RESEARCH REPORT

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Living conditions and quality of life

Bridging the rural–urban divide: Addressing inequalities and empowering communities

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European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions

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Contents

Executive summary

Introduction

This report documents differences in social, political, cultural, economic and living conditions between rural and urban areas and considers whether such differences may pose a threat to social cohesion in Europe. To begin, it considers rural–urban gaps in income and living conditions, employment opportunities and human capital. Because differences in socioeconomic conditions can have an impact on people's attitudes and behaviours, the report considers whether rural and urban residents have different perceptions of the respect that they and their communities receive. It assesses their attitudes towards gender equality, acceptance of immigrants and other metrics of social tolerance. Because feelings of disrespect and neglect pose a threat to social cohesion, the report also investigates rural–urban gaps in political participation and satisfaction with democracy. Finally, the report investigates gaps in the provision and quality of public services between urban and rural areas, and highlights some innovative solutions to public service delivery currently being implemented across Member States.

Policy context

The Treaty of Lisbon, signed in 2007, established territorial cohesion as the third dimension of European cohesion. It put forward the objective of ensuring geographically balanced development across European regions in order to reduce spatial inequalities across and within Member States. Eliminating inequalities between places with different degrees of urbanisation is an important element of promoting territorial cohesion.

In May 2007, the first 'territorial agenda' was agreed. The agenda highlighted the importance of promoting sustainable, polycentric development, ensuring equal access to infrastructure and knowledge. It also emphasised the importance of strengthening regional identities and making better use of the territorial diversity of Europe.

The territorial agenda was updated in 2011; the Territorial Agenda 2030 was adopted in 2020. According to this new agenda, inequalities between people and places in Europe had reached a critical level. It set out actions that would be taken to pursue territorial cohesion under the overarching objectives of building a just Europe and a green Europe.

In addition to being at the centre of broader cohesion policy, the challenges and opportunities faced by rural areas receive specific attention in the Rural Pact. The pact was launched by the European Commission in 2021 and established a framework for cooperation among stakeholders at European, national and local levels, with the aim of amplifying the voices of rural communities.

Cohesion policy is delivered through several specific funds, including the European Regional Development Fund, the Cohesion Fund and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development.

Key findings

- On average, incomes are higher in urban areas than in rural areas, and the rural–urban income gap has increased by approximately 19% over the past decade. But this average increase masks the fact that rural–urban inequalities in income have been falling in some Member States, including Germany and the Netherlands.
- While the share of the population at risk of poverty or social exclusion is higher, on average, in rural areas than urban areas, the rural–urban gap in this metric has narrowed by approximately 0.4 percentage points over the past decade.
- The different trajectories of the gaps in income and the at risk of poverty or social exclusion rate may be related to underlying differences in living conditions, of which one component is housing. The housing cost overburden rate is higher in urban areas than in rural areas, and urban neighbourhoods suffer more with the problems of pollution and crime.
- The employment rate is higher in urban areas than in rural areas. While there has been a general increase in the employment rate over the past decade, the rate has increased faster in urban areas than in rural areas, resulting in a slight increase in the rural–urban gap.
- A higher percentage of young people are not in education, employment or training in rural areas than in urban areas, while in urban areas the rates of attainment of tertiary education are higher.
- There is evidence of a digital divide between rural and urban areas. Rural residents are less likely to have digital skills, are less likely to own a computer and have slower internet connections than those in urban areas.

- The socioeconomic gaps between rural and urban communities can have profound implications for how rural and urban residents feel. Rural residents are more likely than those in urban areas to feel that they themselves or their communities are mistreated, disrespected or ignored by their government.
- Attitudes are also, on average, more conservative in rural areas than in urban areas. Rural residents have less favourable views towards gender equality, they are more cautious about accepting immigrants, and they generally have lower levels of social tolerance than urban residents.
- Rural residents are less likely to be politically engaged than urban residents, but only when it comes to informal political engagement, such as attending protests or signing petitions.
- Rural residents have lower levels of trust in their governments and in the European Union, and express lower levels of satisfaction with democracy, than those in urban areas.
- Gaps in the provision of public services between rural and urban areas are increasing. Declining and ageing populations pose challenges to future service provision, especially in rural areas. However, across Member States, there are many examples of innovative solutions to providing public services to those living in remote areas.

Policy pointers

- Investing in education and training for rural communities needs to be prioritised. Urban areas with young, educated populations have been able to reap the advantages of globalisation. It is essential that rural communities foster the necessary human capital to be resilient to changing macroeconomic conditions.
- The rise in remote work triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic presents a unique opportunity to turn back the tide of rural depopulation. Across Europe, less densely populated areas have become more attractive to those who can work remotely and those who are attracted by the lifestyle offered outside large cities. To ensure the continuation of this trend, high-speed broadband access needs to be available in all areas.
- A shift in public service provision to online methods could bridge the growing gap in service provision between urban and rural areas. Digital connectivity is also essential for this alternative method of service delivery.
- Rural areas have many advantages in terms of quality of life, space and natural surroundings, and lower living costs. They also provide opportunities to pursue climate neutrality. The natural advantages of rural areas should be fostered and promoted in a sustainable way.
- The general lack of trust in government among residents in rural areas is very concerning. Inequalities in economic development and declining public services may be driving this. Good quality public services should be made available in all areas to build trust amongst those citizens who feel their communities are being left behind.
- There is a great diversity of challenges between and within each degree of urbanisation. To design appropriate and targeted policy responses, reliable data should be collected and made available across all countries and regions.
- The voices of rural communities must be amplified. Their residents should be included in development plans, and their concerns should be listened to and respected. Giving a voice to local communities has been shown to be instrumental in the successful implementation of local economic development projects. Equally, attention must be paid to the opinions of populations in urban and suburban areas who feel that they are being left behind in the process of globalisation.
- The use of innovative solutions to provide public services in rural areas is already widespread across Europe. These have included the successful delivery of telehealth services, the repurposing of abandoned buildings and the provision of public transport. Local governments and Member States must learn from each other how to scale up these programmes or tailor them to other contexts.
- Women in rural areas face additional challenges, as the gender employment gap is higher in rural areas and rural residents are less likely to voice strong views in favour of gender equality. Policies should focus on encouraging women in rural areas to enter and remain in the labour force. An important component of this is ensuring that good-quality childcare facilities are available in rural areas.
- The provision of childcare facilities in rural areas, as well as good quality physical and digital infrastructure, and the availability of cultural amenities could boost the attractiveness of rural areas to young people of working age who may otherwise choose to relocate to cities.

Introduction

Most citizens in Western societies, including Europeans, reside in urban areas. According to World Bank data, over 336 million individuals, or 75% of the total population of the European Union (EU), lived in urban areas in 2021. Meanwhile, rural areas covered 83% of the EU's territory but only 25% of the population lived in them. Europe's urban population is higher than the global average of 56%, but lower than the urban population recorded in the United States, which stands at 83% (World Bank, 2023).

Although every Member State has a higher share of urban residents than rural ones, significant heterogeneity exists across the EU. For instance, while more than 80% of people in, for example, Belgium, Malta and the Netherlands live in urban areas, this share is less than 60% in Member States such as Lithuania, Slovakia and Slovenia.

Over the past 60 years, Europe's urbanisation has increased steadily. In 1960, 59% of the EU population lived in urban areas. Since then, the urban population has grown every year, albeit at a decreasing rate (World Bank, 2023).

Importance of territorial cohesion

The place in which people reside is a significant component of their identity and influences their daily lives and activities. With three-quarters of the EU's population residing in urban areas, and metropolitan areas continuing to expand over the past half-century, the EU encompasses extensive geographical diversity, characterised by varying demographic, economic and social structures.

The rural regions have an older population on average, particularly in remote areas, and those in rural regions are also ageing more rapidly than those in other regions (European Parliament, 2022). Urban areas and regions in close proximity to cities have higher employment rates, average gross domestic product (GDP) per capita and productivity. In addition, they have lower rates of poverty and social exclusion than rural and remote regions, which are deeply affected by poor connectivity, restricted access to services, inadequate infrastructure and limited economic activity, and are mostly reliant on traditional primary sectors and low value-added services (Perpiña Castillo et al, 2018). Consequently, rural areas are less attractive for working and living.

Addressing spatial inequalities by rebalancing geographically uneven development and narrowing regional disparities within the EU and its Member States, therefore ensuring territorial cohesion, is of utmost importance for the EU.

Although fostering economic and social cohesion throughout all EU regions is an explicit objective of the EU, established in the Treaty of Rome (1957), territorial cohesion became the third dimension of cohesion in the EU with the signing of the Treaty of Lisbon in 2007. Article 174 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union stipulates that the EU's aim is to promote the balanced and sustainable development of all its regions, including less developed regions, by implementing cohesion policy.

The treaty also emphasises the significance of territorial cohesion, whose objective is to decrease the divide between regions by supporting the development of less developed regions and promoting the integration of all regions into the EU's internal market. While there is a great diversity of urbanisation even within the regions of the EU, the rural–urban dimension is a key component of territorial cohesion.

European Union convergence machine

The EU's territorial convergence policies and dedicated funds have been widely recognised for their success at a global level. In 2012, World Bank economists Indermit S. Gill and Martin Raiser referred to Europe as a 'convergence machine' (World Bank, 2012), citing the region's ability to help poorer countries develop high-income economies and to improve the quality of life of Europeans by increasing GDP and productivity.

While economic and social convergence stalled with the Great Recession of 2007–2009, Eurofound (2021) found that the restoration of convergence among Member States began again in 2014 in most of the indicators included in the social scoreboard accompanying the European Pillar of Social Rights. However, as a legacy of the Great Recession, north–south and east–west divides have emerged, with southern European Member States and regions experiencing a marked deterioration due to the recession, while growth rates in eastern Member States and regions have caught up with the best-performing countries in the economic dimension and, to a lesser extent, in the social dimension. These trends were also observed in the institutional dimension (Eurofound, 2022). In particular, Eurofound (2021) found that the 2014–2019 recovery process did not take place in the most rural and peripheral regions, located at the south of the south and at the east of the east, which increased their distance in terms of economic and social performance from other European regions.

In 2017, the World Bank noted that, although the convergence machine still works in the period following the Great Recession of 2008, it does not automatically benefit everyone. Research has highlighted in particular the growing divide between the north and south and has called for an upgrade to the convergence machine and an increased focus on lagging rural regions. Similar trends were observed within regions, in particular for rural and urban areas. Rural areas struggled to experience an economic recovery and therefore a social recovery, thereby increasing their distance from urban areas (World Bank, 2017).

Role of globalisation, technological change and depopulation

The emerging territorial divide within Member States and regions between flourishing, mainly urban, areas and shrinking, mainly rural, areas is largely a result of technological advancements and globalisation transforming the economy. These transformations have been beneficial mainly for adaptable urban areas with a high concentration of better-educated people. Such areas tend to attract more people and talent seeking to exploit new economic opportunities, thus creating a self-reinforcing cycle. Rural areas, on the other hand, struggle to benefit from globalisation and technological change, leading to depopulation dynamics whereby younger and better-educated people migrate to urban areas to benefit from economic change.

Since the 1990s, technological advancements and globalisation have transformed developed markets from industrial to knowledge economies, which could result in a similar increase in inequality to that observed during the industrial revolution. Physical space is less important, as companies now rely less on affordable land and place more emphasis on acquiring a skilled and well-educated workforce, mainly located in urban areas. Technology favours the educated, who prefer to live and work in larger cities because they offer better services and opportunities. To attract top talent, the most innovative and profitable companies must be located in creative clusters where high-quality services are available. This shift in the ideal location for companies leaves rural residents at risk of being left behind, as innovation and the creation of wealth are less likely to occur in these regions. The combination of technological change and globalisation penalises rural areas even further.

While recent vacancy statistics indicate labour shortages in Europe in all sectors, including manufacturing (European Commission, 2023), the offshoring of production to countries with lower labour costs prompted by globalisation has contributed to growing concerns about the negative impacts of globalisation on developed countries, with a possible decrease in demand for low-skilled domestic manufacturing labour (OECD, 2017). Digital technologies have enabled companies to control production processes in distant parts of the world, where labour is more affordable. Consequently, lower-skilled workers in rural areas find themselves in competition with workers whose labour is more cost-effective, although they may have similar skills levels. As a result, individuals living and working in cities are more likely to reap the benefits of globalisation and innovation, while lower-skilled workers in rural areas are falling further behind. This growing disparity not only deepens economic and social divisions but also undermines workers' sense of identity and recognition (Schmidt, 2002; Jacoby and Meunier, 2010; Lamont, 2018).

As a consequence of these dynamics, depopulation may occur in certain rural areas in Europe, as younger and better-educated individuals are drawn to urban centres, attracted by better economic opportunities, services and overall quality of life. According to the eighth cohesion report of the European Commission (European Commission, 2022), urban areas experienced a positive total population change of 4.5 people per 1,000 inhabitants between 2010 and 2019. This change consisted of a positive natural change of 1.2 people per 1,000 inhabitants and a net migration of 3.3 people per 1,000 inhabitants. This increase was more pronounced in north-western Europe (6.6 people per 1,000 inhabitants) and less pronounced in southern and eastern Europe (2.6 and 2.2 people per 1,000 inhabitants, respectively). Notably, southern and eastern Europe recorded a negative natural change in urban areas, which was only partially offset by net migration. Conversely, rural areas witnessed an overall decrease in their population over the past decade (-1.6 people per 1,000 inhabitants). This decrease was driven by southern and eastern Europe (-3.7 and -4.2 people per 1,000 inhabitants, respectively). Specifically, southern Europe experienced the highest natural decrease (-4.7 people per 1,000 inhabitants), which was partly mitigated by net migration (+1.0 people per 1,000 inhabitants). However, eastern Europe faced a negative natural change (-1.9 people per 1,000 inhabitants), which was further exacerbated by negative net migration (-2.3 people per 1,000 inhabitants).

However, population changes do not affect all rural and urban areas in the same way. There are certain rural areas where the population is growing. Conversely, populations have declined in some urban areas. This indicates that depopulation processes are sensitive to local contextual characteristics, differ according to whether areas are expanding or shrinking and extend to all areas along the rural–urban continuum. Projections indicate that the share of people in the EU living in a shrinking region will increase from 34% in 2020 to 45% in 2030 and 51% in 2040. This will affect all three geographical regions (north-western Europe, eastern Europe and southern Europe), with the share of the

population living in a shrinking region increasing by around 18 percentage points between 2020 and 2040. A rapid reduction in population will be observed mostly in eastern regions and is more likely to occur in rural regions than in urban ones (European Commission, 2022).

Implications for social cohesion

Despite the EU's efforts to promote economic growth and social cohesion throughout Europe, the rural–urban divide poses a significant challenge that could lead to political division and populism (McKee, 2008; Gimpel et al, 2020). In addition, studies of left-behind places highlight economic decline and hardship as the main drivers of the spatial divide (Ford and Goodwin, 2014; Rodríguez-Pose et al, 2023). The economic and social disparities between rural and urban areas in Europe have far-reaching impacts on the fabric of rural communities, including their economic, social and cultural dimensions and their identity (Stenner, 2005; Lamont, 2018). Therefore, policymakers and communities need to address the growing divide between rural and urban areas and support the development and vitality of rural areas to ensure their sustainability and vibrancy. Failure to do so could have profound implications for social cohesion and stability within Member States and the EU as a whole (Kenny and Luca, 2021).

Scholars and policymakers have raised concerns regarding the escalating polarisation between urban and rural areas, suggesting that it could emerge as the primary fault line in Western democracies. This trend appears to be validated by the outcomes of recent elections across various Western democracies. In the United States, in particular, research indicates that political disparities are increasingly shaped by a widening geographical divide, with major cities emerging as Democratic strongholds and rural counties predominantly supporting Republicans (Oberhauser et al, 2019). Similar patterns have been observed in Europe, exemplified by the 2016 Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom (UK), the 2018 *gilets jaunes* protests in France, and elections in Italy, the Netherlands and Spain (Carrosio and Osti, 2019; Kenny and Luca, 2021; Valero, 2021).

Research conducted in the UK and other European countries highlights the significant impact of the rural–urban divide, particularly concerning sociocultural or 'cosmopolitan-nationalist' topics such as immigration, multiculturalism and EU integration. This divide has resulted in conflicts and tensions among diverse groups, ultimately contributing to the polarisation observed between rural and urban areas. This polarisation is reflected in political outcomes and societal attitudes (Maxwell, 2019; Huijsmans et al, 2021).

According to Goodhart (2017), societies are becoming increasingly divided into two main categories: 'anywheres' and 'somewheres'. The 'anywheres' are primarily concentrated in urban areas; they are highly educated, cosmopolitan and open to social and cultural change. They are mobile and flexible, and comfortable with the societal and economic changes resulting from globalisation. The 'somewheres' are rooted in a specific place or community, usually in a small town or in the countryside; they have lower levels of education and stronger local connections and are socially conservative. They are more resistant to social and cultural change, perceiving it as a potential threat. This division generates conflicts and tensions among different groups, which contributes to the divide between rural and urban areas. These differences are evident in political outcomes and social attitudes (The Guardian, 2017).

The tension between 'anywheres' and 'somewheres' can be intensified by a phenomenon known as 'urban imperialism', whereby urban areas or cities exert economic, social, political or cultural dominance or control over surrounding rural or suburban areas (Hansen, 2006). This phenomenon stems from the concentration of political, economic and media elites in urban areas, which grants them the power to shape policies and decisions that have significant repercussions for peripheral regions, even if those actions do not align with their best interests. In addition, the concentration of the media, cultural institutions and other sources of culture in urban areas can influence the prevailing values and beliefs of society, resulting in the marginalisation of rural cultures and the emergence of divergent urban and rural identities. This process contributes to social and cultural disparities between urban and rural or suburban areas (Lamont, 2018).

Risk of political polarisation

Resistance to social change and opposition to urban imperialism could give rise to authoritarian dynamics, as highlighted by Stenner (2005). According to the authoritarian dynamic theory, individuals with a predisposition to authoritarianism are more inclined to support authoritarian leaders and policies when they perceive themselves to be at risk of experiencing economic and social inequalities, and when they are exposed to cultural changes that challenge their established social norms and values. This tendency is particularly pronounced during periods characterised by rapid or systemic changes, such as globalisation and technological progress, when individuals may experience heightened uncertainty about the future and therefore support leaders or policies that promise them stability and security.

Authoritarian dynamics can be attributed to the unequal distribution of benefits and costs associated with globalisation and technological progress, as well as cultural disparities in identities and values. Barca (2019) highlights that in recent years three types of inequalities have been identified as potential triggers of Stenner's authoritarian dynamics, especially in the context of the rural–urban divide.

Economic inequalities: Across Europe, there is increasing economic divergence between core cities on the one hand and peripheral areas that face economic challenges on the other. Urban areas typically offer more economic opportunities and higher levels of wealth than rural areas. Consequently, disparities in living standards and access to resources emerge, fostering a sense of discontentment, anxiety and resentment in rural communities. These factors can contribute to citizens' adoption of a more protective and zero-sum mindset, where the perception of resources being limited fuels competition and resistance to social change.

Social inequalities: In addition to economic inequalities, there is a considerable social divide between rural and urban areas, and they have different levels of access to common goods and public services. Those living in urban areas typically enjoy better access to education, healthcare facilities, high-speed internet and public transport systems than those in rural areas, resulting in a divide in health, well-being, and access to information and economic opportunities.

Cultural and recognition inequalities: Differences between urban and rural life, combined with a perception among rural and town dwellers of being overlooked by economic and political elites, have given rise to growing resentment among these citizens based on cultural and identity-related issues. The recognition gap experienced by rural areas represents the phenomenon of inhabitants of rural areas feeling undervalued and excluded by society and decision-makers. This sense of exclusion and powerlessness contributes to feelings of marginalisation and discontent among rural communities, exacerbating the divide between urban and rural areas.

These inequalities have contributed to a growing mutual alienation and fundamental differences in world views between those in rural and urban areas, which can intensify political and social conflicts. Gaining a deeper understanding of these dynamics is crucial for policymakers to effectively address the root causes of authoritarianism and promote more inclusive and equitable societies.

Structure of the report

This report aims to provide evidence of rural–urban inequalities in Europe across the political, economic, social and cultural dimensions, and explore the implications of these inequalities for social cohesion and stability. The intensifying polarisation between rural and urban areas may have a dramatic effect on the economies and social stability of European societies, potentially fuelling class resentment and perpetuating a detrimental cycle of persistent poverty. Thus, policymakers and communities must find ways to close the gap between rural and urban areas, by supporting the development and sustainability of rural areas.

To address this issue, the report is organised into six chapters.

Chapter 1 outlines the EU policy agenda as it relates to territorial cohesion and goes on to discuss how to conceptualise and measure inequalities between rural and urban areas in Europe, analysing the population distribution in these areas and changes over time. This chapter also highlights the impact of COVID-19 on rural and urban areas.

Chapters 2 and 3 investigate trends in economic and social inequalities between rural and urban areas. They focus on aspects such as material living conditions, employment, human capital and digital skills.

Chapter 4 investigates cultural inequalities and issues around recognition among rural and urban areas. It examines social tolerance and explores whether a recognition gap emerges as a result of individuals feeling excluded from society.

Chapter 5 discusses the political polarisation between rural and urban areas, analysing differences in residents' trust towards governments and the EU as well as their satisfaction with democracy.

Chapter 6 reviews European policies aimed at reducing the rural–urban divide and ensuring territorial cohesion. It discusses the role of public services in rural areas and provides case studies highlighting good practices specifically related to the delivery of healthcare and long-term care.

Chapter 7 provides policy messages and directions for further research. By setting out policy pointers and providing evidence of rural–urban inequalities, this report aims to support policymakers and communities in closing the gap between rural and urban areas and ensuring the sustainable development of these areas in the future.

1 Socioeconomic inequalities in rural and urban areas

European Union policy agenda

The Territorial Agenda 2030 – a policy document focusing on spatial planning in Europe, its regions and communities – defines territorial cohesion as 'promoting balanced and harmonious territorial development between and within countries, regions, cities and municipalities, as well as ensuring a future for all places and people in Europe, building on the diversity of places and subsidiarity' (TA2030, 2020, p. 3). However, a challenge encountered in designing policies is how to address the wide variety of types of regions in Europe, each with very different development challenges and potential that needs to be unleashed. Employment and educational opportunities, economic activities and entrepreneurship, physical and digital accessibility of public services, governance levels, demographic structures, ecosystems and other factors vary greatly depending on the place (e.g. a capital region, a metropolitan area, a town, a rural area or a peripheral area).

EU cohesion policy is delivered through several specific funds. The European Regional Development Fund focuses on providing funding for innovation and research, the digital agenda, the low-carbon economy, and small and medium-sized enterprises. The Cohesion Fund aims to reduce economic and social disparities by funding projects supporting the development of transport, energy and digital infrastructure. The European Social Fund Plus supports people, including the most vulnerable, by providing educational and employment opportunities across the EU. The implementation of the European Green Deal is facilitated by the Just Transition Fund, which supports territories facing serious socioeconomic challenges in the transition towards climate neutrality (Eurostat, 2022a; European Commission, undated-a).

The rural–urban dimension is only one component of territorial cohesion policy and, indeed, is one whose importance varies across Member States, depending on their degree of urbanisation and any associated economic imbalances. Nonetheless, the rural–urban dimension is an important focus of overall cohesion policy and, accordingly, funding instruments are in place that specifically target rural areas. The Common Agricultural Policy supports rural growth and development. The European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, complemented by the European Regional Development Fund and the European Social Fund, aims to facilitate the creation of jobs outside the agriculture sector and foster innovation and the creation of products in the agriculture industry by supporting small and medium-sized enterprises in rural areas. It also aims to develop basic infrastructure in villages and better rural–urban connections and to ensure the sustainable management of natural resources and climate action (European Commission, undated-b). Environmental priorities are at the heart of these instruments, as at least 30% of funding for programmes must be dedicated to measures relevant to the environment and climate change (European Commission, undated-b).[1]

Acknowledging both the challenges and the opportunities in rural areas, the European Commission put forward a long-term vision for the EU's rural areas in the form of a Rural Pact in June 2021. This aims to make European rural areas stronger, more connected, more resilient and more prosperous (European Commission, 2021a). The EU's rural areas should be revived by ensuring better access to services and fostering social innovation, improving digital and physical connectivity, diversifying economic activities and balancing economic growth while preserving natural resources and ensuring resilience.

The 2021–2027 cohesion policy encourages Member States to have a stronger focus on rural–urban linkages and greater cooperation in responding to the needs of territories that fall within more than one administrative unit. People on either side of administrative borders often face similar challenges. Given this, policies should be designed jointly across 'functional areas', stretching across several jurisdictional boundaries. In this context, the European Commission and the World Bank Group signed an administration agreement to improve functional area approaches in the EU. The main objective of this agreement is to enhance the capacity of participating areas to plan and fund investments and services across jurisdictional boundaries. As a result, 12 functional areas in 7 Member States (Croatia, Czechia, Greece, Hungary, Poland, Romania and

1 To help in designing and implementing sustainable and integrated development strategies for non-urban areas in the context of EU cohesion policy, the Joint Research Centre and the Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy published the new *Handbook of territorial and local development strategies* in November 2022, available at https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC130788.

Slovenia) will receive targeted support, and another 12 functional areas in 5 countries (Croatia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia) will receive short-term support as part of the Functional Areas in the EU project.[2]

These long-term policies and short-term instruments addressing territorial divides show that the European convergence machine is constantly being updated to address long-term challenges and new risks, and to make use of emerging opportunities. The past decade has been particularly difficult, as Europeans have had to tackle financial, health and energy crises and shape the transformation to a digital and green economy in a just and sustainable way, against a backdrop of ageing societies and regional diversities.

Conceptualising rural and urban

Territorial cohesion can be seen through a simplified rural–urban lens. To examine disparities between areas based on their degree of urbanisation, it is first necessary to define a usable metric of what is rural and what is urban. Despite the myriad of research projects comparing demographic and socioeconomic indicators across the rural–urban spectrum, the distinction between rural and urban areas is not clear-cut. The urban–rural continuum may include metropolitan areas, capital regions, cities, medium-sized towns, small towns, peri-urban areas, rural areas and remote areas, for example. It can vary from country to country and over time within countries.[3] The definition may be based on a minimum population threshold or population density, or simply administrative boundaries, as well as on the proportion of the workforce employed in (non-)agricultural sectors or the availability of specific health, educational or other infrastructure (UN, 2019).

Some experts highlight the limitations of the rural–urban distinction, noting that it can do more harm than good by encouraging stereotyping and oversimplification, and by creating morally charged symbolic rural–urban divides. Instead of looking at rural and urban locations as if they determine people's lifestyles, a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between space and society should be used. More peripheral rural areas and even small cities are often omitted from the definition of 'metropolitan regions' (Brenner and Schmid, 2015; Dymitrow, 2017; Westlund, 2017; de Olde and Oosterlynck, 2021). Proietti et al (2022) introduced the spatially embedded concept of 'lonely places'. These places are defined by certain vulnerabilities, manifesting in a lack or insufficiency of local endowment of resources or connectivity (digital and/or spatial) compared with other territories. Places (cities, towns and rural areas alike) are labelled as 'lonely' if they experience, for example, depopulation, high-level socioeconomic deprivation, a lack of everyday services or digital remoteness.

Despite these criticisms, the conceptual rural–urban distinction, along with other regional classifications, remains an important categorisation, especially in cross-national studies. Eurostat – the statistical office of the EU – has produced a range of statistics covering different classifications and typologies of diverse EU territories that are indispensable in monitoring EU regional policy targets. One of the most used classifications is the hierarchical Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics (NUTS) system, which divides the EU into smaller regions. The current NUTS 2021 classification has 92 regions at NUTS 1 (major socioeconomic regions) level, 242 regions at NUTS 2 (basic regions for the application of regional policies) level and 1,166 regions at NUTS 3 (small regions for specific diagnoses) level. The NUTS 2 level is used to define regions that are eligible for support from cohesion policy. Similarly, cohesion reports conduct analyses at NUTS 2 level (Eurostat, undated-a).

Analyses of the rural–urban divide can also use Eurostat's degree of urbanisation classification. What constitutes rural and urban has changed over time. Originally introduced in 1991, the degree of urbanisation classification distinguished between densely populated, intermediate-density and thinly populated areas. At that time, it was based on the number of inhabitants, population density and local administrative units. Since 2012, an improved methodology for measuring metropolitan areas has been used. This was the result of the joint efforts of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the European Commission's Joint Research Centre, and the European Commission's directorates-general for regional and urban policy, Eurostat, and agriculture and rural development. The current degree of urbanisation classification classifies local administrative units as 'cities' (densely populated areas), 'towns and suburbs' (intermediate density) and 'rural areas' (thinly populated) based on a combination of geographical contiguity (neighbouring cells) and population density, measured by minimum population thresholds applied to 1 km^2 population grid cells.[4]

2 https://functionalareas.eu/

3 In the UK alone, 30 definitions were in use at one time (Pateman, 2011).

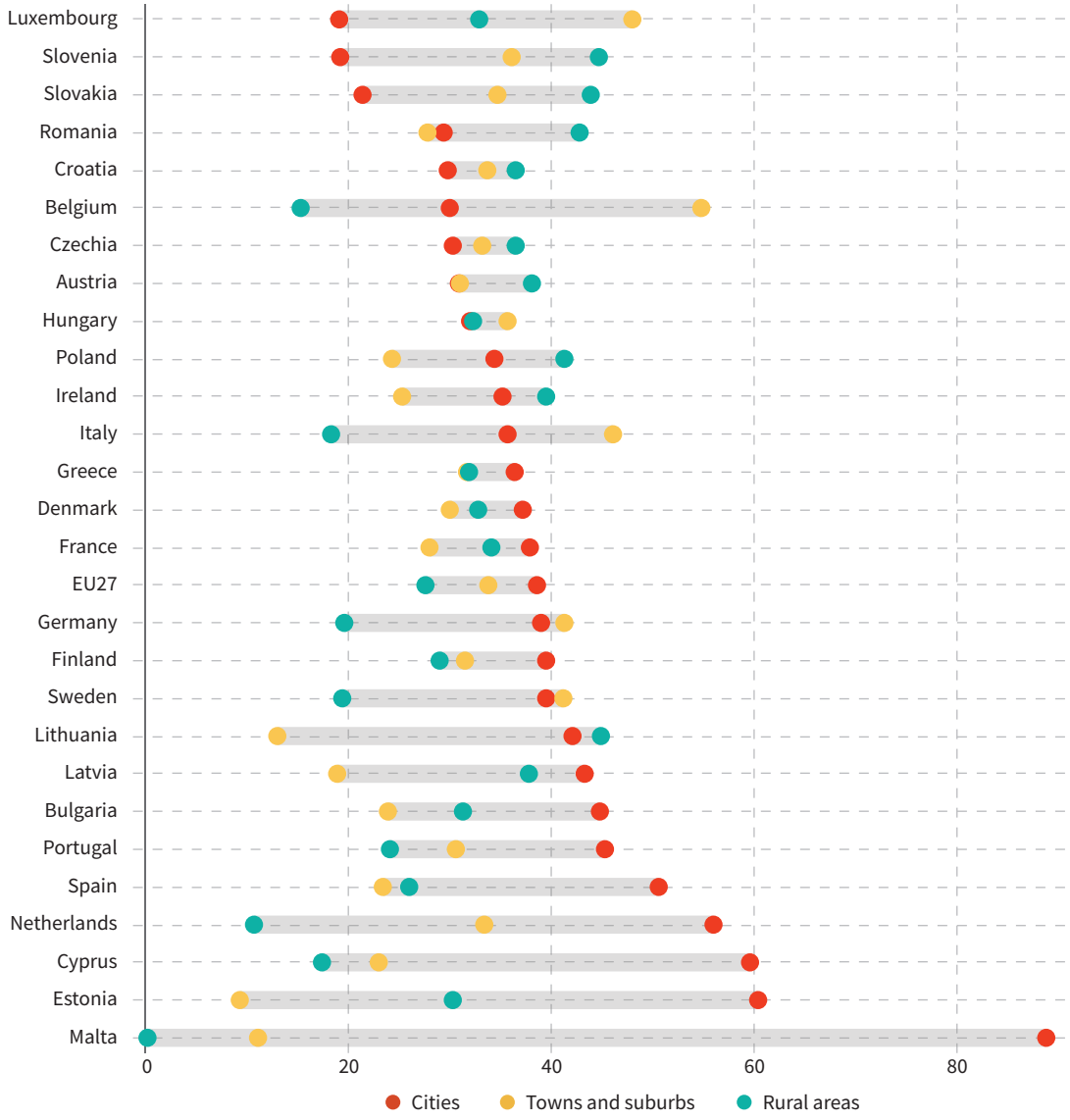
4 The degree of urbanisation classification is updated when needed to reflect changes in both local administrative unit boundaries and population distributions for 1 km^2 grid cells. The latest population grid is based on 2021 EU population and housing census data. For more extensive methodological information, please refer to the methodological manual *Applying the degree of urbanisation — A methodological manual to define cities, towns and rural areas for international comparisons — 2021 edition*.

Throughout this report, this three-category classification is used to analyse the rural–urban divide.

In 2020, based on the current degree of urbanisation classification, almost 40% of Europeans lived in cities, one-third lived in towns and suburbs, and the remaining 28% lived in rural areas (Figure 1). However, there is notable variation across Member States. Close to 90% of Maltese people lived in cities, compared with 19% of the population in Luxembourg and Slovenia. In Belgium, 55% of people lived in town and suburbs, compared with 9% in Estonia. The biggest shares of people living in rural areas were in Lithuania and Slovenia (close to 45% in both countries), and the smallest share was in Malta (0.2%).

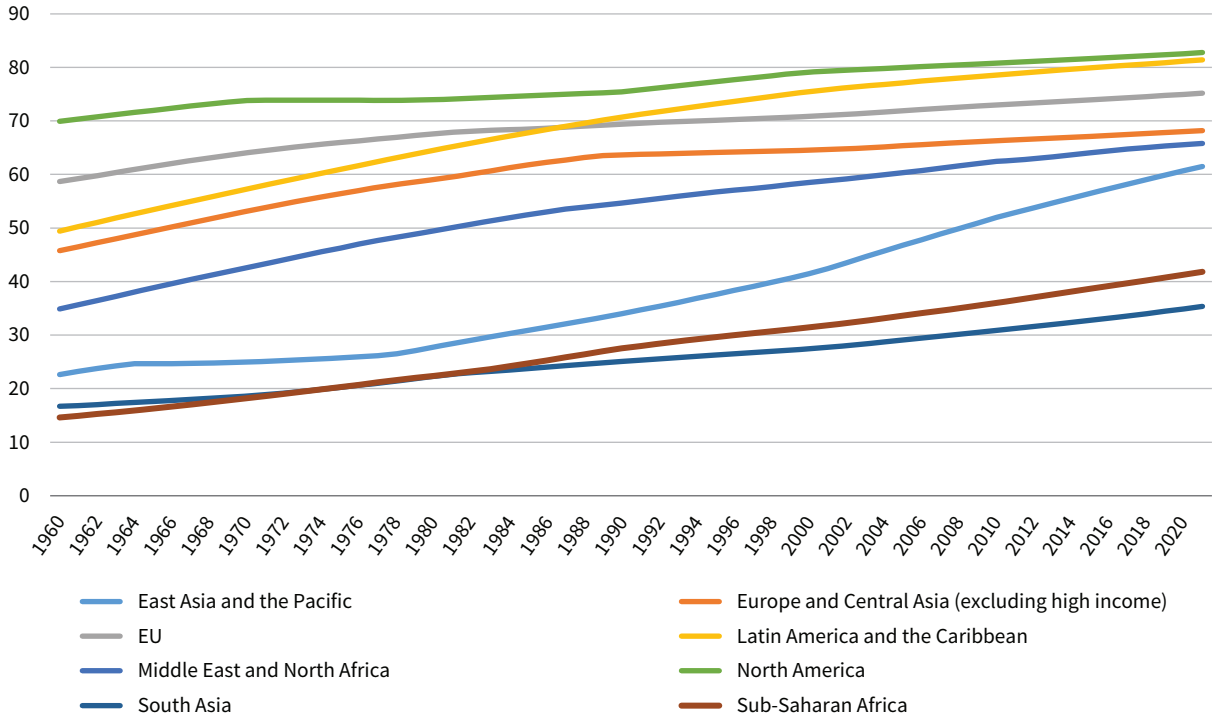
Taking 'rural' and 'urban' as two broad categories, data show that in Europe more than 75% of the population live in areas that can be broadly defined as 'urban'. This is well above the global average of 56%, but slightly below the share in the United States (83%). Over the past several decades, the shares of populations living in urban areas have been steadily increasing (Figure 2). Compared with today, when more than half of the world's population live in urban areas, in 1972, just over one-third of the population did. Different regions of the world saw their degree of urbanisation change at difference paces. Across the world, the degree of urbanisation in North America is greater than in any other region. However, countries in Latin America and

Figure 1: Distribution of population, by degree of urbanisation, EU27, 2020 (%)



Source: *Eurostat [ILC_LVHO01]*

Figure 2: Urban population as a share of the total population, by region, 1960–2021 (%)



Source: *World Bank, World Development Indicators database*

the Caribbean have experienced rapid growth in the share of the total population living in urban areas, from 49% in 1960 to 81% in 2021. A sharp increase in urbanisation rates can also be seen in the East Asia and the Pacific region, from 23% in 1960 to 61% in 2021. The trend in the movement of people from rural to urban areas reflects economic development, as activity moves away from agriculture and towards industry and services, and may be associated with the fact that urban areas provide more jobs and higher income. However, the concentration of more and more people in urban areas can put pressure on essential services, including healthcare and housing, with which policy may struggle to keep pace. As discussed later in the report, outward migration from rural areas to towns and cities can lead to inequalities in living conditions and opportunities and has the potential to foster political and ideological polarisation.

Empirical approach to assessing inequalities

This report investigates differences in the areas of employment, human capital, cultural values and perceived recognition, and income, poverty and living conditions, as well as trust in government and satisfaction with democracy. For each broad theme, existing gaps between cities, towns and suburbs, and rural areas are explored. Where data allow, the changes in such gaps over the past decade are examined. Considering the existing gaps among these areas provides a better understanding of the socioeconomic realities of cities, towns and suburbs, and rural areas. While any aggregate metric of urbanisation simplifies the distinctions between the groups, as well as the diversity within them, such simplification facilitates the assessment of where challenges and opportunities are concentrated, and where policies to ensure geographically balanced economic development should be focused.

Several EU-wide harmonised sets of microdata were used in the analysis, specifically those for the EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC), the European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) and the European Social Survey. EU-SILC, a representative yearly survey, collects harmonised, comparable cross-sectional and longitudinal individual- and household-level data on income, poverty, social exclusion and living conditions. The reference population of EU-SILC consists of private households and their members, while people living in collective households and in institutions are excluded (Eurostat, undated-b). EU-SILC data are used to analyse income, living conditions and human capital. The EU-LFS – a large household sample survey providing representative quarterly results on the labour

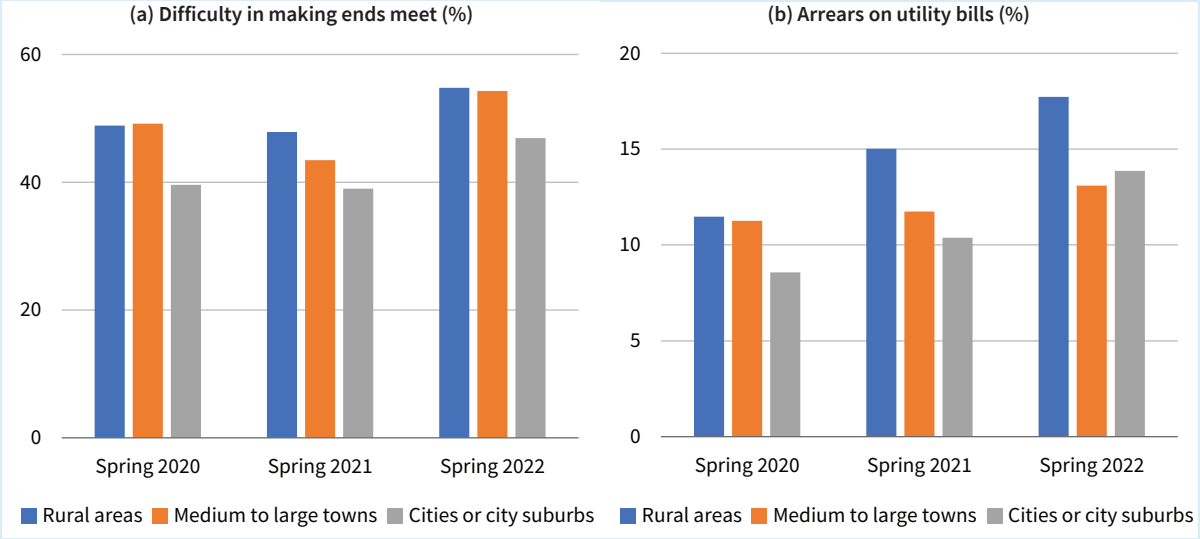
participation of people aged 15 and over – provides data for employment and labour-related indicators.[5] Both EU-SILC and the EU-LFS are produced by Eurostat and use the degree of urbanisation classification to categorise cities, towns and suburbs, and rural areas. Because the methodology used to classify the degree of urbanisation changed in 2012, indicators from these datasets are only used for the period after 2012. These datasets are used in Chapters 2 and 3 of the report. Data from the European Social Survey on digital skills across degrees of urbanisation are used in Chapter 3.

Data from Eurofound's *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey are used to analyse the uneven impact of COVID-19 on various dimensions of the rural–urban divide (see Box 1); perceptions of treatment by and respect from governments (Chapter 4); political participation; satisfaction with governments and democracy (Chapter 5); and perceptions of the quality of public services across degrees of urbanisation (Chapter 6). The e-survey, first launched in early 2020, aims to assess the wide-ranging impact of the pandemic on the work and lives of EU citizens. It uses uncontrolled convenience sampling conducted through social media and by distributing the survey link, and covers individuals aged 18 and over. The e-survey is corrected for the population structure in the EU Member States by weighting the data by age, gender, urbanisation, education level and country size. For the rural–urban analysis, a perception-based indicator (where the respondent declares their living place and which broadly corresponds to Eurostat's classification of the degree of urbanisation) is used.

Box 1: Economic and social impacts of COVID-19 in rural and urban areas

COVID-19 started as a health crisis, but the containment measures adopted to curb its spread meant that it quickly became a health, economic and social crisis. Earlier studies highlighted the nuanced ways in which rural areas were affected by the crisis. On the one hand, Henning-Smith (2020) reports that existing rural–urban inequalities in health, healthcare and financial resources were worsened by the pandemic. On the other hand, the pandemic promoted the relocation, at least temporarily, of people from cities to more rural areas. While this may have improved consumption levels in rural areas (OECD, 2020), it may also have had an impact on the availability and affordability of housing (Colomb and Gallent, 2022) and put pressure on vital services, including healthcare services.

Figure 3: Financial hardship in rural and urban areas throughout the COVID-19 crisis

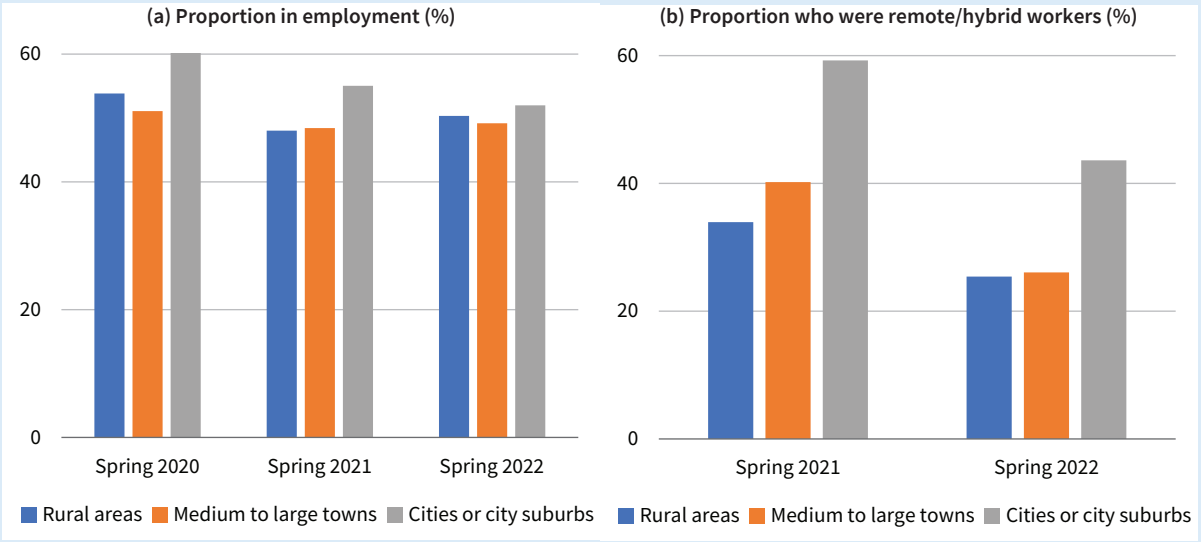


Source: *Authors' own calculations, based on the* Living, working and COVID-19 *e-survey*

5 https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-labour-force-survey

An analysis of Eurofound's *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey finds rural–urban differences over the course of the COVID-19 crisis in income, employment status and mental well-being. Considering first people's ability to make ends meet, a higher share of people in rural areas and towns than in cities found it difficult to make ends meet in all periods considered (Figure 3a). An alternative measure of financial hardship – households' likelihood of being in arrears on utility bills – shows that, in the early stages of the pandemic, rural residents and those in towns had similar struggles in this regard and faced more difficulty than those in cities. As the pandemic progressed, rural residents struggled considerably more than those living in towns and cities (Figure 3b). Both panels also show that in spring 2022, despite economies reopening, the percentage of people having financial difficulties continued to increase, perhaps due to the energy and cost-of-living crises.

Figure 4: Employment situation of rural and urban residents throughout the COVID-19 crisis



Source: *Authors' own calculations, based on the* Living, working and COVID-19 *e-survey*

Differences in the severity of financial hardships over the crisis may reflect underlying differences in employment conditions in rural and urban areas. Figure 4a shows that the rural–city employment gap was about seven percentage points in both spring 2020 and spring 2021. However, employment rates in cities continued to fall in spring 2022, while those in rural areas showed some recovery, so the gap between urban and rural areas largely closed. The employment rate in towns was more stable. Differences in employment rates in the early stages of the pandemic may reflect the fact that workers in cities are more likely to work in sectors, including education and financial and public services, where the possibility of teleworking is greater. The increased capacity of city residents to work from home is confirmed by the survey data, with a larger city–rural gap earlier in the pandemic (Figure 4b). Rates of remote working in towns were only slightly higher than those in rural areas.

The final dataset that was used in the analysis was that of the European Values Study (EVS). The EVS assesses differences in attitudes towards gender equality, immigrant acceptance, and broader metrics of social tolerance (Chapter 4). The EVS uses a large-scale, cross-national longitudinal survey on basic human values. The survey has been fielded every nine years since 1981. Only the two most recent survey editions (2008 and 2017) are used in this report. The survey gathers details of the size of the towns where interviews were conducted; this variable was recoded to three levels of urbanisation. Rural areas were defined as those with a population under 20,000; towns were defined as those with a population between 20,000 and 100,000; and areas with a population in excess of 100,000 were categorised as urban. For each dataset used in the analyses, three broadly comparable degrees of urbanisation were used; however, the definition of the degree of urbanisation is not identical in each dataset. The data and text of each chapter reflect the categorisation that relates to the dataset in question.

Methods used to assess the existence and extent of the gap between rural and urban areas include descriptive analyses presenting summary statistics, analyses of disparities through a sigma convergence lens and regression analyses. In addition, several indices were created to aggregate groups of similar indicators, as guided by polychoric factor analysis. The descriptive

analyses summarise the different levels of indicators by degree of urbanisation for each Member State. Thus, they present – for each Member State – average levels of, for example, educational attainment for rural residents, for those living in towns and suburbs, and for those living in cities. Rural–urban disparities and changes in them over time are assessed by looking at the convergence or divergence of selected indicators since 2012 by means of sigma convergence analysis. Sigma convergence refers to the overall reduction of disparities among countries or regions over time and is measured by analysing changes in statistical measures of dispersion or inequalities. In this report, the standard deviation is used to measure the dispersion. A low standard deviation signals that the values recorded by Member States are close to the mean for the EU, while a high standard deviation indicates that they are spread out over a wider range. Regression analyses consider whether there are meaningful differences between areas by degree of urbanisation, after considering other factors. For example, regression analyses are used to assess whether there are differences by degree of urbanisation in how well people can afford to make ends meet, after accounting for age, gender, educational attainment, income, and marital and activity statuses, as well as for Member State and time. Microdata are used for the regression analyses. For the descriptive analyses, and to assess convergence, macrodata are used.

2 Divide in income, poverty and living conditions

Previous analyses of differences between rural and urban areas in terms of income, poverty and living conditions paint a complex picture. While evidence from outside the EU generally demonstrates that rural areas are more impoverished than urban areas, literature that strictly focuses on the EU depicts a much more complex situation (Bernard, 2019). Based on 2013 EU-SILC data, Bernard (2019) finds that relative poverty (at 60% of the median equivalised income) and material deprivation rates are not generally higher in rural areas than urban areas. In fact, in some cases, the disparities are overturned, with rural areas being more advantaged. This study concludes that rural poverty is found in countries with a lower rural population density, with a higher proportion of farmers and with generally lower levels of economic development. Rural poverty is also found in post-socialist transition economies. Most notably, limited national economic development is the most influential factor behind rural disadvantage.

Other literature confirms the high level of cross-country variation in rural–urban disparities within the EU Member States (Weziak-Bialowolska, 2016; Eurofound, 2019; Eurostat, 2021). Eurofound (2019) found that some Mediterranean, central European and eastern European Member States face starker rural–urban disparities, whereas more affluent Member States do not. The work of Weziak-Bialowolska (2016) echoes this, finding no differences in poverty levels across levels of urbanisation in countries such as Denmark, Finland and Sweden, and showing that less affluent countries such as Bulgaria, Lithuania and Romania face starker geographical inequalities. Eurostat (2021) found different relative risks of poverty within different Member States. On the one hand, it found that in nine western EU Member States the share of the population at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) was larger in cities than in towns and suburbs or rural areas. On the other hand, the risk of poverty or social exclusion was particularly high in the rural areas of Romania and Bulgaria, where rates were 20.5% and 17.2% higher, respectively, than those for towns and suburbs (Eurostat, 2021). Eurofound (2019), based on European Quality of Life Survey 2016 data, reaffirms the hardship people in rural areas face in Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece and Romania, with over 40% of rural residents reporting difficulty or great difficulty in making ends meet. Another notable conclusion from the work done by Eurostat is the difference in the range of poverty and social exclusion rates in cities compared with rural areas (Eurostat, 2021). The highest rate for cities was in Belgium (28.3%) and the lowest was in Slovakia (7.5%). For rural areas, the highest rate was in Romania (50.5%) and the lowest was in Austria (10.8%). These data further emphasise the fact that living conditions vary considerably both within and between Member States.

Convergence in income standards has also been changing across time and space. For example, looking at the disparities in GDP per capita between the NUTS 3 regions of the EU, Pina and Sicari (2021) document progress towards convergence until the 2007–2008 global financial crisis, after which convergence slowed down. Indeed, they find that the Member States that have been part of the EU since before the 2004 enlargement have seen divergence in income levels since the crisis. Pina and Sicari (2021) attribute these persistent disparities between NUTS regions, at least in part, to those NUTS 3 regions that are either entirely remote or close to only a small city being disproportionately poor. Kah et al (2020) find that, across the EU, GDP per capita is consistently lower in rural areas than urban areas, with the gap being even more pronounced in the 'newer' Member States[6] and in Ireland. However, it is important to highlight the limitation of assessing differences across only income per capita: living in urban areas is generally more expensive than living in rural areas and, thus, having more wealth or being in a higher income percentile does not necessarily ensure a higher standard of living (Eurofound, 2014). In fact, research by Allianz SE (2019) corroborates these conclusions, finding that absolute inequality between urban and rural areas in terms of income has not reduced, but income inequality adjusted for living standards has reduced.

Overall, the literature suggests that rural–urban differences in poverty rates may be more complex within the EU than outside its borders, and that income levels within the EU have been converging over time, albeit with important differences between certain groups of Member States. Furthermore, the literature highlights the limitations of using income as a proxy for living standards, as differences in the cost of living and other factors have important mediating effects on the relationship between income and quality of life. The current analysis corroborates the complexity of the picture.

6 The countries that have joined the EU since 2004: Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia.

Table 1: Indicators used to assess the rural–urban divide in income, poverty and living conditions

Indicator	Description
Income level	Median equivalised net income per capita (€)
Risk of poverty and exclusion	Persons at risk of poverty after social transfers, severely materially deprived or living in households with very low work intensity (AROPE) (%)
Affordability of living costs	Four variables from EU-SILC are used to measure affordability: • the ease with which a household can make ends meet • the financial burden of housing costs • a household's capacity to afford unexpected but necessary expenses • a household's capacity to afford a one-week annual holiday
Assets and appliances	Four variables from EU-SILC are used to determine the ownership of: • a colour TV • a computer • a washing machine • a car
Housing costs	Housing cost overburden rate, that is, the share of the population that spends over 40% of their disposable income on housing (%)
Home and neighbourhood	Four variables from EU-SILC are used to assess housing and neighbourhood conditions: • person owns their home (either outright or with a mortgage) • person lives in a dwelling with four or more rooms • pollution and grime are problems in the local area • crime and vandalism are problems in the local area
Structural quality	Four variables from EU-SILC are used to assess structural characteristics: • dwelling too dark, meaning there is not enough daylight coming through the windows • leaking roof; damp walls, floors or foundations; or rot in window frames or floors • household's ability to keep home adequately warm • indoor flushing toilet for sole use of household

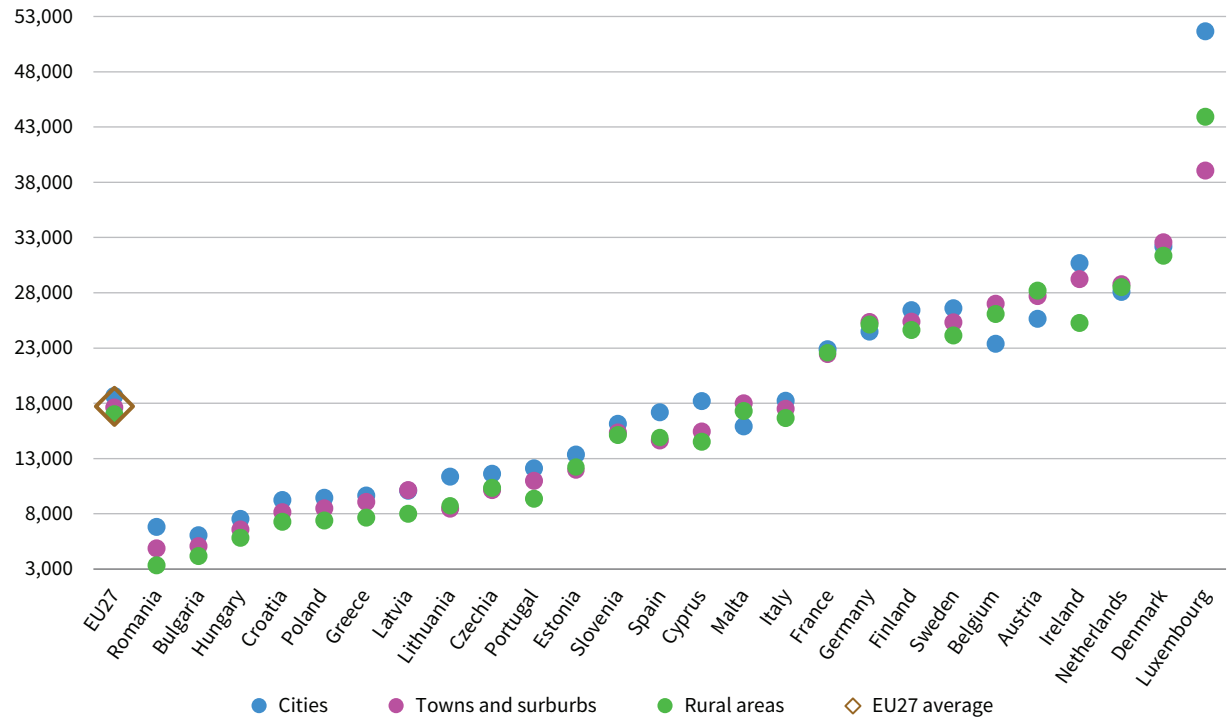
Possible rural–urban gaps in income, poverty and living conditions are assessed using a wide range of indicators to capture the array of factors that can have an impact on the overall quality of a person's living conditions (Table 1). These range from aggregate measures, such as median income, to more nuanced indicators related to the structural quality of a person's home. A combination of macrodata and microdata sources are used. The microdata come from EU-SILC and can be categorised as metrics of non-monetary household deprivation, social exclusion, the physical and social environment, and housing conditions.

Divide in income level and poverty risk

Of the wide range of variables presented in Table 1, median income is considered first as a headline indicator of where differences may exist across degrees of urbanisation.

Considering income levels, Figure 5 shows that, across degrees of urbanisation, median incomes are highest in cities (EU average of €18,668) and lowest in rural areas (average of €17,032), with towns and suburbs falling in between (€17,623). In most Member States, average incomes are highest in cities and lowest in rural areas. However, several do not conform with the aggregate trend, highlighting the complexity of the picture and the heterogeneity between Member States. For example, in Austria, the median income is highest in rural areas (€28,199), and in Austria, Belgium, Germany, Malta and the Netherlands median incomes are lowest in cities. In other Member States, for example Luxembourg, rural areas have lower average incomes than cities but outperform towns and suburbs. Luxembourg is also notable for having the largest income gap based on the degree of urbanisation, where cities have an average income (€51,678) that is approximately 1.3 times as high as that of towns/suburbs (€39,064), where the average income is lowest. There is considerably less inequality by degree of urbanisation in Denmark and France, for example.

Figure 5: Median income, by Member State and degree of urbanisation, 2021 (€)



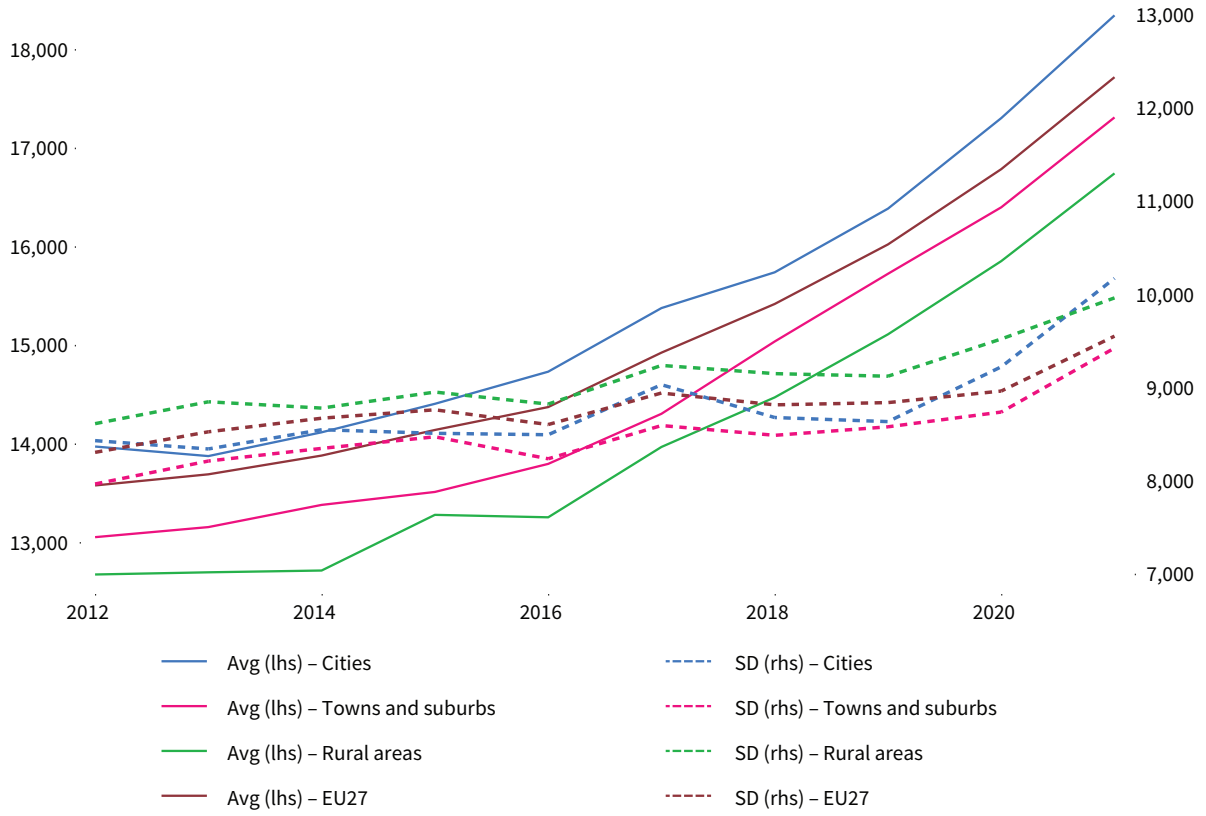
Notes: *Slovakia is not included, as no data were available for 2021. Member States are ordered by median income, from lowest to highest.*
Source: *EU-SILC*

Turning to the changes in inequality over time, Figure 6 shows that, from 2012 to 2021, median incomes increased across all levels of urbanisation. The data show that the gap, in absolute terms, between average median incomes in rural and urban areas increased from €1,298 to €1,602 over the course of the decade. There has also been a moderate upward trend in the standard deviation of incomes for each degree of urbanisation.[7] This increasing dispersion within groups, combined with an increase in the average for each group, shows that – in the context of convergence analysis – upward divergence is taking place. Therefore, EU citizens are becoming richer but income inequalities within each urbanisation level are widening, and the sharp upward trend in the dashed blue line shows that this has been especially true in cities since 2019. Indeed, up to this point, within-group inequality had been highest in rural areas, but cities have recently surpassed rural areas in terms of disparities across Europe.

An alternative metric for assessing the economic well-being of EU citizens across degrees of urbanisation is the AROPE rate. The AROPE rate is the share of the total population that is at risk of poverty, severe material deprivation or living in a household with a very low work intensity. It is a headline indicator under the European Pillar of Social Rights.

7 In all convergence graphs, standard deviations for cities, towns and suburbs, and rural areas are calculated across Member States for each degree of urbanisation; thus, they reflect disparities across, rather than within, Member States. Further analysis at micro level would be a fruitful avenue for future research in order to better understand evolving inequalities.

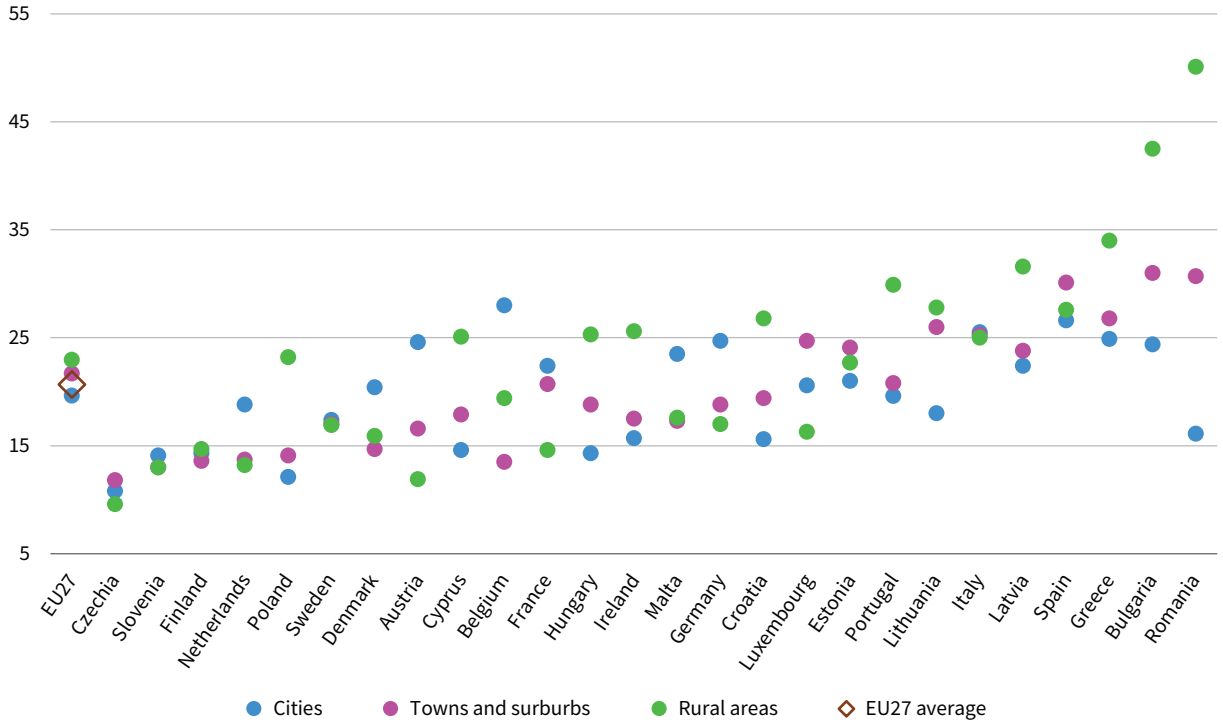
Figure 6: Convergence trends in median income rate, by degree of urbanisation, 2012–2021 (€)



Notes: *Data extend to 2021, but only evenly numbered years are labelled on the x axis. No data were available for Malta for rural areas for 2012–2013 and 2017–2020 or Slovakia for all urbanisation levels for 2021. Avg, average; lhs, left-hand side; rhs, right-hand side; SD, standard deviation.*
Source: *Authors' own calculations, based on EU-SILC*

Figure 7 shows that the average AROPE rate in the EU was 20.7% in 2021. On average across the EU, cities have the lowest AROPE rate (19.7%). Rural areas recorded the highest AROPE rate in 2021, with an average of 22.9%. As with average income per capita, towns and suburbs fall in between the urban and rural averages (with an average of 20.1%). However, these aggregate patterns do not hold true across all Member States. In most western Member States, including Austria, Belgium, France, Germany and the Netherlands, the AROPE rate is highest in cities. The Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) record their lowest AROPE rates in cities. For the three Member States with the highest recorded AROPE rates in 2021, the rate was highest in rural areas and lowest in cities. In general, states with the highest AROPE rates also had the widest gaps in AROPE rate between levels of urbanisation.

Figure 7: AROPE rate, by Member State and degree of urbanisation, 2021 (%)



Notes: *Slovakia is not included, as no data were available for 2021. Countries are ordered based on their average AROPE rate, from lowest to highest.*
Source: *EU-SILC*

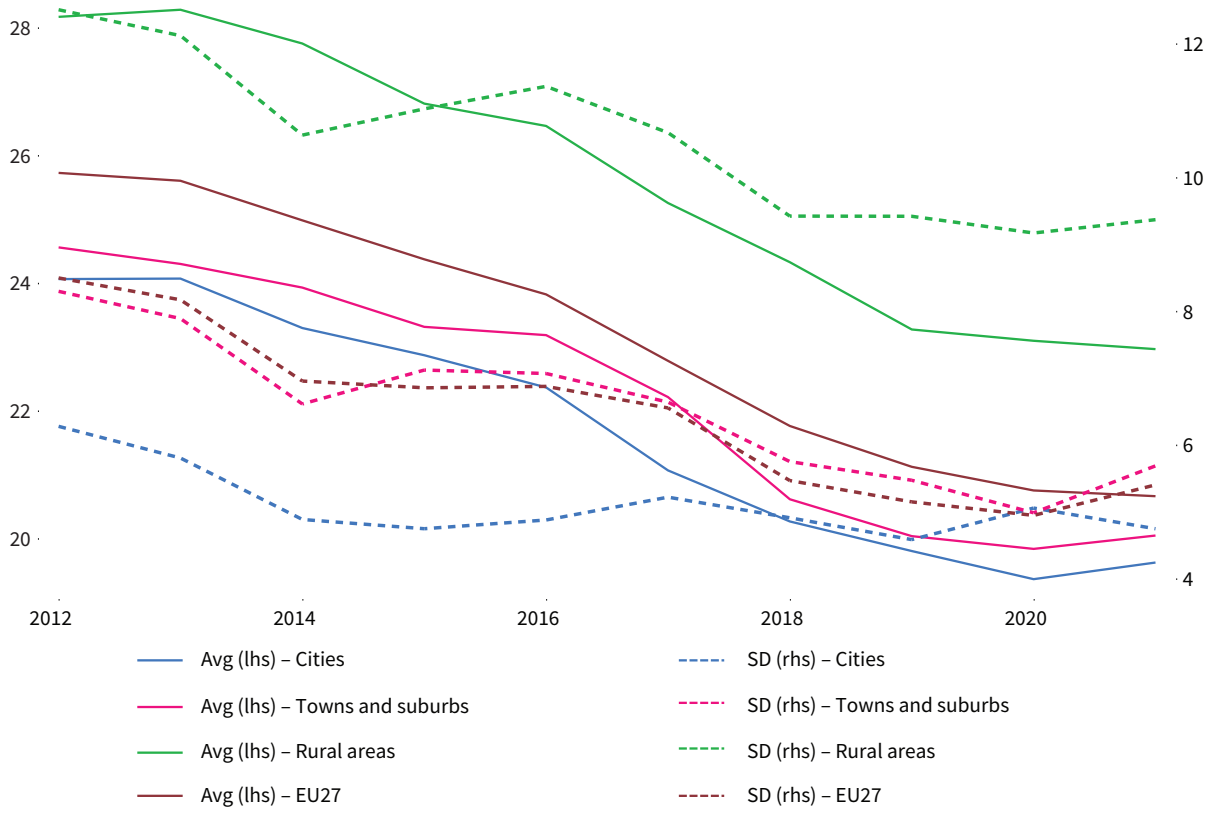
While disparities in average incomes increased from 2012 to 2021, Figure 8 shows that disparities between Member States in the share of the population that was at risk of poverty or social exclusion decreased over the same time. The average share of people at risk also decreased over this time, from 25.7% in 2012 to 20.7% in 2021. Thus, upward convergence occurred in the AROPE rate.

However, once again, what is true on average does not hold true universally, and some Member States saw the average AROPE rate increase between 2012 and 2021. Specifically, France, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Spain saw an increase in the share of their population that was at risk of poverty or social exclusion. However, some Member States, including Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Hungary and Poland, saw considerable declines in the AROPE rate, driving the upward convergence process.

Upward convergence also occurred within each level of urbanisation. Throughout the decade, cities were the best performers, with the lowest AROPE rate (21.7%) as well as the smallest disparities. Rural areas registered the highest average AROPE rate (25.6%) and the greatest disparities. Looking at the decreases in the AROPE rates and disparities across each degree of urbanisation, all were slower than the declines occurring at EU level, suggesting that upward convergence was happening faster across Member States than across the levels of urbanisation. Unlike the rural–urban gap in median income, the rural–urban gap in the AROPE rate did narrow between 2012 and 2021, from 4.1 to 3.3 percentage points.

Taken together, data on income per capita and the AROPE rate suggest that living conditions are, on average, best in cities. However, trends in income per capita suggest a widening of the gap between rural and urban areas from 2012 to 2021, but trends in the AROPE rate suggest that the gap narrowed. Nevertheless, of course, neither metric paints a complete picture of living conditions by degree of urbanisation. A better picture can be obtained by also considering EU residents' own perceptions of their abilities to cover the expenses they face in their lives, and of the assets they possess.

Figure 8: Convergence trends in AROPE rate, by degree of urbanisation, 2012–2021 (%)



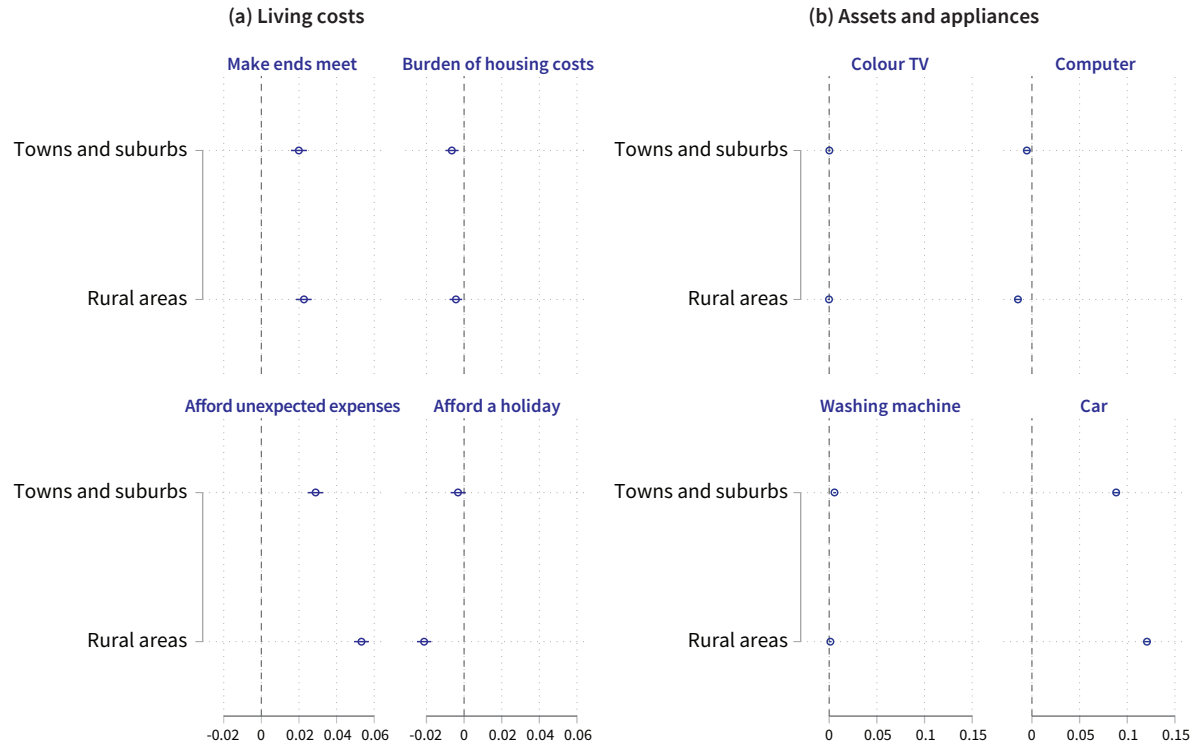
Notes: *No data were available for Slovakia for all urbanisation levels for 2021, Malta for rural areas for 2012–2013 and 2016–2020 or Slovenia for all urbanisation levels for 2016. Avg, average; lhs, left-hand side; rhs, right-hand side; SD, standard deviation.*
Source: *Authors' own calculations, based on EU-SILC*

According to analyses of microdata, residents of towns and suburbs and rural areas are better able to make ends meet even though residents of cities are wealthier on average. This is highlighted in Figure 9. This may be related to the fact that the burden of housing costs is lower for residents of less urbanised areas. People living in towns and suburbs and, even more so, in rural areas are significantly more likely to be able to afford unexpected but necessary expenses than those living in cities. On the other hand, rural residents are less likely than those living in cities to be able to afford to go on holiday, while there is no statistical difference between urban and suburban residents (including those living in towns) in this regard.

Patterns of asset ownership also vary by degree of urbanisation. While those living in rural areas, in towns and suburbs, and in cities appear to be equally likely to own a colour television, rural residents are less likely to own a computer, with the probability of owning a computer being highest in cities. Those living in towns and suburbs are more likely than those living in cities to own a washing machine, while there is no difference in the likelihood between those living in rural areas and those living in cities. Differences in asset and appliance ownership probably reflect different household compositions and different patterns of consumption, which may have wider implications. For example, the lower rate of computer ownership in rural households may be of concern to policymakers due to its implications for the digital divide (discussed later in the report) and because computer ownership in the household is associated with improved educational outcomes among children (Schmitt and Wadsworth, 2006). Poverty comes in many forms (Milbourne, 2004), and the importance of tackling digital poverty, defined as a lack of information and communications technology (ICT) (Barrantes, 2007), to ensure sustainable development, was brought to the fore by the COVID-19 crisis (UN, 2021).

The most striking difference in asset and appliance ownership by degree of urbanisation is in terms of car ownership. The results show that rural residents are much more likely than those in more urban areas to own a car. This probably reflects the fact that rural residents are more dependent on private means of transport. Data from the EU's Rural Observatory show

Figure 9: Capacity to meet living costs (a) and ownership of assets and appliances (b) as proxies of the rural–urban gap in living standards



Notes: *Graphs show, for each outcome, the marginal effects and confidence intervals associated with living in towns and suburbs, and rural areas, relative to the base category of cities. In total, eight regressions are plotted. Each regression includes controls for age, gender, educational attainment, income decile, and marital and activity statuses, and dummy variables for Member State and time. Models were estimated using a logit model with survey weights applied.*
Source: *Authors' own calculations, based on EU-SILC*

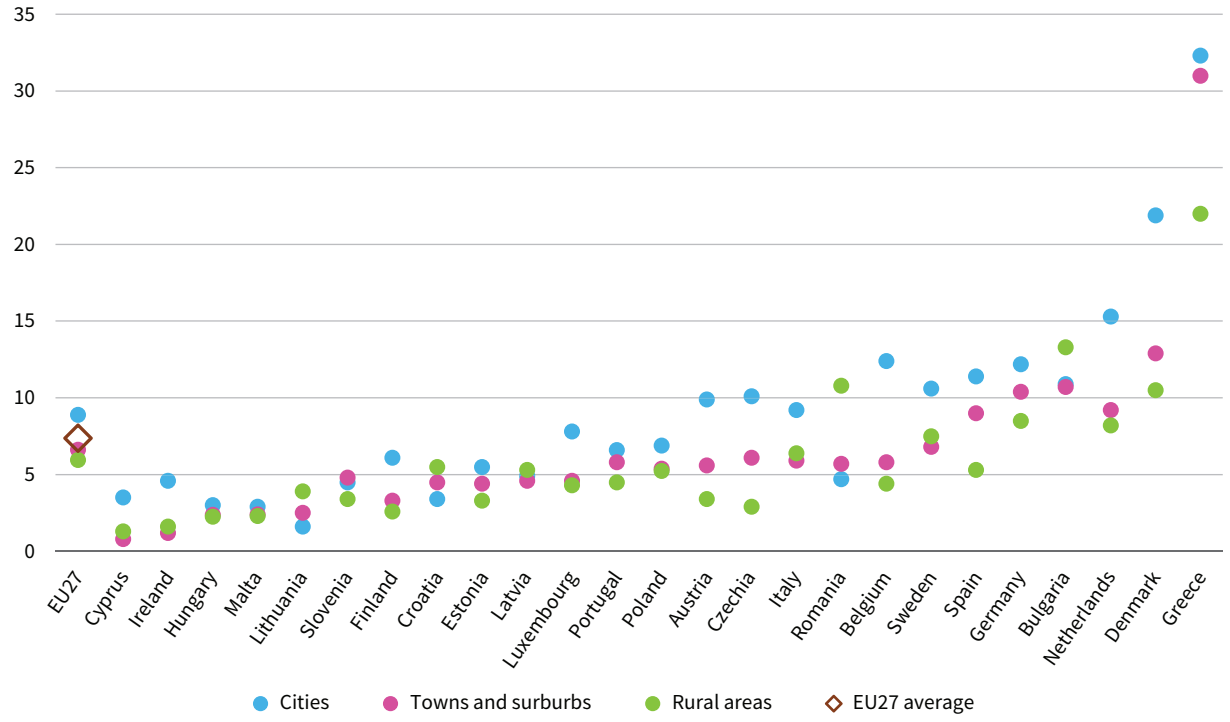
that the average distance to the nearest train station is much farther in rural areas (on average, 11.3 km, compared with an overall EU average of 6.3 km).[8] Several studies have shown that the decision to own a car is not always one that is made willingly, as cars can be necessary for certain segments of the population (Banister, 1994; Carroll et al, 2021). Dependency on private transport leaves rural households particularly vulnerable to increases in fuel prices.

Divide in housing costs and conditions

Given the important role that housing costs play in driving the overall cost of living, and the resulting impact on people's disposable income, it is worth investigating the rural–urban divide in housing costs more closely. The problems associated with housing unaffordability across Europe include housing insecurity and financial strain, and can lead to increased inequality and higher healthcare costs and damage the environment (Eurofound, 2023). An important metric in this regard is the housing cost overburden rate, which represents the share of the population that spends over 40% of their disposable income on housing.

8 Data can be viewed here.

Figure 10: Housing cost overburden rate, by Member State and degree of urbanisation, 2021 (%)



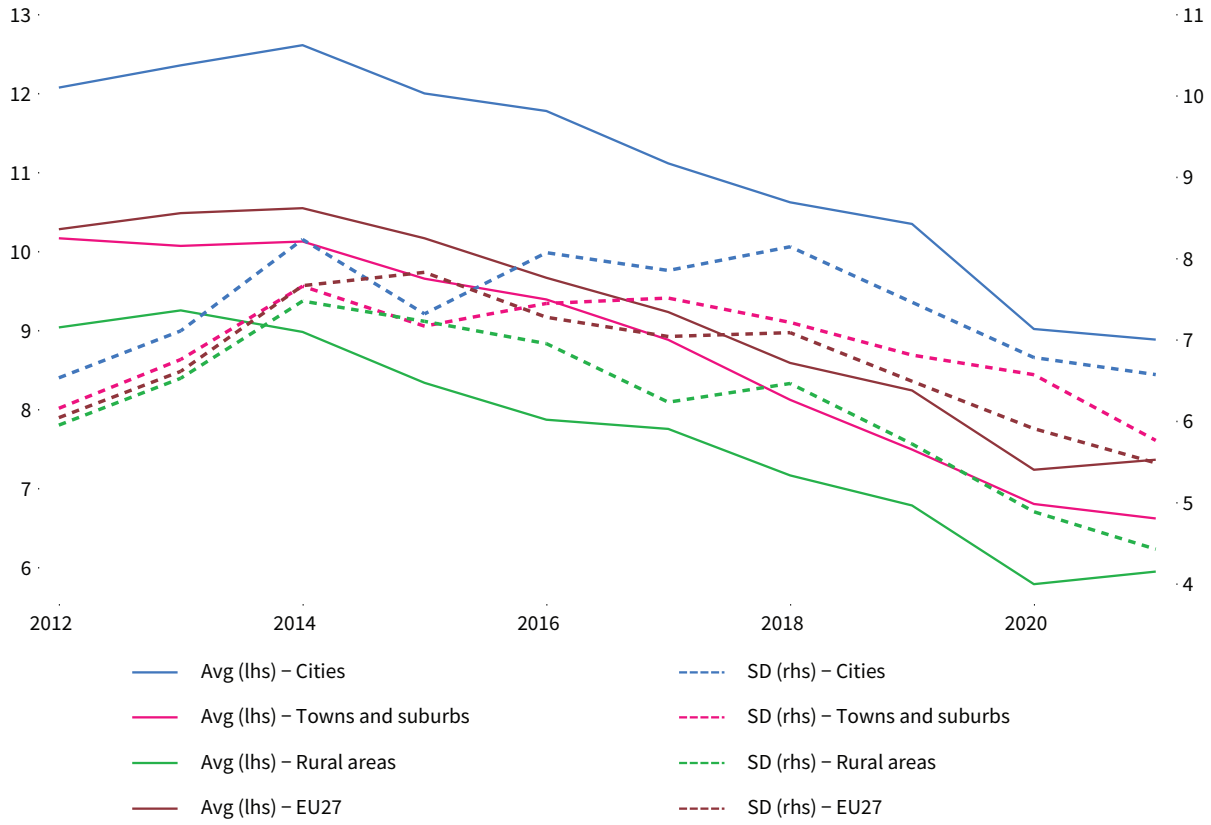
Notes: *France and Slovakia are not included, as no data were available for 2021. Member States are ordered according to their average housing cost overburden rate (i.e. the percentage of their population spending 40% or more of their disposable income on housing), from lowest to highest.*
Source: *EU-SILC*

Figure 10 shows that, as of 2021, 7.4% of Europeans were living in households spending more than 40% of their disposable income on housing. On average across the EU, those living in rural areas were least likely to be overburdened with housing costs (5.9%), with those living in cities most likely to be overburdened with such costs (8.9%) and towns and suburbs falling in between (7.4%). It appears that the housing cost overburden rate is highest in cities in western Member States (Luxembourg, Austria, Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands) and in those Member States where the rates are highest on average (the Netherlands, Denmark and Greece). Lithuania, Croatia and Romania are exceptions, as they recorded their lowest rates in cities and their highest in rural areas.

Overall, from 2012 to 2021, at EU level, upward convergence occurred in the housing cost overburden rate (Figure 11). The share of the population overburdened with housing costs decreased from 10.3% in 2012 to 7.4% in 2021. Disparities also decreased between 2012 and 2021 at EU level. However, upward convergence was not consistent across time and urbanisation levels. Indeed, over the past decade, while upward convergence occurred in rural and suburban areas, upward divergence occurred in cities. Rural areas maintained the lowest share of the population overburdened with housing costs, and maintained the lowest average level of disparity, declining faster than the EU average. As the degree of disparity increased in cities and decreased in suburban and rural areas, the gaps in the level of disparity between each urbanisation area expanded. The rural–urban gap in the housing cost overburden rate remained largely unchanged from 2012 to 2021.

Microdata summarising citizens' perceptions of their housing situations can help shed further light on the rural–urban divide in this important area. The results paint a rich picture of some of the housing challenges faced at different levels of urbanisation. Indeed, the analysis shows the value of digging deeper into the headline indicators of income and AROPE rates.

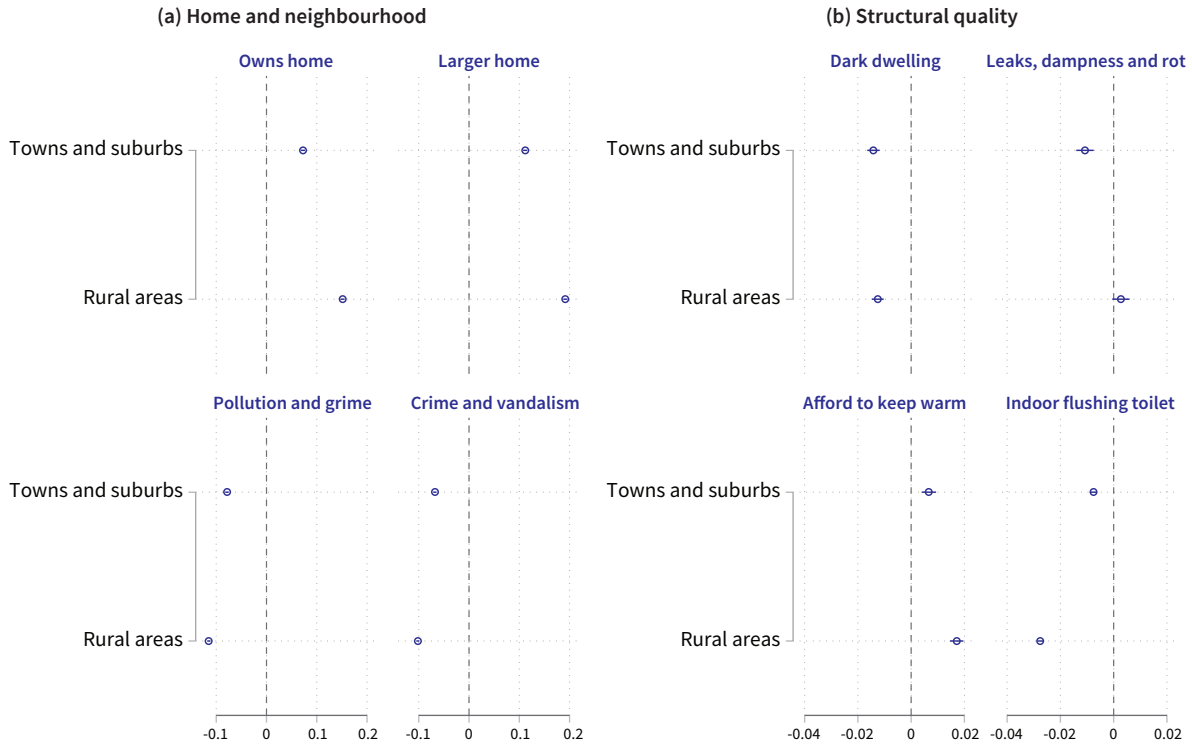
Figure 11: Convergence trends in housing cost overburden rate, 2012–2021 (%)



Notes: *France and Slovakia are excluded for all urbanisation levels, as no data were available for 2021. Avg, average; lhs, left-hand side; rhs, right-hand side; SD, standard deviation.*
Source: *EU-SILC*

Figure 12 shows that households living in rural areas are more likely than those in towns and suburbs, and much more likely than those in cities, to own the homes they live in. Rural homes are significantly more likely to be above average size (as measured by the number of rooms), and their residents are less likely to experience negative conditions such as environmental pollution and grime; they are also less likely to report incidents of crime, violence and vandalism in their area. However, the picture is more nuanced when it comes to the structural characteristics of homes. Residents of towns and suburbs and of rural areas are less likely to live in a dark dwelling than those living in cities. Residents of towns and suburbs are less likely to live in homes where leaks, dampness and rot are issues than residents of cities and rural areas. Inhabitants of cities are less likely than those in towns and suburbs and rural areas to be able to keep their homes warms. Households in towns and suburbs and rural areas are less likely to have certain utilities in their homes, including an indoor flushing toilet.

Figure 12: Aggregate home and neighbourhood characteristics (a) and structural quality (b) as proxies of the rural–urban gap in housing conditions



Notes: *Graphs show, for each outcome, the marginal effects and confidence intervals associated with living in towns and suburbs, and in rural areas, relative to the base category of cities. In total, eight regressions are plotted. Each regression includes controls for respondents' age, gender, educational attainment, household size, income decile, and marital and activity statuses, and dummy variables for Member State and time. Models were estimated using a logit model with survey weights applied.*
Source: *Authors' own calculations, based on EU-SILC*

Summary of findings

When the differences between rural and urban areas in the EU are considered in terms of income, poverty and living conditions, the data paint a somewhat varied picture (Table 2). According to two metrics, urban areas perform better, while the other suggests that life may be better in rural areas.

While income rates and the share of the population at risk of poverty or social exclusion are higher in more urban areas, the rural–urban gap has widened in terms of income but narrowed in terms of the AROPE rate. These diverging trends may in part reflect other factors that drive living conditions, including the important issue of housing. The housing cost overburden rate has been consistently higher in cities.

Table 2: Summarising rural–urban gaps in income, poverty and living conditions

Indicator	Direction of the gap	Change in the gap between rural and urban areas
Median income	Incomes are higher in urban areas	Gap has widened
AROPE rate	AROPE rate is lower in urban areas	Gap has narrowed
Housing cost overburden rate	Overburden rate is lower in rural areas	Unchanged

3 Divide in employment and opportunities

While the previous chapter focused on the rural–urban divides in terms of income and living conditions, this one focuses on important factors related to these gaps. Specifically, it considers rural–urban differences in employment, human capital, and internet access and digital skills.

Several studies have documented a rural–urban divide in employment. The European Commission's recent cohesion report (European Commission, 2022) states that, since the 2007–2008 global financial crisis, employment rates have been growing, but that regional disparities are larger now than they were before the crisis. Others have found that the relationship between the severity of unemployment and degree of urbanisation varies by country. Shucksmith et al (2009) find that in richer Member States unemployment levels are higher in urban areas than rural areas. However, the opposite was true for countries with lower per capita GDP, including Bulgaria, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia, where rural respondents face higher rates of unemployment. This was confirmed by a more recent study by Kah et al (2020), who find that, on average, unemployment is slightly higher in urban areas than in rural areas across the EU, but that this varies significantly across Member States. Across the rural–urban spectrum, there are also differences in the sectoral concentration of employment opportunities. While the agriculture, forestry and fishery sector provides 5% of jobs across the entire EU, in rural regions, the proportion is notably higher, at 12% (European Commission, 2021b). In Member States with lower levels of GDP per capita, the agriculture, forestry and fishery sector plays an even more important role, accounting for more than 30% of employment in the rural regions of Bulgaria and Romania. However, the share of employment in these activities in rural areas has been decreasing over time: from 2000 to 2018, the share of employment in the agriculture, forest and fishery sector decreased from 21% to 12% in rural areas, with the share of employment in the service sector increasing in tandem (European Commission, 2021b).

When considering employment opportunities, of particular concern in Europe are opportunity gaps faced by young people. There is evidence to suggest that youth unemployment may be more common in rural areas. For example, while Kah et al (2020) find that integrating young people into the labour market is a challenge across the EU regardless of urbanisation level, they note that it is a particular challenge in rural areas, as younger people are likely to migrate to places with more opportunities. This is confirmed by Simões et al (2022), who find that in 2019 the percentage of young people not in employment, education or training (NEET) in the EU's rural areas (10.7%) was higher than in both suburbs (10.40%) and cities (9.40%).

Differences in employment rates may be related to different levels of human capital accumulation, in particular educational attainment. According to Eurostat data, those of working age in towns and suburbs were most likely to have not reached a level of education beyond lower secondary, followed by those in rural areas, with those in cities being least likely to have stopped their education at this level (Eurostat, 2022b). However, when looking at patterns at Member State level, the only countries that replicate the EU average trend are Czechia, France and Luxembourg. In 20 Member States, rural areas had the highest share of the working age population with low educational attainment, followed by towns and suburbs; inhabitants of cities were again least likely to have stopped their education at lower secondary level. Other evidence shows that grades in science in 2015 and reading in 2018 were better in cities than rural areas in all EU Member States except for Belgium, where rural areas outperformed urban areas in science (European Commission, 2022). Furthermore, Eurofound (2019) highlighted a tertiary education gap of almost 10 percentage points between rural and urban dwellers.

Gaps in broadband access and skills may exacerbate gaps in economic opportunities. While basic broadband access is almost universal across the EU, the same cannot be said about high-speed internet connections (European Commission, 2022). Kah et al (2020) identify limited access to high-speed broadband as a barrier to the widespread development of digital skills and further technological advancements in rural areas. In the eighth cohesion report, the European Commission highlights the stark digital divide between areas within Member States including France, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Spain, where high or very high internet connection speeds are found in cities but not in other areas (European Commission, 2022). This lack of high-speed broadband access is reflected in a lack of basic digital skills: in 2019, the share of the population with basic digital skills was 14% lower for rural dwellers than for urban dwellers (European Commission, undated-c).

To capture the diverse ways in which inhabitants of areas at different levels of urbanisation may have access to employment opportunities, as well as different levels of human capital, several indicators are used. These indicators are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3: Indicators used to assess the rural–urban divide in employment and opportunity

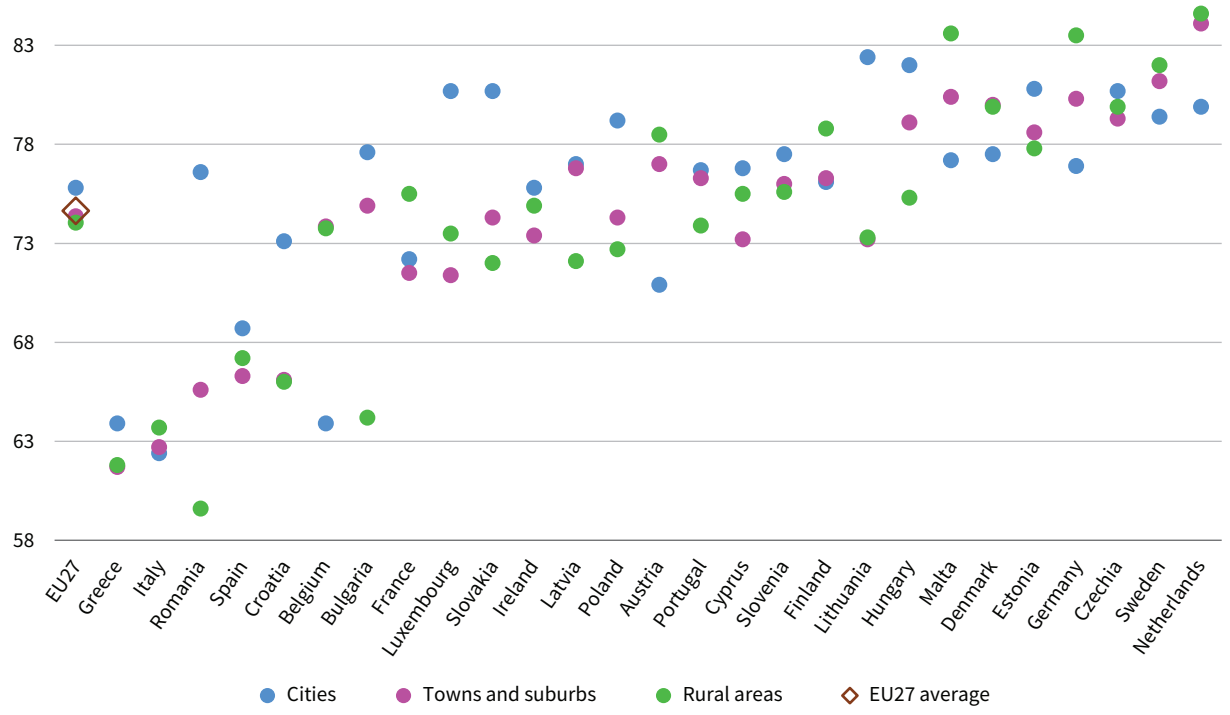
Indicator	Description
Employment rate	Total employment in population aged 20–64 years (%)
NEET rate	Share of young people (aged 15–29 years) who are NEET (%)
Tertiary education	Share of population aged 25–34 years who have completed tertiary education (%)
Digital skills	Share of individuals with a basic or higher level of overall digital skills (%)

Divide in employment

The employment rate for each Member State, disaggregated by level of urbanisation, is an important indicator of where economic opportunities are concentrated or lacking.

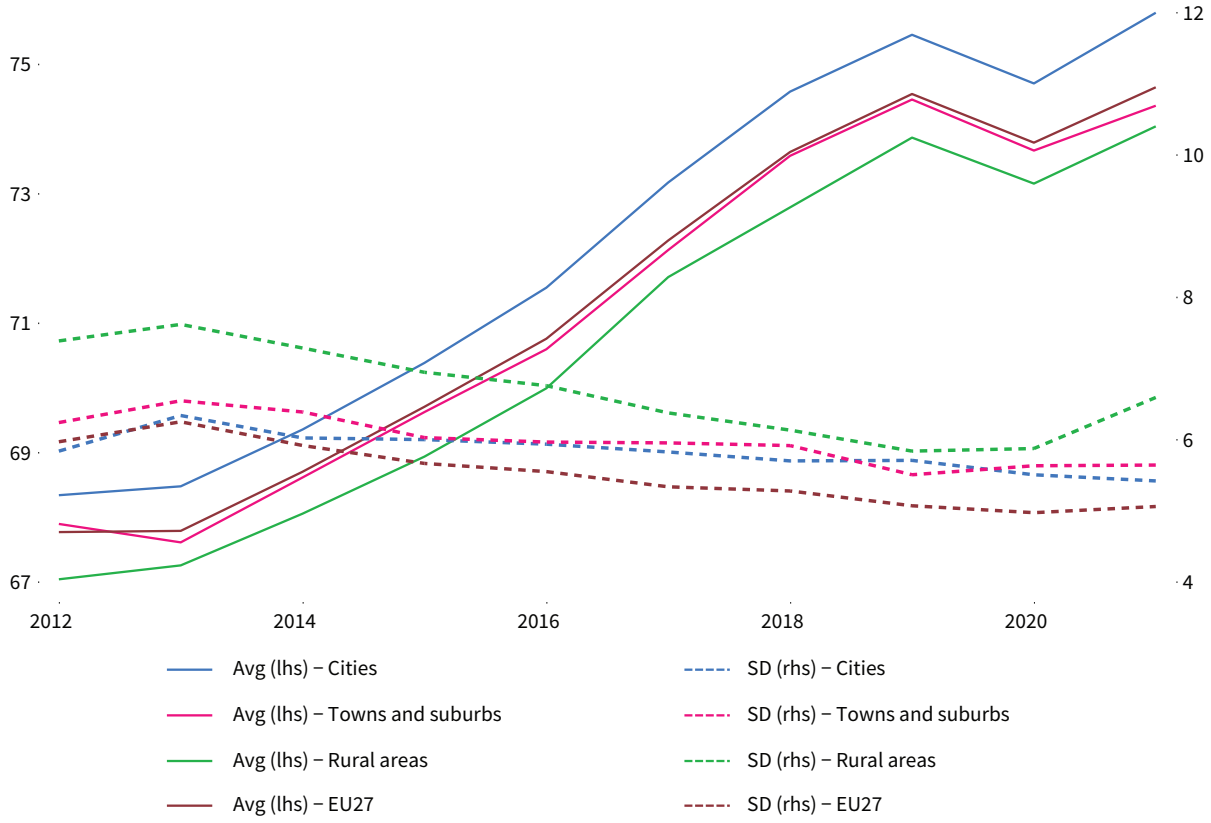
Figure 13 illustrates that, in 2021, 74.6% of the European population aged 20–64 years old was employed. The data also show that, in 2021, average employment rates in the EU were similar across degrees of urbanisation: cities have the highest employment rate (75.8%), followed by towns and suburbs (74.4%) and rural areas (74%). At Member State level, most record their highest employment rates in cities. However, there are several exceptions to this general trend, and, of the five Member States with the highest average employment rates in the EU, three (Germany, Sweden and the Netherlands) record their highest rates in rural areas. Some countries have a significantly greater number of employment opportunities in cities than in rural areas. The widest gaps are found in Romania and Bulgaria, at 17 percentage points and 13.4 percentage points, respectively.

Figure 13: Employment rate among 20- to 64-year-olds, by Member State and degree of urbanisation, 2021 (%)



Notes: *Member States are ordered by average employment rate, from lowest to highest.*
Source: *EU-SILC*

Figure 14: Convergence in employment rate, by degree of urbanisation, 2012–2021 (%)



Notes: *Data extend to 2021, but only evenly numbered years are labelled on the x axis. Avg, average; lhs, left-hand side; rhs, right-hand side; SD, standard deviation.*
Source: *EU-LFS*

Figure 14 shows that, from 2012 to 2021, the average employment rate increased in every Member State (from an average of 67.8% in 2012 to 74.6% in 2021) and the disparities between Member States fell. This resulted in strict upward convergence within the EU. Except for a temporary dip in the employment rate from 2019 to 2020, the upward trajectory in the employment rate was consistent.

The convergence trends across each degree of urbanisation followed a similar trend to the European average. While urban and suburban areas experienced strict upward convergence, the upward convergence process was weak in rural areas, as rural Romania experienced a decline in its average employment rate (-10.6%). The data show a slight increase in disparities at all levels of urbanisation from 2012 to 2013, followed by consistent decreases in inequality from 2013 until 2019, indicating overall upward convergence in employment. In 2019, the upward convergence process was interrupted across all levels of urbanisation. However, this phenomenon appears to have been temporary in cities as well as in towns and suburbs, as after 2020 employment rates began to grow again in these areas and inequalities continued to fall in cities and towns and suburbs. However, while rural areas experienced an employment rebound after 2020, the disparities between the rural areas of Europe began increasing in 2020. Another trend to highlight is that, over time, there was a slight increase in the employment gap between cities and rural areas (from 1.3 to 1.8 percentage points between 2012 and 2021), and a more prominent increase in the employment gap between cities and suburbs and towns (from 0.4 to 1.4 percentage points between 2012 and 2021).

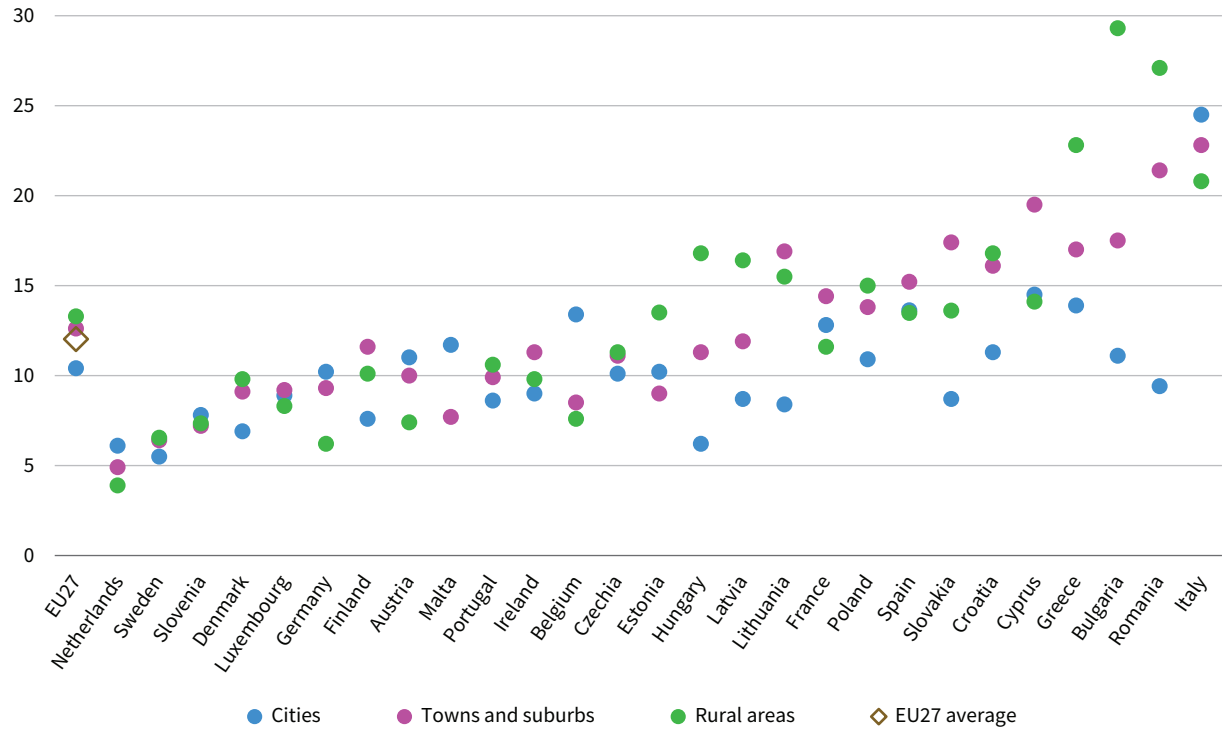
The employment rate is just one aggregate indicator of opportunity gaps. Data from Eurostat show differences in labour market conditions between rural and urban inhabitants across several dimensions. For example, the gender gap in employment is higher in rural areas than in urban areas. The activity rate is generally higher in urban areas, while there is a higher proportion of self-employed individuals in rural areas. Furthermore, EU-LFS data show that rural residents are considerably more likely to be employed in the agriculture, forestry and fishery sector than urban residents. In contrast, those living in cities are significantly more likely to be classified as being in professional occupations. All these factors have the potential to influence people's incomes and economic security throughout their lifetimes.

When it comes to employment and opportunities, one group that is a particularly high priority in EU policy is young people. Indeed, since 2010, the issue of youth unemployment and how to engage young people in the labour market has been at the centre of the EU policy agenda (Eurofound, 2016). In this context, the term NEET has been used to highlight the challenges faced by young people aged 15–29 who are not in employment, education or training. The NEET rate refers to the percentage of young people in this situation.

In Europe, according to data for 2021, 12% of the population aged 15–29 years is NEET. As illustrated in Figure 15, and previously highlighted by Eurofound (see, for example, Eurofound, 2016, 2021), there is substantial heterogeneity between Member States in the NEET rate. Considering the NEET rate by degree of urbanisation across the EU, the average is lowest in cities (10.4%) and highest in rural areas (13.3%). Towns and suburbs fall in between, with an average rate of 12.6%. While most Member States recorded their highest NEET rate in rural areas, in many Member States the NEET rate was lowest in rural areas, specifically in Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Spain. Across Member States and levels of urbanisation, the Netherlands is the best performer on average (with an overall NEET rate of 5.5%), in towns and suburbs (4.9%) and in rural areas (3.9%). The best performer among cities is Sweden, with a rate of 5.5%. Italy has the highest NEET rate on average across Europe and for both cities (24.5%) and towns and suburbs (22.8%). Bulgaria records the highest NEET rate for rural areas (29.3%).

When it comes to the rural–urban gap and the NEET rate, eastern Member States, in particular Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania, register a wide gap between their relatively low NEET rates in cities and their high rates in rural areas.

Figure 15: NEET rate, by Member State and degree of urbanisation, 2021 (%)



Notes: *No data are available for Malta for rural areas for 2021. Member States are ordered by average NEET rate, from lowest to highest.*
Source: *EU-LFS*

Figure 16: Convergence in NEET rate, by degree of urbanisation, 2012–2021 (%)

Notes: *Data extend to 2021, but only evenly numbered years are labelled on the x axis. No data are available for Malta for rural areas for 2017–2021. Avg, average; lhs, left-hand side; rhs, right-hand side; SD, standard deviation.*
Source: *EU-LFS*

Figure 16 shows that the prospects for young people have been improving on average over the last decade. In 2012, 15.4% of young EU citizens were NEET, while the rate had dropped to 12% by 2021. Over this period, disparities also reduced between Member States, implying that upward convergence occurred. However, as the NEET rate increased in both Austria and Romania, the upward convergence is characterised as weak. Also noteworthy is the fact that the improvements did not take place consistently over the period. Following the 2007–2008 financial crisis, the NEET rate was on the rise, as were the disparities between Member States. However, the period from 2013 to 2019 was characterised by upward convergence because the NEET rate and disparities between Member States decreased. This progress was interrupted by the COVID-19 outbreak, which led to an increase in both the NEET rate and disparities between Member States. While the NEET rate fell again in 2021, inequality continued to increase on average across Europe, as well as in towns and suburbs and in rural areas. Across the EU's urban areas, there was a slight increase in disparity level from 2019 to 2020, but a decrease from 2020 to 2021.

Upward convergence also took place from 2012 to 2021 across each level of urbanisation. Indeed, the trends were similar to the EU average, with divergence taking place from 2012 to 2013 and the period from 2013 to 2019 being characterised by upward convergence. At the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, upward convergence was interrupted across all urbanisation levels. From 2020 onwards, upward convergence resumed only in cities, while suburban and rural areas continued to experience divergence as NEET rates fell but inequality increased. Throughout the period of analysis, cities had the lowest NEET rate and the lowest disparity level, which declined faster than the EU average. Rural areas had the highest NEET rate and disparity level, which declined more slowly than the European average. The experience in towns and suburbs was in between those of rural and urban areas, in terms of both the NEET rate and the disparity level.

Overall, the gaps in the NEET rates by degree of urbanisation shrank from 2012 to 2021. The rural–urban gap in the NEET rate shrank modestly over the period (from 3.1 to 2.9 percentage points), and the gap between each type of area's disparity level also decreased. In addition, most Member States saw the rural–urban gap in the NEET rate fall, with significant progress being made in Cyprus, Ireland and Spain.

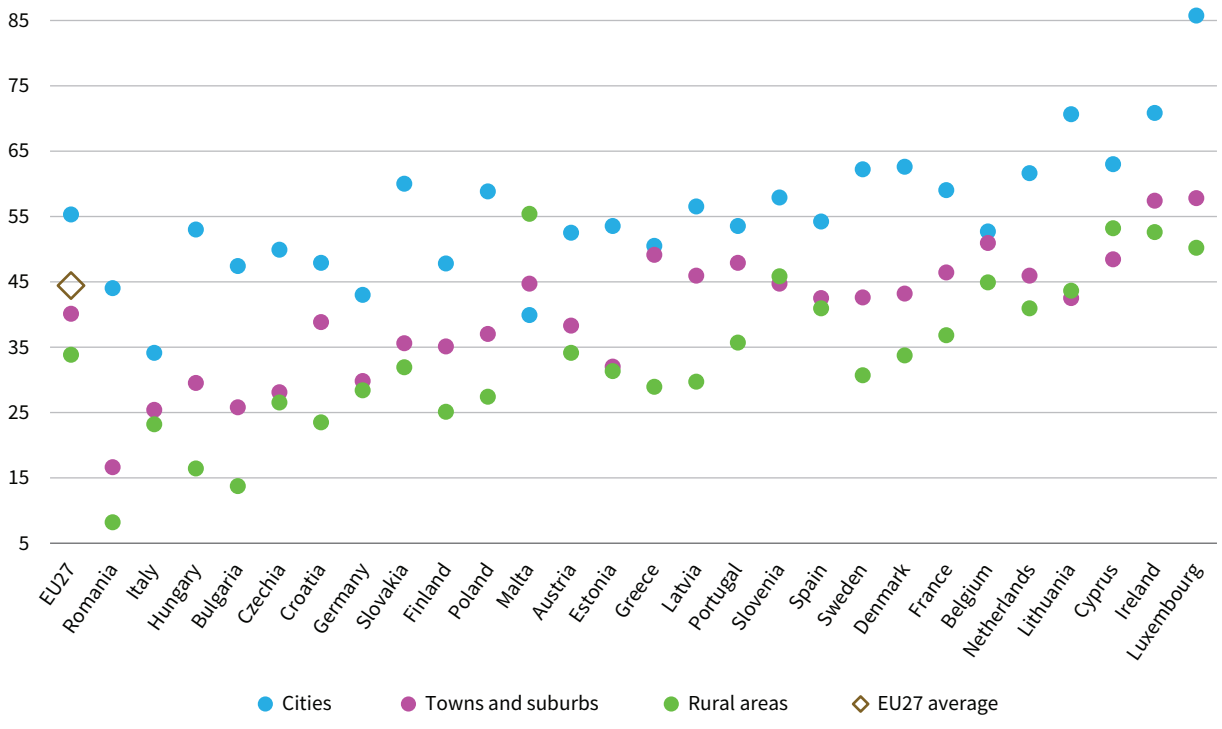
However, Italy and Portugal are exceptions, as both Member States saw the rural–urban gap in the NEET rate increase over the period. In contrast to the general decline in the rural–urban gap in the NEET rate, the gap between the rates for suburbs and towns and cities increased over this period (from 1.8 to 2.2 percentage points).

Divide in human capital

Related to rural–urban gaps in employment are gaps in educational attainment, which may determine people's pathways to subsequent employment opportunities. An important metric of human capital is the rate of attainment of tertiary education.

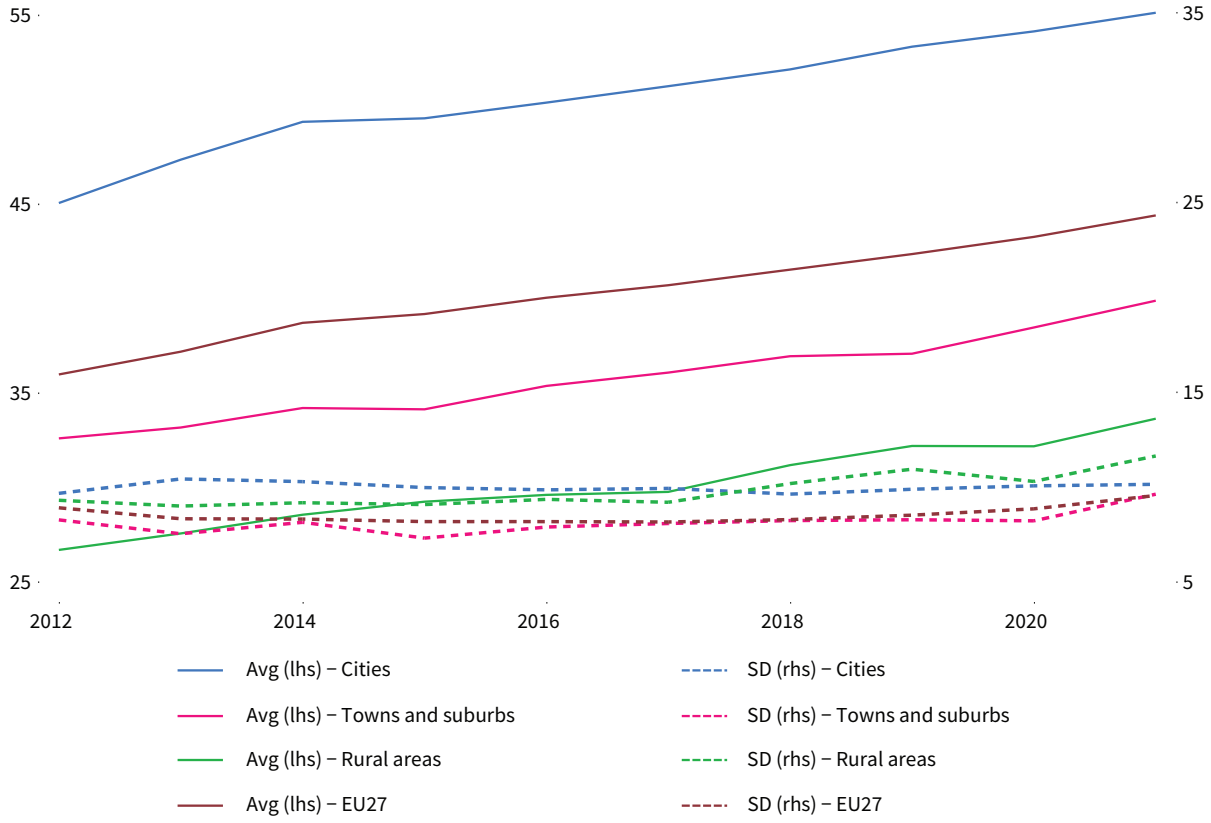
Rates of attainment of higher education, the presence of higher education institutions and the quality of research output have been linked to economic growth, reductions in poverty and resilience to changing economic climates (Chatterji, 1998; Enders et al, 2011; Gardiner and Hajek, 2023). As highlighted by Figure 17, there are large differences in the EU both between and within Member States in tertiary educational attainment rates. Looking at disparities between areas at different degrees of urbanisation, a clear pattern emerges across Member States, whereby the attainment of tertiary education is more prevalent among those living in cities (55.3%) than inhabitants of rural areas (33.8%). As with many statistics presented in this report, towns and suburbs fall in between the two (40.1%). There are exceptions to this trend; for example, in Malta, the rate of attainment of tertiary education is highest in rural areas (55.4%) and lowest in cities (39.9%). In Cyprus and Lithuania, the rate is lowest among those living in towns and suburbs (48.4% and 42.5%, respectively). In general, across Member States, the gaps between urbanisation levels are wide; this is true not only in Member States where the average tertiary educational attainment rate is low (for example, Hungary and Romania), but also in Member States that have average rates above the EU average (e.g. Luxembourg and Sweden). The smallest rural–urban gaps are found in Belgium and Cyprus.

Figure 17: Tertiary educational attainment, by Member State and degree of urbanisation, 2021 (%)



Notes: *Member States are ordered based on their average tertiary educational attainment rate, expressed as a percentage of the population aged 25–34, from lowest to highest.*
Source: *EU-LFS*

Figure 18: Convergence in tertiary educational attainment, by degree of urbanisation, 2012–2021 (%)



Notes: *Data extend to 2021, but only evenly numbered years are labelled on the x axis. Avg, average; lhs, left-hand side; rhs, right-hand side; SD, standard deviation.*
Source: *EU-LFS*

Figure 18 illustrates that, at EU level, upward divergence occurred in tertiary educational attainment rates from 2012 to 2021, as the average attainment rate and disparities between Member States increased over the period. However, divergence did not occur throughout the period; indeed, disparities between Member States decreased from 2012 to 2017, but subsequently increased from 2017 to 2021 due to the uneven pace of progress between Member States. At the level of individual Member States, the strongest increases in tertiary educational attainment were recorded in Austria, Croatia, Malta and Portugal – Member States that were among the worst performers in 2012. In contrast, most of the best performers in 2012 improved at a pace that was slower than the EU average.

Upward divergence also occurred across each level of urbanisation. Throughout the decade of analysis, the percentage of people aged 25–34 with tertiary education was highest, and increasing, in cities. The upward trend in tertiary educational attainment in urban areas was driven by a strong increase in Austria and Poland. At the same time, the level of disparities within cities also decreased, albeit moderately and at a pace that was below the EU average. The average rate of tertiary educational attainment was lowest in rural areas in both 2012 and 2021; however, it did increase over the course of the decade at a rate above the EU average. The increase in rural areas was driven by progress in Austria, Poland and Slovenia. Alongside the increase in average educational attainment, there was an increase in disparities across rural areas. Indeed, in 2018, the degree of disparity between rural areas surpassed that of urban areas, which had up until that point seen the largest degree of disparity. The upward trajectory of educational attainment was also seen in suburbs and towns. The degree of disparity between suburban areas of Member States initially decreased and then subsequently increased, but towns and suburbs had, throughout the period, the lowest levels of disparity. Considering the gap across degrees of urbanisation, the rural–urban gap increased over the course of the decade from 18.4 percentage points in 2012 to 21.5 percentage points in 2021. The gap between towns and suburbs and rural areas also increased moderately, from 5.9 to 6.2 percentage points. In most Member States, the differences between the educational attainment rates in the worst- and best-performing areas also increased. However, in Cyprus, Lithuania and Spain the gaps between their best- and worst-performing areas narrowed.

Digital divide

The digital divide refers to the gap in the degree to which people can avail themselves of ICT and have the skills to apply it. According to van Dijk (2008), there are two main reasons why governments may want to reduce the digital divide: the first is to promote opportunities for innovation and economic development, and the second is to foster social inclusion. Robinson et al (2015) argue that in the 21st century digital inequality deserves a place alongside more traditional forms of inequality that concern policymakers. The digital divide may be caused or exacerbated by inequalities already discussed in this report, including in income rates and access to tertiary education. The digital divide may occur across several dimensions. This report considers the divide by degree of urbanisation, but, as Reddick et al (2020) highlight, intracity digital divides are also particularly evident in low-income areas.

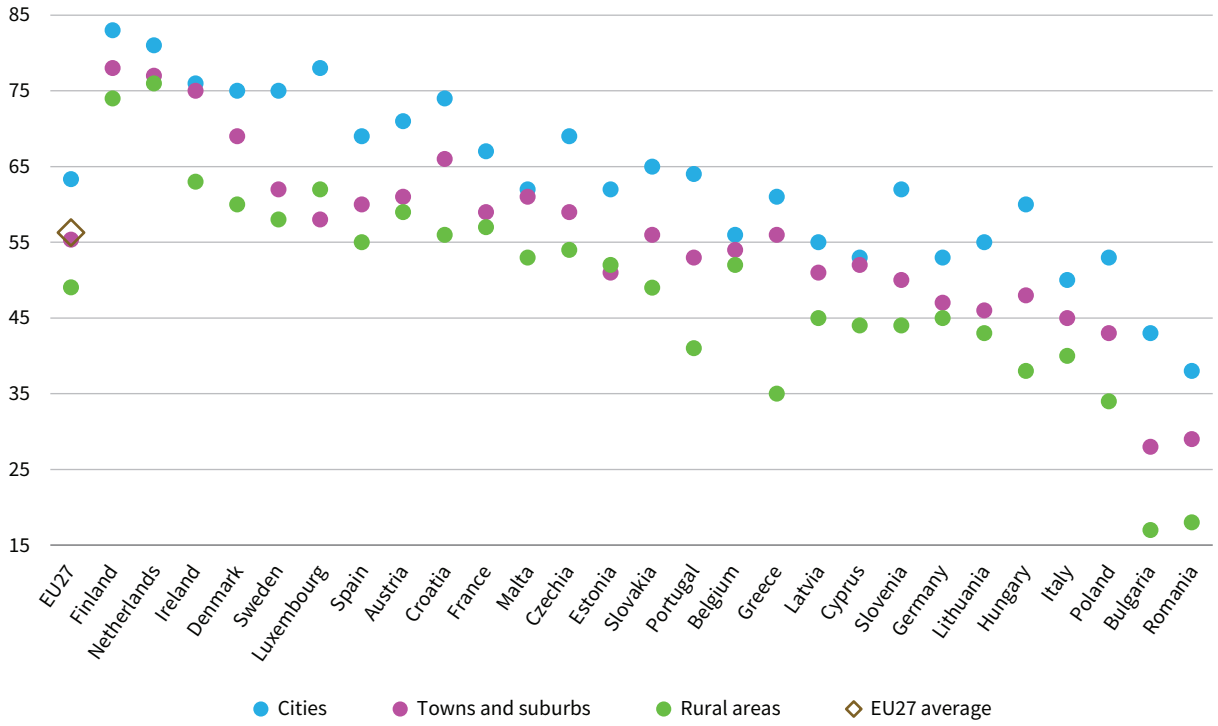
Across Europe, the percentage of households connected to the internet is high. According to data for 2021, 92% of European households are connected to the internet. However, access to the internet is a very broad metric of connectivity. The speed and quality of internet connections have a large bearing on how much value households and businesses can get from their internet connection, as do the digital skills of the users. Data from the EU's Rural Observatory demonstrate large gaps in internet speed, for both fixed and mobile networks, between rural and urban areas (Rural Observatory, undated). For example, data for 2022 show that in France, where average fixed network broadband speeds were highest, the average broadband speed for fixed networks in urban areas was 219.07 Mb/s. In contrast, in rural areas, the average speed was little more than half this, at 128.6 Mb/s. A gap of a similar magnitude was recorded in Spain. What is perhaps of most concern is that this gap appears to be widening over time. In each Member State except for Hungary, the gap in fixed network broadband speed between rural and urban areas increased from 2019 to 2022, in some cases more than doubling. A similar pattern of increasing disparities emerges when broadband speed across mobile networks is considered.

Beyond internet access and connection speeds, relevant knowledge and skills are vital to reap the benefits of the digital transition. Therefore, any potential gaps in digital literacy along the rural–urban spectrum could have long-term implications for economic growth and cohesion. These can be investigated by exploring, by level of urbanisation, the share of the population aged 16–74 with at least basic digital skills.

Figure 19 shows that, on average across the EU in 2021, 56% of individuals had at least basic digital skills. The rate was above average in cities, at 63%. In every Member State, the largest share of the population with at least basic digital skills was found in cities. In Finland, the best-performing Member State in this regard, 83% of the population of cities had at least basic digital skills. In Romania, where these skills were least prevalent, 38% of the population of cities had at least basic digital skills. In rural areas, 49% of EU citizens have at least basic digital skills. The share of the rural population with at least basic digital skills ranges from 76% in the Netherlands to 17% in Bulgaria. Again, the average rate in towns and suburbs (55%) falls between those of rural and urban areas. The widest rural–urban gaps in digital literacy are found in Bulgaria and Greece, at 26 percentage points. In general, eastern Member States, specifically Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Romania, have the largest rural–urban gaps in digital skills. The smallest gaps are found in Belgium and the Netherlands.

Data on the share of EU citizens with basic digital skills are available for 2015, 2016, 2017, 2019 and 2021, but, due to a major methodological change in 2021 in the way the indicator is calculated, it is not possible to run a convergence analysis on the data for this period. Looking at the changes by degree of urbanisation between 2015 and 2019 (based on the old methodology), on average, the gap in digital literacy between urban and rural populations decreased slightly, from 14.14 to 13.8 percentage points. However, caution should be applied when interpreting these statistics due to breaks in the data series. Instead, the focus should be on monitoring future trends across levels of urbanisation using the updated methodology.

Figure 19: Population with at least basic digital skills, by Member State and degree of urbanisation, 2021 (%)



Notes: *Member States are ordered from the highest level of digital skills to the lowest.*
Source: *European Social Survey Community survey on ICT usage in households and by individuals*

Summary of findings

Compared with the findings of the previous chapter, which painted a varied picture of rural–urban gaps in income and living conditions, a more consistent rural–urban gap emerges when it comes to employment and opportunities – one that favours urban residents (Table 4). Across each metric considered, urban areas performed better on average across the EU.

However, heterogeneities remain within Member States. According to some headline metrics, such as the employment rate and the NEET rate, the rural–urban gap that exists at EU level does not hold for several individual Member States. On the other hand, rural–urban gaps at EU level in tertiary educational attainment and digital skills are present in all or most Member States. When it comes to changes in these gaps over time, the average EU trend shows that the rural–urban gap in the NEET rate has narrowed. On the other hand, gaps in employment and tertiary educational attainment rates have widened.

Table 4: Summarising rural–urban gaps in employment and opportunities, 2012–2021

Indicator	Direction of the gap	Change in the gap over the past decade
Employment rate	Employment rate is higher in urban areas	Gap widened
NEET rate	NEET rate is lower in urban areas	Gap narrowed
Tertiary education	Tertiary educational attainment levels are higher in urban areas	Gap widened
Digital skills	Digital skills are higher in urban areas	Data not available

Note: *The methodology for measuring the share of the population with at least basic digital skills (the bottom row of the table) changed in 2021 and, therefore, a temporal analysis cannot be conducted.*

4 Cultural values and the recognition gap between rural and urban areas

The rural–urban divide is a complex issue with profound implications for the social cohesion and stability of European societies (European Committee of the Regions, 2022). In the previous chapters, significant differences in economic opportunities and social conditions between rural and urban areas have been documented. However, the divide is seen not only in material resources but also in recognition, status and cultural values (Lamont, 2018).

Europe is a continent characterised by its diverse cultural landscape, encompassing a wide range of traditions, customs and values. Within this mosaic, notable differences can be observed between rural and urban areas, each with its distinct set of cultural values and practices. Understanding these differences is crucial for comprehending the social dynamics and identities that shape the lives of individuals in different settings across Europe. Cultural differences can be understood in terms of cosmopolitanism versus nationalism, and 'somewheres' versus 'anywheres' (Goodhart, 2017).

Urban areas tend to be more cosmopolitan, meaning that they are open to diversity, multiculturalism and global influences. Urban dwellers are more likely to embrace liberal and progressive values, such as individualism, secularism, human rights and environmentalism. They tend to have higher levels of education, income and mobility, which enable them to interact with people from different backgrounds and cultures. They may also be more exposed to international media, arts and trends, which shape their cosmopolitan outlook. In contrast, rural areas tend to be more nationalist, meaning that they prioritise local and national identity, tradition and sovereignty. Rural dwellers are more likely to embrace conservative and traditional values, such as family, religion, patriotism and the rural lifestyle. They may also have lower levels of education, income and mobility, which limit their exposure to diversity and cosmopolitanism (Hansen, 2006).

However, cultural differences among rural and urban areas can also be understood in terms of the 'somewheres' versus 'anywheres' approach, as coined by David Goodhart (2017). The 'somewheres' are people who have strong attachments to their local and national communities, values and identities. They tend to prioritise stability, continuity and familiarity over change, diversity and cosmopolitanism. They may feel left behind by the globalising and modernising forces of the economy, politics and culture, which they perceive as threats to their way of life. They may also resent the 'anywheres', who are people who have cosmopolitan and mobile lifestyles, careers and values. The 'anywheres' tend to prioritise autonomy, diversity and innovation over tradition, stability and familiarity. They may feel disconnected from their local and national communities, which they see as parochial and backward. They may also underestimate the cultural and social capital of the 'somewheres', who may have different but valuable forms of knowledge, skills and networks.

Moreover, the cultural differences between rural and urban areas can also be explained by the concept of 'urban imperialism' (Hansen, 2006). This refers to the dominance and influence of urban culture, values and institutions over rural areas. Urban imperialism can be seen in the way that urban areas tend to set the standards and norms of culture, the media, education and politics, which are then diffused to rural areas. This can lead to the homogenisation and marginalisation of rural cultures and identities, as they are seen as inferior or outdated compared with urban culture and identities. Urban imperialism can also exacerbate the rural–urban divide, as rural areas may feel excluded or oppressed by urban hegemony.

Recognition gap

The perceived marginalisation of rural communities as well as the economic and social inequalities between rural and urban areas may drive a surge in what Lamont (2018) calls the 'recognition gap'.

Societal worth depends on whether individuals meet the criteria for cultural membership; if they do, then they are perceived as valued members of the community. The recognition gap is a concept that refers to the subjective experiences of individuals and groups who feel that their cultural identities are not valued or recognised in particular social contexts. This can manifest in feelings of disrespect, stigmatisation or exclusion, which can in turn have a significant impact on individuals' self-esteem, social mobility, and political participation and discontent.

In the context of the rural–urban divide in Europe, the recognition gap can be seen as a major source of cultural differences and tensions between these two types of areas. Rural areas are often characterised by a strong sense of local identity and tradition, which can clash with the more cosmopolitan and diverse values that are prevalent in urban areas. This can lead to

feelings of cultural marginalisation and resentment among rural residents, who may feel that their way of life is not valued or respected by urban elites.

One example of the recognition gap in action is the way that rural communities are often portrayed in the media and popular culture. Rural residents are often depicted as backward, ignorant or even racist, which can reinforce negative stereotypes and undermine their sense of self-worth. This can also lead them to resent urban elites, who are seen as looking down on rural residents and their way of life.

The recognition gap can also be seen in the way that rural communities are often overlooked or marginalised by policymakers and other decision-makers. Rural areas are often seen as less important or less relevant than urban areas, which can lead to a lack of investment in infrastructure, education and other public services. This can further reinforce feelings of marginalisation and exclusion among rural residents, who may feel that their needs and interests are not being taken seriously by those in power.

Measuring the recognition gap

Recognition gaps occur when there is a mismatch between individuals' perceptions of themselves and the way they are treated by society. To determine whether a recognition gap exists and differs among urbanisation levels in Europe, this section investigates whether urbanisation levels are predictive of recognition gaps and if the magnitude of recognition gaps increases as the degree of urbanisation decreases.

In order to do so, the concept of a recognition gap needs to be operationalised. In this regard, in the fifth round of Eurofound's *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey, conducted in spring 2022, respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with five statements on their perception of how they are treated by their government. The five statements are listed in Table 5.

Using statistical techniques, the five statements from the e-survey are aggregated into two broader factors.[9] The first, the individual recognition gap, measures respondents' perceptions that their government is unfair towards 'people like them'. The second, the community recognition gap, measures respondents' perceptions that they are alienated by the government due to their identities. Hence, for the two factors two indicators were created by aggregating the responses falling within each factor. The two indicators were then dichotomised, being given a value of 0 if the respondent disagreed with all statements included in the factor and a value of 1 if the respondent agreed with at least one statement.

In Figures 20 and 21, descriptive statistics are provided for individual and community recognition gaps, across urbanisation levels and Member States.

At EU level, the share of the population perceiving an individual recognition gap is quite large, at 61.9%. This share reaches 65% in rural areas, 60% in medium to large towns, and 58% in cities and city suburbs.

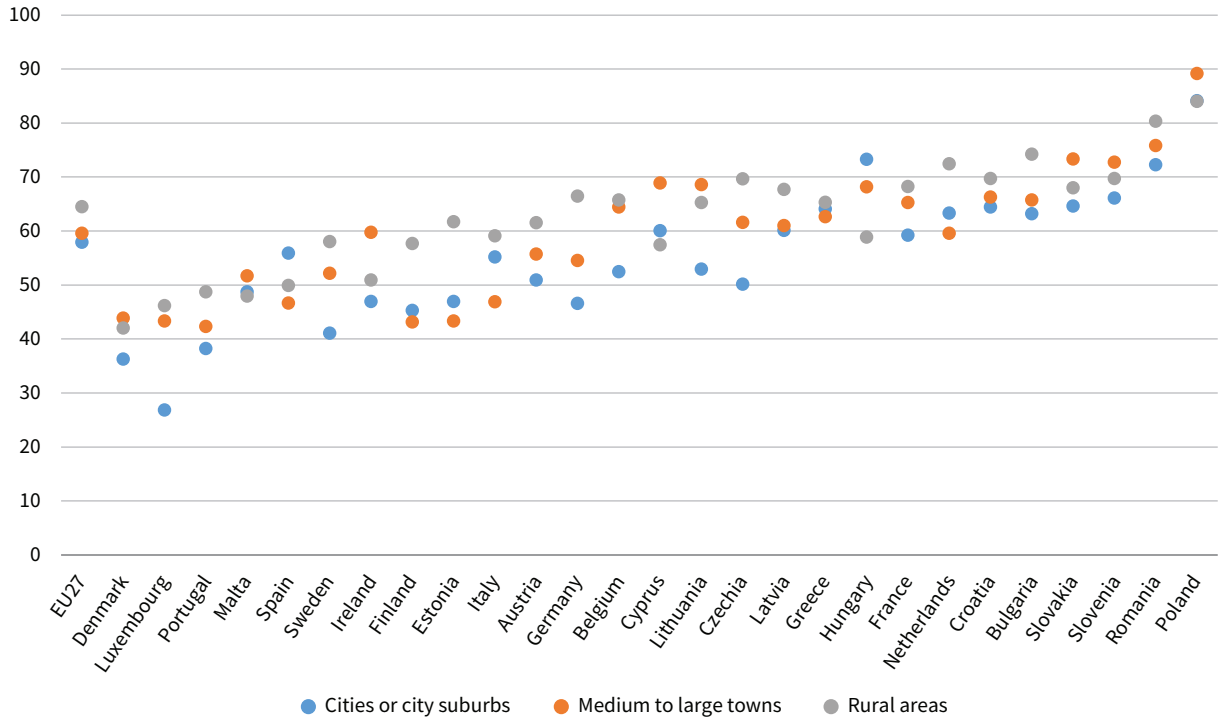
At Member State level, less than half the population in only four Member States experience individual

Table 5: Individual and community recognition gaps

Recognition gaps	E-survey question	Values
Individual	Do you agree or disagree with the following statements? • The government acts unfairly towards people like me. • The government doesn't respect people like me. • The government usually ignores people like me.	0: respondent disagrees with all statements 1: respondent agrees with at least one statement
Community	Do you agree or disagree with the following statements? • The government cares less about people in my area than about people in other parts of the country. • The government usually ignores my community.	0: respondent disagrees with all statements 1: respondent agrees with at least one statement

9 Specifically, a polychoric factor analysis was conducted to aggregate the five statements into two factors.

Figure 20: Individual recognition gap, by Member State and degree of urbanisation (%)



Notes: *The figure indicates the share of the population agreeing with at least one of the following statements: 'The government acts unfairly towards people like me', 'The government doesn't respect people like me' and 'The government usually ignores people like me'. Member States are ordered from the lowest average individual recognition gap to the highest.*
Source: Living, working and COVID-19 *e-survey (spring 2022)*

recognition gaps: Denmark (40%), Luxembourg (43%), Portugal (46%) and Malta (just under 50%). Eastern Member States tend to have the highest average individual recognition gaps: the gap is 84% in Poland, 77% in Romania and 70% in Slovenia.

For most Member States, the share of the population perceiving an individual recognition gap decreases as the degree of urbanisation increases. Therefore, the share is lowest in city/city suburbs and highest in rural areas. However, there are exceptions, including Hungary and Malta, where individual recognition gaps are lowest in rural areas. In addition, in some Member States, the individual perceptions of recognition are not considerably different across degrees of urbanisation, for example between towns and rural areas in Denmark, or between cities and rural areas in Cyprus.

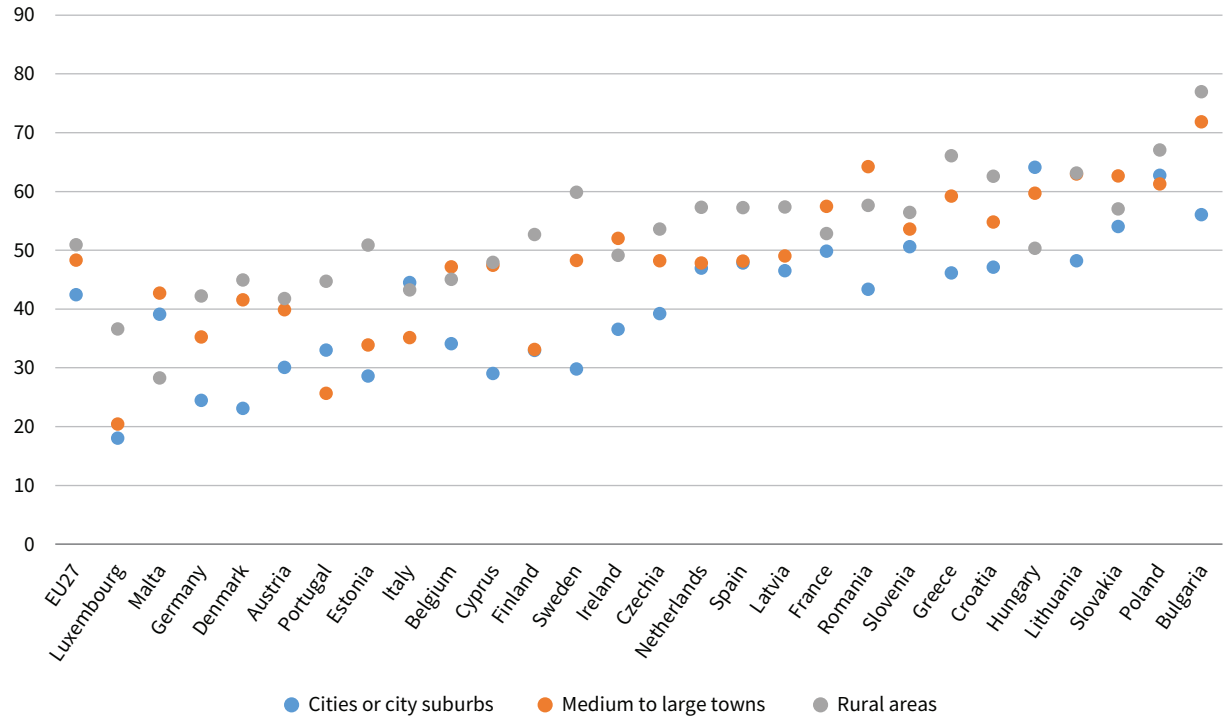
At EU level, in 2022, 48% of the population perceived a community recognition gap. The share is highest in rural areas (51%), followed quite closely by medium to large towns (48%). In cities and city suburbs, the share is 6 percentage points lower, at 42%. The highest average community recognition gaps are registered in eastern Member States: Bulgaria (68%), Poland (64%) and Slovakia (59%). The lowest are recorded in Luxembourg (31%), Malta (37%) and Germany (also 37%).

Across Member States, the community recognition gap generally decreases with the degree of urbanisation.

Most countries registered their lowest individual recognition gaps in cities and city suburbs, with the individual recognition gap being highest, on average, in rural areas. Once again, Hungary and Malta are exceptions in this regard, as in these Member States the share of the population perceiving a community recognition gap is, on average, lowest in rural areas. And once again, there are several examples of Member States where the gap in community recognition is not perceptibly different between degrees of urbanisation. For example, in Luxembourg, the share of the population perceiving a community recognition gap is almost the same in cities and towns, and in Italy there is no significant community recognition gap between cities and rural areas.

Two conclusions can be drawn from the descriptive statistics on individual and community recognition gaps. Firstly, at both EU and Member State levels, a large share of the population is experiencing recognition gaps. This share is especially high for people perceiving unfair treatment from the government towards 'people like them'. It is important to note that the data were collected in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis (in spring 2022), which may have worsened negative feelings in certain areas. Secondly, at EU level and for many Member States, the share of the population experiencing recognition gaps increases as the degree of urbanisation decreases, with the widest gaps found between rural areas and cities/city suburbs.

Figure 21: Community recognition gap, by Member State and degree of urbanisation (%)



Notes: *The figure indicates the share of the population agreeing with at least one of the following statements: 'The government cares less about people in my area' and 'The government usually ignores my community'. Member States are ordered from the lowest average community recognition gap to the highest.*
Source: Living, working and COVID-19 *e-survey (spring 2022)*

Recognition gap between urban and rural areas

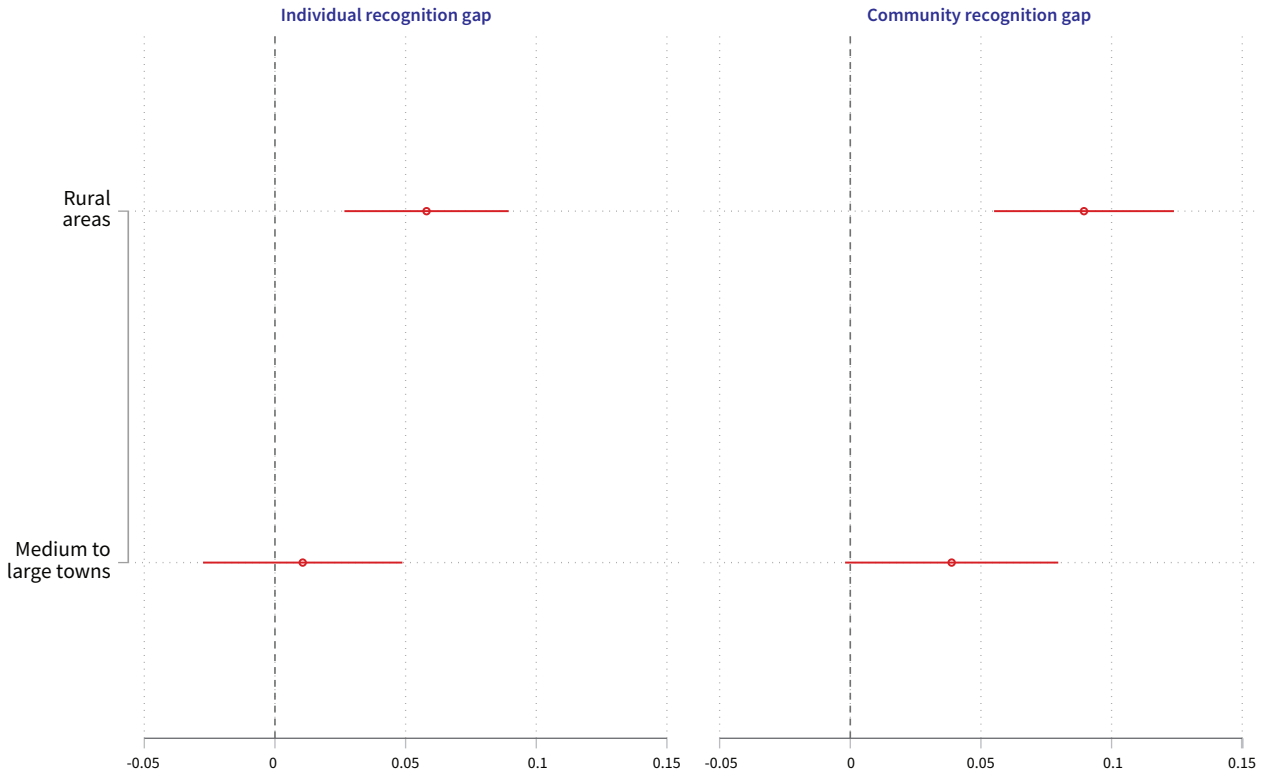
To determine whether areas' degrees of urbanisation are predictive of recognition gaps after controlling for other factors, a regression analysis was undertaken. As the individual and community recognition gaps are binary outcomes, a logistic model was applied. The model controls for a range of sociodemographic factors: gender (men, women), age, background (native, not native), educational attainment (lower than secondary, secondary, tertiary), poverty (difficulty in making ends meet, no difficulty in making ends meet) and employment gaps (employment status, spells of unemployment and sector of employment). Country fixed effects are also included (Lamont, 2018, p. 423; Kenny and Luca, 2021).

Figure 22 visualises the results of the model, predicting the likelihood of respondents perceiving individual and community recognition gaps as a function of the degree of urbanisation of the area in which they live, after controlling for the aforementioned sociodemographic characteristics.

The results from the econometric model (Figure 22) show that those living in rural areas are significantly more likely to experience both individual and community recognition gaps than those residing in a city or city suburb, even after controlling for other predictors. However, those living in towns do not experience these gaps at a statistically higher rate than their urban counterparts. Therefore, rural residents are the only group that are significantly more likely to perceive recognition gaps relative to their urban counterparts.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that other variables are also significant predictors of recognition gaps. For example, regarding poverty gaps, respondents struggling to make ends meet are more likely to perceive both individual and community recognition gaps than respondents who are not struggling. In addition, education is a significant predictor of recognition gaps, with those who have completed tertiary education less likely to experience individual or community recognition gaps. Moreover, in terms of employment, being long-term unemployed (i.e. unemployed for more than 12 months) is associated with a significantly higher likelihood of experiencing individual and community recognition gaps.

Figure 22: Individual and community recognition gaps



Notes: *Graphs show, for each outcome, the marginal effects and confidence intervals associated with living in the countryside or a small village (rural area) or a medium to large town, relative to the base category of cities and city suburbs. Results from two separate regressions are plotted. Each regression includes controls for gender, age, native versus non-native, educational attainment, ease of making ends meet (as a proxy of poverty) and employment, and the Member State in which the respondent is located. Models were estimated using a logit model with survey weights applied.*
Source: *Authors' calculations, based on the* Living, working and COVID-19 *e-survey*

Cultural differences between rural and urban areas

The difference in cultural values between rural and urban areas in Europe reflects the intricate tapestry of the continent's social fabric. These values play a pivotal role in shaping the behaviours, attitudes and priorities of individuals and communities. They reflect the deeply ingrained beliefs and norms that guide social interactions and shape the collective identity of a group (Huijsmans et al, 2021).

The tension between tradition and modernity is an aspect that may divide rural and urban areas in Europe.

On the one hand, rural communities often exhibit a stronger attachment to traditional values, customs and practices. There is a sense of pride in preserving cultural heritage and maintaining a connection to historical roots. Traditional celebrations, rituals and craftsmanship are valued and passed down through generations. The pace of change is often slower in rural areas, and there can be resistance or scepticism towards rapid societal transformations.

On the other hand, in urban areas, people are generally more open to modernity and have a more cosmopolitan outlook. Cities are often at the forefront of cultural innovation, technological advancements and social change. Urban dwellers tend to embrace new ideas, lifestyles and global influences. The rapid pace of urban life and exposure to diverse cultures can foster an environment that encourages experimentation, diversity, and adaptation to new trends and values.

When examining the differences in cultural values between rural and urban areas in Europe, several key aspects emerge. These include attitudes towards family values, attitudes towards migrants and gender equality (Luca et al, 2023).

In terms of gender equality, urban regions tend to exhibit higher levels of gender equality than rural areas (Evans, 2017). Factors such as better education and employment opportunities, increased access to resources, and exposure to diverse ideas and lifestyles contribute to the higher level of autonomy that women in cities often experience. Women in cities also have greater representation in professional fields, politics

and leadership positions, and more freedom to make choices regarding their careers, relationships and personal lives than those in rural areas. In contrast, rural areas, characterised by traditional and conservative values, may present more pronounced gender disparities. Traditional gender roles tend to be more often enforced, with women predominantly assuming caregiving and domestic responsibilities while men engage in manual labour or farming. However, it is important to note that there can be variations in gender equality across rural communities based on geographical location, cultural traditions and generational attitudes.

Regarding attitudes towards migration, those in urban areas tend to be more accepting and inclusive of migrants than those in rural areas due to their multicultural environments (Maxwell, 2019). Cities provide a wider range of social and economic opportunities, making them attractive destinations for individuals seeking better lives. Urban residents are more likely to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds, giving them a more cosmopolitan world view. In contrast, rural areas with close-knit communities and more homogeneous populations may exhibit more scepticism or resistance towards migration. Some rural communities prioritise cultural preservation and tradition over embracing diversity, perceiving migrants as a threat to their cultural identity or economic stability. However, it is important to recognise that rural areas are not static, and that attitudes towards migration can evolve as demographic shifts occur and interactions with migrants increase.

Family values also differ between rural and urban areas (Luca et al, 2023). In rural communities, traditional family structures and conservative values are often more prevalent than in urban areas. The importance of close-knit familial bonds is emphasised, with extended families living in proximity and actively participating in each other's lives. Gender roles within families may be more traditional, with women primarily taking on domestic responsibilities and men being seen as primary breadwinners. In urban areas, there is greater diversity in family structures and values than in rural areas. Globalisation, individualism and changing social norms have led to a broader acceptance of non-traditional family arrangements, such as single-parent households, same-sex partnerships and cohabitation without marriage. The importance of personal autonomy is also emphasised in urban settings, allowing individuals more freedom to choose their own paths in terms of their relationships, career and lifestyle.

Measuring cultural differences between rural and urban areas

This section investigates the potential existence of cultural differences between rural and urban areas with respect to gender equality, family values and attitudes towards migrants. In order to do so, three social tolerance indices were developed using data from the European Values Survey (EVS): a gender equality index, a liberal morality index and an immigrant acceptance index. These indices were amalgamated to form a social tolerance index.

The previous section investigated whether urbanisation levels are predictive of gaps in the three indicators of social tolerance and whether the magnitudes of the social tolerance gaps increase as the urbanisation level decreases.

Data and methods

The EVS is a large-scale, cross-national longitudinal survey on basic human values that has been repeated every nine years since 1981, with the latest two editions being conducted in 2008 and 2017.[10] This report focuses strictly on these editions. The survey enquires about basic human values, providing an insight into the ideas, beliefs, values, preferences and attitudes of citizens across Europe. The number of countries included varies with each edition, with the 2008 survey covering all countries in the EU27 and the 2017 survey omitting Belgium, Cyprus, Greece, Ireland, Luxembourg and Malta. The survey is representative of all adults residing within private households in each country, irrespective of their nationality (Luca et al, 2023, p. 8).

Based on the methodology used by Luca et al (2023), three indices addressing attitudes towards gender, liberal morality and immigrants were developed as part of this analysis in order to assess cultural differences across the levels of urbanisation. In a similar manner to Luca et al (2023), the three indices were built using variables that are common to the 2008 and 2017 EVS editions. The indices are composed of the variables presented in Table 6.

10 https://europeanvaluesstudy.eu/

Table 6: Variables from the EVS used to measure cultural differences

Index	EVS survey question	Values
Gender equality	• EVS08: A pre-school child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works **or** EVS17: When a mother works for pay, the children suffer • EVS08 and EVS17: A job is alright but what most women really want is a home and children • EVS08 and EVS17: When jobs are scarce, men have more right to a job than women	Average of the values recorded on a scale of 1–10
Liberal morality	Can this always be justified, never be justified, or something in between? • Euthanasia (terminating the life of the incurably sick) • Homosexuality • Abortion • Divorce • Having casual sex • Prostitution	Average of the values recorded on a scale of 1–10
Immigrant acceptance	• EVS08: Immigrants take jobs away from natives in a country and EVS17: Immigrants take jobs away from [nationality] • EVS08 and EVS17: Immigrants make crime problems worse • EVS08 and EVS17: Immigrants are a strain on a country's welfare system	Average of the values recorded on a scale of 1–10

Source: *European Values Survey, 2008 and 2017*

The main independent variable used in this analysis was the size of the settlement where the interview was conducted, which is referred to as the urbanisation level. The variables were recoded so that rural areas were areas with a population under 20,000, towns were those with a population between 20,000 and 100,000, and urban areas were those with a population of 100,000 people or more.

A factor analysis was performed on each index to ensure that the variables were correlated. For each index, the internal consistency of the variables was tested using Cronbach's alpha tests. The findings of these tests reveal that the variables in the three indices were either sufficiently or highly correlated (Cronbach's alpha was 0.56 for gender equality, 0.85 for liberal morality and 0.78 for immigrant acceptance).

Variables were then recoded and rescaled, so that all variables were measured on a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 represents the highest level of social tolerance and 1 represents the lowest level. Lastly, the indices were created by taking the average score across the variables for each of the indices.

Figures 23, 24 and 25 show the values for each of the indices for 2017 stratified by country and urbanisation level, with the countries being ordered by the smallest to the largest average value across all degrees of urbanisation.

Gender equality index

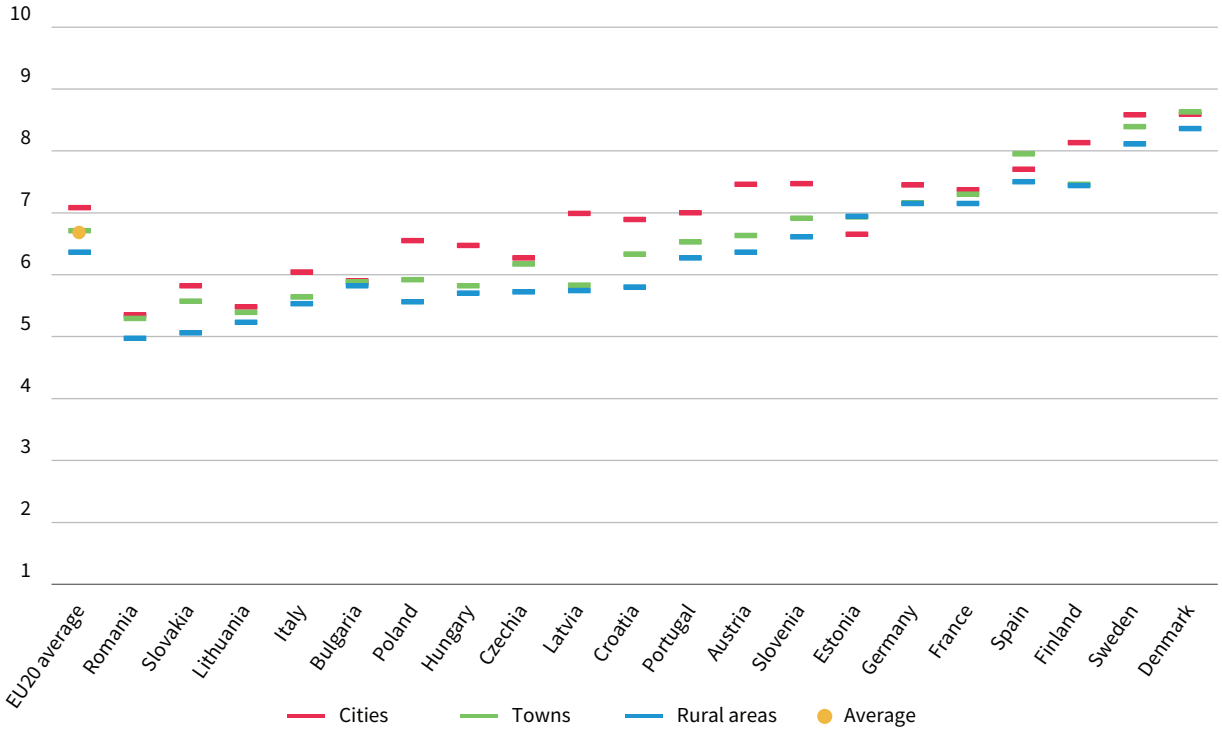
At EU level, the score for the gender equality index was 6.68 (on a scale of 1 to 10) in 2017. The score ranges from 6.36 in rural areas to 6.72 in towns and 7.08 in urban areas.

The highest scores for the gender equality index were registered in the Nordic countries: Denmark (8.47), Sweden (8.41) and Finland (7.73). The lowest scores were recorded in countries that acceded to the EU in 2004 or later: Romania (5.12), Slovakia (5.31) and Lithuania (5.34). Italy (5.68) is an exception to this, with the fourth lowest gender equality score.

Looking across urbanisation levels, at Member State level, scores for the gender equality index increase with the level of urbanisation. As shown in Figure 23, urban areas had higher gender equality scores than rural areas in all countries except for Estonia. Towns regularly scored somewhere between rural and urban areas, with the exception of Bulgaria, Spain and Denmark.

At EU level, the rural–urban gap was 0.72 points (Figure 23). The greatest differences in gender equality index scores between urban areas – with the highest scores – and rural areas – with the lowest scores – were recorded in Latvia (1.25), Austria (1.1) and Croatia (1.09). The smallest differences between the Member States' highest- and lowest-performing urbanisation levels were registered in Bulgaria (0.06) and France (0.22).

Figure 23: Gender equality index, by Member State and degree of urbanisation, 2017



Notes: *The survey uses a scale of 1 to 10, hence the scale used on the y axis in Figures 23, 24 and 25. Only 20 countries were surveyed in EVS17.*
Source: *Authors' calculations, based on the EVS*

A descriptive convergence analysis was performed between the three levels of urbanisation for 2008 and 2017 (not shown). At EU level, there was an increase in all forms of polarisation (rural–urban gap, urban–town gap and town–rural gap). Just over half of the Member States analysed faced an increase in the rural–urban gap (12 countries), the urban–town gap (11 countries) and the town–rural gap (12 countries).

Liberal morality index

At EU level, the score for the liberal morality index was 5.39 in 2017. The score ranges from 5.04 in rural areas to 5.5 in towns and 5.76 in urban areas.

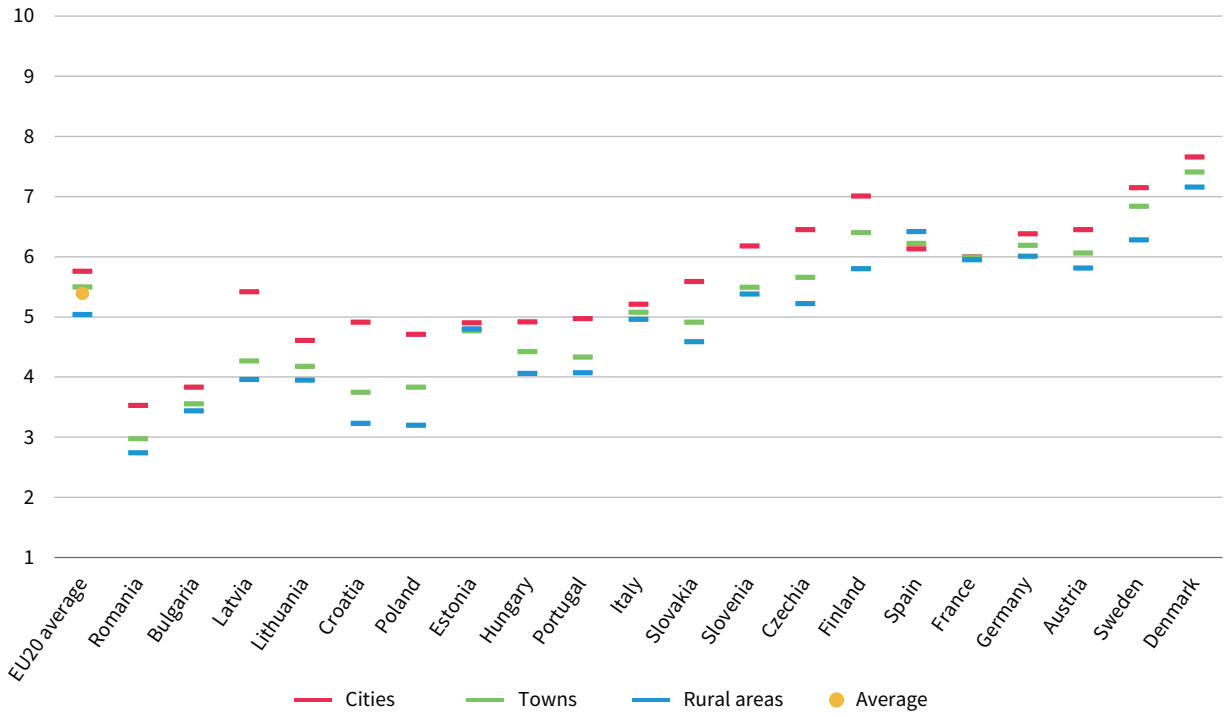
As with the gender equality index, the highest average scores – across all degrees of urbanisation – for the liberal morality index were registered in the Nordic Member States of Denmark (7.47) and Sweden (6.80). The lowest average scores were recorded in countries that acceded to the EU in 2004 or later, including Romania (2.96) and Bulgaria (3.37).

Across urbanisation levels, at Member State level, scores for the liberal morality index increase with degree of urbanisation. As shown in Figure 24, urban areas had higher liberal morality scores than towns and rural areas in all countries except for France and Spain. For 18 out of 20 countries, the score for towns was between the scores for urban and rural areas.

At EU level, the rural–urban gap was 0.72 points (Figure 24). The greatest differences in liberal morality index scores between urbanisation levels were recorded in Latvia (1.46), Croatia (1.68) and Poland (1.51) between urban and rural areas. The smallest differences between the Member States' highest- and lowest-scoring areas were registered in Italy (0.25) and France (0.04).

A descriptive convergence analysis was performed between the three levels of urbanisation for 2008 and 2017 (not shown). At EU level, there was a decrease in the rural–urban gap and the urban–town gap, but an increase in the town–rural gap. In approximately half of the Member States analysed there was an increase in the town–rural gap (11 countries), the urban–town gap (11 countries) and the rural–urban gap (9 countries).

Figure 24: Liberal morality index, by Member State and degree of urbanisation, 2017



Notes: *Only 20 countries were surveyed in EVS17.*
Source: *Authors' calculations, based on the EVS*

Immigration acceptance index

At EU level, the score for the immigrant acceptance index was 5.03 in 2017. The score ranges from 4.74 in rural areas to 4.96 in towns and 5.49 in urban areas.

The highest scores for the immigrant acceptance index were registered in Spain (5.92), Sweden (5.86) and France (5.59). The lowest scores were recorded in Czechia (3.37), Hungary (3.38) and Bulgaria (3.61).

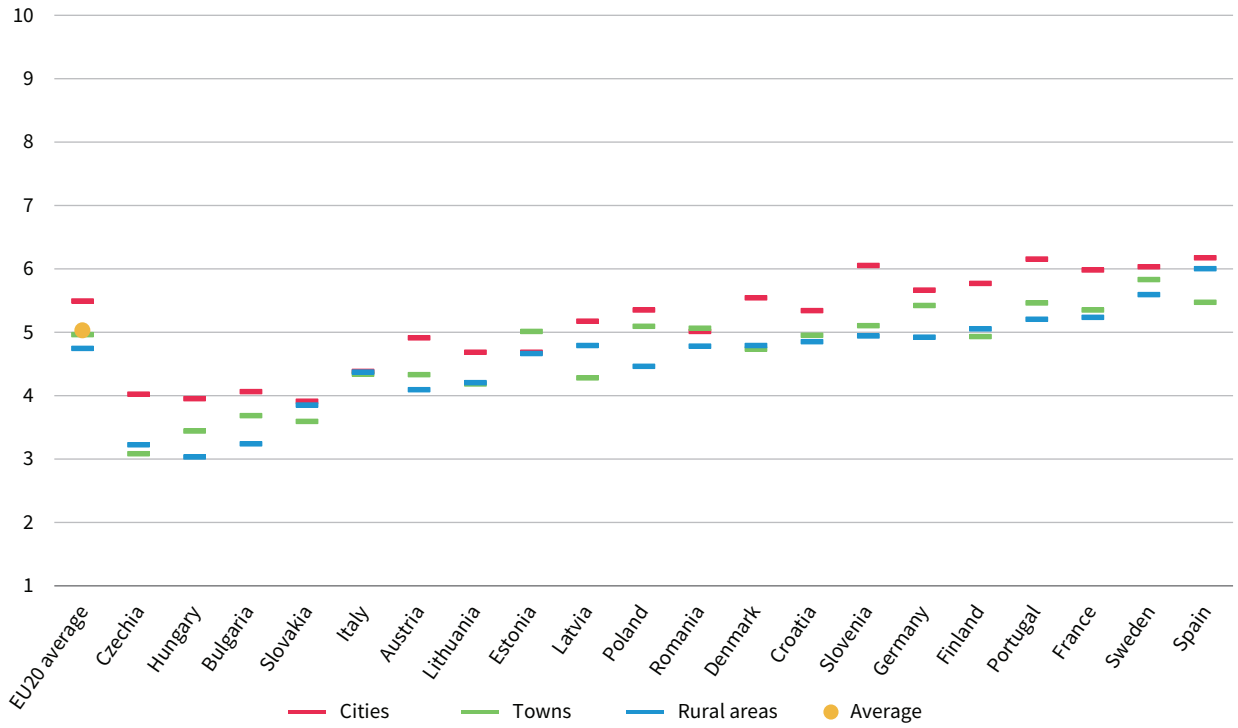
Across urbanisation levels, at Member State level, scores for the immigrant acceptance index generally increase with degree of urbanisation, although in a less uniform way than for the gender equality and liberal morality indices. As shown in Figure 25, urban areas had higher immigrant acceptance scores than any other level of urbanisation in all countries except for Italy, Estonia and Romania. For exactly half of the countries analysed, the score for towns was between the scores for urban and rural areas. For seven countries, urban areas had the highest scores for the immigrant acceptance index, followed by rural areas and then towns.

At EU level, the rural–urban gap is 0.75 points. The greatest differences in immigrant acceptance index scores between urbanisation levels are recorded in Slovenia (1.11) and Portugal (0.95) between urban and rural areas, and in Czechia (0.94) between urban areas and towns. The smallest differences between the Member States' highest- and lowest-performing urbanisation levels were registered in Italy (0.03) and Romania (0.28).

A descriptive convergence analysis was performed between the three levels of urbanisation for 2008 and 2017 (not shown). At EU level, there was an increase in polarisation between all three levels of urbanisation. In about half of the Member States analysed there was an increase in the rural–urban gap (11 countries), the town–rural gap (11 countries) and the urban–town gap (12 countries).

From the descriptive statistics on cultural differences across urbanisation levels, two conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, in 2017, urban areas had the most progressive views, followed by towns and then rural areas, with the results being most uniform for the gender equality index. The liberal morality index scores were more variable, and the results at country level were most varied for the immigrant acceptance index. Secondly, regarding the longitudinal analysis of the results for 2008 and 2017, for all three indices and across all levels of urbanisation about half of countries faced increasing polarisation.

Figure 25: Immigrant acceptance index, by Member State and degree of urbanisation, 2017



Note: *Only 20 countries were surveyed in EVS17.*
Source: *Authors' calculations, based on the EVS*

Differences in social tolerance between urban and rural areas

To investigate whether and how urbanisation levels are predictive of cultural differences and to determine whether this changed between 2008 and 2017, various linear regression analyses were conducted. The linear models were formulated using four dependent variables (gender equality score, liberal morality score, immigrant acceptance score and social tolerance score) for 2008 data and 2017 data, resulting in the eight models shown in Figure 26. The models control for numerous sociodemographic factors that can influence individuals' views on gender equality, liberal morality and immigrants, specifically age, sex, education, income, main activity, self-reported health, being in a steady relationship, having children, being born abroad, having parents born abroad, being religious, political views, political interest, life satisfaction and trust in people.

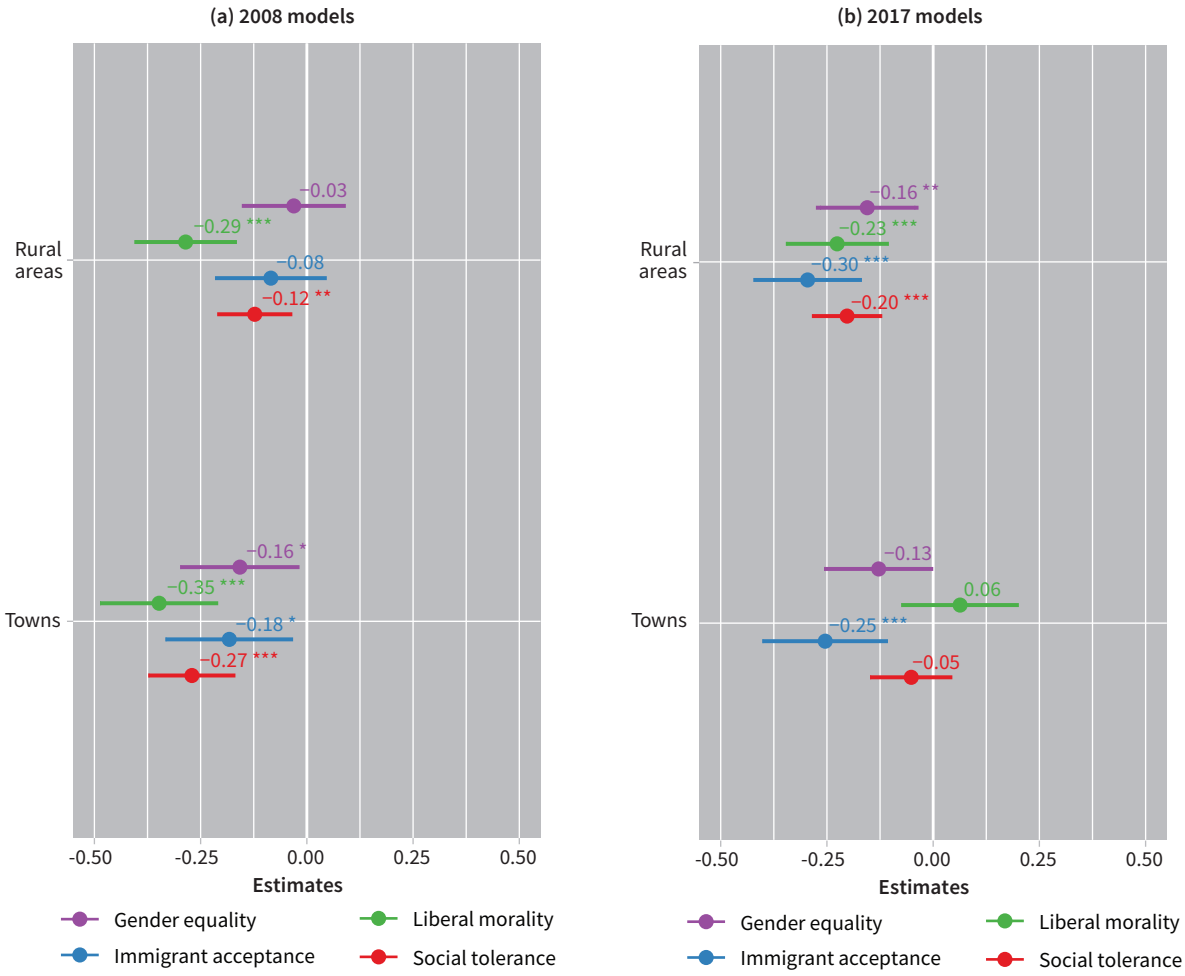
Figure 26 visualises the results of the linear regression analyses, showing the coefficients, the confidence interval and the p-values for each variable with respect to the dependent variables. All eight models were run controlling for the same set of sociodemographic factors.

In 2017, even after controlling for a variety of variables, the degree of urbanisation remained predictive of attitudes. The results show that rural areas had significantly less favourable attitudes towards gender equality, liberal morality, immigrants and social tolerance. However, according to the 2017 data, there was no difference in these attitudes between those living in towns and those living in cities, with the exception of attitudes towards immigrants, where residents of towns were less accepting of immigrants than those living in cities.

With regard to the 2008 data, Figure 26 shows that both towns and rural areas had lower levels of aggregate social tolerance than those living in cities. The data also show that the gap between rural areas and cities increased from 2008 to 2017, but the gap between towns and cities shrank. Indeed, in the case of all attitudes (except for acceptance of immigrants) the gap between towns and cities became insignificant by 2017. This suggests an increase in polarisation between the different degrees of urbanisation in terms of cultural values, particularly between rural and urban areas.

Furthermore, other variables also significantly predict social tolerance. For example, the results show that women were more socially tolerant than men in both 2008 and 2017. Those with tertiary education were significantly more socially tolerant in 2008 and 2017 than those without. Those who considered themselves

Figure 26: Estimate of urbanisation level as a predictor of views of gender equality, liberal morality, immigrant acceptance and social tolerance, 2008 and 2017



Note: *The models show the coefficients of a variable indicating that a person resides in a rural area or a town, relative to the reference category of living in a city. * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001.*
Source: *Authors' own calculations, based on EVS 2008 and 2017*

religious were less socially tolerant than those who did not. In both 2008 and 2017, those who identified as left wing were most socially tolerant, and those who identified as right wing were less socially tolerant than those who identified as centrist in terms of their political views. In both 2008 and 2017, those not interested in politics were less socially tolerant than those who self-reported that they were interested in politics. Lastly, those with higher life satisfaction and those with higher trust in people were more socially tolerant than those who were more dissatisfied with their lives and those who had lower trust in people, once again for both 2008 and 2017.

Summary of findings

The results of the analysis show that the rural–urban divide goes beyond mainstream gaps in education, employment and poverty. When controlling for these factors, those living in rural areas are still significantly more likely to perceive recognition gaps.

This analysis, by highlighting the spatial dimension of recognition gaps, suggests that the rural–urban divide could be a destabilising political force in Europe, especially if these gaps continue to widen. Policymakers should address the growing polarised discontent to ensure that Europeans feel that they are being treated fairly by their governments. In particular, Lamont (2018, p. 426) defines social actors as 'buffers or scaffolding' of recognition gaps, as they shape who feels a sense of belonging to society.

By understanding and addressing these gaps, we can work to create more inclusive and respectful communities that value the unique contributions and perspectives of all individuals and groups. To reduce recognition gaps, social actors should promote cultural membership with a wide variety of criteria for inclusion (Lamont, 2018, p. 426). This would allow individuals to feel valued in society for reasons other than socioeconomic success and help diffuse the rural–urban tension.

In addition to recognition gaps, the analysis quantified and revealed gaps in attitudes and acceptance across the different levels of urbanisation. In a similar manner to recognition gaps, once other important drivers, including sex, education, age, employment and religion, are accounted for, urbanisation level is still a significant predictor of social tolerance, particularly when considering urban areas relative to rural areas.

The cultural gaps relating to views on gender equality, homosexuality, abortion, divorce and the acceptance of migrants reveal diverging fundamental beliefs between the different levels of urbanisation. While this diversity characterises Europe, it can also pose a challenge to policymakers. As the results of this analysis show, the lack of a united moral compass across the geographical landscape within and across countries in the EU needs to be considered when designing policies that may have an impact on rural–urban tensions.

5 Political polarisation

The concept of social cohesion, that is the 'sense of togetherness, resilience and orientation towards a common good' (Eurofound, 2018a), is composed of five aspects: social inclusion, low ethno-cultural social tensions, interpersonal trust, civic engagement and political activity, and sense of community (Jenson, 2010). Low levels of political participation, low trust in institutions and low satisfaction with democracy can make a society less cohesive and trigger negative feedback loops, further reducing cohesiveness. Moreover, when economic or cultural instability occurs, citizens could feel more inclined to support strong leaders, favour policies that restrict civil liberties and display prejudice or hostility towards outgroups (Stenner, 2005). This occurred during the 2007–2008 global financial crisis, when trust in institutions declined and support for anti-EU parties increased (de Vries and Hobolt, 2016; Morlino and Quaranta, 2016; Eurofound, 2018a). Low political participation, low trust in institutions and dissatisfaction with democracy are important not only at supranational or national level, but also at regional and local levels. Increases in political polarisation can trigger divisions in social cohesion; the potential rural–urban divide is the focus of this chapter.

Earlier chapters of this report have highlighted the socioeconomic divide between rural and urban areas. Average incomes are higher in cities, and the divide in this regard is growing (Chapter 2). In addition, opportunities for education and employment are higher in cities (Chapter 3). As illustrated in Chapter 4, the challenges that those in rural areas face in terms of living conditions and opportunities are associated with feelings of being ignored or disrespected. Moreover, they are also associated with lower levels of social tolerance and less favourable views towards gender equality and migration. This chapter considers whether inequalities between rural and urban areas also extend to differences in rates of political participation. It also considers whether the rural–urban inequalities portrayed in earlier chapters lead rural residents to become disenchanted and to distrust the institutions and governments that serve them.

According to the literature, two possible approaches can be used to explain disenchantment. The first links disenchantment to individual characteristics such as education, age, income and occupation. The second approach explores the geographical dimension of disenchantment, identifying differences that arise due to characteristics of the place where a person lives, and not just their individual circumstances. In terms of political participation, citizens who engage in political action, participatory democracy, and provision of civil society and community support are more inclined to trust institutions (Dijkstra et al, 2020; Kenny and Luca, 2021). Evidence has shown rural–urban differences in the EU in this regard. For example, city dwellers are more likely to be engaged in political matters and tend to be more satisfied with democracy (Kenny and Luca, 2021). In contrast, political participation is lower in rural areas, where the anti-EU vote also tends to cluster (Dijkstra et al, 2020). The work of Kenny and Luca (2021) analyses EU data from 2002 to 2018 and finds that those living outside cities are systematically less satisfied with democracy and the political system in their country. This can result in votes for political parties that promote anti-EU values (Bachtler and Begg, 2017; European Commission, 2021a; Rodríguez-Pose et al, 2023).

While no political polarisation was reported between urban and rural dwellers before the economic crisis of 2008–2013 (Eurofound, 2013; Eder and Katsanidou, 2015; Mitsch et al, 2021), during and after the crisis there was a rise in extremist and populist anti-EU sentiments. An oft-cited example illustrating the culmination of such discontent is Brexit (the UK's renunciation of its EU membership). This event has been explained in the literature as a consequence of economic decline, job losses and actual or perceived lack of support for the areas and regions most affected (Dijkstra et al, 2020; McCann, 2020; Rodríguez-Pose et al, 2023).

Despite the rural population being smaller than the urban population at EU level, the importance of rural–urban differences in the distribution of discontent should not be underestimated. This discontent could give rise to civil unrest (e.g. as exhibited by the *gilets jaunes* in France and the *movimento dei forconi* in Italy), with damaging side-effects, potentially including the strengthening of anti-EU parties. The discontent of rural citizens could also politically merge with other types of discontent, for example that resulting from the recognition gap in terms of cultural values (Lamont, 2018), as discussed in Chapter 4. This gap can thereby affect other populations, for example those living in suburbs around large towns, and not only those living in rural areas.

Understanding how political changes are spatially distributed and where additional support for social cohesion is needed is vital for the European project (Stenner, 2005; Hoskins and Mascherini, 2009; Scharfbillig, 2021). The place-based approach is a theoretical framework that relates rural–urban differences in levels of trust in government to the differences in social conditions, including distrust of government and satisfaction with democracy, and

differences in access to public services and infrastructure.[11] This chapter explores divergences in political participation, trust in institutions and satisfaction with democracy across degrees of urbanisation, specifically in rural areas, medium to large towns, and in cities. The spatial distribution of discontent is investigated using data from Eurofound's *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey, and the findings from this novel data source build on the existing literature in this area.

Political participation

The foundation of modern European democracies is the universal right to vote and to participate in the political life of the state. A low rate of participation worries policymakers, as it indicates that citizens feel unrepresented and alienated. Citizens' disenchantment from political life can, in turn, influence their level of trust in institutions (Eder and Katsanidou, 2015). Political engagement manifests not only through voting behaviour but also through a plethora of actions that can be undertaken by citizens, such as taking part in a local council meeting or writing a letter to a political representative, protesting or participating in a demonstration, or boycotting a company because it promotes values that go against one's beliefs (Eder and Katsanidou, 2015). These actions can happen more frequently than voting and can, therefore, also be used to gauge political participation (Anduiza, 2002). Thus, they form part of the broader concept of active citizenship. There are several definitions of active citizenship. Many of them explore the link between lifelong learning and education and participation in community life. Others focus more on political engagement, and can be summarised as 'participation in civil society, community and/or political life, characterised by mutual respect and non-violence and in accordance with human rights and democracy' (Hoskins and Mascherini, 2009). The active citizenship composite index (Hoskins and Mascherini, 2009) measures the level of active citizenship in a population by grouping more than 60 indicators into four dimensions: democratic values, representative democracy, community life, and protest and social change. In this present analysis, the focus is on a selection of indicators of political participation, as the aim was to investigate political participation (or civic engagement) across degrees of urbanisation. Useful indicators for this analysis are those that measure participation in formal democratic processes (voting in national or EU elections, political party-related activities, contacting elected representatives), as well as participation in informal activities, such as taking part in protests or demonstrations, commenting on issues online, signing petitions or boycotting companies or products (Hoskins and Mascherini, 2009). These actions are described and analysed through a rural–urban lens.

These political activities are captured in Eurofound's *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey. The e-survey includes seven indicators that, taking inspiration from the active citizenship composite index (Hoskins and Mascherini, 2009), measure formal political participation as well as informal participation (Table 7).

Table 7: List of survey questions used to analyse political participation

Political engagement type	E-survey question
Formal	Some people don't vote nowadays for one reason or another. Did you vote in your country's last national election?
	Over the last 12 months, have you attended a meeting of a trade union, a political party or political action group?
	Over the last 12 months, have you contacted a politician or public official (other than routine contact arising from use of public services)?
Informal	Over the last 12 months, have you attended a protest or a demonstration?
	Over the last 12 months, have you signed a petition, including an e-mail or online petition?
	Over the last 12 months, have you commented on a political or social issue online?
	Over the last 12 months, have you boycotted certain products or companies?

Source: Living, working and COVID-19 *e-survey, round 5 (2022)*

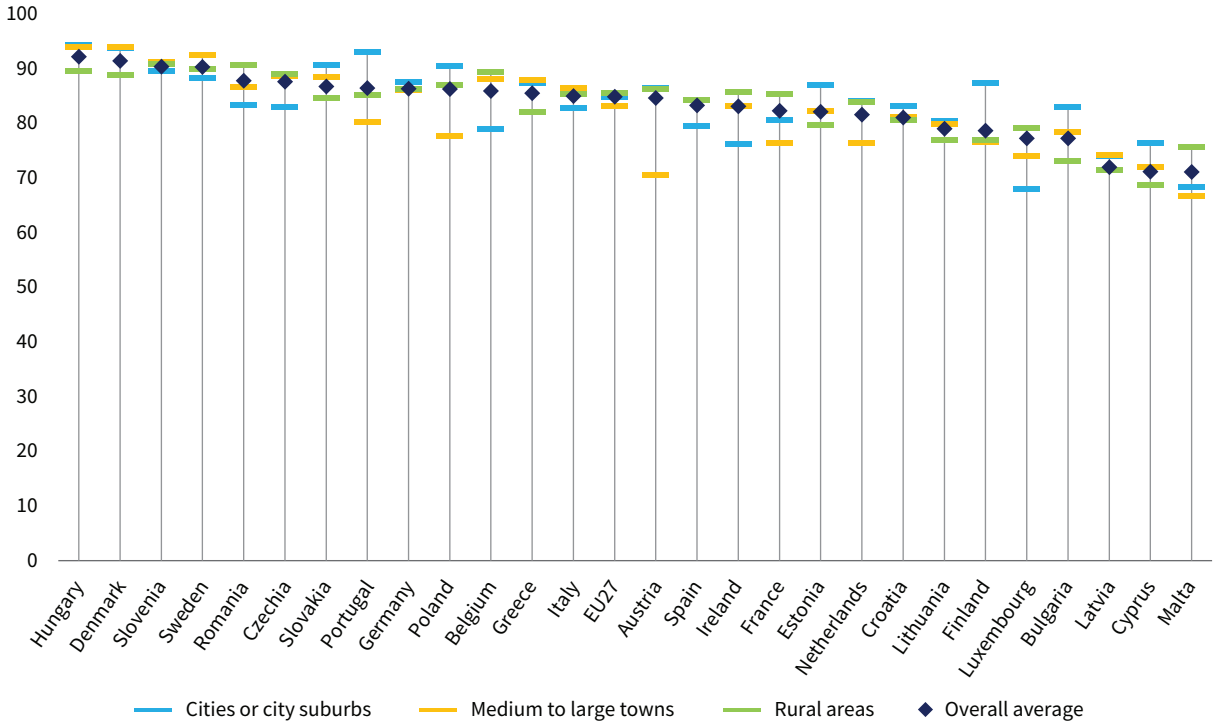
11 There are three main theorical frameworks for studying the urban–rural divide in the literature. Social capital theory looks at the relationships between people in a certain area and at their social networks, finding that people's level of trust in government is determined by their social relationships. Institutional theory is based on the consideration that people's perceptions of the legitimacy, credibility and effectiveness of institutions influence their trust in them. The place-based approach finds that differences are due to social and infrastructural characteristics specific to territories.

Formal political participation

This section explores three components of formal political participation: voting in national elections, attending a meeting of a party or a trade union and contacting a politician or a public official.

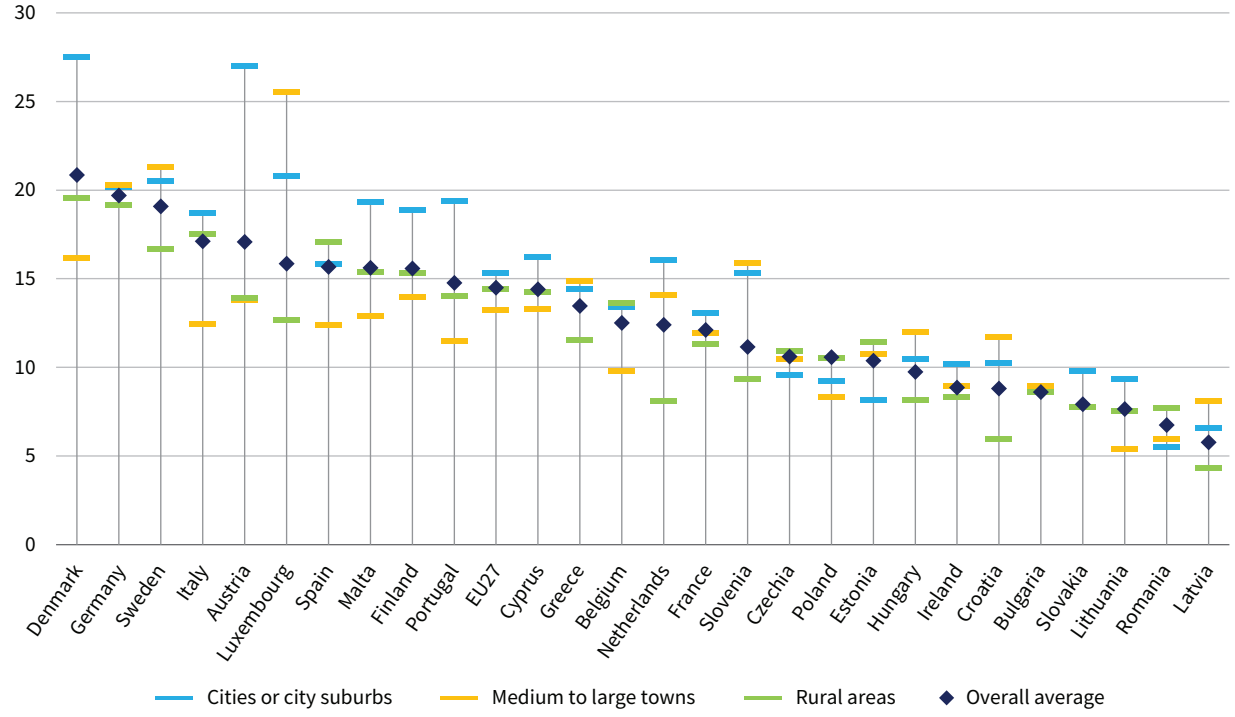
The data show that, at EU level, more than 80% of respondents voted in their last national election, with no major differences across urbanisation levels (Figure 27). At EU level, the share of respondents who voted ranged from 83% in medium to large towns to 85% in rural areas and cities. In 16 Member States (Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal and Slovakia), a higher share of city dwellers voted than the national average. In Austria, the Netherlands and Poland, both city dwellers and rural residents voted at rates above the national average.

Figure 27: Share of respondents who voted in their last national election, by Member State and degree of urbanisation (%)



Notes: *Member States are ordered by average across all urbanisation levels.*
Source: Living, working and COVID-19 *e-survey, round 5 (2022)*

Figure 28: Share of respondents who have attended a meeting of a trade union, political party or political group, by Member State and degree of urbanisation (%)



Notes: *Member States are ordered by average across all urbanisation levels.*
Source: Living, working and COVID-19 *e-survey, round 5 (2022)*

Considering the probability of attending a meeting of a trade union, political party or political group, city residents were, on average across Europe, most likely to report having done so (15.3% reported this) (Figure 28). At Member State level, the share of respondents living in cities who attended a meeting of a trade union, a political party or a political action group was lower than the national average only in four countries – Czechia, Estonia, Poland and Romania. In Belgium, Czechia, Estonia, Romania and Spain, those living in rural areas were most likely to engage in this type of political activity.

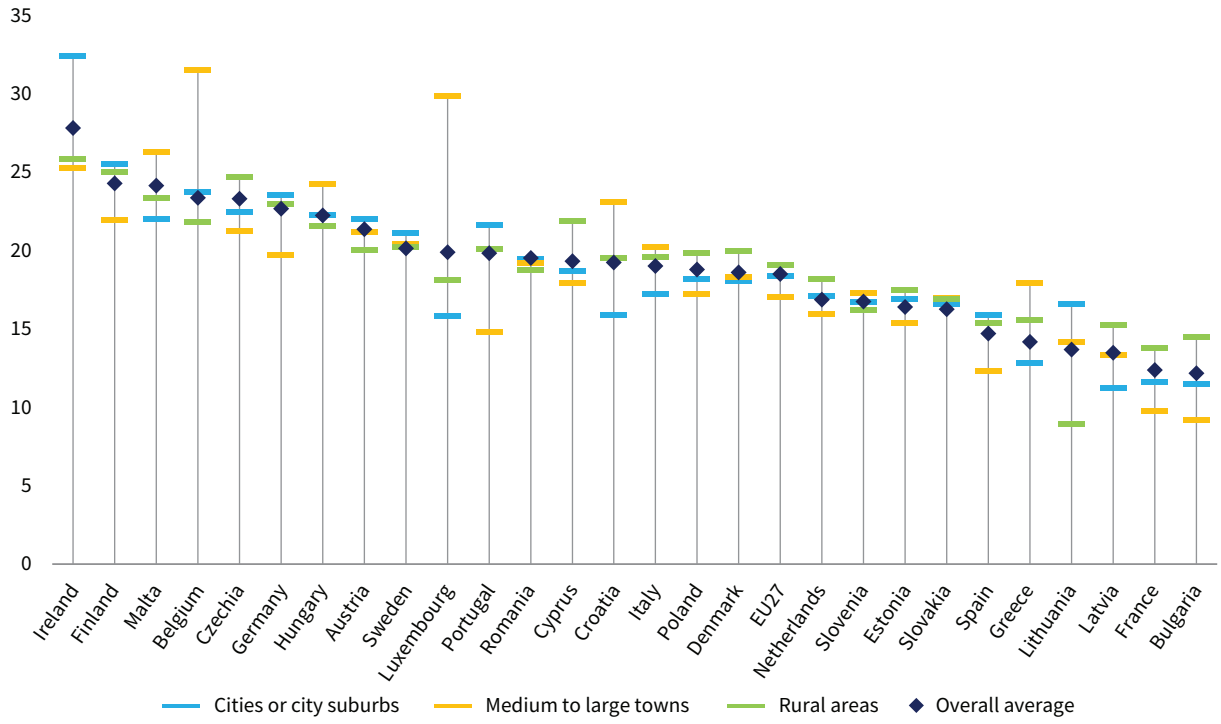
City residents were, on average, more likely to have contacted a politician or public official than those in rural areas (Figure 29). More than one in four city residents in Ireland and Finland reported contacting a politician or public official. While in Finland there is only half a percentage point difference between the shares of urban and rural residents reporting this type of political participation, in Ireland, 32.4% of city dwellers had contacted a politician, compared with 25.8% of those living in rural areas. Ireland and Finland also report the highest figures for rural areas of all Member States, suggesting different cultural attitudes. The share of rural dwellers reporting contact with a politician or a public official was higher than the national average in all countries bar Austria, Belgium, Hungary, Ireland, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Romania and Slovenia.

Informal political participation

This section explores four components of informal political participation: attending a protest or demonstration, signing a petition, commenting on an issue online and boycotting a product or company.

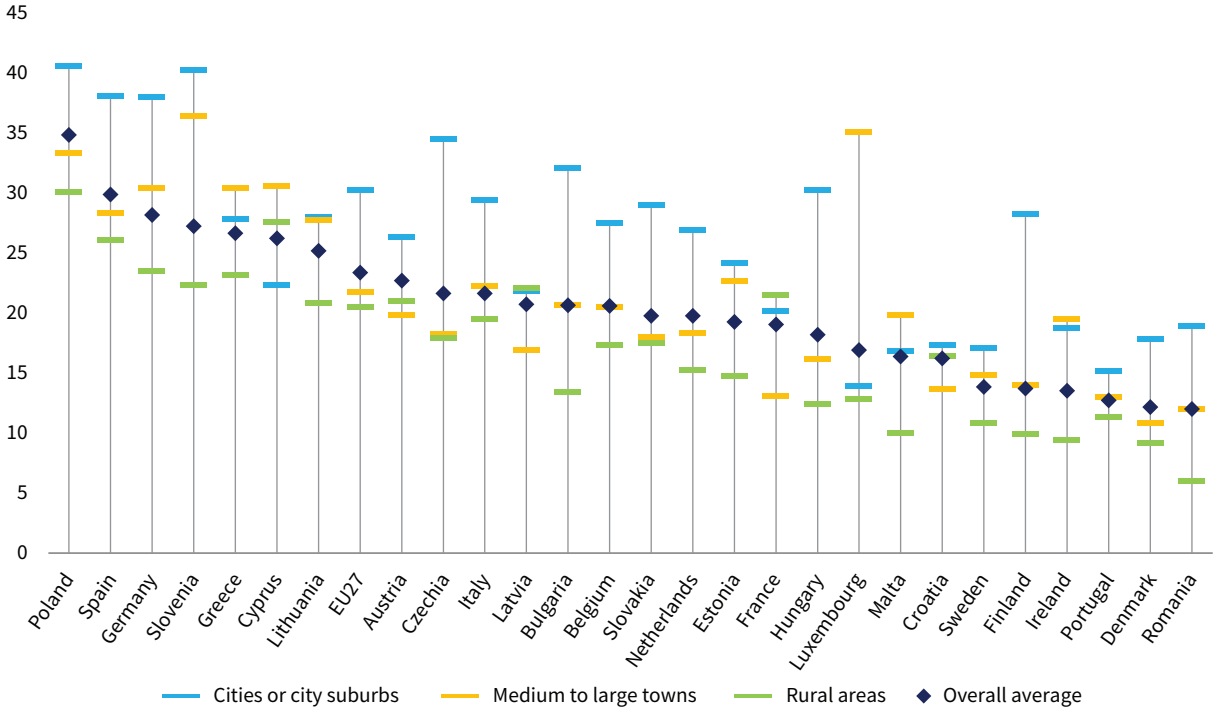
On average, across the entire EU, the data show that respondents living in cities are more likely to take part in a protest than respondents living in less urbanised areas; this holds true at the national level, except for Cyprus, Greece, Luxembourg, Malta and Ireland (Figure 30). However, in France and Latvia, this type of political participation is more popular among rural residents (21.5% and 22%, respectively) than among residents of more urban areas.

Figure 29: Share of respondents who have contacted a politician or a public official, by Member State and degree of urbanisation (%)



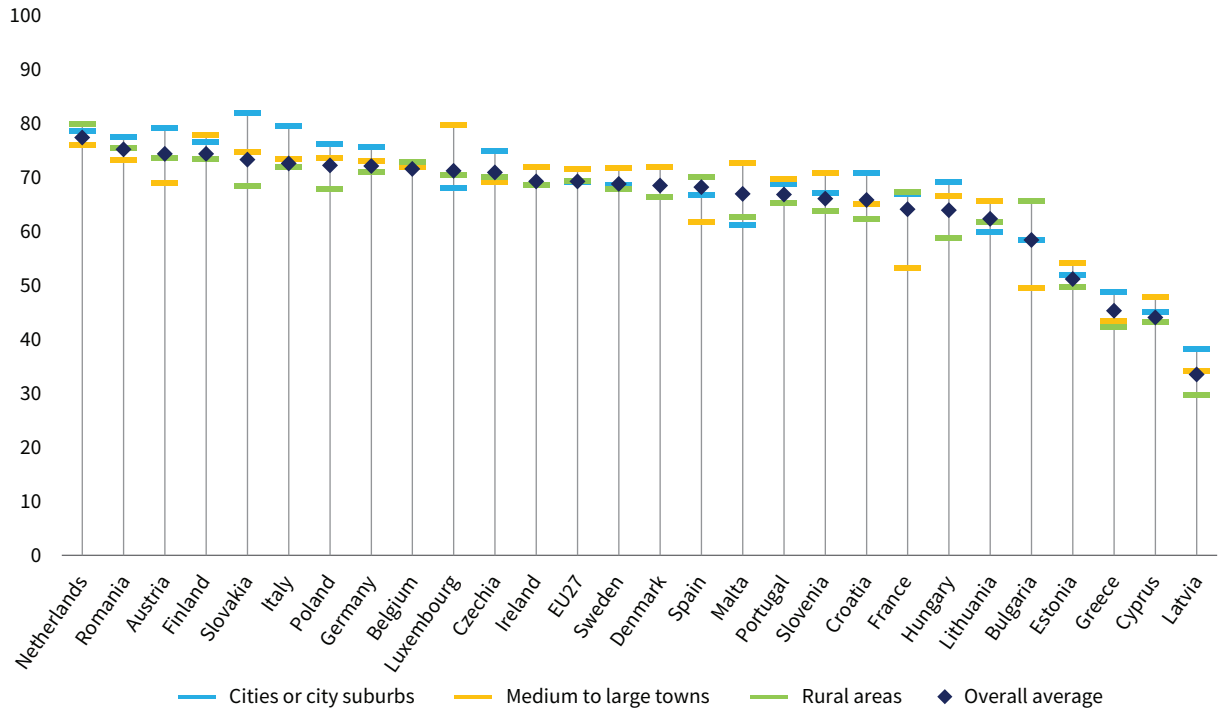
Note: *Member States are ordered by average across all urbanisation levels.*
Source: Living, working and COVID-19 *e-survey, round 5 (2022)*

Figure 30: Share of respondents who have attended a protest or demonstration, by Member State and degree of urbanisation (%)



Note: *Member States are ordered by average across all urbanisation levels.*
Source: Living, working and COVID-19 *e-survey, round 5 (2022)*

Figure 31: Share of respondents who have signed a petition, by Member State and degree of urbanisation (%)

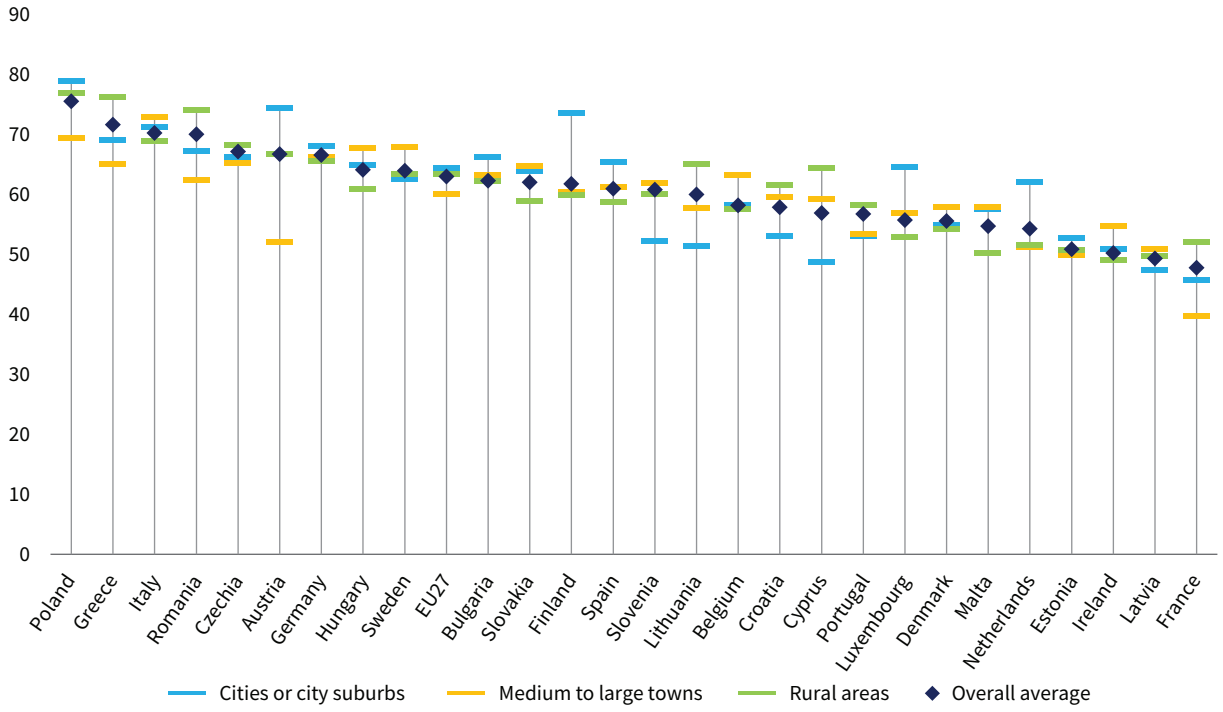


Note: *Member States are ordered by average across all urbanisation levels.*
Source: Living, working and COVID-19 *e-survey, round 5 (2022)*

According to the e-survey data, signing a petition seems to be a popular form of political engagement for cities' residents, who, on average across urbanisation levels, are most likely to report this type of political engagement (Figure 31). However, in some Member States, specifically Belgium, Bulgaria, France, the Netherlands and Spain, rural residents are most likely to have signed a petition.

On average across Europe, those living in cities are most likely to comment on an issue online (64.5%), followed by those living in rural areas (63.3%) and then towns (60.1%). At Member State level, in Austria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, France, Greece, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal and Romania, the share of rural residents commenting online is above the national average (Figure 32).

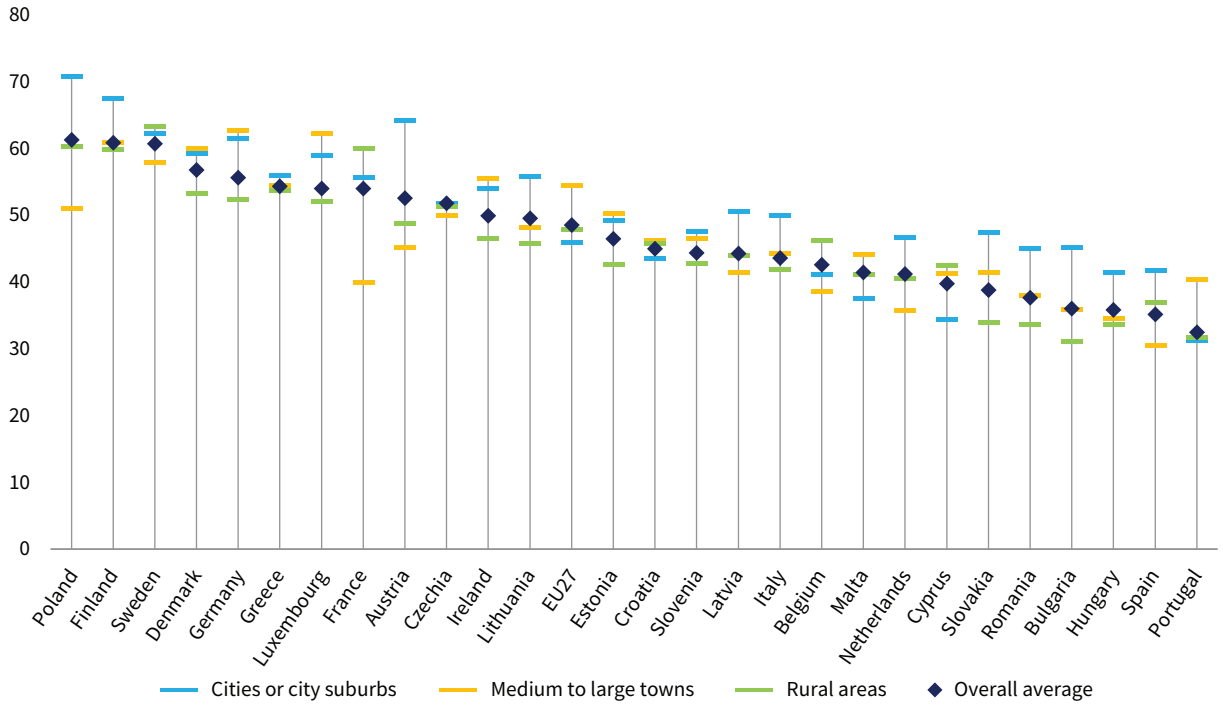
Figure 32: Share of respondents who have commented on an issue online, by Member State and degree of urbanisation (%)



Note: *Member States are ordered by average across all urbanisation levels.*
Source: Living, working and COVID-19 *e-survey, round 5 (2022)*

While residents in cities or city suburbs are more likely to boycott a product or a company than rural residents in 20 Member States (Figure 33), in Belgium, Cyprus, France and Sweden, rural residents are most likely to engage in this type of activity.

Figure 33: Share of respondents who have boycotted a product or service of a company, by Member State and degree of urbanisation (%)



Note: *Member States are ordered by average across all urbanisation levels.*
Source: Living, working and COVID-19 *e-survey, round 5 (2022)*

Differences in political participation by degree of urbanisation

The figures presented in the previous two subsections summarised average rates of political participation in each Member State, disaggregated by degree of urbanisation. Table 8 presents a summary for each activity across the entire EU.

According to the descriptive statistics presented in Table 8, there does not seem to be any set pattern of formal political participation across degrees of urbanisation. However, informal political participation appears to be more prevalent in cities and medium to large towns than in rural areas. Statistical techniques were used to confirm that it was valid to separate political participation activities into these broad groups.[12] Given this, the statistical model that is presented next uses just the two broad indicators: formal participation and informal participation.

Two models were run to investigate the link between political participation (formal and informal) and degree of urbanisation. In both cases, a logistic regression model was applied, where formal and informal political participation, respectively, were the dependent variables, and degree of urbanisation was the main explanatory variable. The models also account for several sociodemographic variables that may be related to political participation, specifically gender (men, women), educational level (primary, secondary, tertiary), employment status and household type (employed before/after the pandemic and number of people in the household), age, poverty (difficulty in making ends meet, no difficulty in making ends meet) and illness/health status. Unobserved factors at country level are also controlled for by including fixed effects.

The results, displayed in Figure 34, show no statistically significant differences in formal participation between the different degrees of urbanisation. However, the differences are statistically different when it comes to informal political participation. The results show that, the less urbanised an area is, the less inclined its inhabitants are to engage in boycotting or protesting, comment online or sign a petition. In line with the results of Kenny and Luca (2021), the differences in participation across degrees of urbanisation hold after controlling for age, employment status and household composition, health status, country and poverty status. This suggests that a different form of political engagement is present in cities, where citizens may be more engaged at grass-roots level than in less urbanised areas. City residents use their voice, on the streets and online, and their purchasing power to make their political views known.

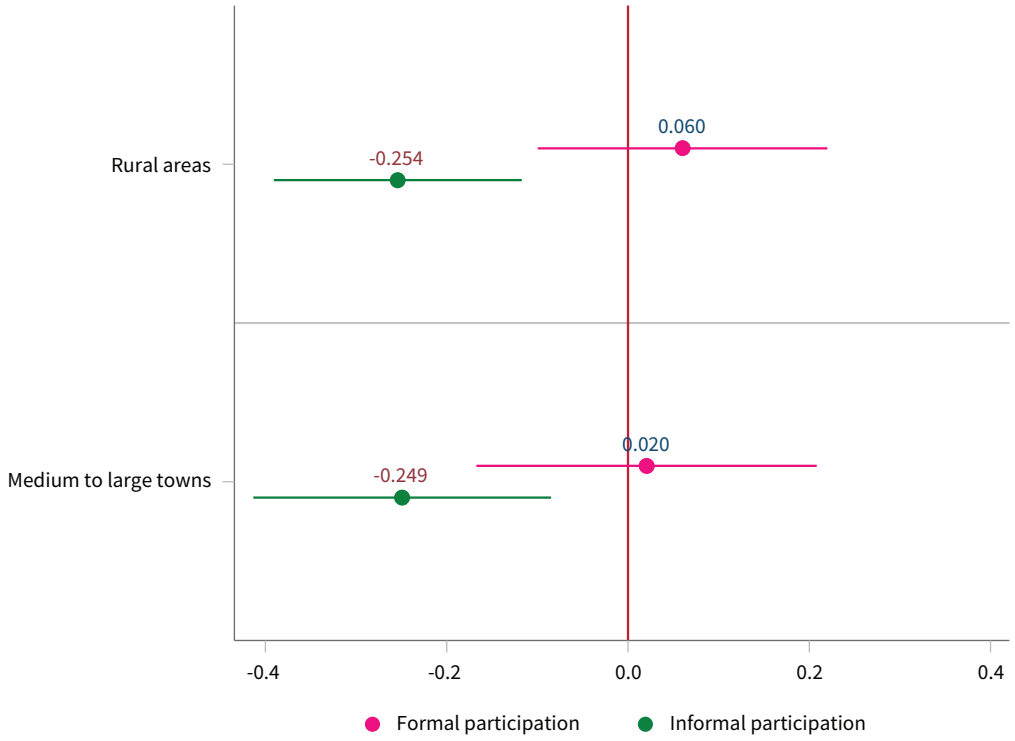
Table 8: Political participation indicators, by degree of urbanisation and political participation type, EU27, 2022 (%)

		Rural areas	Medium to large towns	Cities	EU average
Formal participation	Voted	88	86	88	85
	Attended a meeting	14	13	15	14
	Contacted a politician	19	17	18	18
Informal participation	Protested	20	22	30	23
	Signed a petition	69	72	69	69
	Commented online	63	60	64	63
	Boycotted a company or product	48	54	46	49

Note: *The two factors, formal and informal participation, were coded with 0 to 3 (or 4), where 0 indicates that the respondent disagrees with all statements included in the factor and 3 (or 4) indicates that the respondent agrees with all the statements.*
Source: Living, working and COVID-19 *e-survey, round 5 (2022)*

12 This was verified by the results of a polychoric factor analysis, with varimax rotation.

Figure 34: Logistic regression results for formal and informal political participation, by degree of urbanisation



Source: Living, working and COVID-19 *e-survey, round 5 (2022)*

Trust in institutions and satisfaction with democracy

Political trust can be described as 'confidence in institutions such as the executive, the legislature, the judiciary, the bureaucracy, and the police' (Uslaner, 2018; see also Eder and Katsanidou, 2015; Zmerli and van der Mee, 2017). According to Eurofound (2018b), trust in institutions is an indication of institutional performance and a precondition for effective governance. When citizens have confidence in institutions, they are more likely to accept their decisions and actions as legitimate. This legitimacy contributes to political stability, as it reduces the likelihood of social unrest, protests or challenges to the system. In turn, stability helps maintain social cohesion by providing a predictable and secure environment for individuals and communities (Warren, 1999). An environment characterised by high levels of trust facilitates the enactment of long-term policies, which in turn foster citizens' collaboration in a virtuous cycle of engaging in political activities such as voting and participating in political events, and paying taxes (Warren, 1999; Eurofound, 2018b). The recent literature examining trust in institutions in Europe identifies differences along the rural–urban divide, where less urbanised areas are characterised by lower levels of trust in institutions and satisfaction with democracy (Dijkstra et al, 2020; Kenny and Luca, 2021). Satisfaction with democracy is an important indicator because its absence can trigger instability and thus further polarisation (Stenner, 2005; Barca et al, 2012).

The e-survey questions that measure trust in institutions (the government and the EU) and satisfaction with democracy are used as indicators for the analysis in this section. They are summarised in Table 9, and are all measured on a scale of 1 to 10 (with higher numbers indicating higher levels of trust/satisfaction).

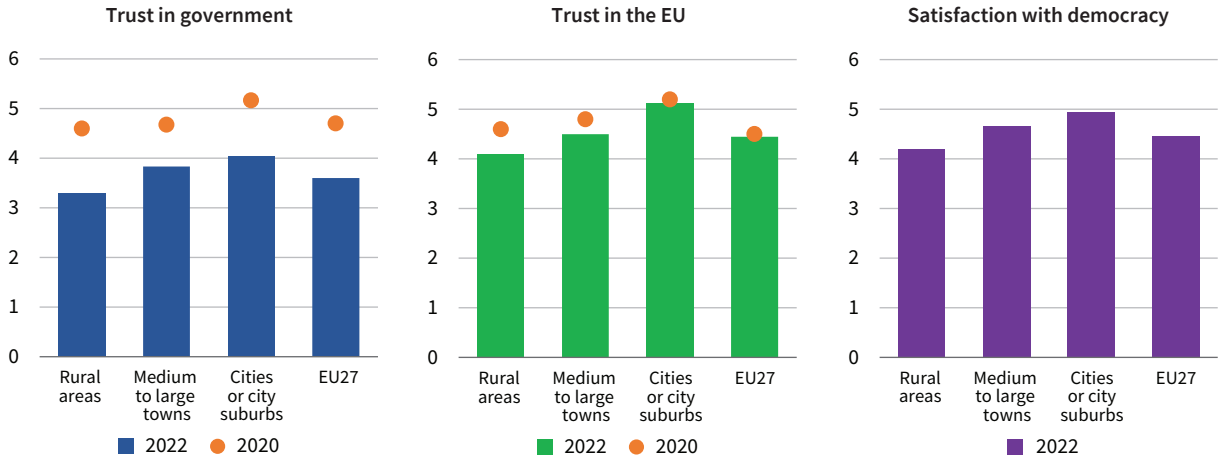
Table 9: Political participation variables in Eurofound's *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey

E-survey question	Values
On a scale of 1–10, how much do you personally trust your country's government?	1–10
On a scale of 1–10, how much do you personally trust the European Union?[13]	1–10
On the whole, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in your country?	1–10

Source: Living, working and COVID-19 *e-survey, round 5 (2022)*

13 The first two questions in this table have been rephrased slightly for conciseness.

Figure 35: Trust in government, trust in the EU, and satisfaction with democracy, by degree of urbanisation, EU27



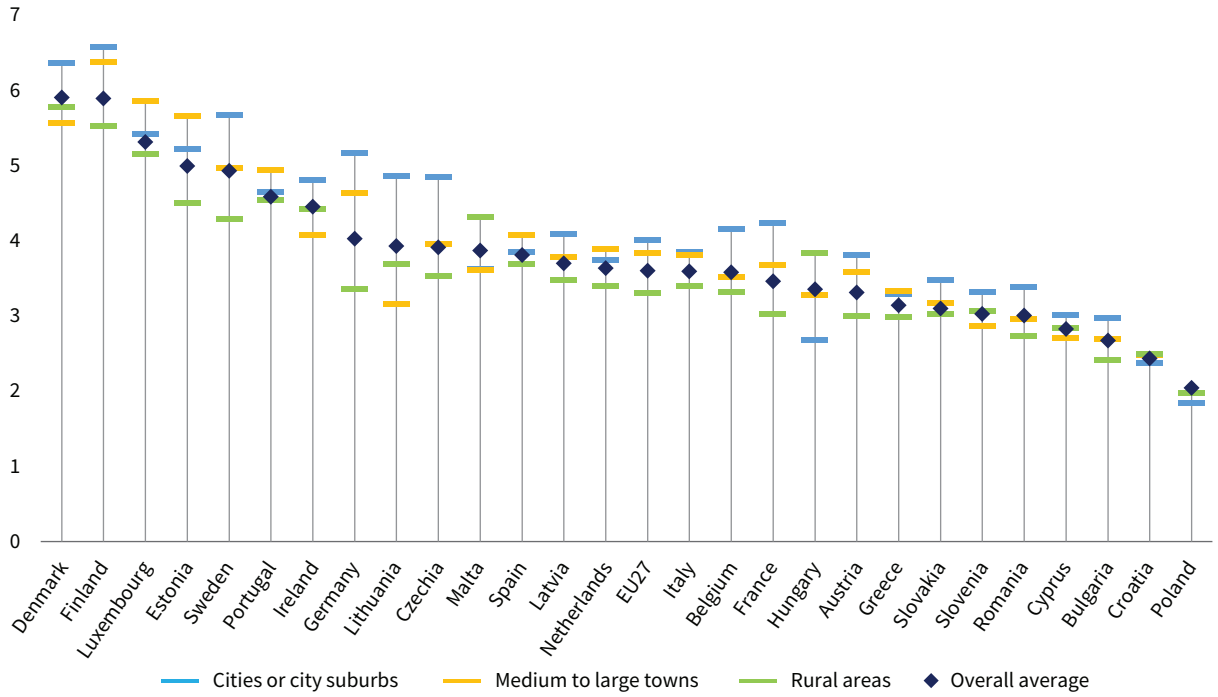
Note: *Scale ranges from 1 to 10, with 1 representing the lowest level of trust/satisfaction.*
Source: Living, working and COVID-19 *e-survey, round 5 (2022)*

The e-survey findings show that in 2022, for all three indicators, across the Member States the highest score is registered for city dwellers and the lowest for those living in rural areas (Figure 35).

Across the EU27, trust in government is low, at 3.6 out of 10 points. However, residents of cities and medium to large towns report slightly higher levels, at 4 and 3.8, respectively. These figures represent a decline from 2020, when trust in government was at an average of 5.2 in cities and 4.6 in medium to large towns. Trust in the EU is higher than that in governments, with a mean of 4.4. Again, residents of cities and medium to large towns have higher average levels of trust in the EU than those in more rural areas, at 5.1 and 4.5, respectively. Trust had declined since 2020, but by less than a single point on average. Rural areas saw the largest decline, from 4.6 to 4.1 points. Across Member States, satisfaction with democracy in rural areas is just below average levels of trust in the EU (4.2 versus 4.5), and is slightly higher for those who live in cities (4.9) and medium to large towns (4.7).

When the data are analysed by Member State (Figure 36), they reveal that trust in government is higher in cities than other areas for most countries, except Croatia, Hungary, Malta and Poland, where trust in government is higher in rural areas than other areas. In Estonia, Greece, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Spain, trust in government is highest in medium to large towns. The Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland and Sweden) record higher levels of trust in cities than the national averages, but in Finland and Sweden the average scores in rural areas are noticeably lower. The lowest levels of trust in government are recorded for cities in Croatia and Poland, rural areas in Bulgaria, Croatia and Poland, and medium to large towns in Cyprus.

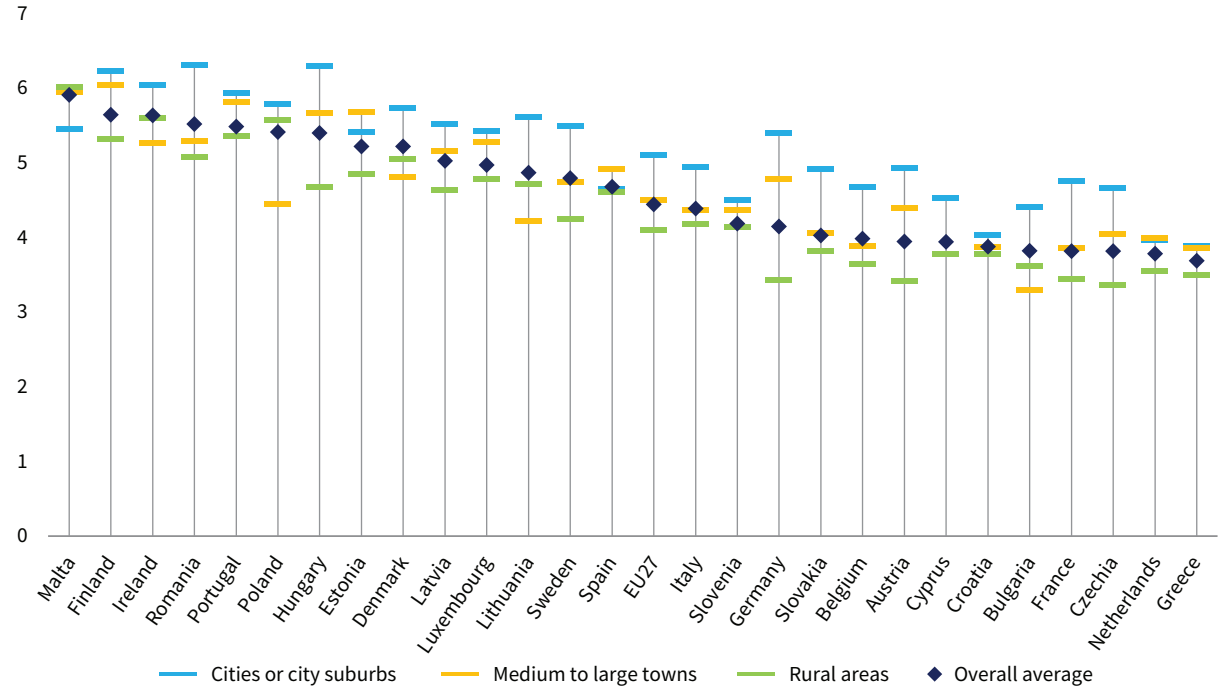
Figure 36: Trust in government, by Member State and degree of urbanisation (%)



Note: *For the analysis at Member State level, the 'open countryside' and 'village/small town' categories were merged to form the 'rural' category.*
Source: Living, working and COVID-19 *e-survey, round 5 (2022)*

With regard to levels of trust in the EU, residents of cities in Finland, Ireland and Romania, and residents of rural areas in Malta, for example, recorded well above average levels of trust in the EU (Figure 37). In 24 Member States, trust in the EU is stronger among residents of cities than among residents of other areas. Residents of medium to large towns in Estonia, Spain and the Netherlands record higher levels of trust in the

Figure 37: Trust in the EU, by Member State and degree of urbanisation (%)



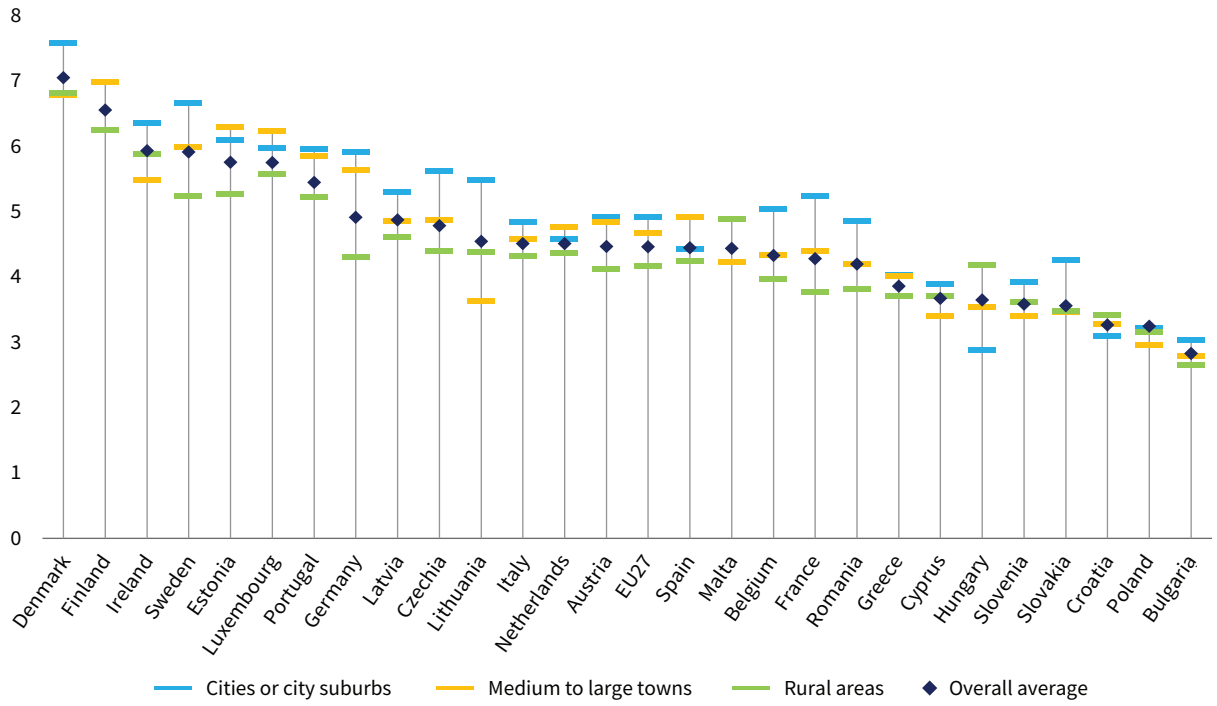
Note: *For the analysis at Member State level, the 'open countryside' and 'village/small town' categories were merged to form the 'rural' category.*
Source: Living, working and COVID-19 *e-survey, round 5 (2022)*

EU than those living in cities or in rural areas. Trust in the EU is lowest among residents of rural areas of Germany, Czechia, the Netherlands, France, Austria and Greece.

The rural–urban gap in levels of trust in the EU is highest in Germany, Hungary, Austria, France, Czechia and Sweden, where cities report the highest levels of trust.

In terms of satisfaction with democracy, residents of cities in Nordic countries and Ireland express the highest levels of satisfaction, while the satisfaction of city dwellers is lowest in Croatia, Bulgaria and Hungary (Figure 38). The countries reporting the largest rural–urban gap in this regard are Germany, Sweden, France and Czechia, where residents of cities are notably more satisfied with democracy than their rural counterparts. In contrast, the differences between cities and rural areas are minimal in Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, the Netherlands, Poland, Slovenia and Spain.

Figure 38: Satisfaction with democracy, by Member State and degree of urbanisation (%)



Note: *For the analysis at Member State level, the 'open countryside' and 'village/small town' categories were merged to form the 'rural' category.*
Source: Living, working and COVID-19 *e-survey, round 5 (2022)*

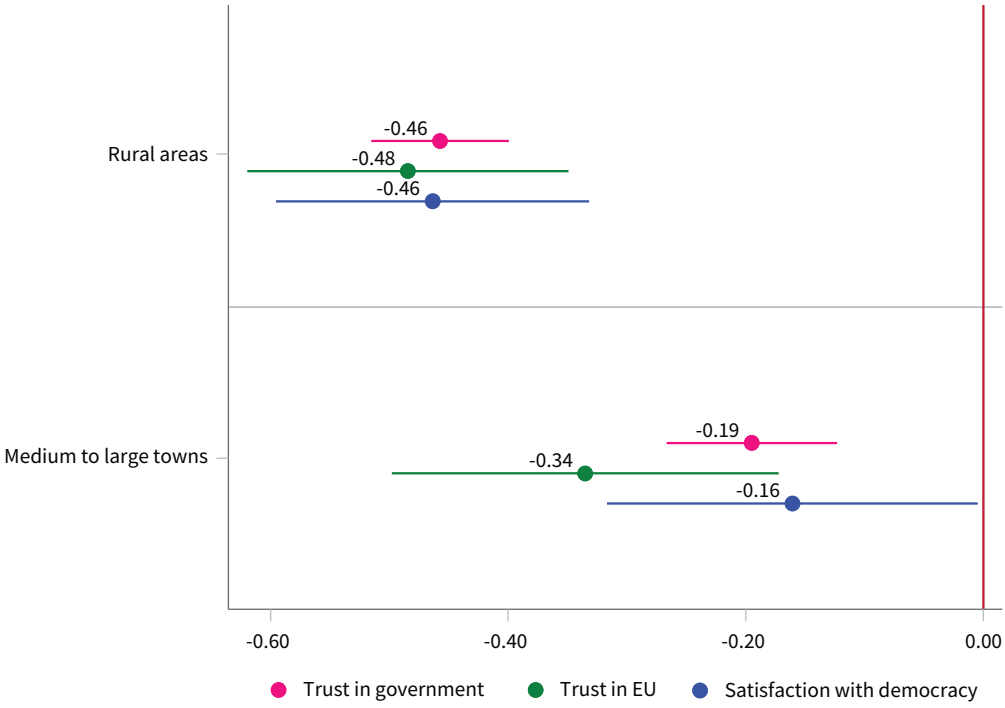
Once again, a logistic regression model was used to test for statistical differences in satisfaction and trust along the rural–urban spectrum. Three models were run, with trust in government, trust in the EU and satisfaction with democracy as the dependent variables and the degree of urbanisation as the main explanatory variable. The results of these estimations show that, even after controlling for age, employment status and household composition, health status, availability of savings and unobservable factors at country level (country fixed effects), there are indeed statistically significant differences in the levels of trust and satisfaction between areas at different degrees of urbanisation.

Statistically significantly lower levels of trust in institutions and satisfaction with democracy are observed in rural areas and, to a lesser extent, in medium to large towns, than in urban areas (Figure 39). Residents of rural areas are 0.46 times less likely to trust their government, 0.48 times less likely to trust the EU and 0.46 times less satisfied with democracy than urban dwellers.

Using data from the first round of the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey, which took place in 2020, changes in trust in institutions across time can be assessed. When the period is added to the model (including results for 2020 and 2022), the results show that over the two years of the pandemic there was an overall decline in the level of trust in government across all degrees of urbanisation. However, the differences in the levels of trust in government between urban and rural residents remain, and the difference between 2020 and 2022 is statistically significant. On a positive note, trust in the EU did not fall as much, with no statistically significant difference between the two years. Satisfaction with democracy was only measured in 2022 and, therefore, it is not possible to conduct a temporal analysis on this outcome.

These results build on earlier analyses based on a Eurobarometer survey (Scipioni and Tintori, 2021) that use data from 2018 to show that the rural–urban gap in trust in the EU is larger than that for trust in the government. The results of the current analysis, presented in Figure 39, show that the gap exists in both instances and is not statistically different between trust in the EU and trust in national governments. Interestingly, Scipioni and Tintori (2021) go a step further, considering electoral outcomes from 2014 to 2019. Again, they find evidence of a rural–urban divide, with urban voters being more likely than rural voters to favour parties that promote integration and liberal immigration policies.

Figure 39: Logistic regression results for trust in institutions and satisfaction with democracy, by degree of urbanisation, 2022



Source: Living, working and COVID-19 *e-survey, round 5 (2022)*

Summary of findings

The analysis of Eurofound's latest e-survey, *Living, working and COVID-19*, shows that city dwellers are more likely to participate in informal political actions, particularly protests and boycotts, than those in less urbanised areas. Residents of cities also have significantly higher levels of trust in government, trust in the EU and satisfaction with democracy. The results in this chapter draw the attention of policymakers to the potential weakening of social cohesion, when these levels of political participation and trust in government and institutions differ by degree of urbanisation.

Monitoring political participation, trust in institutions and satisfaction with democracy and addressing rural–urban gaps should be a high political priority. However, it is worth noting that political polarisation along the rural–urban divide, at EU level, is not very pronounced. For example, there are no significant differences in terms of citizens' likelihood of voting or participating in other formal political activities. This bodes well for the future of cohesion in the EU. However, to achieve such cohesion, it is essential that trust in institutions and satisfaction with democracy recover from the low levels reached during the COVID-19 pandemic.

6 Fostering development in all regions

Providing access to high-quality public services for all Europeans is a key component of European territorial cohesion policy (European Commission, 2022); nevertheless, the lack of access to high-quality services in rural areas is well recognised (European Parliament, 2022). High-quality service provision, including water, sanitation, transport connectivity, healthcare, childcare and education, is necessary to achieve a high level of well-being in rural regions and to boost the attractiveness of rural regions to newcomers and to investors (OECD, 2020). The European Pillar of Social Rights sets out 20 principles that Member States should aim to achieve in order to build a strong social Europe. Included in Chapter III of the pillar are principles affirming the rights to affordable, high-quality early childhood education and care (principle 11), adequate activation support for unemployed people from public employment services (principle 13), healthcare (principle 16), long-term care (principle 18), and high-quality essential services, including water and sanitation, energy, transport, financial services and digital communications (principle 20). These principles apply to all areas of Europe, regardless of the degree of urbanisation. However, declining populations in rural areas are making it increasingly challenging, and costly, to provide these services in areas outside urban centres.

Rural–urban gaps in access to services

People living in rural areas must travel considerably greater distances to access essential services.[14] For example, in cities across Europe, the average distance to the nearest primary school is less than 2 km, but in rural areas it is 4.8 km. For secondary schools, the average distance to travel remains less than 2 km for residents of cities and increases to 10.8 km for those living in rural areas. These gaps in access may increase over time, as, in some rural regions, schools are closing or being amalgamated due to declining numbers of pupils (see, for example, the case study presented in Box 2). For healthcare and public transport, the pattern is similar. People living in urban areas of Europe need to travel an average distance of 2.4 km to access healthcare services; this increases to 14.4 km for those living in rural areas. For people living in rural areas that are located far from cities, the average is 22.1 km. The average distance those living in urban areas need to travel to reach a train station is 6.3 km, but this increases to 11.3 km for rural residents.

Box 2: Mansfeld-Südharz – Economic and demographic challenges of a former copper mining county in Germany

Of utmost concern in terms of rural–urban polarisation is the issue of rural depopulation and its consequences for the growth and long-term sustainability of rural areas. Many rural, and indeed urban, areas of Europe are experiencing population decline driven by a range of factors. The case of Mansfeld-Südharz county,[15] in the former East Germany, is interesting because of the severity of depopulation and decline in opportunities in the area. The 2022 edition of the Future Atlas – comparing how well prepared Germany's 400 districts and cities are for future growth and change – ranked Mansfeld-Südharz in last place, highlighting the severity of the problems in the county (Prognos, 2022). However, while Mansfeld-Südharz represents an extreme case, it is a county with many parallels throughout the east of the EU's largest Member State.

Germany's reunification process triggered a particularly strong trend of outward migration from Mansfeld-Südharz towards western parts of the country. It has been predominantly young people who have moved in search of new opportunities, resulting in a sharp drop in the fertility rate. The outward migration of young people has also led to a decline in economic competitiveness and an increase in unemployment. Compounding the problem of outward migration, Mansfeld-Südharz was heavily reliant on the copper mining industry, which collapsed in 1989. Today, the profile of companies in the area is largely characterised by small and medium-sized

14 Data on distances travelled to reach essential infrastructure and services for rural and urban areas are available from the EU's Rural Observatory. The discussion of distance to reach services is restricted to those services for which distance data are available.

15 The authors are grateful for ESPON's input in highlighting the case of Mansfeld-Südharz; this short case study draws heavily on its much more in-depth analysis (ESPON, 2020).

enterprises and, while unemployment rates have stabilised in recent years, employment opportunities have never recovered from the gap caused by this large-scale deindustrialisation. A second, albeit smaller, deindustrialisation process is on the cards with the closure of the coal mining industry in the area imminent in accordance with the national plan to phase out brown-coal mining in Germany by 2038.

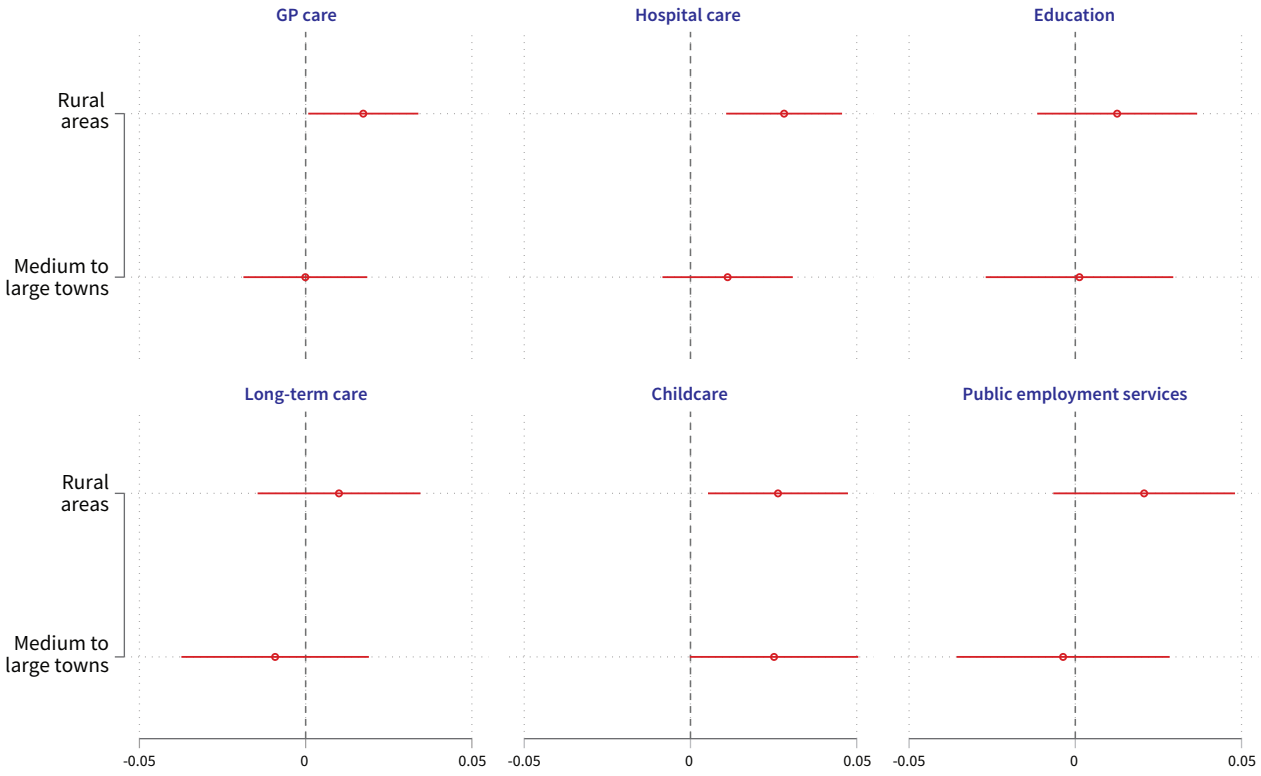
Alongside this decline in population and economic opportunities, there has been a decline in the provision of certain public services (ESPON, 2020). Many primary and secondary schools in the county were closed or amalgamated. Among the schools that closed was a technical school, the loss of which has had significant ramifications for the development of human capital and the attractiveness of the region to investors. Broadband access is also well below the national average, with only 63% of households having a broadband connection, compared with a national average connection rate of 93%.

The difficulties faced by Mansfeld-Südharz are widely recognised. Large proportions of EU structural funds have been allocated to the region, particularly through the European Regional Development Fund. EU funds have been combined with national funds, and these funding commitments are also reflected at local administrative level. While there is some evidence that the economic situation has stabilised (e.g. the unemployment rate has stopped rising), the older-than-average population, low fertility rates and lack of new employment opportunities suggest that these investments will have a limited effect. Reasons for this may include a lack of administrative and financial capacity to absorb the funding and to set projects in motion. At local level, policy fatigue may also be at play and there may be a degree of scepticism regarding projects proposed by external parties. This highlights the importance of project buy-in from local actors and bolstering the capacity of local administrators to absorb funds and implement projects.

In addition to the distance to such essential services, the quality of the services provided matters. Data from Eurofound's *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey show that, after taking account of respondents' income, education, age and Member State, rural residents are more likely to rate the quality of healthcare services in their country as poor (a score of 3 or less on a 10-point scale). This is true of the quality of general practitioners (GPs), family doctors or health centres and of the quality of hospital services or medical specialist services. Furthermore, those living in the countryside or small towns and villages are more likely to perceive the quality of childcare services to be poor. There was no statistical difference in the quality of education systems, long-term care services or public employment services by degree of urbanisation (Figure 40). And, across all types of services considered, there is no evidence of a significant gap in the perception of service quality between towns and cities/city suburbs.

According to research by Kompil et al (2022), three main factors drive the decline of service provision in rural areas. Firstly, public and private services are increasing in size to benefit from economies of scale and reduce operating costs and increase profit. Small-scale services in rural areas are more costly to run and, consequentially, more likely to close. Secondly, during the financial crisis of 2007–2008, the austerity measures adopted by governments across Europe in response to fiscal constraints resulted in the consolidation of many public services. Thirdly, the user base for services in rural areas is declining due to rural depopulation and population ageing, which makes services in these areas more costly to provide. Kompil et al (2022) highlight that, because this third driver is likely to persist, it is necessary to find new and more innovative ways of providing services to those living in rural areas to adhere to the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights relating to access to services. In some instances, promoting online access to services and investing in

Figure 40: Likelihood of perceiving services as poor quality, by degree of urbanisation



Notes: *Graphs show, for each outcome, the marginal effects and confidence intervals associated with living in the countryside or a small village (rural area) or a medium to large town, relative to the base category of cities and city suburbs. In total, six regressions are plotted. Each regression includes controls for self-reported ability to make ends meet (as a proxy of income), education and age, and the Member State in which the respondent is located. Models are estimated using a logit model with survey weights applied.*
Source: *Authors' calculations, based on the* Living, working and COVID-19 *e-survey*

digital skills can present new opportunities for rural areas to flourish. The case study of Ciugud in Romania (Box 3) is an excellent example of how the power of digital technology can be harnessed in rural villages.

Specific examples of innovative policies to ensures access to health and long-term care for older Europeans in rural and remote areas are highlighted in the next section of this chapter.

Box 3: Ciugud – Innovation and growth in a 'smart village' in rural Romania

In 2017, the European Commission launched an EU action for 'smart villages'. The concept of smart villages is being used to help Member States combat rural decline (Juan and McEldowney, 2021). The action provides a novel path towards economic growth, by encouraging people to find innovative solutions to problems such as depopulation, urban migration and declining service provision. Smart villages focus on mobilising solutions offered by digital technologies, for example to enhance public services such as public lighting and waste management. For agricultural communities, the solutions include the remote monitoring of crops and precision farming.

Ciugud, a commune in Romania, has embraced the concept of smart villages and has even been ahead of the trend (Iordache, 2022). The commune has been transformed by the judicious use of the EU's structural funds. Indeed, as Iordache (2022) outlines, Ciugud stands out as a municipality with one of the highest rates of absorption of EU funds. It is in a country where EU funds have generally been poorly absorbed: from 2014 to 2020, only 59% of funds made available through the European Structural and Investment Funds were used. Before Romania even joined the EU, Ciugud made use of pre-accession funds of €100,000 to invest in software and computers for local public administration. To date, the commune has attracted over €30 million, which has been invested in digitisation, infrastructure, green energy, cultural facilities and tourism.

A key example of the forward-looking investment of funds was the construction of Romania's first 'smart school' (Euractiv, 2021). The school is equipped with sensors to continuously monitor factors such as temperature, CO_2 emissions and ventilation. All pupils are equipped with tablets, digital books and manuals, and a cloud space. In addition, webcams have been installed in classrooms to ensure that pupils who are absent have the opportunity to learn. Prior to the construction of the new smart school, children used to attend a school in Alba Iulia, the capital city of the county.

This focus on digital solutions for citizens has expanded beyond education, with the creation of digital payment solutions for local taxes and fees. There are also self-pay stations in each of the commune's villages for those that need them. Through the innovative use of digital solutions, Ciugud is ensuring that citizens have a positive experience interacting with local authorities despite reduced human resources (The Diplomat Bucharest, 2022). Free Wi-Fi is available in public spaces, and a 'smart' car park produces electricity using photovoltaic panels to power the administrative headquarters of the municipality and to charge electric cars.

Ciugud has not turned its back on more traditional sources of rural employment and growth, including tourism. In 2017, a large golf course (the largest in the country) and accompanying resort were opened. In addition, the local government plans to develop the tourism industry around the natural resource of the nearby Mureș river (Euractiv, 2021). Opportunities for employment in industry have also been ensured by the development of an industrial zone, where many Romanian and foreign companies are located. The combination of the investments by the local government have resulted in the creation of over 1,000 jobs (Iordache, 2022).

Thanks to judicious and innovative investments, Ciugud is an attractive place to live. It has bucked the trend of outward migration that so many rural villages have seen. Many citizens who had left the area years ago are now returning. Alongside them, newcomers are arriving. In 2000, the population of Ciugud was approximately 2,600; today it has an additional 1,000 residents (Euractiv, 2021).

Policies to address access to health services and long-term care for older Europeans

Rural and remote areas across Europe are especially vulnerable to demographic ageing and, as a result, have lower population densities and reduced working-age populations. In addition, residents often have to travel long distances to reach essential services as a result of geographical isolation, which is particularly relevant in mountainous or island regions. The establishment and operation of public health and long-term care services in rural areas often incurs greater costs, and residents often have difficulties in accessing these services. There is evidence that these are issues even in countries with highly developed health and long-term care systems. In Denmark, the density of hospitals per 100,000 inhabitants in rural areas is half of the national average, while in Finland it is at least three times lower (WHO, undated). Alternative ways to enhance access to health and long-term care services, such as telehealth initiatives, may be hampered by limited broadband connections in such regions (European Commission, 2020a). Austerity and budgetary cuts to public services have added to the difficulties in accessing services in rural areas (Eurofound, 2014) and were especially evident in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. In these circumstances, it is perhaps unsurprising that rural areas exhibit poorer quality of care and worse health outcomes (Kompil et al, 2022).

Besides supply-side barriers to access, rural areas are also characterised, as discussed in Chapter 2, by a lower average income per capita and a lower percentage of highly educated people. Older people in rural areas are therefore not only at increased risk of needing care – both income and education are social determinants of health – but are also less likely to be able to afford health and long-term care services. The predominance of agricultural activities, seasonal work, informal economic activities (e.g. production for self-consumption outside the market) and lower levels of female employment also render older rural populations less likely to be covered by health insurance or other social benefits (ILO, 2015).

Barriers to accessing health and long-term care for older people can be categorised into four main groups (European Commission, 2021b): awareness, availability, physical accessibility and affordability. Awareness refers to being informed of opportunities to access health and long-term care; availability measures the extent to which resources (e.g. workforce, technologies) are in place to provide adequate and timely care (including opening days and opening hours of care facilities); physical accessibility includes how easy it is to travel to health and long-term care facilities; and affordability pertains to the direct and indirect costs (e.g. transport) associated with accessing health and long-term care.

These challenges are recognised in a number of key EU policy documents. The EU's long-term vision for rural areas (European Commission, 2021b) highlights inequalities in access to healthcare in rural areas as a

key challenge in addressing the consequences of demographic ageing. The EU also identified the need for nearby health and care services, improved broadband connection for e-health services, and improved living conditions and career prospects for health and care professionals in rural areas in its document *A long-term vision for the EU's rural areas – Towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040* (European Commission, 2021b).

Against this backdrop, this overview highlights public policies and initiatives at different levels of government that aim to increase access to health and long-term care for older rural populations in Europe. To this end, policies and initiatives to improve access are described and examples of good practices in addressing each of the four main barriers to accessing services mentioned above are analysed.

The scope of this mapping exercise includes health and long-term care provided to older people who, as a result of mental or physical frailty, or disability over an extended period of time, depend on help to carry out activities of daily living (which include walking, feeding and toileting) or to carry out instrumental activities of daily living (including managing finances, shopping and meal preparation). These people may also need permanent nursing care. Given this, the analysis covers healthcare services that are mostly used by older people, such as those linked to chronic conditions and primary care. It does not, however, include strictly social services such as meals on wheels or socialisation activities (e.g. meeting other individuals).

Availability

Areas with lower population densities are hampered in their capacity to achieve economies of scale, that is, the per capita costs of offering a service become too large if the number of users is small. This happens, for example, because the costs of expensive medical equipment are fixed (and the equipment may be needed by a large or small number of patients), and because a larger number of patients allows greater specialisation of staff, with higher productivity levels. Combined with the pressure to increase efficiency in hospitals, particularly reinforced in the context of austerity, this rise in costs per person as the population declines started a trend towards reducing the number of hospital beds, and the closure or merging of hospitals that do not meet certain criteria for costs or volume of patients or procedures. Efficiency concerns have therefore also had an impact on the supply of health and long-term care services in rural settings.

Population ageing is also reflected in the increased retirement rate of medical doctors and other health and care professionals in many European countries: as the workforce ages, retiring professionals are not all replaced by younger professionals. This is a more acute problem in rural areas, where staff numbers are already limited. A few country examples illustrate this. In Estonia, France and Slovenia, the number of medical doctors in remote rural areas is approximately 2.5 per 1,000 inhabitants, compared with around 4 per 1,000 inhabitants for metropolitan areas, while figures for Latvia are 2 per 1,000 and 6 per 1,000, respectively (OECD and European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies, 2021a). According to the same source, even in Sweden – the EU Member State with the highest number of medical doctors per 1,000 inhabitants in remote rural areas and the lowest discrepancy with metropolitan areas – remote rural areas have 3.5 medical doctors per 1,000 inhabitants, compared with just short of 5 per 1,000 inhabitants in metropolitan areas. In addition, working in smaller hospitals may be considered less prestigious or hamper career prospects. Consequently, rural settings that do not possess any large hospitals are less able to attract and retain health and care workers. If the region is lacking in other services (e.g. childcare and education services), this adds to its inability to attract workers. For example, in Nógrád county in northern Hungary, 55.6% of the total population (approximately 200,000 inhabitants) live in zones where the local medical practice is vacant.[16]

In this context, many initiatives in Europe aim to improve the availability of health and social care services in non-urban areas. The following broad types of policies or measures have been identified: those dealing with the availability of health and care staff; those seeking to enhance the efficiency of health and long-term care delivery and thus enabling care to be provided to a greater number of individuals using the same resources (e.g. through the reassignment of tasks and the creation of professional networks); and those involving direct provision of care specifically in rural settings (e.g. through the direct employment of informal carers).

16 Information obtained from personal communication with a national expert.

Financial incentives to attract health and care workers to rural areas

Among the measures to attract health and care workers to rural areas is the payment of wage premiums to medical doctors and other health workers in the public health system or the implementation of above-average wage increases for such workers (Danish et al, 2019).

The Latvian Ministry of Health, as part of a European Social Fund project, active from December 2017 to December 2023, created financial incentives to attract healthcare personnel, including medical doctors, to work in regions outside Riga (OECD and European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies, 2021a). In the same vein, the French government created several financial incentives to attract private practice physicians to pre-defined areas with a low density of medical practitioners (Or and Gandré, 2021). In both cases, the initiatives included one-off payments and monthly accommodation allowances, as well as programmes encouraging the replacement of retiring doctors with newcomers.

In Italy, GPs and some specialists receive an additional payment of €5 per consultation in rural areas, while in Denmark some municipalities have provided clinic buildings for free or allowed medical doctors to own more than one private practice in rural areas (Tikkanen et al, 2020).

Non-financial initiatives to attract health and care workers to rural areas

Other policies aim to provide non-financial incentives to retain health and care workers in rural areas. These include, for example, selection and admission rules in medical schools that give preference to medical students who have a rural background or who commit to practising in remote areas after they graduate. In Germany, the recently created Masterplan for Medical Studies 2020 (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung, 2020), applied since 2020, allows federal states to award up to 10% of medical school places to applicants who plan to undertake work for up to 10 years after completing their studies in general medicine in underserved rural regions. Since 2015, medical universities in Latvia have been expected to give priority to applicants who have undertaken to practise in a rural area (OECD and European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies, 2021a).

There is evidence to show that if medical students have contact with rural practices – for example, through learning from physicians who share their experiences working there or visiting rural health facilities – or study in programmes with some rural-focused content, they will be more likely to want to work in those underserved areas (Danish et al, 2019). If medical schools themselves are located in rural areas, this too may increase the chances of graduates remaining in those areas (OECD, 2016). Several countries have adapted university programmes to highlight the importance of rural medicine. The University of Magdeburg in Germany created an elective clinical course on rural medicine for its undergraduate programme. As part of the course, students spend two weekends in a small village of 140 inhabitants in a relatively remote region to learn about work and life in the countryside. They take part in activities, including discussions with rural practitioners from the region (Holst et al, 2015). In France, according to the Health Law of 24 July 2019 (*Loi n° 2019–774 du 24 juillet 2019 relative à l'organisation et à la transformation du système de santé*), medical students must complete an internship lasting at least one semester primarily in a region identified as having a low population density.

Reorganisation of medical tasks and new providers of care

To compensate for the reduction in the availability of doctors, particularly GPs, some initiatives have sought to transfer some functions and tasks to other health professionals.

The prescribing rights of nurses have been expanded in several European countries. The Netherlands has been at the forefront of this initiative. Nurse specialists with a master's degree in advanced practice nursing study pharmacotherapy as part of their curriculum and, under a 2018 law (following temporary legislation enacted in 2012), have full prescribing rights within their specialty (Maier, 2019). They have also been allowed, since 2011, to perform procedures such as cardioversion/defibrillation, catheterisation and endoscopy (European Commission, 2019). In France, a new profession – medical assistant – introduced under the national strategy *Ma Santé 22* was created to allow doctors to forgo administrative tasks and focus on the medical aspects of care. Physicians with a medical assistant are expected to increase the number of patients they attend to. Some mobile health units created to address shortages of GPs in rural settings also rely on nurses to carry out certain medical tasks (see the section 'Physical accessibility').

The role of pharmacists has also been extended beyond the distribution of medicines. In many countries, they provide health screening tests, support for smoking cessation, seasonal vaccinations and chronic disease management programmes (Alcimed, 2020). The concept of 'pharmaceutical care' was endorsed by the Council of Europe (in resolution CM/Res(2020)3) as 'the process through which a pharmacist co-operates with a patient and other professionals in designing, implementing and monitoring a therapeutic plan that will produce specific therapeutic outcomes for the patient'. Pharmacies may also act as a first line of contact with the healthcare system for people with dementia and their carers. Alzheimer Austria developed a project in which pharmacy staff received training that enabled them to counsel and help people affected by dementia, including by organising support groups. The pilot project was applied both in Vienna – a completely urban

context – and in Lower Austria, which has vast swathes of rural areas. Pharmacies in rural areas are particularly important because they enjoy high levels of trust and have regular contact with customers (Heimerl et al, 2020). In the Netherlands, on the other hand, GPs in rural areas may act as pharmacists as well (Tikkanen et al, 2020).

Professional networks and integrated care

One difficulty in working in remote areas comes from the risk of having no other health and long-term care facilities nearby. Healthcare professionals in those settings tend to work long on-call hours because of the absence of other facilities and staff, and they may lack access to other colleagues with whom to exchange views on diagnoses. Professional networks increase their opportunities for consultation and professional development. Healthcare reforms that started in 2014 in Estonia and Romania involved the creation of hospital networks between regional hospitals and smaller, county-level hospitals. These networks share health professionals and technologies so that broader geographical areas are covered by specialist care services (Dubas-Jakóbczyk et al, 2020). Professional networks of providers can also take advantage of digital technology. The Greek National Telemedicine Network connects health centres in the Aegean Islands, which serve mostly an aged population, with hospitals in Athens. Thanks to cameras and diagnostic equipment installed in the health centres, the network provides people in more remote areas with access to specialists who are in the capital. There is a plan to expand the network so that people can access services from their own homes (European Commission, 2020b).

Professional cooperation may also take the form of multidisciplinary teams working together. In Ireland, a primary care team usually consists of GPs, nurses, home helps, social care professionals, and healthcare assistants (HSE, undated). All team members work in a coordinated way to provide the appropriate care to patients. In Austria, the 2016 healthcare reform started with the implementation of primary healthcare centres, many of which are in rural settings. For example, a health centre in Haslach an der Mühl, a rural municipality in Upper Austria, was having difficulties in replacing retired GPs. By bringing together several health professionals, including nurses, physiotherapists and dieticians, the work of care delivery is shared, and the active promotion of health is better accomplished. The Haslach health centre aims to meet the needs of people by taking on board regular feedback from a citizens' council (Goodwin-Hawkins, 2020).

A large international project based in Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Italy, but with pilot projects in eight other European regions, promoted the coordination of the work of patients, relatives, social providers and healthcare workers. One of the pilot regions was Aragon in Spain, which has a very sparse and aged population. The EU-funded SmartCARE project promoted the use of ICT to facilitate communication between all those involved in health service delivery, for telemonitoring and for transmitting data through mobile devices in the patients' homes to a health platform (European Commission, 2021c). In the mainly rural municipality of Kubrat in Bulgaria, the 'Home care for the elderly' project, co-funded by the EU, integrated health and social care services, including psychological support, in the home environment for people with physical limitations (Helpdesk, undated).

Green care farms

Green care farms are a type of initiative that is specific to rural settings, combining care services with agricultural activities. Green care farms can be used with different target groups, for example older people, particularly those with dementia. Green care farms offer day care or 24-hour nursing home care in home-like, small-scale environments. Their focus is on integrating service users into their community and involving them in meaningful activities. Green care farms benefit from an additional source of income by selling the farms' traditional products. In some countries, the farms are already well developed (e.g. Belgium and the Netherlands), while in others they are still being promoted. In Italy, green care farms have been legally recognised since 2015 (with the implementation of Law 141/2015), but there is a need for better coordination between care farms and traditional social service and healthcare service agencies, which are governed by regional laws (Galardi et al, 2022). In Poland, the initial projects of green care farms, offering six-month-long stays, were implemented in the Kujawsko-Pomorskie region, with funding from the EU. In 2018, the first All-Poland Congress of Care Farms was organised, with the aim of expanding the concept to the whole country. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the care functions of these farms were suspended (Kamiński and Marcysiak, 2021).

Direct hiring of informal carers

A different way to enhance the availability of care services in rural areas involves the hiring of existing informal carers as professionals by local municipalities or regional governments. These initiatives are confined mostly to rural areas and aim to cover gaps in access to formal services in areas where their provision may not otherwise be economically feasible and where professional services may therefore be insufficient or unavailable. In Sweden, this scheme is also known as a carer allowance (*anhöriganställning*) and is subject to an assessment of needs by the municipality. Eligibility rules (for example, whether close relatives can be employed) and compensation levels vary across municipalities. Since the mid-2000s, the number of municipalities providing this option and the number of

informal carers hired through the scheme has been reduced,[17] as the scheme is considered a measure of last resort that could 'entrap' women in low-paying occupations.[18] Moreover, the measure seems to have been provided particularly to people of migrant backgrounds, which may also signal difficulties in mainstream care services reaching those population groups. In Austria, a similar scheme is in place in Burgenland, with the income and working hours of employed informal carers dependent on the level of need of the cared-for person and a means test.[19]

Physical accessibility

The dispersion of the population and the long average distances to care services that characterise rural areas can result in unmet needs when the costs of travel, and the time associated with it, are too high. For older people, these costs can be greater if they do not own a car or are unable to drive. A number of solutions have been implemented by national governments to enhance the physical accessibility of health and long-term care services: mobile units that take necessary care services directly to older people; initiatives dedicated to transporting older people to health and long-term care services; telehealth initiatives that allow care to be provided without the physical presence of a medical doctor; and, finally, the decentralisation of care services, in which the responsibility for providing certain services or tasks is devolved to local providers (as discussed in the section 'Availability').

Mobile units

One solution to enhance access to health and long-term care services is to move services closer to rural populations using mobile units so that people do not need to travel to obtain the services, as care providers visit them according to a predetermined timetable. This type of initiative can already be found in many European countries. Mobile units can be employed to deliver a broad range of services, such as healthcare for patients with severe mental disorders in rural Greece (Peritogiannis et al, 2022) and dental care across the border regions between Bulgaria and Romania (European Commission, 2016). In Portugal, the National Health Service delivers primary healthcare in the more rural and geographically isolated parts of the country with the help of mobile units (OECD and European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies, 2021b). This highly versatile model of care is also used by local governments and civil society organisations in different contexts. For example, the Mobile Health Service project, run by the Santa Casa da Misericórdia (a faith-based non-profit organisation) in Marco de Canaveses, Portugal, with several partners including the local government, helps older people to remain in their home environment and provides training to informal caregivers. Its multidisciplinary team combines nursing care, pharmacy, nutrition, psychology, social work, occupational therapy and physiotherapy (Misericórdia Marco Canaveses, undated).

In Finland, the 'Mallu car' takes nursing and pharmacy services to remote regions where they do not exist (Euromontana, 2017). A minivan equipped to serve as a healthcare centre travels across nine mountainous municipalities offering a range of health services. It uses technology that allows for real-time consulting with more specialised medical staff working at a healthcare centre in a city, if needed. In Hungary, the 'Taking screening examinations to place' initiative also relies on mobile labs mounted on buses to perform screening tests (e.g. mouth cancer screening, cardiovascular risk screening) in small settlements. Mobile health centres on buses have also been created as part of the Rural Settlements Development Programme – Hungary's most important national programme tackling poverty. Initiated in February 2019, it targets the 300 least developed small settlements in the country. These mobile health centres aim to address GP shortages by having nurses perform tests and a medical doctor available through video call to address more serious needs.[20] In addition, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Hungarian army operated five buses to help vaccinate the inhabitants of remote settlements.[21]

In northern Hesse, Germany, the Medibus offers family doctor, nursing and counselling services, and includes a laboratory and a small treatment room (KVHessen, undated). In 2021, after the first two years of the project, developed by Kassenärztliche Vereinigung Hessen – an association of Hessian physicians – and Deutsche Bahn, the Hessian Ministry of Social Affairs and Integration started supporting the Medibus financially.

Greece has set up a number of mobile mental health units in rural areas and the islands (Peritogiannis et al, 2022). These units house multidisciplinary teams that provide outpatient mental health care in remote rural areas, while also engaging with local stakeholders (e.g. teachers, police). These teams routinely travel to designated facilities (e.g. rural public healthcare centres) to provide outpatient care. They target the whole population but in most settings the majority of beneficiaries are older people. A number of studies have shown the cost-effectiveness of this solution and its ability to reduce hospitalisations.

17 In some municipalities, care providers themselves can also hire informal carers as professional carers for the relative who is in need of care.

18 Information obtained from personal communication with a national expert.

19 See https://www.pflegeserviceburgenland.at/

20 Information obtained from personal communication with a national expert.

21 Information obtained from personal communication with a national expert.

Transport initiatives

Another solution to enhance access to services is to develop dedicated transport solutions that provide an alternative to private means of transport or irregular public transport in rural areas. Several initiatives can be found across Europe, including carpooling and door-to-door services.

Community carpooling initiatives, such as those established in some Italian regions, can, for example, use web platforms to match people, provide information and sometimes coordinate the shared transport services with existing public transport. An initiative in Val Maira (Piedmont) uses a web platform and is managed by a local community cooperative supported by the Italian National Strategy for Inner Areas – a national strategy created to enhance service provision in rural areas. In Elba, the Shared Use Mobility Agency was created as part of the Civitas Destinations project, funded by the EU's Horizon 2020 programme. It provides information about timetables, prices and booking, and coordinates the shared transport services with existing public transport (Ambrosino, 2018).

A different type of solution is a door-to-door bus service, which requires pre-booking and collects and drops off passengers from their address. This is the model used by the TFI Local Link door-to-door service in Ireland, which caters for the needs of older people and those with disabilities. These include access to daycare facilities and non-acute patient transport. Over time, the service has been extended from the initial target groups to the whole population. TFI Local Link operates in the context of the national Connecting Ireland Rural Mobility Plan (TFI, undated).

Some innovative projects have taken advantage of volunteer work. Examples include Sopotniki in Slovenia and the 'Bürgerbus' in Germany (Rural Shared Mobility, undated). Sopotniki operates in parts of the country with a low population density, targeting older people living in remote villages who need transport. Sopotniki is a non-profit organisation, and its services are free of charge. It offers entirely door-to-door services, with volunteer drivers. The Bürgerbus is a volunteer-based community transport service operating in several parts of Germany, mostly in rural areas. These initiatives are mostly funded by municipalities and, in the case of the German initiative, also by federal states.

Telehealth and smart housing

Telehealth is another way to increase accessibility, by allowing healthcare to be provided without the physical presence of doctors or patients. Generally, patients are assessed through digital means of diagnosis, with doctors interacting from a distance over a digital medium. Several such measures have been implemented across Europe, some of which specifically target rural areas. One of these is the Greek National Telemedicine Network (discussed in the section 'Availability'), which offers access to specialist care by connecting health centres in the Aegean Islands with hospitals in Athens (European Commission, 2020b).

A similar 'drip and ship' approach – in which a patient is first treated through telehealth at a regional hospital and then transferred to a central hospital offering comprehensive specialist care – is also in place in the Franche-Comté region of France. The hospitals involved include several small regional hospitals without the capacity to provide specialised neurological care and one university hospital in the Franche-Comté region. Computerised tomography scans, magnetic resonance imaging and telethrombolysis (treatment for stroke) are available at several small regional hospitals to patients suspected of having had a stroke. These regional hospitals are linked through telecare to the university hospital (Medeiros de Bustos et al, 2018). Such measures facilitate early diagnosis and treatment and may also reduce unnecessary transfers between hospitals.

Telehealth is also an important tool linking care homes in rural areas with primary healthcare services. In Germany, such initiatives have been implemented in rural areas, particularly after recent policy changes that allow treatments to be prescribed without personal contact with the patient and the reimbursement of telehealth by health insurance funds (Ohligs et al, 2020).

Technology can also be used in a multitude of ways to eliminate the need for care workers to travel to patients at certain times, which can be particularly useful in the case of remote rural populations. As part of the IMPROVE project implemented in Västernorrland, Sweden, monitoring cameras were installed that are activated only during the night and at times decided by the user and carers, to replace night visits by carers. The same project involved the installation of sensors for incontinence management, which allow caregivers to determine the individual patterns of their older clients who suffer from incontinence and thus better plan the timing of home visits (Northern Periphery and Arctic Programme Secretariat, 2018).

New points of delivery in rural areas

If it were not for the lack of resources, the most obvious solution to meet the needs of rural populations would be to bring the services that are available in urban areas to rural areas. This can be viewed as reducing physical barriers to services, as well as increasing the availability of services. The Pharmacy of Your Choice scheme is a Maltese national initiative that enables pharmacies to provide medication free of charge for chronic conditions (Magno, 2021). Before this programme was implemented, medicines and other pharmaceutical products for chronic conditions could only be accessed for free at pharmacies operating in four hospitals and health centres across Malta, which older people in rural areas had to use costly and inconvenient methods of

travel to access. In Austria, dementia service centres were created to reach populations in rural areas, particularly those areas where no psychiatrists or psychologists were available. They employ a multi-component psychosocial support model directed at both patients and their families (Auer et al, 2015, 2020).

Awareness

To access health and long-term care services, patients must have the necessary information about the services available and how to use them. This includes knowledge of how the health and social care system works and of one's rights and entitlements. Older populations in rural settings may have less awareness than those in urban settings, for several reasons. Social isolation and smaller networks may render older people in rural settings less likely to receive information or less likely to have someone who could act as their advocate in contacting health and long-term care services. Lower digital literacy and worse internet connections may be additional barriers, as information and access to health and long-term care services (e.g. through online forms) are increasingly provided online. The relative scarcity of health and long-term care services in rural settings may in itself mean that fewer people are aware of them.

Awareness may entail having greater health literacy and thus being able to manage one's health (e.g. through better medicine management, early diagnosis). Two main types of awareness-raising initiatives or policies are identified (although they may overlap): those seeking to improve people's awareness of existing health and long-term care services and those mostly aiming to improve people's health literacy and thus enhance their health and well-being.

Awareness of existing care services

An example of an awareness-raising initiative that specifically targets rural older people is the 'village and rural caretaking service' implemented as part of the social care system in Hungary (Gyarmati, 2019). Village and rural caregivers are usually local people who know the community in which they work and have information about the services available and how people can access them. The caregiver can assist in providing basic services, including home care, and thus minimise the disadvantages that older people living in rural and remote areas face in accessing long-term care (Halloran and Calderón Vera, 2005).

Other initiatives set up in rural areas rely on integrated care to enhance access to health and care services. While these initiatives also seek to enhance efficiency of care delivery, and thus could be seen as improving the availability of services, they often include case and care managers that support older people and their informal carers in navigating and accessing care services. One such example is the Age Friendly Region project, which relies on case and care management to enhance access to care for older people across the border regions of Austria and Hungary.[22]

In at least two Member States, stakeholders not involved in providing health and care services have conducted preventive visits to isolated older people in rural areas. In France, the postal service has created a service where workers visit older people in their homes to check on their health status. This initiative has evolved into a paid service that also delivers medicines and provides low levels of care; however, the take-up of this service remains low.[23] In Portugal, the police force responsible for rural areas (Guarda Nacional Republicana) routinely identifies isolated older people through visits conducted by its police officers. These visits ensure the safety of isolated older people. One way in which they do this is by identifying and referring people requiring health and long-term care to the appropriate authorities (Safe Communities Portugal, undated).

Awareness of health and/or health literacy

Older people with dementia face specific and even greater challenges in rural communities. Dementia-friendly pharmacies (as highlighted in the section 'Availability') are an example of an initiative raising awareness of the condition, facilitating early detection and providing counselling. In Germany, they can be found in several regions, including rural districts such as Berchtesgadener Land, and are connected to regional nursing service and social care and support providers. A similar aim also underpins the Maltese scheme Pharmacy of Your Choice, improving physical access to health services. Regular contact with pharmacists allows patients to learn about symptoms, safe medication use and strategies to control their conditions (Magno, 2021). The Austrian dementia service centres, also mentioned previously, are particularly important in raising awareness of dementia, in referring patients for medical diagnosis, and in supporting and educating patients after a diagnosis is obtained. Working in rural areas, the teams in these centres consist of a social worker and a psychologist supervising dementia trainers, who deliver a specific certified curriculum. Dementia service centres also organise events to promote the social inclusion of people with dementia. With the same purpose of providing information and promoting early diagnoses,

22 See https://www.interreg-athu.eu/en/agefriendlyregion/downloads/

23 https://www.laposte.fr/services-seniors/les-visites-du-facteur-une-prevention-contre-l-isolement-des-personnes-agees

the Diabetes-Info-Mobile programme in Germany facilitates the teaching of rural populations and Turkish migrants about diabetes mellitus and the referral of newly diagnosed cases to specialist contacts (Chrodis+, 2017).

Another German initiative that relies on preventive actions to improve health among older populations is Gesundes Kinzigtal, set up in the Kinzig river valley region in the federal state of Baden-Württemberg. This initiative brings together several providers to offer targeted interventions for the prevention of health conditions, the promotion of health and the management of interfaces between health and long-term care in a mostly rural setting (Marill, 2020). Its target groups include chronically ill people. The initiative uses specific prevention and health promotion programmes and enables patient activation. It also optimises the management of health and long-term care resources in the area.

The 'WellCo – Wellbeing coach for behaviour change' project aims to make people aware of their lifestyles to induce behaviour changes. It is an ICT-based platform for well-being and health that offers personalised intervention techniques and continuous monitoring. This EU-funded project included pilot projects among people aged 65 and older and their informal caregivers in rural settings in Denmark and Spain (European Commission, undated-d).

Awareness raising can also involve the provision of information directed specifically at caregivers for the benefit of older people, or at the community for the benefit of the individuals within it. The international Rural Mental Health project (Mental Health Europe, undated), funded with support from the European Commission (2019–2022), offers a training platform on basic care provision not only for individual use but also to help rural actors identify and understand mental health problems and reach out to those affected.

Affordability

Out-of-pocket payments for health and long-term care services may represent a large share of the disposable income of older people, particularly in rural areas. Indeed, average income among older people in rural areas tends to be below the national average, which affects the pension amounts that many older people in rural areas receive (European Commission, 2008). As a result, unmet needs due to the unaffordability of services, travel costs and waiting lists in the EU are higher in rural areas (4.2%) than in cities (3.5%), with the difference being even higher in newer Member States (Eurostat, 2020). Solutions to enhance affordability could aim to increase the disposable income available to users of care services (e.g. through vouchers) and reduce the direct and indirect costs associated with care or limit their percentage of disposable income.

Information on initiatives aimed at enhancing affordability specifically in rural contexts is very scarce and mostly limited to local or regional initiatives. In Cyprus, long-term care services are offered by a mix of public and private providers, and informal care plays an important role. In rural areas, more local authorities and local charities participate in providing subsidised or free services than in urban areas (OECD and European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies, 2021c).

In Italy, several regions (e.g. Lombardy, since 2015) have implemented a voucher system targeted at older people and people with disabilities. The system seeks to formalise much of the home care provided by informal providers (e.g. migrant carers), and contribute to the funding of costs of care by increasing the disposable income available to users (Università degli Studi di Milano, 2021). The use of vouchers is not limited to rural areas, but residents in these areas form a large share of its beneficiaries, not least because access to formal in-home care is more difficult in rural areas.

One example of a national policy that seeks to address affordability comes from Slovenia, where the health insurance system adjusts funds for providers of long-term care as a function of their geographical location. As these funds ultimately affect the fees paid by older users of care services, they can be seen as a way of lowering the costs of care in rural areas.[24]

In addition to the initiatives addressing direct costs of care, several healthcare systems reimburse the costs of travel to and from medical consultations. For example, in Finland, travel costs (and in some cases accommodation costs) associated with necessary healthcare are reimbursed by the national health insurance scheme. Users are, however, liable for paying a co-payment of up to €25 per trip (up to a maximum of €300 per year). In addition, the scheme does not cover some types of healthcare, such as preventive care.[25] In Slovenia, a similar scheme operates where reimbursement is also limited and beneficiaries are still liable to pay part of their transport costs.[26] A further allowance for accommodation and subsistence is also available when needed. A similar scheme also exists in Hungary, where the administrative procedure for claiming reimbursements was simplified from June 2022, enabling beneficiaries to claim reimbursements online.[27] Providing these services in rural areas also

24 Information obtained from personal communication with a national expert.

25 See https://www.kela.fi/web/en/travel-costs

26 See https://www.zzzs.si/en/compulsory-health-insurance/the-extent-of-rights-deriving-from-compulsory-health-insurance/cash-benefits/reimbursement-of-travel-and-transportation-costs/

27 Information obtained from personal communication with a national expert.

poses financial challenges for governments. Policymakers can embrace innovative ways of capitalising on the natural advantages of rural areas, including the large amount of space available, which does not exist in condensed urban districts, to ensure sustainable long-term growth. This has been done with great success in Peccioli, a small municipality in rural Italy, as presented in the case study in Box 4.

Box 4: Peccioli – Investments in sustainability and culture, ensuring prosperity in rural Italy

The municipality of Peccioli is in the rural area at the centre of the triangle between Pisa, Florence and Siena. Despite its small population of only 4,747 inhabitants, which accounts for a mere 1.2% of the population of Florence while covering almost the same area, Peccioli has actively pursued strategies to combat the economic and social struggles that are often associated with peripheral regions.

Recognising the potential of innovation, culture and services to drive economic and social growth, Peccioli has embarked on a transformative journey. Through the establishment of the Belvedere Spa, a public–private company created in 1997, Peccioli has successfully converted its local landfill site into an innovative industrial centre for waste management. This forward-thinking approach, inspired by the Nordic model and engaging citizens, resulted in the construction of a plant for treating urban organic waste in 2020. The final project drawings for a new thermal oxidation plant using flameless technology for the closure of the waste cycle were recently presented to the Tuscany region. This will become the most complete and innovative plant in the region for waste disposal and treatment. In addition, investments have been made in solar energy infrastructure in the landfill area, along with other renewable energy initiatives. Thus, the municipality has defied the negative reputation of landfill sites by implementing a sustainable waste management approach that is perfectly integrated into the surrounding landscape.

Impressively, with more than 300,000 tonnes of waste treated every year, the energy produced by Peccioli's waste treatment plant is more than three times greater than the energy consumed by its residents. This achievement has not only revitalised the local economy but also generated numerous employment opportunities. Furthermore, the revenues generated from the waste treatment and energy production initiatives are reinvested in a comprehensive programme of public arts and cultural projects.

Recognising the crucial role of tourism in the area's development, the establishment of the Fondazione Peccioliper in 2004 also demonstrates the forward-looking approach adopted by the municipality of Peccioli, and the municipality's commitment to connecting culture, arts and the economy. By investing the plant's revenues in the construction of two open-air theatres – the Anfiteatro Fonte Mazzola, capable of hosting up to 2,000 people, and the Anfiteatro Triangolo Verde, an ecological marvel within the waste treatment plant – and in the organisation of cultural festivals and concerts, Peccioli has cultivated an artistic atmosphere. Notably, the Museo D'Arte Contemporanea a Cielo Aperto showcases more than 70 large-scale outdoor installations throughout the Peccioli area and its villages. Among them, Via di Mezzo stands as a remarkable work of art. It is an entire street adorned with art by the British artist David Tremlett in the village of Ghizzano, a small hamlet of just 300 residents perched atop a hill and surrounded by vineyards and olive groves.

These initiatives have significantly enhanced the quality of local public spaces, both catering to the community and attracting more than 50,000 tourists in 2022. Moreover, substantial investments have been made in infrastructure and public services to improve the quality of life of Peccioli's citizens, transforming Peccioli from a medieval village into a vibrant contemporary town. The creation of new educational facilities, ranging from crèches and daycare centres to primary schools, alongside improved transport options, has facilitated access to education. In addition, the development of new sports, social and cultural facilities, including music schools educating over 400 children, has brought immense benefits not only to the residents of Peccioli but also to those of neighbouring villages. Prioritising environmental sustainability, including electrified transport, has played a vital role in reprogramming the village's long-term development trajectory.

To ensure the continued participation of citizens, which has proven instrumental in the success of the landfill site's transformation, a focus group called 'Tessuto Sociale' has been established and maintained. This group aims to understand the essential needs of citizens and determine effective approaches to addressing them.

Summary of measures

This chapter aimed to identify, in a non-exhaustive way, public policies and initiatives that seek to enhance older people's access to health and long-term care services in rural and remote areas across Europe. The mapping exercise focused on four main barriers: affordability, availability, physical accessibility and awareness.

The exercise showed a lack of measures dealing with barriers relating to **affordability** that are specifically directed at rural regions. In fact, most EU Member States have general provisions in place in their health and long-term care systems that protect individuals, particularly those with a low income, from high costs of care (e.g. exemptions from out-of-pocket payments or caps on the amounts paid), but do not have measures specifically targeting rural areas. These general measures may still benefit older people in rural areas more than the general population, because a higher share of them are poor, but they are not meant to target specific geographical locations.

The policies and measures focusing on the **availability** of services mostly address shortages in human resources in rural areas. These include efforts to directly increase the number of staff and providers in rural areas, as well as the use of professional networks and ICT solutions to enable a greater number of users to be served by existing services and resources. It is worth pointing out, however, that most initiatives concerning workforce shortages focus on healthcare personnel and have not been extended to social care workers.

The **physical accessibility** of services is mostly enhanced using mobile solutions that bring care services to underserved populations in rural areas. Several initiatives also seek to reduce the costs associated with travel (both monetary and non-monetary). These costs include, for example, the costs of transport and reliance on new points of care delivery (e.g. pharmacies). Concerning physical accessibility, access to health and long-term care services in rural regions may also be indirectly enhanced by measures implemented outside these two sectors, namely those focusing on public transport and internet access.

Finally, **awareness**-raising solutions are implemented at local or regional level through integrated care initiatives that bring together health and long-term care providers, particularly to facilitate case and care management. Other solutions involve stakeholders from outside the health and long-term care sectors, such as the police and postal services. As with physical accessibility and availability, several initiatives aimed at improving people's awareness of services or healthy behaviours rely on pharmacies, as these healthcare providers are embedded in the community and are geographically widespread.

The mapping exercise showed no clear pattern or clustering of policies and initiatives around geographical areas or health and long-term care systems (i.e. social insurance or tax-based systems). With a few exceptions, initiatives were found mostly at local or regional level rather than national level, and it is unclear whether there are any links between the different levels. Moreover, most initiatives mapped in this section are at a small scale, potentially limiting their impact. There is a clear potential for replicating or scaling up many of the initiatives surveyed here. Their success was not completely dependent on the context in which they were implemented or the type of system in which they operated (e.g. social insurance or tax-based systems). Furthermore, there is robust evidence of the cost-effectiveness of many of the initiatives presented here, but the need to coordinate between different levels of government or ministries and insurance funds could still be a significant barrier to their transferability.

7 Conclusions

Rural areas make up 83% of Europe's land mass, but only one-quarter of Europe's population live in rural areas. Globalisation and technological change have boosted economic growth in urban areas and this continues to be the case. These processes attract young and highly educated people, creating further opportunities for growth and resulting in a self-reinforcing cycle whereby more and more young people move from rural to urban areas. In rural Europe, this gives rise to the issues of ageing populations and depopulation, and exacerbates the problem of 'lonely' places (Proietti et al, 2022). Ensuring territorial cohesion, whereby growth and opportunities develop in a balanced and harmonious fashion across and within all Member States, is of utmost importance to the EU.

Historically, Europe has been touted as a 'convergence machine', promoting economic growth and development in less developed regions of the continent. However, in recent years, progress in achieving balanced growth across Europe has slowed, and the convergence machine may require a tune-up. Rural areas, particularly those that are more remote and less developed, face significant challenges and hardships that need to be addressed (European Parliament, 2022). With this aim, the EU has put in place a wide range of policies to promote the development of rural areas from many angles, brought together under the EU's vision for rural areas.[28] These include policies supporting agricultural livelihoods, creating jobs in rural areas outside the agricultural sector, promoting innovation, providing education and employment opportunities, protecting the most vulnerable and ensuring a just transition towards climate neutrality.

Inequality in living standards between areas at different degrees of urbanisation poses a threat to democracy and the very fabric of society. Those in less prosperous regions can feel that their economic, social and cultural identities are under threat. This can lead to a rise in populism and drive voters towards more authoritarian leaders. Inequality can also undermine trust in government and in the EU and lead to social unrest. This highlights the need to better understand the economic, social, cultural and political gaps between rural and urban areas, while acknowledging the diversity within regions.

Rural–urban divide in income, poverty and living conditions

On average across the EU, incomes are highest among urban populations and lowest for those living in rural areas. The data show that the rural–urban gap in incomes has increased in absolute terms over the past decade. During that period, on average across the EU, median incomes have been characterised by upward divergence, whereby both incomes and inequalities have increased. The increase in inequality has been seen between Member States and between degrees of urbanisation. On the other hand, the rural–urban gap in the percentage of the population at risk of poverty and exclusion has declined over the past decade.

In general, when the situations of rural and urban households are examined more closely, a picture of substantial heterogeneity in living conditions, assets and consumption patterns emerges. Inhabitants of cities struggle more to make ends meet and experience a higher burden of housing costs than those in rural areas. While those in cities are less likely to be able to afford to pay for unexpected expenses, they are more likely to be able to afford an annual holiday. The data also show that those in cities are more likely to own a computer but less likely to own a car than those in rural areas.

Housing is another important area where those living in urban areas do not have an advantage compared with those in rural areas. The data show that the housing cost overburden rate is higher in cities than in rural areas. Furthermore, rural residents are more likely to own their own home and to live in a larger home. They also suffer less from problems like crime and pollution.

This somewhat varied picture of rural–urban gaps in living conditions serves to underscore the need to avoid oversimplifying the rural–urban gap. Rural, suburban and urban populations are heterogenous, and policies to ensure the development of all geographical regions must fully appreciate this.

28 https://rural-vision.europa.eu/rural-vision_en

Rural–urban divide in employment and opportunities

Rural–urban divides measured by employment and opportunity highlight the disadvantages of living in rural areas. None of the indicators considered show an advantage for rural residents.

The headline employment rate shows that those living in cities are more likely to be employed. A convergence analysis shows that the employment rate has been increasing over the past decade, both on average across the EU and across all degrees of urbanisation. Furthermore, the inequalities between Member States have been reducing. However, while within-group inequality in employment has been decreasing, the employment rate gap between degrees of urbanisation has been increasing, resulting in an overall increase in the rural–urban employment gap.

Among young people, the NEET rate (the percentage of those aged 15–29 not in education, employment or training) has been consistently higher in rural areas than in urban areas. However, upward convergence has been taking place in this indicator – with the overall NEET rate falling, and inequalities also decreasing. Furthermore, the rural–urban gap in the NEET rate has shrunk over the past decade.

When it comes to gaps in education and human capital accumulation, rates of completion of tertiary education are higher in urban areas. While rates are increasing at all degrees of urbanisation, progress is happening faster in urban areas.

There is also evidence of a digital divide between rural and urban households, with those living in cities having faster internet connections and higher levels of digital literacy. This has significant implications for people's ability to participate in and benefit from the digital transition.

Rural–urban recognition gap and cultural differences

The data suggest large aggregate differences between those living in rural and urban areas. Rural populations are older, have lower incomes, have lower levels of education and are less digitally connected. Moreover, rural populations are also shrinking. Given these differences, it is perhaps unsurprising that there are differences between rural and urban residents in terms of opinions, concerns and values.

The analysis shows that those living in rural areas are more prone to feeling disrespected or forgotten than their urban counterparts. Specifically, rural inhabitants are more likely to perceive an individual recognition gap, that is, unfair treatment, disrespect or disregard from the government. They are also more likely to perceive a community recognition gap and to believe that the government cares less about or ignores people in their area.

The perception of disrespect and disregard for individuals and their communities should raise significant concerns for policymakers and governments. In addition to potentially harming the well-being of those who feel disrespected, these perceptions may give rise to sentiments of intolerance towards other groups. The data show that residents of rural areas have less positive attitudes towards gender equality, liberal morality and immigrant acceptance than those living in urban areas. Notably, even after considering various sociodemographic and economic factors, urban areas exhibit significantly higher levels of tolerance than rural areas when these attitudes are combined into a social tolerance index. Furthermore, particularly noteworthy is the fact that the gap in social tolerance between urban and rural areas has grown over time.

Political participation and confidence in government and democracy in rural and urban areas

Low levels of political participation, trust in institutions and satisfaction with democracy can be detrimental to social cohesion and may contribute to a self-reinforcing cycle of discontent and disengagement. The analysis of political polarisation highlighted several interesting findings across different degrees of urbanisation. For example, while there is no significant difference between urban and rural areas in formal political participation, such as voting, attending meetings and contacting politicians, urban residents are more inclined to engage in informal political activities such as taking part in protests, signing petitions and participating in boycotts.

Moreover, significant disparities exist in the trust that rural and urban residents have in national governments and the EU, as well as their satisfaction with the functioning of democracy. The analysis showed that those living in rural areas are less inclined to have trust in their government, trust in the EU or satisfaction with the democratic processes in their country.

Policymakers should be particularly concerned about the lower political engagement of rural residents compared with urban residents, potentially stemming from a perception of futility, as well as their decreasing levels of trust in government and democracy. These attitudes present significant challenges to social cohesion and may contribute to the heightened endorsement of populist political figures, who frequently adopt divisive rhetoric to gain support.

Policy pointers for bridging the rural–urban divide

Rural areas face a distinct disadvantage in terms of employment opportunities, human capital accumulation, internet access and service provision. This leads them to feel as though they are being forgotten or disrespected and is associated with lower levels of social tolerance in rural communities and dissatisfaction with governments and democracy more generally. This poses a threat to social cohesion in the EU and its Member States. Policies should focus on addressing these gaps and their underlying causes.

Invest in education and training in rural communities

Urban centres with young and highly educated workforces have been able to take advantage of the opportunities afforded by globalisation and technological change. Rural communities should also be equipped with tools that enable them to reap the benefits of economic change. Promoting education and the knowledge economy is key in this regard. The data show that the rural–urban gap in tertiary educational attainment is growing, which could relate to the migration to cities of those with higher levels of education, in order to take advantage of better employment opportunities. Policies must focus on reversing this trend and ensuring that the accumulation of human capital and skills is achievable for all areas so that they can attract innovation and investment and ensure future growth.

Ensure internet access to guarantee growth in all regions

There are notable deficiencies in the quality of broadband connections for those living in rural areas. Rural residents and enterprises must be guaranteed high-speed broadband access so that they are not left behind in the digital transition. The rise of remote work accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic offers important opportunities for rural areas, as former city residents consider the benefits of rural living. However, for people to be able to work remotely from rural areas in the long term, they need to be assured of the quality of internet connections. Moreover, many solutions to the declining availability of services in rural areas rely on a shift to online methods for the provision of certain services. This will only be possible with the expansion of high-speed broadband connections.

Involve rural communities in policy design and implementation

It is clear from the findings of this report that rural residents feel as if they, and those around them, are being forgotten and ignored. They are less politically engaged than urban residents and trust governments less. These facts pose an important threat to social cohesion. To address these feelings of isolation and distrust, rural communities must be given a platform to express their opinions and concerns, and they must be assured that their voices are heard and acted on. Rural communities must be involved in the design of policies to address service gaps and promote economic development in their communities (see Box 4). They must be assured of their value to both the social fabric and economic engines of their countries and of the EU.

Find innovative solutions for providing essential services

One of the main challenges to providing high-quality public services in rural communities is that depopulation and population ageing are making it more costly to provide these services. Current demographic trends suggest that rural communities will continue to face these challenges and innovative solutions for public service delivery must therefore be embraced. This report has provided several examples of innovative solutions in action across Member States that ensure the continued provision of health and long-term care in rural communities. Local and national stakeholders should develop best practices for service provision, which account for the specific needs of communities. In addition to solutions for providing health and long-term care services, policymakers need to embrace the repurposing of vacant buildings in rural areas and find innovative ways to provide public transport to rural communities. Across Member States, many communities have designed novel solutions using the many natural advantages of rural areas to address the challenges that are associated with being located further from population centres. Governments across the EU should support these measures and, when necessary and appropriate, find ways to expand them.

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The Treaty of Lisbon established territorial cohesion as the third dimension of European cohesion. Despite the high priority given in policy to achieving geographically balanced economic development, gaps in living conditions still exist between rural and urban areas. In some cases, these gaps are growing. This report documents rural–urban differences in social, political, cultural and economic outcomes. These differences may pose a serious threat to social cohesion in Europe. Indeed, this report finds that rural residents more often perceive themselves as disregarded by governments and have lower levels of trust in governments and institutions than urban residents. Moreover, public service provision in rural areas is poorer than in urban areas, and gaps in provision are continually emerging. To ensure a bright future for all areas, innovative solutions to combat economic decline must be found. This report outlines creative solutions that are being deployed across Member States to provide services in remote areas.

The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound) is a tripartite European Union Agency established in 1975. Its role is to provide knowledge in the area of social, employment and work-related policies according to Regulation (EU) 2019/127.

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