European context. These authors emphasize the spatial distribution of populations, housing inequalities, and urban models. The second cluster includes authors such as van Ham and Tammaru, representing more recent research directions focused on social and spatial inequalities, as well as the dynamics of segregation in contemporary urban settings. The connections between the two clusters are relatively limited, indicating a degree of theoretical fragmentation within the field, where parallel but not fully integrated research traditions coexist. This finding confirms that research on the spatial segregation of Roma communities is developing within a broader, yet still consolidating, scientific debate.



**Figure 5.** Co-citation analysis. Source: Authors' elaboration based on VOSviewer.

The overlay visualization, based on the average publication year, reveals a clear evolution in the thematic focus of the research (Figure 6). Earlier studies (shown in blue) are concentrated on topics such as housing conditions, health, and general social issues, indicating an initial descriptive and problem-oriented approach.

In the intermediate period, there is a noticeable increase in empirical research focused on data analysis, impact, and evidence, reflecting a shift toward more analytical and quantitative approaches. The most recent studies (highlighted in yellow) show a clear transition toward topics related to Roma communities, spatial planning, public spaces, and institutional policies. This trend indicates a growing interest in the spatial and governance dimensions of segregation, as well as in the role of social and legal mechanisms for addressing it.

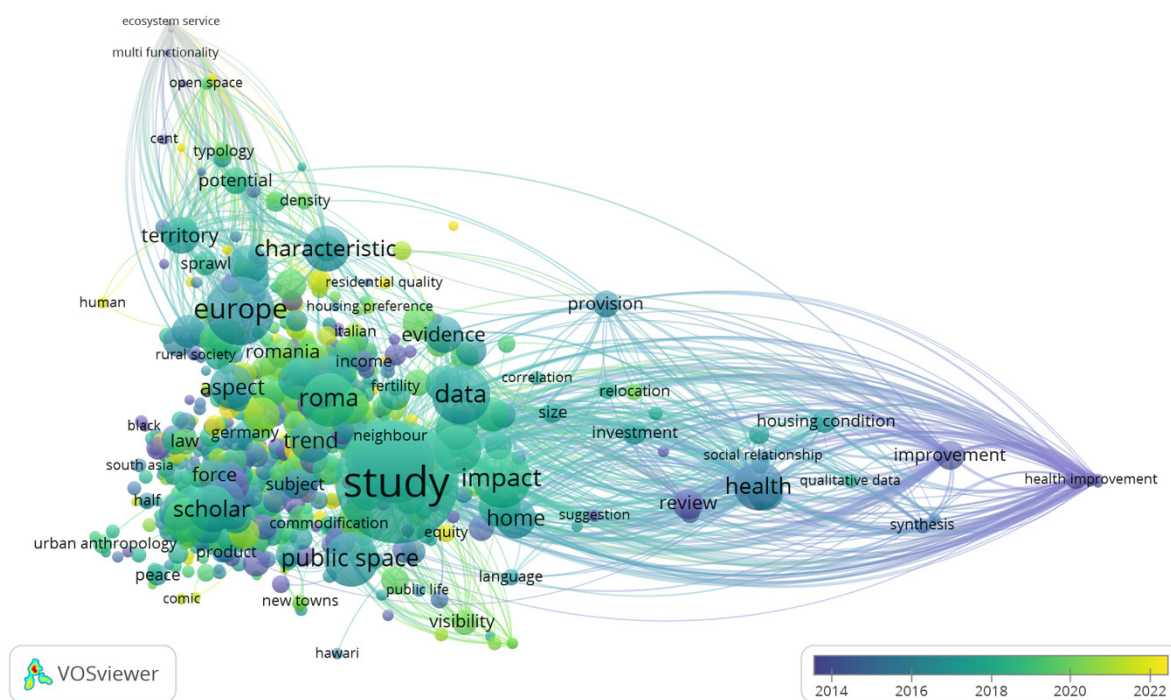


Figure 6. Overlay visualization of the analyzed publications. Source: Authors' elaboration based on VOSviewer.

## Discussion

The results of the bibliometric analysis reveal a complex and multi-layered structure of the scientific field devoted to spatial segregation in urban environments, with a focus on Roma communities. The combination of quantitative indicators (publications, citations) and network analyses makes it possible to identify both the main thematic directions and the evolution of research interest over time.

First, the findings confirm that research on segregation is strongly embedded in the broader scientific debate on urban development, social inequalities, and the spatial organization of cities. The co-occurrence analysis demonstrates a clear distinction between three main thematic cores: classical studies on segregation and ethnic groups; theoretical and conceptual approaches from social geography and urban studies; and economic and transformational processes related to urban development. This structure reflects the interdisciplinary nature of the field, where multiple analytical perspectives intersect.

Second, the citation analysis reveals a relatively fragmented structure of the scientific field. The absence of a clearly dominant theoretical school and the presence of multiple loosely connected clusters indicate that research on the spatial segregation of Roma communities is developing within parallel but not fully integrated research traditions. This is further confirmed by the co-citation analysis, which identifies two main theoretical lines—a classical urban perspective focused on residential segregation and a more contemporary approach from social geography emphasizing spatial inequalities and the dynamics of urban processes.

A particularly important contribution of this study is the identification of the temporal evolution of thematic focus through overlay visualization. A clear shift is observed from earlier studies centered on housing conditions and

social problems toward more recent research emphasizing spatial planning, public policies, and institutional mechanisms. In this context, Roma communities emerge as a key empirical focus through which broader processes of social and spatial exclusion are examined.

The geographical analysis further confirms the territorial embeddedness of the research. The concentration of publications in countries from Southern, Western, Central, and Eastern Europe reflects not only academic interest but also the actual spatial manifestation of segregation processes. This highlights the importance of local context in the analysis of segregation and demonstrates that it cannot be understood as a universal phenomenon, but rather as a process deeply rooted in specific social and urban conditions. In this sense, the results contribute to a better understanding of spatial segregation as a dynamic and multidimensional process that develops at the intersection of social, economic, and spatial factors. They also point to the need for greater theoretical integration and the development of interdisciplinary approaches capable of bridging different research traditions.

The findings of this study can be further interpreted in relation to the theoretical perspectives outlined above. In particular, the identified fragmentation of the scientific field and the coexistence of multiple thematic clusters correspond to existing theoretical approaches that conceptualize spatial segregation as a multidimensional and dynamic process shaped by complex interactions between social, economic, and spatial factors. This confirms that segregation cannot be fully explained within a single theoretical framework but requires an integrated and interdisciplinary perspective.

Moreover, the results are consistent with previous review and bibliometric studies, which also highlight the increasing interdisciplinarity and thematic diversification of research on spatial segregation and urban inequalities. The observed shift from descriptive approaches toward more policy-oriented and spatially grounded analyses reflects broader trends in the literature, emphasizing the growing importance of governance, spatial planning, and institutional mechanisms in addressing segregation processes. In this sense, the present study contributes to the consolidation of the field by providing a systematic overview of its structure and development.

## Conclusion

This study presents a comprehensive bibliometric analysis of the scientific literature on spatial segregation in urban environments, with a focus on Roma communities. The results reveal clear trends in the development of the scientific field, both in terms of publication dynamics and its thematic and theoretical structure. First, the analysis demonstrates a stable and growing interest in the topic over the examined period, confirming its relevance and significance in the context of contemporary urban processes. Second, the distribution of citations indicates that research on the spatial segregation of Roma communities is in a stage of active development. The limited number of highly cited publications and the predominance of more recent studies with lower citation counts point to a dynamically evolving research field. The thematic analysis confirms the interdisciplinary nature of the research, which develops at the intersection of

multiple academic disciplines. The results of the network analyses further highlight the complex structure of the field. The absence of a clearly dominant theoretical school and the presence of multiple relatively weakly connected clusters indicate that research on spatial segregation is evolving within parallel but not fully integrated research traditions. In summary, spatial segregation can be understood as a multidimensional and dynamic process shaped by the interaction of social, economic, and spatial factors. This study contributes to the scientific literature by systematizing existing research and identifying the main trends and directions in the development of the field. At the same time, the findings underline the need for greater theoretical integration and the development of interdisciplinary approaches that can bridge different research traditions. Future research should focus on a more in-depth analysis of the relationship between spatial segregation and public policies, as well as on the development of practical solutions to address the social and spatial isolation of vulnerable groups.

## **Additional information**

### **Conflict of interest**

The author have declared that no competing interests exist.

### **Ethical statement**

No ethical statement was reported.

### **Artificial Intelligence (AI) use**

The author accept full responsibility for the content of the manuscript, including the disclosure of any use of AI.

Regarding the use of AI in the preparation of this manuscript, the author declare the following: GPT

**Used for:** Language, style and writing, Literature discovery and brainstorming

AI tools were used for minor language editing, stylistic refinement, and literature-related brainstorming. No AI tools were used for data analysis, methodological design, or generation of original scientific content. The author retains full responsibility for the content of the manuscript.

### **Funding**

This paper presents the results of the “Spatial models of the Roma ghettoized urban structures in Bulgaria”, a project funded by the Bulgarian National Science Fund (BNSF), Ministry of Education and Science, contract КП-06-H65/7 from 12.12.2022.

### **Author contributions**

Kamelia Petkova conceived the study, designed the methodology, conducted the analysis, and wrote the manuscript.

### **Author ORCIDs**

Kamelia Petkova  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3108-3887>

### **Data availability**

All of the data that support the findings of this study are available in the main text.

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