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While Russia's aggression against Ukraine may have reconnected a part of the public with the European project, support for Eurosceptic parties has continued to grow, hitting critical levels in a good deal of European Union (EU) member states. Euroscepticism has a variable geography but can be heard loud and clear in certain more depressed areas, peripheries marked by a lack of opportunities, particularly rural settings. The urban-rural divide delineates to a large extent what some have called the geography of discontent in Europe (CoR, 2024). Understanding and addressing the root of this discontent may be crucial for the future of the EU after the upcoming elections in June.

### The root of discontent in Europe

The disaffection existing in many European regions is attributable to several factors, ranging from cultural circumstances (proportion of older people, low levels of education, migratory imbalances) to economic aspects (rates of wealth and employment) and even geographical considerations (population density or the quality of public services available).

Economic growth in the EU is primarily concentrated in large urban centres. This is largely down to the economic benefits associated with agglomeration and density. In most EU countries there is a significant differential in terms of GDP per capita between large cities and systems of intermediate cities and rural zones. The former have more advanced infrastructure and greater capacity to attract investment, innovation and talent. And that is why they offer better opportunities and salaries. The latter, meanwhile, lead the rankings of stagnation and lack of economic progress.

The gap in prosperity between urban centres and rural zones is mirrored in people's confidence in the public sector, particularly in the European Union (Dominicis *et al.*, 2020). A major portion of the dissatisfaction with the European project is concentrated in regions blighted by prolonged decline; regions that have seen unemployment rise, the young

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and talented move away, public services become ever more substandard and often limited infrastructures decay. It is a discontent not only rooted in economics, but which is also fed by a sense of political and social marginalisation that is accentuated when these regions compare themselves to the most developed and affluent areas, which may lead to a disturbing regional polarisation.

Several indicators point to a rise in Euroscepticism in recent years. One of the clearest signs is the support for parties that take a more or less open stand against the European Union, be it against the project as a whole or one or other of the policies driven from Brussels in critical areas such as climate change or migration. Support for Eurosceptic parties has increased dramatically in the last 20 years, from 6.9% of the votes cast in national elections in 2003 to 28.5% in 2023 (Rodríguez-Pose *et al.*, 2023).

A detailed analysis of those figures reveals an urban-rural divide. In most EU countries the Eurosceptic vote is largely concentrated in rural and intermediate areas. This is true in countries where Eurosceptic parties have performed very well in subnational and national elections in recent years, such as Italy Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. And it is also true of countries with a tradition of Euro-enthusiasm, like Germany, where the vote for the burgeoning Alternative for Germany (AfD) is strongest in the less prosperous areas in the east of the country; or in the Netherlands, Portugal or Estonia, where the few regions in which the Eurosceptic vote was higher than 30% were predominantly rural. At the other extreme, large prosperous cities and capitals like those of the four countries that make up the Visegrad Group have frequently become spaces of resistance. The main exception is France, where the Eurosceptic vote cuts across the whole of society.

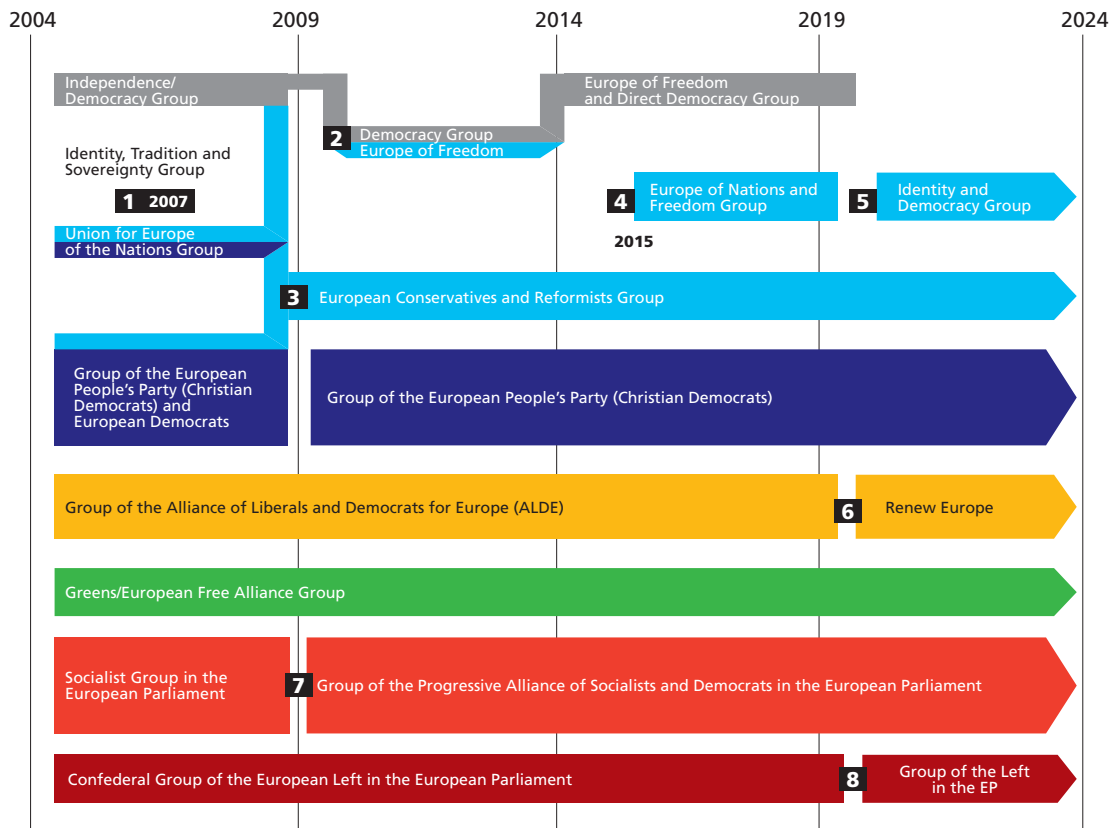
Given these circumstances, and ahead of elections to the European Parliament whose results could mark a milestone for Eurosceptic parties and have a considerable impact on the policies promoted by the EU, there is an urgent need to assess the possible responses to counter this discontent and advance the necessary cooperation between rural areas, intermediate territories and urban agglomerations.

### **Cohesion policy and other proposals to deal with the discontent**

There is some consensus that one of the most effective means of combating the social discontent is to devise solid development strategies for those areas that are trailing behind (Rodríguez-Pose y Dijkstra, 2021). And this is precisely what the European institutions have been trying to do since the inception of the cohesion policy in the late 1980s, coinciding with the accession of Greece, Portugal and Spain to the EU. This is no small undertaking: for the period 2021-2027 it accounts for a third of the entire EU budget.

Given cohesion policy's potential, it follows that strengthening it as an instrument to address economic and industrial decline in middle-income regions could help to tackle the growing Euroscepticism. That is also the conclusion of a [report released recently by the European Commission](#), which highlights the need to offer specific and tailored proposals to the

**Who wants to vote with me? How the political groups in the European Parliament have evolved over two decades (2004-2024).**



**1** *Identity, Tradition and Sovereignty*. A far-right group that formed in 2007 and fell apart in November of the same year following offensive remarks made by Alessandra Mussolini regarding its members from the Greater Romania Party.

**2** *The Europe of Freedom and Democracy Group* was formed, a coalition of 11 parties chiefly composed of members of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and Italy's Lega. In June 2014, it lost nine of its members and re-formed under the name of Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy Group (EFDD).

**3** *The European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR)* was founded. It is a Eurosceptic, anti-federalist, right-wing and, increasingly, far-right group, particularly since Brexit and the departure of the British Conservatives.

**4** Following an initial unsuccessful attempt to form a stable far-right group after the elections of 2014, led by Marine Le Pen, Matteo Salvini and Geert Wilders, the *Europe of Nations and Freedom Group* finally came into being in June 2015, composed of the French National Front and the Austrian and Dutch far right, among others.

**5** Ahead of the 2019 elections the Europe of Nations and Freedom Group was re-founded as the *Identity and Democracy Group (ID)*, with the participation of parties from ten member states, including Italy's Lega, the French National Front (FN, now National Rally; RN) and Alternative for Germany (AfD).

**6** Building on the framework of the *Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE)*, the liberal group re-formed as *Renew Europe* to come together with the candidates of French President Macron's Renaissance party.

**7** The group officially changed its name to the *Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D)*.

**8** The group officially changed its name to *The Left in the European Parliament - GUE/NGL*.

Source: Compiled by CIDOB.

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inhabitants of smaller cities, town and villages and rural areas, especially in terms of guaranteeing the same public services as those enjoyed by the inhabitants of major cities.

It is surprising, then, that only four of the current European political families include direct or indirect references to cohesion policy or the regional dimension of European policies in their election manifestos. There are also significant differences between them in terms of the importance given to urban and rural development issues. They range from somewhat vague references to the need to “overcome economic and social disparities between Europe’s regions” (the Left) and to “prioritise investment in modernisation and convergence of under-served regions” (the Greens) to explicit mentions of the need to continue implementing cohesion policy (the Socialists), though without making a distinction in how it should be done differently in cities and rural areas.

The rather modest presence of cohesion policy and rural development issues in the leftist and centre-left parties’ manifestos contrasts with the importance the EPP gives them, devoting a whole section to the subject.<sup>1</sup> They speak of needing to “turn the brain drain into brain gain” and vow to work to ensure there are no “first and second-class citizens” via a cohesion policy that takes account of the interests of rural and urban areas equally. They are also the only ones to explicitly mention improving rural-urban synergies and closing existing gaps.

The European Popular Party even puts forward a specific plan for rural areas in its manifesto. This forms part of a long-term strategy to give weight to rural affairs and [present itself as the champion](#) of farmers and rural interests. According to the EPP, “rural areas are not the periphery, but the heart of Europe”. It is worth recalling that rural and peri-urban zones [occupy 80%](#) of the European Union’s total area, though they only account for 30% of its population.

The tensions between the agenda for Europe’s green transition and the interests of the inhabitants of rural areas also explain part of the current discontent. It is important to note here the effort that the left-wing parties are making in their manifestos to counter the narrative that the European Green Deal is anti-farmer. The Greens make it clear that the green transformation should go hand in hand with a strong social cohesion policy to “ensure all regions of Europe benefit”. In the same vein, according to the Socialists the “fight for the Green Deal is also a fight to improve the lives of farmers”. In their electoral programme they speak of the need to offer them financial and technical support to achieve the goals of the green transition.

The leftist parties’ climate commitment, however, contrasts with the more moderate positions (or open climate denial) of the European right. The EPP seeks to curb the ambition of the European Green Deal, particularly anything that might directly impact rural Europe. A first sign of that arose some months ago, when the party voiced its opposition to two fundamental proposals of the European Green Deal: [the regulation for a sustainable use of pesticides](#) and the [regulation for nature restoration](#). They argue that these regulations could threaten the EU’s food security in the long term, pursue overly ambitious goals and place an unreasonable burden on farmers just as they are struggling.

1. The European People’s Party is the only party on the right to put forward solutions to the problems of rural Europe in its political proposal, establishing a certain connection with urban Europe. The European Conservatives and Reformists group overlooks the issue in its programme and merely refers vaguely to the need to have “efficient and modern public services and sensitivity to the needs of both rural and urban communities”. The parties on the radical right that form the Identity and Democracy group, meanwhile, make no mention of the issue whatsoever in their manifesto.

## In conclusion

The recent protests by farmers in several European capitals – Brussels included of course – provide a clear snapshot of this geography of discontent. The agricultural sector is unhappy with EU policies, particularly the bureaucracy coming out of the European institutions and the proscriptions that come with the climate commitment. And the feeling is compounded by the widening gap between more prosperous and dynamic urban zones and disadvantaged and stagnating rural areas. The sense of abandonment and anger goes a long way to explaining why in most European countries the vote for the various forms of Euroscepticism is concentrated in these latter areas.

Most experts agree that cohesion policy remains the best tool for addressing this discontent and the urban-rural divide behind it. Still, it is surprising how timidly the left-wing groups approach the issue and how little importance they attach to the urban agenda. Although this inattention can be explained by the fact that cities generally concentrate a good part of the progressive vote, it contrasts with the fact that the right does take cohesion policy into account as the main tool to promote territorial convergence and take care of rural areas, where they have the largest number of votes.

Rural discontent with climate policies appears to have drawn a section of the traditional right towards the climate denial bloc, or at least to those looking to rein in the EU's ambition of recent years. Bearing in mind that, according to Eurocities data, climate action is the first priority of the mayors of Europe's main cities, the new balances of power to arise out of the election in June may spell trouble for the urban agenda. Add to that the recentralising trends making inroads in Europe in recent years and the scenario appearing over the horizon looks bleak.

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