



**European Committee  
of the Regions**

**Commission for  
Natural Resources**

**NAT**

# **Rural areas and the geography of discontent**



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## Executive summary

This study applies a rural-urban lens to the outcomes of recent national and subnational elections of European Union (EU) Member States, with the aim of analysing Eurosceptic (anti-EU values) voting patterns and identifying possible explanations for voter discontent in rural areas. Findings show high Eurosceptic voting in many rural areas across the EU. At national election level, this rural-urban trend is most marked in Member States that are the most Eurosceptic overall. In Italy, for instance, the largest share of support for anti-EU parties comes from rural areas. In Poland and Hungary, Eurosceptic support is primarily driven by rural areas. However, rural Euroscepticism also occurs in less Eurosceptic countries: in the Netherlands, while most regions did not reach a 25% vote threshold for anti-EU parties, the country's only rural region, Zeeuwsch-Vlaanderen, reached a 33% vote share. Similarly, in countries such as Portugal, Croatia and Estonia, the one or few Eurosceptic regions are all predominantly rural.

Transposing the same lens to subnational elections for four case study countries provided further insights into the phenomenon at regional and local level:

- In **France**, the 2021 regional elections displayed a significantly lower share of Eurosceptic voting compared to the 2022 national elections. Nonetheless, the regions displaying Eurosceptic preferences in subnational elections expressed similar Eurosceptic preferences in national elections. The case study found that socioeconomic challenges in agriculture drive rural support for the leading hard-coded Eurosceptic party, Rassemblement National (RN), as well as cultural insecurities across rural areas. The increase in Euroscepticism between elections is mainly explained by changes in party coalitions and electoral systems. In contrast to national elections, regional elections are typically characterised by less partisanship, together with high re-election rates for incumbents and frequently divided government.
- In **Germany**, voter support for the only Eurosceptic party, Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) is most concentrated in the Eastern part of the country. Recent subnational (Landtag) elections confirm that rural and intermediate NUTS 3 regions are by far the largest supporters of the AfD. Research suggests that discontent is rooted in migration concerns and feelings of uncertainty among local populations. This is associated with lower economic opportunities and educational standards in rural areas. Notably, Hessen's 2023 Landtag elections showed the growing popularity of the AfD in rural areas of western Germany. Support is associated with voter discontent with ongoing crises, to which the AfD's nationalist-pleasing

platform provides an appealing response.

- In **Italy**, after the dramatic success of the Eurosceptic parties Lega and Fratelli d'Italia in the 2022 national elections, Eurosceptic voting in the subsequent regional government elections remained significant, albeit relatively lower. Rural areas continue to display a higher share of anti-EU votes compared to intermediate and urban areas. Similar to France, differences in outcomes can be partially attributed to the use of candidate-based lists and the weaker local roots of Eurosceptic parties. Additionally, subnational elections across Italy have been generally characterised by low and declining turnout rates.
- In **Slovakia**, support for Eurosceptic parties is stronger in the rural, eastern areas of the country. Eurosceptic parties enjoyed success in both regional and municipal elections in 2022, albeit with lower turnouts. The most recent national election outcomes in 2023 indicate a significant increase in Euroscepticism across the country. Support was most prominent in the same rural areas where Eurosceptic voting was already pronounced in subnational elections, confirming trends. Discontent is associated with long-lasting, structural economic challenges in rural areas, among other factors.

The study identifies electoral patterns in anti-EU voting (Section 4), which demonstrate how rural areas can be central to the success of Eurosceptic parties at both national and subnational level. Overall, these findings underscore the potential repercussions for the EU in neglecting rural areas. They validate institutional actors' concerns in relation to ongoing initiatives targeting the strengthening of rural areas (such as long-term vision for the EU's rural areas 2040) and underscore their urgency, particularly in a year of important upcoming elections across different levels of administrative bodies in Europe.

More broadly, the study's conclusions provide a useful basis to reflect and debate the rural dimension of Eurosceptic and anti-EU sentiment, including origins and consequences, which impact not only the well-being of EU citizens, but the values and future of the EU itself. The study concludes with a series of questions for further reflection by European Committee of the Region (CoR) members and the wider stakeholder community.

## Introduction

Over the past decade, the European Union (EU) has witnessed a surge in Euroscepticism and anti-EU votes during both European Parliament (EP) and national elections. While protest votes and oppositional political movements are inherent to any democratic system, they raise legitimate concerns when they challenge the very foundations of an institutional framework. Recent research, including the European Commission's Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG REGIO) study 'The geography of EU discontent and the regional development trap' (DG REGIO 2023 study), has aimed to map such voting and link anti-EU electoral outcomes to regional-level development indicators such as persisting economic and industrial downturns, limited educational opportunities and local employment prospects. However, this work lacks a rural-urban lens and overlooks subnational and local elections when assessing EU support among the electorate. Article 174 of the Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) foresees paying particular attention to the protection and development of rural and transitioning regions, thus it remains imperative to map voter discontent in rural areas to identify how EU policy and decision-making might be falling short of its targets and purpose.

The escalating prevalence of anti-EU votes prompts a critical examination of how EU policies can effectively counter voter discontent. In view of the forthcoming EP elections, a thorough examination of the rural-urban dynamics within the so-called 'geography of discontent' becomes central to informed decision-making on future EU support for rural areas. A recent Eurostat survey revealed that individuals residing in rural areas are less inclined to engage in discussions on EU politics compared to their urban counterparts, necessitating tailored approaches for outreach and participation in EU-related policy-making activities<sup>1</sup>.

This report complements DG REGIO's research by providing comprehensive data on voters' choices in rural areas and exploring potential variations in voting patterns compared to urban areas, incorporating insights from selected subnational elections. More specifically, it (i) analyses whether specific rural-urban patterns emerge across EP, national and subnational elections in the Member States; (ii) presents drivers of Eurosceptic and anti-EU voting, particularly in rural areas; and (iii) develops broad policy recommendations for providing better support to rural areas in the EU. It aligns with the insights from the recent study<sup>2</sup> for the European Committee of the Regions' (CoR) Commission

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<sup>1</sup> Eurostat (2023). Democracy in action: One year before the European elections. Spring 2023 survey. <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3093>

<sup>2</sup> Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS) and Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) (2023). The cost of non-rurality: preparing for a better urban-rural balance in EU funding. [https://cor.europa.eu/en/engage/studies/Documents/Study\\_the\\_cost\\_of\\_non\\_rurality.pdf](https://cor.europa.eu/en/engage/studies/Documents/Study_the_cost_of_non_rurality.pdf)

for Natural Resources on the political repercussions of neglecting rural areas.

Secondly, the report aims to contribute to the key messages of the CoR in the lead-up to the 2024 EP elections and the development of post-2027 support for rural areas and strategies to involve rural citizens, including the European Commission's forthcoming report on the long-term vision for rural areas. The study also highlights the potential role of local and regional authorities (LRAs) in countering Euroscepticism and strengthening European democracy.

The report is structured as follows: Chapter 1 lays out the theoretical framework underpinning this report, based on existing grey and academic literature exploring anti-EU voting patterns in Europe and rural-urban divides. It also presents the basic methodology developed to answer the research questions, highlighting some key considerations underpinning the main findings. Chapter 2 analyses rural-urban voting patterns in recent national and European elections, building on the DG REGIO 2023 study and Eurostat's Urban-rural typology (2021). Chapter 3 then compares anti-EU voting patterns in subnational and national elections in five EU countries with high Eurosceptic voting preferences<sup>3</sup>. Each case study provides a quantitative breakdown of rural-urban patterns in the most recent subnational elections and presents possible drivers of Eurosceptic voting at local and regional level for each of the territories studied. Chapter 4 summarises the main conclusions of this study and develops some broad recommendations to maintain positive support for the EU, especially in rural areas across Europe. These are based on potential scenarios that can be expected to unfold in the future if structural drivers of Euroscepticism continue to be unaddressed.

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<sup>3</sup> The case study for Poland compares voting in rural regions in the two national elections of 2019 and 2023.

# 1. Methodology and theoretical framework

## 1.1 Theoretical framework

Several research studies have investigated the reasons behind people voting for candidates or parties that espouse anti-EU values (Euroscepticism), primarily focusing on personal characteristics such as education, age and income<sup>4</sup>. The impact of geography on anti-EU attitudes has only been considered recently<sup>5</sup>.

Exploring the potential divide between urban and rural areas in Eurosceptic and anti-EU voting is a newer development. de Dominicis et al.'s 2020 working paper, 'The urban-rural divide in anti-EU vote: Social, demographic and economic factors affecting the vote for parties opposed to European integration'<sup>6</sup>, was among the first to examine differences in anti-EU sentiment between rural and urban areas in the EU and the United Kingdom (UK). It found that between 2013 and 2019, there were fewer votes for parties that oppose the EU in cities, towns, and suburbs compared to rural areas. The drivers of voting for anti-EU parties differ between rural and urban areas, with some factors overlapping.

The research found that living in rural areas is closely tied to voting for political parties that are against the country's membership in the EU. This connection is mainly influenced by the country's overall situation and economic factors. The impact of other factors, such as age structure of the population, level of education, and migration, also varies depending on the level of urbanisation. Higher rates of unemployment, low voter turnout, and the presence of a larger number of individuals born outside the EU are all linked to a higher likelihood of voting for anti-EU parties in both rural and urban areas. In small towns, suburbs and rural areas, higher proportions of university graduates, people between the ages of 20-64, and individuals from other EU countries are associated with a decrease in anti-EU voting; however, in cities, these factors do not have an impact. In rural areas, by contrast, economic decline and lower levels of education contribute to more anti-EU sentiment<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Lenzi, C. and Perucca, G. (2021). People or Places that Don't Matter? Individual and Contextual Determinants of the Geography of Discontent. *Economic Geography*, 97(5), 415-445.

[10.1080/00130095.2021.1973419](https://doi.org/10.1080/00130095.2021.1973419); Koeppen, L., Ballas, D., Edzes, A. and Koster, S. (2021). Places that don't matter or people that don't matter? A multilevel modelling approach to the analysis of the geographies of discontent. *Regional Science Policy & Practice*, 13(2), 221-245.

<sup>5</sup> Dijkstra, L., Poleman, H. and Rodríguez-Pose, A. (2018). The geography of EU discontent. WP 12/2018. Luxembourg: European Union.

<sup>6</sup> de Dominicis, L., Dijkstra, L. and Pontarollo, N. (2020). The urban-rural divide in anti-EU vote: Social, demographic and economic factors affecting the vote for parties opposed to European integration. WP 05/2020. Luxembourg: European Union.

<sup>7</sup> See also: de Dominicis, L., Dijkstra, L. and Pontarollo, N. (2022). Why are cities less opposed to European integration than rural areas? Factors affecting the Eurosceptic vote by degree of urbanisation. *Cities*, 130, p. 103937.

According to de Dominicis et al.<sup>8</sup>, encouraging economic growth and providing more opportunities for education and employment (including remote learning and work) can lessen negative feelings towards the EU in rural areas. Fostering the economic integration of immigrants from non-EU countries would benefit both migrants and the communities in which they reside, and could potentially decrease negative feelings towards the EU, especially in more rural areas and smaller towns.

In their 2021 study, Rodríguez-Pose and Dijkstra<sup>9</sup> concluded that the EU, as a major target of anti-system and populist parties, has come under scrutiny for its role in supporting less developed regions. However, research has shown that European Cohesion Policy has played a significant role in mitigating discontent and resentment in these regions, despite some parties claiming otherwise. The authors suggest that carefully targeted interventions in previously neglected middle-income areas could be an effective way to address the root causes of Euroscepticism and anti-system voting. The EU has the potential to lead these interventions through its Cohesion Policy – expanding the Policy to encompass economic and industrial decline in middle-income regions could effectively tackle the issues facing these regions and reduce discontent and resentment. The primary takeaway from the 2023 European Week of Regions and Cities<sup>10</sup> was the vital role of strong Cohesion Policy in aiding regions to overcome the barriers of the regional development trap<sup>11</sup>. Similarly, Bayerlein and Diermeier’s findings<sup>12</sup> reflect that while there may be limits to the effectiveness of increasing cohesion funding in silencing Eurosceptic or pro-integration sentiments in regions, such spending must be accompanied by enhanced visibility of its explicit links to the EU in order to ensure a positive perception of EU investments.

The DG REGIO 2023 study<sup>13</sup> introduces a novel perspective on comprehending the voting patterns of Euroscepticism by exploring the concept of the ‘regional development trap’. This phenomenon refers to regions that are trapped in a state of economic stagnation, characterised by lower growth in terms of income, productivity and employment, as well as benchmarks such as historical performance, country, and the EU. The study notes that the depth and intensity of

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid; de Dominicis, L., Dijkstra, L. and Pontarollo, N. (2020). The urban-rural divide in anti-EU vote: Social, demographic and economic factors affecting the vote for parties opposed to European integration. WP 05/2020. Luxembourg: European Union.

<sup>9</sup> Rodríguez-Pose, A. and Dijkstra, L. (2021). Does Cohesion Policy reduce EU discontent and Euroscepticism? *Regional Studies*, 55, 354-369. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2020.1826040>

<sup>10</sup> Brussels, 9-12 October 2023.

<sup>11</sup> European Week of Regions and Cities and European Commission (2023). Elections: leaving regions behind puts European project at risk. Politico. 26 October 2023. <https://www.politico.eu/sponsored-content/elections-leaving-regions-behind-puts-european-project-at-risk/>

<sup>12</sup> Bayerlein, M. and Diermeier, M. (2022). Exchanging money for love? A regional analysis of EU Cohesion Policy and Euroscepticism. Kiel Working Paper, No. 2219, Kiel Institute for the World Economy (IfW Kiel), Kiel. <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/256926/1/KWP2219.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Rodríguez-Pose, A., Dijkstra, L. and Poelman, H. (2023). The geography of EU discontent and the regional development trap. WP 03/2023. Luxembourg: European Union.

these development traps correspond to higher levels of support for Eurosceptic parties. The analysis reveals the cumulative impact of being trapped in a state of economic underperformance, with a longer duration resulting in a greater propensity for Eurosceptic voting. This is complemented by findings by Vasilopoulou and Talving<sup>14</sup>, showing that ‘a non-linear association exists whereby poor and rich European regions tend to trust the EU more compared to the middle-income regions, and that within-region over-time growth is associated with higher levels of EU trust.’

The DG REGIO 2023 study confirms that a variety of social, economic, and demographic factors have a significant impact on the rise of Euroscepticism. Higher levels of employment, higher rates of tertiary education, and more effective government policies tend to decrease the propensity for Eurosceptic voting. Additionally, the presence of a larger proportion of residents born in another EU Member State and higher population densities also show a negative correlation with Eurosceptic voting. Conversely, higher Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita, a larger older population, and a greater percentage of residents born outside the EU are found to increase support for Eurosceptic parties in most statistical analyses.

The same study highlights the need for further research on three critical concerns. Firstly, there is a need for a deeper understanding of the factors contributing to the persistent underdevelopment of regions and effective strategies to overcome the issue. Secondly, it is imperative to engage with the inhabitants of smaller cities, towns and rural areas to comprehend the sources of their feelings of insignificance. Thirdly, the closure of local public and private services can engender feelings of disenfranchisement and marginalisation. Further research is warranted to identify areas where access to services is declining, ascertain the groups most adversely impacted, and devise policies that guarantee sufficient access to essential services. Addressing these overarching issues will necessitate redistributing attention to the territorial effects of policies.

Florida<sup>15</sup> notes that discontent is a pervasive characteristic of societal transformations, particularly in relation to the changing nature of capitalism. This is due to the shift from an industrial to a knowledge-based economy, resulting in economic and geographical divisions. Discontent goes beyond economic and cultural factors, and is linked to the geographical separation of different social

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<sup>14</sup> Vasilopoulou, S. and Talving, L. (2023). Euroscepticism as a syndrome of stagnation? Regional inequality and trust in the EU. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 1-22.

<sup>15</sup> Florida, R. (2021). Discontent and its geographies. *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, 14(3), 619-624.

groups. Effective, localised policies to aid regions to break free from their development traps is crucial<sup>16</sup>.

## 1.2 Data sources and analytical approach

Applying a rural-urban lens to election data at European, national and subnational level provides a useful contribution to existing literature on Euroscepticism among Member State voters, alongside important insights for regional and local policy-making. To understand whether there are specific voting patterns in rural areas compared to non-rural areas, this study analysed the publicly available data used in the DG REGIO 2023 study. These data describe vote shares obtained by all political parties in Member States' (then-) latest national elections, ranging from 2018 to 2022.

To assess the extent of Eurosceptic voting, this study uses the Comparative Manifestos Project's Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) dataset to understand the extent to which votes for national parties in the EU represent anti-EU or Eurosceptic sentiment. CHES-Europe has measured national party positioning on European integration, ideology and several EU and non-EU policies for more than two decades by surveying political scientists with national expertise in political parties and European integration. The CHES receives funding from a range of public and private sources across the US and Europe, and its results are publicly available in the form of a dataset on its website<sup>17</sup>.

The most recent wave of the CHES was carried out in 2020. It tasked 421 political scientists with assessing the 2019 stances of 277 European political parties across all EU Member States<sup>18</sup>. To ensure credibility and accuracy, CHES has been cross-referenced with earlier surveys, validating results<sup>19</sup>. Given its pluralistic approach based on the consensus of national political science experts, academics frequently rely on CHES results to categorise European parties based on factors such as left-right ideological orientations, main platform positions, and levels of populism<sup>20</sup>. The CHES dataset was also used in the DG REGIO 2023 study. To assess Euroscepticism, the CHES questionnaire includes a question on parties' perspectives on European integration. Answers are categorised on a scale ranging from 1 to 7, where a score of 1 signifies pronounced Euroscepticism and 7

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<sup>16</sup> Rodríguez-Pose, A. and Dijkstra, L. (2021). Does Cohesion Policy reduce EU discontent and Euroscepticism? *Regional Studies*, 55, 354-369. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2020.1826040>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.chesdata.eu/>

<sup>18</sup> Jolly, S., Bakker, R., Hooghe, L., Marks, G., Polk, J., Rovny, J., Steenbergen, M. and Vachudova, M.A. (2022). Chapel Hill Expert Survey Trend File, 1999-2019. *Electoral Studies*, 75 (February). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2021.102420>

<sup>19</sup> Steenbergen, M and Marks, G. (2007). Evaluating expert judgements. *European Journal of Political Research*, 46, 347-366.

<sup>20</sup> Pew Research Centre (2023). Appendix A: Classifying European political parties. *Attitudes in an Interconnected World*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2023/12/06/global-citizenship-appendix-a-classifying-european-political-parties/>

indicates complete support for European integration. This rating functions as the basis for Eurosceptic coding in the DG REGIO 2023 study and is also used here for comparability. Parties with a score below 3.5 are considered Eurosceptic. In a select number of cases where political parties are missing from the CHES database, this study uses the Euroscepticism scores assigned by the DG REGIO 2023 study.

Similar to the DG REGIO 2023 study, this study draws a distinction between ‘hard’ Eurosceptic parties, characterised by scores below 2.5, and ‘soft’ Eurosceptic parties, with scores between 2.5 and 3.5. While hard Euroscepticism broadly aims to capture parties that explicitly support national withdrawal from the EU or policies opposing the European project, soft Euroscepticism reflects parties that are hesitant towards further European integration in specific policy areas<sup>21</sup>. These different types of Euroscepticism broadly map onto the widely cited distinction defined by leading political scientists in the academic field<sup>22</sup>.

Separating hard and soft categories is less meaningful for an EU-wide mapping of Eurosceptic voting, as the degree of Eurosceptic party supply is likely to inherently depend on and be shaped by national contexts. By including both soft- and hard-coded parties, the data capture Eurosceptic voting preferences in Member States from Eastern Europe, notably Poland and Hungary, where Eurosceptic parties tend not to oppose EU membership per se but resist further integration on key policy areas. In general, hard Eurosceptic parties are more typically found in Western Europe, while anti-EU party supply in Eastern Europe is limited to softer forms.

The analytical approach consisted of adding Eurostat’s 2021 ‘Urban-rural typology’ as a categorical variable to the dataset used by DG REGIO. The rural-urban typology was applied as NUTS 3 level<sup>23</sup>. This was then used to identify the urban, intermediate and rural NUTS 3 regions that reached minimum thresholds of 25% and 50% of vote shares for soft and/or hard Eurosceptic parties<sup>24</sup>, as coded by CHES and DG REGIO experts in the dataset.

In applying Eurostat’s 2021 Urban-rural typology to election data, the analysis highlights some important considerations that may bias statistical outcomes. Most

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<sup>21</sup> Rodríguez-Pose, A., Dijkstra, L. and Poelman, H. (2023). The geography of EU discontent and the regional development trap. WP 03/2023. Luxembourg: European Union; see also: Taggart, P. and Szczerbiak, A. (2002). The party politics of Euroscepticism in EU Member and Candidate States. Brighton: Sussex European Institute.

<sup>22</sup> Taggart, P. and Szczerbiak, A. (2002). The party politics of Euroscepticism in EU Member and Candidate States. Brighton: Sussex European Institute.

<sup>23</sup> The Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics (NUTS) classification has three levels, ranging from major socioeconomic regions (NUTS 1) to basic regions for the application of regional policies (NUTS 2), to small regions for specific diagnoses (NUTS 3). <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/nuts/overview>

<sup>24</sup> In line with DG REGIO’s 2023 study, ‘hard’ Euroscepticism covers parties assessed to be opposed or strongly opposed to EU integration, while ‘soft’ Euroscepticism covers parties that are only somewhat opposed, e.g. only voicing concerns about specific policy areas of European integration.

notably, the division of NUTS 3 regions does not appear to be consistent across Member States, with region sizes varying significantly even between countries of comparable population size (see Annex A). One clear example is Germany, with a total of 401 NUTS 3 regions (compared to France and Italy, at 101 and 107 NUTS 3 divisions, respectively) and Estonia (with five NUTS 3 regions, compared to Latvia's 10). Different region sizes lead to different levels of granularity to which Eurostat's 2021 Urban-rural typology is applied. The distribution of predominantly rural, intermediate and predominantly urban NUTS 3 regions appears to be driven by national context, which may limit the extent to which conclusions on rural-driven anti-EU votes can be drawn. For instance, countries with centralised administrations, many of which are found in Eastern Europe, are typically organised with one urban region (around the capital city) and mostly rural and/or intermediate surrounding regions. On the other hand, more decentralised countries such as Spain, Italy or Germany contain a lower share of predominantly rural regions, likely due to the wider dispersion of urban centres outside the capital regions. Consequently, the NUTS 3 typology may not always be useful or meaningful for gauging rural voting preferences, as any definition of rurality based on population density may be influenced by country-level factors.

Five countries were selected for in-depth study. These case studies compare Eurosceptic voting patterns in national and subnational elections<sup>25</sup>, providing crucial qualitative insights to complement quantitative election data and address the potential shortcomings of NUTS-3 level statistics. To facilitate comparability with the national election outcomes provided by the DG REGIO 2023 study, voting outcomes for subnational elections were also analysed at NUTS 3 level, while the CHES 2019 dataset was used where possible<sup>26</sup> to code the Eurosceptic level of candidate parties not included in the report on national elections. Nevertheless, full comparability with national election outcomes was not always possible, as differences in national and subnational electoral systems created variance in party supply across elections. Coalitions and shared lists were widespread at subnational level, making it difficult to isolate the number of voters expressing support for specific Eurosceptic parties.

### ***Mapping Euroscepticism in EP elections***

The European NUTS-Level Election Database (EU-NED) provides European election results at NUTS 3 level, to which Eurostat's 2021 Urban-rural typology can be applied. EU-NED records the number of votes received by political parties

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<sup>25</sup> The case study for Poland investigates voting outcomes in rural regions in two national elections, given the important outcome of the recent national parliamentary election.

<sup>26</sup> When not included in the CHES 2019 dataset or deemed outdated, these were independently coded by the research team, based on the definitions of party Euroscepticism outlined in Taggart and Szczerbiak (2002).

in the latest election year of the EP in every Member State.

Methodological limitations<sup>27</sup> meant it was ultimately concluded that these data would not yield useful comparison with the outcomes of national parliamentary elections. Most notably, parties, coalitions and candidates running for EP elections are often not the same as those running for national elections. As the CHES provides data on political parties running in the national elections of Member States, its scoring cannot be applied to EU-NED<sup>28</sup> to analyse Eurosceptic voting patterns at EP election level.

The study considered an alternative approach to mapping running parties, based on their affiliation to EP political groups. However, the seven groups could not be distributed across an EU-integration axis, as both Eurosceptic and non-Eurosceptic European parties occasionally belong to the same parliamentary groupings. This approach thus could not meaningfully capture Eurosceptic voting preferences among the European electorate.

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<sup>27</sup> NUTS 3 level data unavailable for several Member States, including Belgium, Greece, Ireland, Malta, Slovenia.

<sup>28</sup> Expert judgement on the position of each party on EU integration in order to calculate a similar Euroscepticism score to CHES data was beyond the scope of this study.

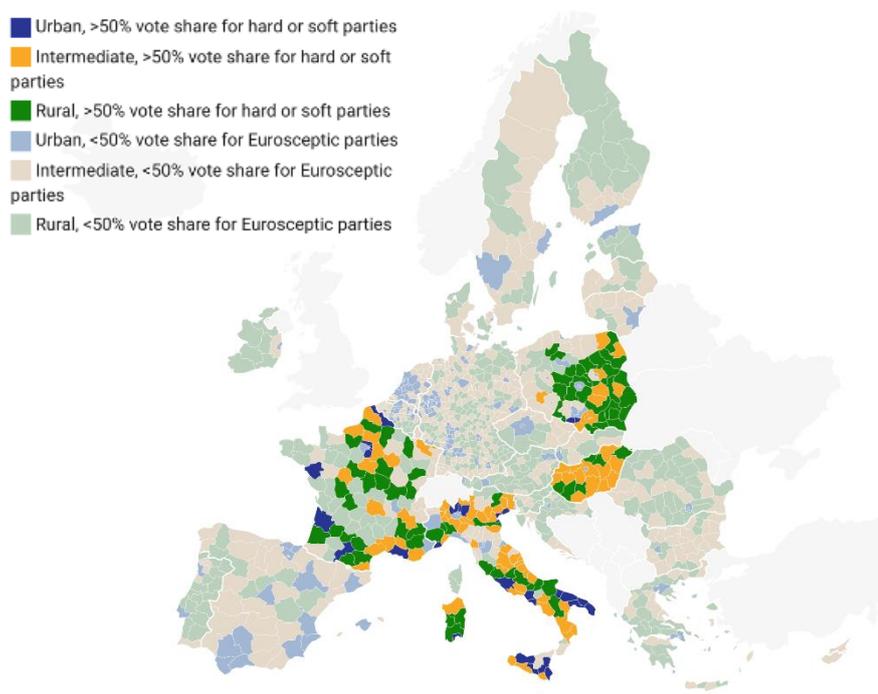


## 2. Rural-urban trends in national and European elections

This chapter investigates whether it is possible to identify specific anti-EU voting patterns across the rural-urban divide in national and European elections in the Member States. It also looks at how possible common drivers of Euroscepticism, collectively summarised as ‘the development trap’ (DG REGIO, 2023), manifest in rural areas, compared to urban areas.

### 2.1 National elections

**Map 1 – Euroscepticism, by urban-rural typology, 50% minimum vote threshold**



Source: Milieu (based on CHES and DG REGIO data collection).

The first analysis examines NUTS 3 regions with a 50% minimum voting threshold for Eurosceptic parties. Visualising this data on a map<sup>29</sup> highlights four Member States where Eurosceptic parties reached a 50% vote share in national elections: France, Italy, Hungary and Poland. The following relevant EU-level voting patterns appear:

- In **Italy**'s 2022 national elections, 81% of predominantly rural regions reached a majority vote share for Eurosceptic parties. This constitutes a slightly higher overall share than that of intermediate regions (71% of which reached a majority vote share for hard and soft Eurosceptic parties),

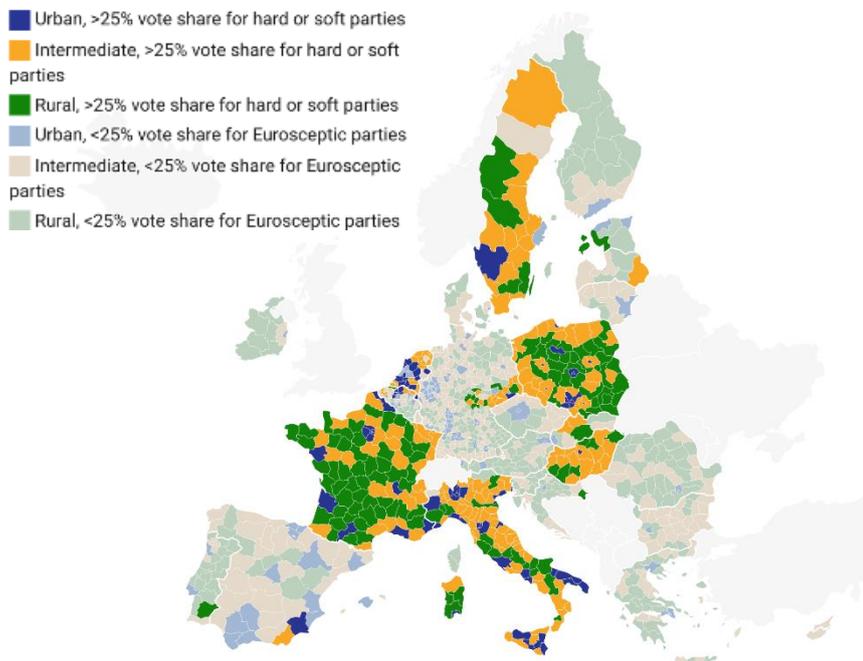
<sup>29</sup> Data visualisations were produced with the online tool [Datawrapper](#), which works similarly to IMAGE but allows authors to select their own colour schemes (essential to colour-code two separate categorical variables that could not be reduced to a two-colour scheme under IMAGE).

as well as predominantly urban ones (63%).

- In **France**, the urban-rural type with the highest share of regions reaching a 50% voting threshold for Eurosceptic parties in the 2022 national election was urban regions (60%). A minimal difference is observed between intermediate and rural regions (45% and 41% of region types reaching the threshold, respectively).
- In **Hungary**, the only NUTS 3 region where Eurosceptic parties did not reach a 50% threshold in the 2022 national elections was Budapest, which is also the only predominantly urban Hungarian region under the Eurostat typology. This is a significant finding, which endorses previous findings on the rural-urban voting divide.
- In **Poland**'s 2019 national elections, Eurosceptic parties reached a majority vote threshold in 84% of predominantly rural regions, compared to 37% and 14% of intermediate and predominantly urban regions, respectively.

Looking at NUTS 3 regions with at least a 25% share of voting for Eurosceptic parties identifies a significantly broader range of Member States as having anti-EU voting trends.

**Map 2 – Euroscepticism, by urban-rural typology, 25% minimum vote threshold**



Source: Milieu (based on CHES and DG REGIO data collection).

At first glance, the Eurosceptic trend is confirmed as a cross-country phenomenon in the four countries identified in the previous analysis. In France, every mainland NUTS 3 region surpassed a 30% Eurosceptic vote share. Similarly, in Poland and

Hungary, Eurosceptic parties reached at least 40% of the vote share in every NUTS 3 region. In Italy, only two provinces, Valle d'Aosta and Bolzano, did not reach the 25% threshold.

Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, Slovakia and Sweden also emerge as countries with a significant share of NUTS 3 regions casting anti-EU votes.

- In **Belgium**, almost one-third (27%) of NUTS 3 regions reached the 25% threshold for Eurosceptic voting; these are predominantly urban and intermediate areas located in Flanders. This voting pattern can be explained by the fact that the Eurosceptic-coded party is the Flemish nationalist group, Vlaams Belang.
- In **Germany**, Eurosceptic NUTS 3 regions were concentrated in the east of the country, notably in the federated states of Saxony, Thuringia and Brandenburg. Overall, the largest share of these regions were intermediate (60%), followed by predominantly rural areas (37%). Only one hard-coded party (AfD) ran in the 2021 national election, potentially explaining the low levels of vote share for Eurosceptic parties.
- In the **Netherlands**, 75% of NUTS 3 regions reached the 25% threshold. The country has one rural NUTS 3 region (Zeeuwsch-Vlaanderen), which reached a 33% Eurosceptic vote share. Eurosceptic regions were equally urban and intermediate; however, among the regions that did not reach the 25% threshold, urban areas were predominant.
- In **Sweden**, 86% of NUTS 3 regions had at least a 25% vote share for Eurosceptic parties. Votes were mostly cast for the hard-coded party Sweden Democrats (SD), compared to the soft-coded Left Party (V). Overall, 19% of the predominantly rural regions voted Eurosceptically; Stockholm was the only region that did not reach the 25% threshold, representing one of the two urban NUTS 3 regions in Sweden (the other being Västra Götalands, which reached a 28% Eurosceptic vote share). Four out of five of Sweden's predominantly rural regions voted Eurosceptically.
- In **Slovakia**, three regions of interest emerge: Trenčiansky kraj (27%, intermediate), Žilinský kraj (26%, intermediate) and Banskobystrický kraj (26%, predominantly rural). In all three cases, vote shares were equally split between hard-coded parties (Vlast; Ludova strana Nase Slovensko) and soft-coded Eurosceptic parties (Slovenska narodna strana; Sme Rodina - Boris Kollar).

Five Member States with 'outlier' Eurosceptic regions emerged. A single NUTS 3 region reached the 25% voting threshold in each of Portugal, Croatia and

Estonia, all three of which were predominantly rural.

- In **Portugal**, the Alentejo region displayed a higher Eurosceptic vote share than the rest of the country, which had a majority of predominantly rural NUTS 3 regions (16 out of 25 are rural). In particular, the Baixo Alentejo area reached a 31% Eurosceptic vote share in the 2022 national elections, driven by votes for the hard-coded Unitary Democratic Coalition (compared to the soft-coded Chega party). A similar pattern is found in Alentejo Central (24% Eurosceptic vote share) and Alentejo Literol (22% Eurosceptic vote share).
- In **Estonia**, all predominantly rural areas displayed significantly larger shares of votes for the hard-coded party Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond (EKRE), reaching 25%, 23% and 21% of vote shares, compared to 13% and 8% in the remaining two urban regions (Põhja-Eesti and Kirde-Eesti).
- In **Croatia**, the only NUTS 3 region reaching a significant Eurosceptic share was Vukovarsko-srijemska county, located in the far east of the country. This vote share was significantly driven by support for the soft-coded coalition, led by the Homeland Movement party (Domovinski pokret Miroslava Škore).

In Latvia, one intermediate region out of six NUTS 3 regions (one urban, three intermediate, two rural) reached the 25% threshold. Similarly, two southern NUTS 3 regions in Spain (Murcia and Ceuta), one predominantly urban and one intermediate, reached this threshold, voting for the soft-coded Vox part.

### ***Recent trends in Eurosceptic voting***

There is a growing literature dedicated to understanding the reasons behind variations and trends in Eurosceptic voting. On a broad level<sup>30</sup>, drivers of Eurosceptic voting range from cultural factors (migration imbalances, share of older people, low levels of education<sup>31</sup>) to economic (wealth or employment rates<sup>32</sup>) and geographical factors (population density<sup>33</sup>, quality of regional

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<sup>30</sup> While cross-country trends in drivers of Euroscepticism can be identified, local contexts are better suited to explaining anti-EU voting preferences at national level (see case studies in chapter 3).

<sup>31</sup> Ford, R. and Jennings, W. (2020). The changing cleavage politics of Western Europe. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 23(1), 295-314; Di Matteo, D. and Mariotti, I. (2021). Italian discontent and rightwing populism: determinants, geographies, patterns. *Regional Science Policy & Practice*, 13(2), 371-396.

<sup>32</sup> Di Matteo, D. and Mariotti, I. (2021). Italian discontent and rightwing populism: determinants, geographies, patterns. *Regional Science Policy & Practice*, 13(2), 371-396.

<sup>33</sup> Rodden, J. A. (2019). *Why cities lose: The deep roots of the urban-rural political divide*. New York: Basic Books; Rickardsson, J. (2021). The urban-rural divide in radical right populist support: the role of resident's characteristics, urbanisation trends and public service supply. *Annals of Regional Science*, 67(1), 211-242.

governments<sup>34</sup>).

Academics note that low voter turnout is one potential driver of high Euroscepticism in election outcomes<sup>35</sup>. The DG REGIO 2023 study concluded that, contrary to expectations, higher turnout was associated with greater support for hard Eurosceptic parties, suggesting widespread discontent among voters. According to the database used in the study, voter turnout varied significantly across Member States in the most recent national elections, from 30.5% in Romania to 84% in Malta. Based on DG REGIO data, the average turnout of valid votes for the national elections across the EU was 63.6% (see Annex A).

Notably, voter turnout was consistently lower in predominantly rural NUTS 3 regions, with the exception of Austria, France, Estonia, Latvia and Sweden. The largest rural-urban difference in turnout was in Poland (9% higher turnout in urban NUTS 3 regions), followed by Bulgaria, Lithuania and Hungary (7% difference apiece). A notable exception is Latvia, where the turnout in rural areas was 11% higher than urban areas.

The DG REGIO 2023 study investigated the development trap<sup>36</sup> as a potential driving factor of Eurosceptic voting. To assess how the development trap relates to the rural-urban divide, a simple correlation analysis was conducted<sup>37</sup>. In line with DG REGIO's findings, the likelihood of being in the development trap<sup>38</sup> was positively correlated to Eurosceptic voting in NUTS 3 regions, including rural areas. However, the correlation with Eurosceptic vote shares was less strong for the depth of the development trap<sup>39</sup>. Table 1 shows the correlation between Eurosceptic vote shares (for hard and soft parties) and development trap indicators for NUTS 3 regions in each urban-rural category. The association between Eurosceptic preferences and the development trap appears strongest in intermediate regions. In both intermediate and predominantly rural regions, the likelihood of being in a development trap (*DT1*) and the duration of stagnation (*number of years in a development trap*) are more closely associated with Eurosceptic voting, compared with the perceived depth of the trap (*DT2*).

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<sup>34</sup> Díaz-Lanchas, J., Sojka, A. and Di Pietro, F. (2021). Of losers and laggards: the interplay of material conditions and individual perceptions in the shaping of EU discontent. *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, 14(3), 395-415.

<sup>35</sup> Guiso, L., Herrera, H., Morelli, M. and Sonno, T. (2017). Demand and supply of populism. London, UK: Centre for Economic Policy Research; Leininger, A. and Meijers, M. J. (2021). Do populist parties increase voter turnout? Evidence from over 40 years of electoral history in 31 European democracies. *Political Studies*, 69(3), 665-685.

<sup>36</sup> In a development trap region, economic growth (GDP per capita, employment, productivity) is lower than that of the EU, the country in which the region is located, and/or the region itself in a previous period.

<sup>37</sup> While correlations indicate a relationship between variables, they are not able to indicate causation. As a result, this analysis is insufficient to conclude whether exposure to the development trap can be deemed a potential driver of Eurosceptic voting outcomes in rural areas (see DG REGIO 2023 study for causal findings).

<sup>38</sup> DG REGIO (2023). Development Trap Index 1.

<sup>39</sup> DG REGIO (2023). Development Trap Index 2.

**Table 1 – Correlation between Eurosceptic vote shares and development trap indicators in Member States’ national elections, by urban-rural**

Variables	Predominantly rural regions	Intermediate regions	Predominantly urban regions
Correlation: Eurosceptic vote share and DT1	0.08	0.19	0.10
Correlation: Eurosceptic vote share and DT2	-0.06	0.09	0.05
Correlation: Eurosceptic vote share and number of years in a development trap	0.02	0.14	0.07

Source: Milieu, based on DG REGIO data (2023).

Interestingly, the development trap indicators themselves do not appear to be correlated with a particular rural-urban category: the average development trap index scores are very similar across urban, intermediate and rural NUTS 3 regions (see Table 2). This suggests that no one particular urban-rural type is more likely to be stuck in a development trap. However, there may still be differences in how the development trap influences voter preferences across urban-rural types. More drivers and trends of Eurosceptic voting, including some dimensions captured by the development trap, are analysed at local level as part of the case studies in chapter 3.

**Table 2 – Average development trap index scores, rural and urban regions in the EU**

	Predominantly rural regions	Intermediate regions	Predominantly urban regions
DT1 ( <i>likelihood of being in a development trap</i> )	0.52	0.53	0.54
DT2 ( <i>depth of the development trap</i> )	0.74	0.73	0.78
Average number of years stuck in a development trap	10	10	9

Source: Milieu, based on DG REGIO data (2023).

### 3. Voting patterns in selected subnational elections

This chapter focuses on anti-EU voting patterns in recent subnational elections in four selected countries: France, Germany, Italy and Slovakia. A fifth case study on Poland compares Eurosceptic voting in rural areas of the recent 2023 national election to that of 2019. Each case study begins with a brief overview of the national elections, followed by a discussion of the Eurosceptic voting within the selected subnational election, disaggregated by NUTS 3 unit-areas to provide a rural-urban lens. Lastly, the case studies assess whether subnational elections correspond to or could be considered to preempt national elections (or vice versa, see Table 16 in Annex B). The chapter also presents factors (or combinations thereof) influencing votes in rural areas with a high level of Eurosceptic vote shares.

#### 3.1 France

##### 3.1.1 National election (2022)

In France, the urban-rural type with the highest share of regions reaching a 50% voting threshold for Eurosceptic parties in the 2022 national parliamentary election was predominantly urban regions (60%). There was a minimal difference between intermediate and rural regions (45% and 41% of region-types reaching the threshold, respectively). The two Eurosceptic parties running for elections were RN, coded as a hard-Eurosceptic party, and the Nouvelle Union Populaire Ecologique et Sociale (NUPES) coalition, coded as soft-Eurosceptic (see Table 3).

The administrative regions<sup>40</sup> with significant shares of rural and Eurosceptic NUTS 3 regions were Bourgogne-Franche, Nouvelle-Aquitaine, Occitania, Centre-Val de Loire and Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur.

**Table 3 – Euroscepticism of political parties, French national parliament elections, 2022**

Party ID	Party	Position on EU integration
RN	Rassemblement National	1.4
NUPES (FI + PS + PCF + EELV)	Nouvelle union populaire écologique et sociale	2.9
R!	Reconquête!	3.0
LR	Les Républicains	5.5
LÉ	Les Ecologistes	6.4
/	Ensemble ! (Majorité présidentielle)	6.8

Source: Milieu, based on DG REGIO data (2023) and CHES data (2019).

<sup>40</sup> The so-called administrative regions of France correspond to Eurostat’s NUTS 2 regions.

### 3.1.2 Subnational elections (2021)

The subnational analysis focuses on the 2021 regional elections, which renewed all of the metropolitan<sup>41</sup> regional councils in France. The fact that France's regional councils were elected one year before the national parliamentary assembly makes an interesting and pressing case for the comparison of national and subnational voting preferences in rural and urban areas.

Since the 2016 NOTRe law<sup>42</sup>, France has 13 regions. These are responsible for transportation (ports, airports, regional express trains, road networks), public secondary education, vocational training, spatial planning and environmental initiatives. They also manage European funds. The departments handle social welfare, public assistance, child welfare services, and administrative responsibilities related to civil registration, elections, and land management. They also maintain and develop local infrastructure (e.g. roads) and support cultural and heritage initiatives<sup>43</sup>.

France's regional electoral system is a mixed two-round system, combining proportional representation for 75% of the seats and a majority bonus of 25% of the seats for the leading list in the decisive round. Initially, if a list secures over 50% of the votes in the first round, it can claim victory; if no list reaches this threshold, a second round is organised in which a relative majority is sufficient to win. The majority bonus was added through a 2004 electoral reform and aimed to incentivise coalition formation. Only the first round of the 2021 regional elections is analysed here, as it typically reflects the diversity of political opinions within the electorate and often serves as an indicator of initial public preferences – subsequent rounds may see strategic voting or the formation of coalitions<sup>44</sup>.

While party affiliation is freely chosen by the candidate, list affiliation is assigned by the Ministry of the Interior. According to French national law, this makes the results clearer to the public and is an 'essential condition' for analysis of election outcomes<sup>45</sup>. A total of 26 lists were validated by the Ministry of the Interior for the 2021 regional elections, reflecting the main political formations and sensibilities at the time<sup>46</sup>. In general, candidates were assigned to a list according

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<sup>41</sup> This analysis omits the five overseas administrative regions of France.

<sup>42</sup> Loi portant sur la nouvelle organisation territoriale de la république (NOTRe). <https://www.ecologie.gouv.fr/loi-portant-sur-nouvelle-organisation-territoriale-republique-notre>

<sup>43</sup> Regional competences. <https://www.prefectures-regions.gouv.fr/Le-savez-vous/Quelles-sont-les-competences-d-une-region>

<sup>44</sup> Gougou, F. (2021). The 2021 French Regional Elections: Beyond Second-Order Effects. *Regional and Federal Studies*, 33 (4). <https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04016093>

<sup>45</sup> Vie Publique (2021). Loi du 22 février 2021 portant report, de mars à juin 2021, du renouvellement général des conseils départementaux, des conseils régionaux et des assemblées de Corse, de Guyane et de Martinique. <https://www.vie-publique.fr/loi/277829-loi-report-elections-regionales-departementales-juin-2021>

<sup>46</sup> Ministère de l'intérieur et des outre-mer (2021). Résultats des élections régionales 2021. [https://mobile.interieur.gouv.fr/Elections/Les-resultats/Regionales/electresult\\_regionales-2021/\(path\)/regionales-2021/nuances.html](https://mobile.interieur.gouv.fr/Elections/Les-resultats/Regionales/electresult_regionales-2021/(path)/regionales-2021/nuances.html)

to the following criteria:

1. If the candidate is nominated or supported by a single political grouping with its own list, this list is directly validated. Parties that presented their own lists at the 2021 subnational elections<sup>47</sup> were: the Parti Communiste Français (PCF), France Insoumise (FI), the Parti Socialiste (PS), La République en Marche, Europe Écologie – Les Verts, RN, and Debout la France (DLF).
2. If the candidate is neither nominated nor supported by a political grouping, or the supported party does not have its own list, the Ministry of the Interior assigns the candidate to a coalition list corresponding to the candidate's position on the political spectrum. Such lists included: Union à gauche (LUG), Union au centre, Divers gauche, Divers centre, Divers droite, Union à l'extrême-droite, and Les Régionalistes.
3. If the candidate is nominated or supported by more than one political group, the situation falls into one of the two previous cases.

Not every list was presented in each region. Firstly, parties can choose the regions in which to run for election. For instance, the Liste de La République en marche (LREM) of Emmanuel Macron was presented in all regions except one. Additionally, parties can choose whether to present their own list or run under a coalition list in each region. The PS, for example, presented a total of nine lists in coalition with other left parties (under the LUG list). However, in the five regions where the potential for a radical right-wing victory was most pronounced, they worked with Europe Ecologie Les Verts (EELV) to form broader left-wing coalitions (under the Liste d'union à gauche avec des écologiste (LUGE) list). On average, 8.8 lists were presented per region<sup>48</sup>.

For the 2021 subnational elections, two hard Eurosceptic parties could be identified according to the 2019 CHES data. Both are situated on the right side of the political range, notably RN and DLF. Additionally, there were two soft Eurosceptic parties, both occupying the left side of the spectrum: FI and the PCF. Table 4 shows the CHES score of the parties that presented their own lists at the 2021 regional elections<sup>49</sup>.

The right-wing party, DLF, presented its own list in four regions and supported the LR list in another region. The radical right party, RN, stood in all regions under its own list. The radical left party, FI, ran its own list in two regions, while

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<sup>47</sup> In at least one administrative region.

<sup>48</sup> Gougou, F. (2021). The 2021 French Regional Elections: Beyond Second-Order Effects. *Regional and Federal Studies*, 33 (4). <https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04016093>

<sup>49</sup> All but one of the lists analysed were directly associated with a political group. These lists were the ones with CHES scores available. The only coalition list (LUGE) that was retained was that of the PS and EELV, two parties for which a CHES score was available, and which were always consistent in terms of party coalition across regions. This was not the case for the other party coalitions (such as LUG) which, despite having the same list name, were formed by different parties in different regions.

the PCF had its own list in one region.

**Table 4 – Euroscepticism of political parties, French regional elections, 2021**

List ID	Party IDs	Party	Position on EU integration
LRN	RN	Rassemblement National	1.4
LDSV	DLF	Debout la France	1.43
LFI	FI	France Insoumise	2.9
LCOM	PCF	Parti Communiste Français	3.0
LLR	LR	Les Républicains	5.5
LSOC	PS	Parti Socialiste	6.1
LUGE	PS and EELV	Liste d'union à gauche avec des écologiste	6.3
LECO	EELV	Europe Écologie – Les Verts	6.4
LREM	REM	La République en Marche	6.8

Source: Milieu, based on DG REGIO data (2023) and CHES data (2019).

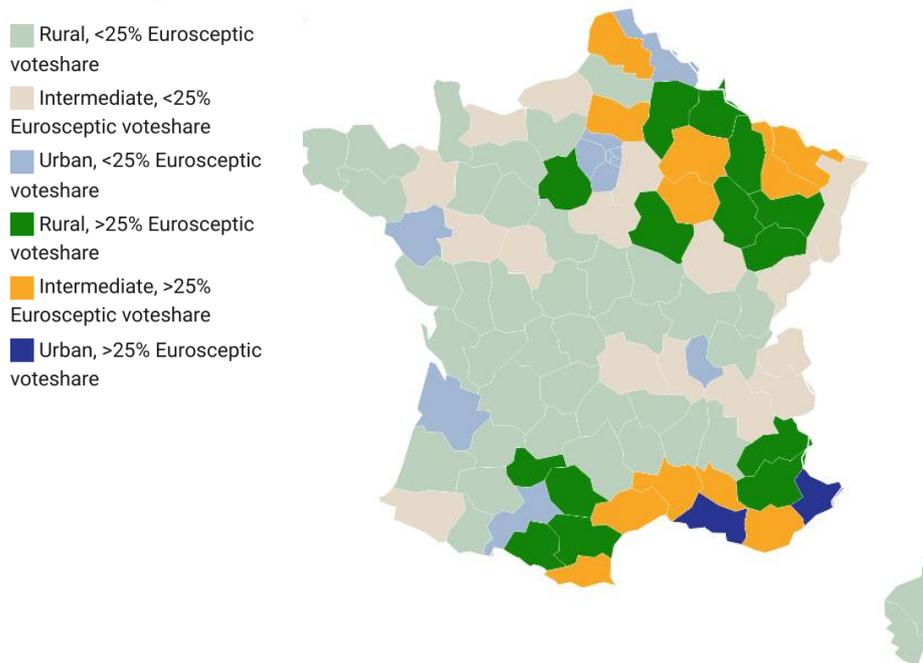
Note: \*Calculated by Milieu, taking the CHES average for the parties under coalition.

Voter turnout reached a historic low, with just 33.3% of the French electorate participating in the first round and 34.7% in the second round of elections. RN received an aggregate vote share of 19.1% across regions but failed to win a majority in any region, contrary to initial expectations. The other small radical right party, DLF, as well the radical left parties, FI and PCF, did not reach the second round in any of the regions where they presented a list<sup>50</sup>.

An analysis of the election results shows a significantly lower incidence of Eurosceptic voting in the NUTS 3 regions compared to the national parliamentary elections. The percentage of votes for Eurosceptic parties did not reach 50% in any region in 2021, a striking difference from the 2022 national elections, when 45% of all NUTS 3 regions exceeded this threshold. Lowering the threshold of analysis, Eurosceptic parties reached a 25% vote share in 27 NUTS 3 regions (28% of the total regions). Eurosceptic voting NUTS 3 regions at the subnational level mainly comprised predominantly rural areas (52%) and intermediate regions (41%). Compared to the national elections, rural areas were significantly less likely to vote Eurosceptic parties. While 96% of predominantly rural regions reached a 25% Eurosceptic vote share in national elections, this rural level of support dropped to 26% in the subnational elections.

<sup>50</sup> DLF's maximum share of the vote was 9.1% in a department in the Grand-Est region, while it received an average of 3% in all the regions where it presented a list. The PCF only stood in Corsica, where it won a maximum of 3.5%, while the FI, which stood in Brittany and Occitania, won a maximum of 5.9%; Bendjanballah, S. and Sauger, N. (2021). France: Political Developments and Data for 2021. *European Journal of Political Research Political Data Yearbook*, 61, 160–170. doi: 10.1111/2047-8852.12374.

### Map 3 – Vote share for Eurosceptic parties (hard and soft), French regional elections, first round, 2021



Source: Milieu, based on data from France's Ministry of the Interior<sup>51</sup>.

The administrative (NUTS 2) regions with the highest proportion of votes for Eurosceptic parties were Grand-Est, Bourgogne-Franche-Comté, Occitanie and Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur, corresponding mainly to the regions that supported hard Eurosceptic parties in the national elections of the same year. However, it the definition of Eurosceptic parties changed considerably between 2021 and 2022.

That change in definition is the main reason for the difference in support for Eurosceptic parties in the subnational and national elections. In the national elections, the PS and EELV joined forces with the Eurosceptic parties, FI and the PCF, to form the NUPES coalition, which according to the CHES score was a soft-coded Eurosceptic list (see Table 4).

However, the four NUPES parties mainly ran separately in the 2021 regional elections, and neither the PS nor the EELV are considered Eurosceptic by the CHES. Without the support of the mainstream PS and the growing EELV, the soft Eurosceptic parties (FI and PCF) could only secure a negligible share of the vote in the regional elections, in line with their historical trend. The hard Eurosceptic DLF was also generally unable to secure many votes when running its own list, both in the 2021 regional elections and the 2022 national elections.

<sup>51</sup> Ministère de L'intérieur et des Outre-Mer (n.d). <https://www.archives-resultats-elections.interieur.gouv.fr/resultats/regionales-2021/index.php>

Among the hard Eurosceptic parties, it is more relevant to consider the vote share of the RN (formerly the Front National), which has always been recognised by academics as the primary actor in France's Eurosceptic landscape<sup>52,53</sup>. Although the RN did not win a majority of votes in any region in the 2021 subnational elections, it won 19.2% of the total votes in the second round (across all regions), making it the second most popular party after the LR (20.1%). From a macro-trend perspective, the RN share of the vote has increased significantly over the years: in the 2010 regional elections, it was 11.7%, while in 2015 it reached 28.4%. In the national parliamentary elections, RN's success ranged from 3.6% in 2012 to 6.06% in 2017 and 17.8% in 2022, marking the third-highest number of seats in parliament (after the NUPES coalition and the presidential majority *Ensemble!*), a historical record for the RN. The RN's inability to win a majority of seats in any region might therefore be seen as an exception, rather than a trend, in light of previous and subsequent elections at both national and subnational level.

Support for political parties such as the RN has been the subject of research for some time. The RN has attracted attention for its political positions, including on immigration, nationalism and Euroscepticism<sup>54</sup>. Ivaldi and Gombin (2015) highlight the significant role of socioeconomic challenges, particularly those affecting the agricultural sector, as a key factor driving rural support for the RN. They noted that the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has historically protected farmers by ensuring income stability amid growing international competition in national agricultural markets, fostering strong support for European integration among French farmers. However, recent perceptions of the CAP's diminished effectiveness among certain sub-groups of farmers have led to dissatisfaction with EU policies within these segments and contributed to their support for the RN's national protectionist stance<sup>55</sup>.

According to Goldhammer (2015)<sup>56</sup> and Cremer (2023)<sup>57</sup>, there is a cultural driver behind RN support. People living in rural areas, less exposed to the benefits of

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<sup>52</sup> Likay, X., Rieble L. and Theuer L. (2020). Euroscepticism in France: An analysis of Actors and Causes. Working paper, No. 132/2020. Institute for International Political Economy Berlin.

<sup>53</sup> Ivaldi G. (2018). Contesting the EU in times of crisis: The Front National and politics of Euroscepticism in France. *Politics*, 28(3), 278-294.

<sup>54</sup> Likay, X., Rieble L. and Theuer L. (2020). Euroscepticism in France: An analysis of Actors and Causes. Working paper, No. 132/2020. Institute for International Political Economy Berlin; Ivaldi G. (2018). Contesting the EU in times of crisis: The Front National and politics of Euroscepticism in France. *Politics*, 28(3), 278-294; Cremer, T. (2022). The Rise of the Post-Religious Right: Christianity and Secularism in the French Rassemblement National. *Party Politics*, 29(1).

<sup>55</sup> Ivaldi, G. and Gombin, J. (2015). The Front National and the New Politics of the Rural in France. In D. Strijker, G. Voerman and I. Terluin (Eds.). *Rural Protest Groups and Populist Political Parties*. Wageningen: Wageningen Academic Publishers, pp. 243–263.

<sup>56</sup> Goldhammer, A. (2015). Explaining the Rise of the Front National: Political Rhetoric or Cultural Insecurity? Review of *L'Insécurité culturelle* by Laurent Bouvet and *Marine Le Pen prise aux mots: Décryptage du nouveau discours frontiste* by Cécile Alduy, Stéphane Wahnich. *French Politics, Culture & Society*, 33(2), 134-142.

<sup>57</sup> Cremer, T. (2022). The Rise of the Post-Religious Right: Christianity and Secularism in the French Rassemblement National. *Party Politics*, 29(1).

globalisation, are more and more affected by the so-called sense of ‘*Insécurité Culturelle*’. This is a series of deep-rooted cultural crises and insecurities, such as economic insecurity, fear of unfamiliar cultural and religious practices, crime and terrorism, which French people, especially those living outside urban areas, increasingly associate with the EU and its policies. The RN capitalised on these concerns<sup>58</sup>.

Overall, the party results in the national and subnational elections were very different. The 2021 regional elections were characterised by the complete re-election of incumbents, all from the two mainstream parties of the French political spectrum, the PS and LR. In addition, LREM, the governing coalition, and RN, the increasingly popular main Eurosceptic party, failed to win a majority in any of the regions, performing below expectations. The 2022 national elections instead saw the re-election of the ruling coalition (LREM) and the confirmation of the historic rise of the RN. In terms of the political offer, the elections were significantly influenced by a new coalition, NUPES, made up of FI, PCF, PS and EELV, which was created to stop the advance of the extreme right, and which, despite achieving a good result, failed to do so.

The extent to which the 2021 subnational elections might be considered a possible predictive model of the 2022 national elections remains limited. Academics consider French regional elections to be second-order national elections, mostly focused on candidates rather than parties, and centred on local rather than national issues. Gougou (2020) adds that French subnational elections are increasingly characterised by a decreasing impact of partisanship on voting, a high level of incumbent re-election, and a high level of divided government, which is rarely the case at national level<sup>59</sup>.

### **3.1.3 Conclusions**

Despite coming just one year apart, the 2021 regional elections had significantly different results to the national election the following year. No NUTS-3 region reached a 50% Eurosceptic vote share in the regional elections, but 27 regions exceeded 25%, mostly rural or intermediate areas. The regional elections saw the re-election of incumbents from the PS and LR and the underperformance of the LREM and RN. This difference can be explained by the fact that French regional elections are increasingly seen as secondary to national elections, prioritising candidates over parties and focusing more on local issues. In addition, regional elections are increasingly characterised by less partisanship, together with high re-election rates for incumbents and frequently divided government.

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<sup>58</sup> Goldhammer, A. (2015). Explaining the Rise of the Front National: Political Rhetoric or Cultural Insecurity? Review of L’Insécurité culturelle by Laurent Bouvet and Marine Le Pen prise aux mots: Décryptage du nouveau discours frontiste by Cécile Alduy, Stéphane Wahnich. *French Politics, Culture & Society*, 33(2), 134-142.

<sup>59</sup> Gougou, F. (2021). The 2021 French Regional Elections: Beyond Second-Order Effects. *Regional and Federal Studies*, 33(4). <https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04016093>

Socioeconomic challenges in agriculture drive rural support for the hard-coded Eurosceptic party, RN, as well as cultural insecurities across rural areas.

## 3.2 Germany

### 3.2.1 National election (2021)

No NUTS 3 region in Germany reached the 50% vote share threshold for Eurosceptic parties. However, trends emerge when the threshold is lowered to 25%. Eurosceptic regions were concentrated in eastern Germany, and the largest share of these regions were intermediate (60%), closely followed by predominantly rural areas (37%). Eurosceptic-voting regions were located across three federal states:

- In **Saxony**, nine out of 13 regions surpassed a 25% Eurosceptic vote share. Of these, two (out of two) were predominantly rural, six (out of seven) were intermediate, and one (out of four) were predominantly urban.
- In **Thuringia**, 13 out of 23 regions voted more Eurosceptic. This comprised 70% of predominantly rural areas, compared to 46% of intermediate areas. As a state without urban NUTS 3 regions, the trend of urban areas voting less Eurosceptically cannot be inferred at state level.
- In **Brandenburg**, only two of 18 NUTS 3 regions reached the 25% threshold, and both were rural.

CHES data identifies one German political party as a (hard) Eurosceptic actor: AfD. Established in 2013, this far-right nationalist party was represented for the first time in the 2014 EP elections. Since then, it has enjoyed steady growth, becoming the third-largest party in German national elections in 2017 based on vote counts<sup>60</sup>, and acquiring 94 of the 709 seats of the Bundestag (national parliament). Its success at the time was closely interlinked with the European migrant crisis<sup>61</sup>, specifically the 2015 immigration politics of Angela Merkel, which allowed many migrants in need to stay in Germany. As a Eurosceptic party, the AfD's main goals include opposing immigration and limiting European integration; in some German federated states, the party is even considered by some as anti-democratic. As the AfD is the only political party in Germany considered Eurosceptic, its vote share can be directly transcribed into indicators for Euroscepticism.

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<sup>60</sup> Federal Returning Officer (2023). Bundestag election 2017. *Statistisches Bundesamt*. <https://www.bundeswahlleiterin.de/en/bundestagswahlen/2017/ergebnisse/bund-99.html>

<sup>61</sup> Peters, B. (n.d.). 5 Reasons for the far right rising in Germany. *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*. <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/projekte/artikel/politik/afd-5-reasons-for-the-far-right-rising-in-germany-e403522/>

**Table 5 – Euroscepticism of political parties, German national elections, 2021**

Party ID	Party	Position on EU integration
AfD	Alternative für Deutschland	1.9
FW	Freie Wähler	4
Linke	Die Linke	4.7
DieTier	Tierschutzpartei	5
CSU	Christlich Soziale Union in Bayern	5.7
FDP	Freie Demokratische Partei	5.8
CDU	Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands	6.3
Piraten	Piratenpartei Deutschland	6.5
SPD	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands	6.5
Grüne	Bündnis '90; Die Grünen	6.8

Source: Milieu, based on DG REGIO data (2023) and CHES data (2019).

### ***3.2.2 Subnational elections (2019 and 2023)***

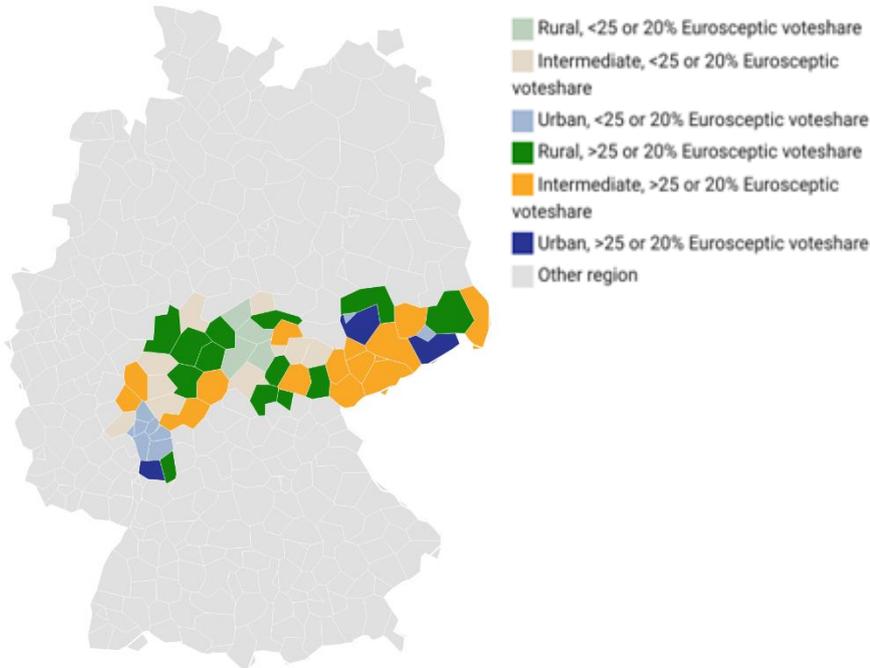
In Germany, subnational elections are organised at federal state parliament level (Landtagswahlen) and municipal level (Kommunalwahlen). This case study focuses on Landtag elections, where electoral data is organised by NUTS 3 units and thus provides a comparable approach to rural-urban analysis with other case studies. Landtags are responsible for the control of the state government and the adoption of state laws. Only parties that win at least five seats in a Landtag can be represented at federal level in the national parliament.

Thuringia and Saxony, two of the most representative regions of Euroscepticism in Germany, were selected for analysis at subnational level. Both held Landtagswahlen in 2019. To complement Thuringia and Saxony, which are both historically and culturally east German states, a third, historically western state, Hessen, was also included in the subnational analysis. Although Hessen did not demonstrate significant Eurosceptic voting in the 2019 national elections (the average AfD vote share across NUTS 3 regions was 9.3%), the subnational Landtagswahlen took place in October 2023, providing valuable very recent data for the analysis of Eurosceptic voting preferences and significant changes in voting trends.

Elections comprise two votes: the first is dedicated to a representative and the second to a party. The two votes are independent, i.e. the representative does not have to be from the same party supported by the second vote. While the second (party) vote dictates the initial shares of seats available for each party, the first (representative) vote goes on to dictate how the allocated seats are filled in practice, by determining which representatives are elected via direct mandate. If a party obtains more seats with the second vote than the number of its representatives elected at the constituency level with the first vote, the remaining seats are filled with other candidates from the party list.

When compiling election data for comparison with national election outcomes, the subnational data screening took only the second vote into account, as it allows comparability with data for the 2021 national election (also disaggregated by party).

**Map 4 – Vote share for Eurosceptic parties, German subnational elections, 2019**



Source: Milieu, based on Saxony, Thuringia and Hessen state data portals<sup>62</sup>.  
 Note: Eurosceptic vote share thresholds for Saxony and Thuringia are set at 25%; for Hessen, 20%.

At the Landtag elections for Saxony in 2019, the AfD reached a 25% vote share in 11 of the 13 NUTS 3 regions. This success was driven by high electoral support in all intermediate and rural regions. Only the two city-regions, Leipzig and Dresden, expressed limited support, with 17% and 21% of votes for the AfD, respectively.

Despite the large vote share achieved by the AfD in Saxony, electoral results did not directly translate into proportionate power in the state government, with the party able to fill only 35 of its 38 allocated seats (out of 119 total Landtag seats). This was because the AfD had significantly higher success with the second vote, but was unable to fill its seats with elected representatives and its list of candidates was not sufficient to fill the remaining seats. One explanation for such divergence between voter preferences across the two votes is that AfD support was primarily a protest vote against the incumbent state government. Therefore, while voters expressed support for the AfD as a party, identification with specific AfD candidates remained low and representative-elected seats remained empty in

<sup>62</sup> Hessen: [https://bundestagswahl.statistik.hessen.de/b\\_2021/html/landkreise+kreisfreie-staedte/413000](https://bundestagswahl.statistik.hessen.de/b_2021/html/landkreise+kreisfreie-staedte/413000); Saxony: <https://wahlen.sachsen.de/landtagswahl-2019-wahlergebnisse.php>; Thuringia: <https://wahlen.thuringen.de/datenbank/wahl1/wahl.asp?wahlart=LW&wJahr=2019&zeigeErg=Land>

practice.

The AfD was not able to secure a prominent role in state government despite the election results because the Landtag of Saxony is a majoritarian electoral system. As a result, parties must cooperate to form coalitions to reach a majority seat share. In 2019, a coalition between the CDU, the Grüne (Greens), and the SPD was formed as an absolute majority government, excluding the AfD.

In Thuringia, the AfD won the majority of the votes in 10 of 23 NUTS 3 regions, with the Eurosceptic vote equally split between intermediate and predominantly rural areas. It achieved 22 of the 90 seats of the Thuringia Landtag. The turnout for voters under 30 years was unexpectedly high<sup>63</sup>. At the same time, the Grüne, the leading party for climate-friendly politics and normally with quite a young audience, achieved lower results than previously, suggesting a shift in preference among the younger electorate.

In Hessen, in 2023, Eurosceptic support saw a distinct rise in popularity compared to the 2021 Bundestag elections. While none of the NUTS 3 regions reached a 20% vote share in 2021 at the national elections, 11 reached this threshold in 2023 at the most recent subnational elections. Before the 2023 Landtag election, the leading party in Hessen was the CDU, which entered a coalition with the Grüne. The AfD nevertheless secured 28 of 133 seats in the new election of October 2023, becoming the second-strongest party in Hessen<sup>64</sup>. This represents an overall increase of 5.3% in its popularity compared to 2018<sup>65</sup>. This gain is partially explained by the general upward trend for populist parties presenting simplistic solutions in times of multiple crises.

Voter preference at national elections does not always align with voting trends at subnational level (see Table 6). In Thuringia and Saxony, the AfD saw an overall stable evolution in popularity in the national elections, compared to subnational elections occurring two years prior. On the other hand, compared to the 2019 national elections, Eurosceptic voting in Hessen increased at the 2023 Landtag elections, potentially indicating a continuing upwards trend of Eurosceptic voting for other German states.

Differences in voting patterns according to the urban-rural divide are also worth noting. Predominantly rural areas appear to be the largest basis of support for the

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<sup>63</sup> Reuter, B. (2019). Landtagswahlen 2019 in Ostdeutschland: Nirgendwo wählte die Jugend so rechts wie in Thüringen. *Tagesspiegel*, 28 October 2019. <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/nirgendwo-wahlte-die-jugend-so-rechts-wie-in-thuringen-4113457.html>

<sup>64</sup> Hessenschau (2023). Endgültiges Ergebnis der Landtagswahl in Hessen steht fest. <https://www.hessenschau.de/politik/landtagswahl-2023-in-hessen-das-endgueltige-ergebnis-steht-fest-v1,offizielles-wahlergebnis-100.html>

<sup>65</sup> Endt, C., Schach, D. and Troger, J. (2023). Alle Ergebnisse der Landtagswahl in Hessen. *Zeit Online*, 9 October 2023. <https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2023-10/hessen-landtagswahl-2023-wahlergebnisse-live#gewinne-und-verluste>

AfD across all three states. While rural Eurosceptic support remained stable in Saxony in the Bautzen and Nordsachsen regions, AfD support appears to be increasing in rural NUTS 3 regions in both Thuringia and Hessen. Perhaps most notably, in Hessen, the AfD was able to reach the previously unmet 20% threshold in all six predominantly rural regions at the 2023 Landtag election.

Predominantly urban areas in Saxony and Hessen remained significantly less Eurosceptic, with the exception of Bergstraße in Hessen and Sächsische Schweiz-Osterzgebirge in Saxony. Finally, changes to intermediate regions (by far the most common NUTS 3 region in the three selected states) remained relatively stable. In Saxony, the city-region Chemnitz, nominated in January 2021 as the 2025 European Capital of Culture, showed lower support for the AfD at the national elections compared to its Landtag election two years prior. In Thuringia, voting patterns also remained similar between the two elections, with the intermediate region Schmalkalden-Meiningen displaying an increase in Eurosceptic support at the national election. In Hessen, four out of 10 intermediate regions showed increased support for the AfD in 2023.

**Table 6 – Comparison of AfD support at subnational and national elections, NUTS 3 regions in Saxony, Thuringia and Hessen**

<i>Land</i>	<i>Number of NUTS 3 regions reaching a minimum vote share for the AfD (25% for Saxony and Thuringia, 20% for Hessen)</i>		
	Urban-rural typology	Most recent subnational election	National election (2021)
Saxony	Predominantly urban	2/4	1/4
	Intermediate	7/7	6/7
	Predominantly rural	2/2	2/2
Thuringia	Predominantly urban	-	-
	Intermediate	5/13	6/13
	Predominantly rural	5/10	7/10
Hessen	Predominantly urban	1/10	0/10
	Intermediate	4/10	0/10
	Predominantly rural	6/6	0/6

Source: Milieu, based on DG REGIO data (2023), CHES data (2019) , Saxony, Thuringia and Hessen state data portals<sup>66</sup>.

The timeframe of elections is very significant when considering the factors that could have driven changes in Eurosceptic voting in Germany. Between 2019 and 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic was a major influence on people's beliefs and needs. The importance of a common regulation for human health and the interconnectedness due to globalisation and trade may have been perceived as a reason to amplify support for European integration. Nonetheless, persistent

<sup>66</sup> Hessen: [https://bundestagswahl.statistik.hessen.de/b\\_2021/html/landkreise+kreisfreie-staedte/413000](https://bundestagswahl.statistik.hessen.de/b_2021/html/landkreise+kreisfreie-staedte/413000); Saxony: <https://wahlen.sachsen.de/landtagswahl-2019-wahlergebnisse.php>; Thuringia: <https://wahlen.thuringen.de/datenbank/wahl1/wahl.asp?wahlart=LW&wJahr=2019&zeigeErg=Land>

Eurosceptic voting in subnational elections, as seen in Hessen's very recent Landtag elections (October 2023), suggests that anti-EU sentiments remain prevalent among certain parts of the population. This may be the result of a growing pessimism among the German public regarding German parties' capability to solve the problems facing Europe<sup>67</sup>.

Less educated and unemployed voters tended to display greater support for the AfD, compared to highly educated people and high-income earners<sup>68</sup>. The proportion of foreign nationals also plays a role in voters' choices: areas with fewer foreign national residents, such as rural areas, are associated with lower tolerance of diversity and thus greater support for nationalist and xenophobic parties like the AfD. The fact that there may be a tendency in rural, eastern German areas towards low education, income, employment and fewer foreigners provides support for these hypotheses and may explain why the AfD received exceptional support in Saxony and Thuringia. Indeed, AfD supporters are least likely to associate the EU with the term 'prosperity' (42% hardly or not at all, compared to just over 10% of CDU/CSU, SPD, FDP and Die Linke voters) or with 'security' (52% hardly or not at all, compared to just over 10% of CDU/CSU, SPD and Die Linke voters)<sup>69</sup>.

Nevertheless, the AfD recently gained in popularity in western Germany, as evident in Hessen. Alongside voters' discontent with the current national government, the AfD offers nationalist-pleasing programmes, which, especially during the current crises and inflation, have proven very convincing to its audience nationwide. As the only Eurosceptic party in Germany, the AfD does not have an equal competitor and does not share votes with another party, contributing to higher vote shares<sup>70</sup>. After a prominent leader of the AfD left the party in 2022, when internal conflicts divided the party and lowered its credibility, the AfD was able to present itself as more united than before. Despite the fact that the AfD is becoming increasingly radical<sup>71</sup>, it also appears to be progressively

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<sup>67</sup> Neu, V. (2023). Die europafreundlichen Deutschen - Repräsentative Umfrage zu Einstellungen zu Europa in der deutschen Bevölkerung. Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. <https://www.kas.de/de/monitor-wahl-und-sozialforschung/detail/-/content/die-europafreundlichen-deutschen>

<sup>68</sup> Giebler, H. and Regel, S. (2018). Who votes right-wing populist? : Geographical and individual factors in seven German state elections.

<sup>69</sup> Neu, V. (2023). Die europafreundlichen Deutschen - Repräsentative Umfrage zu Einstellungen zu Europa in der deutschen Bevölkerung. Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. <https://www.kas.de/de/monitor-wahl-und-sozialforschung/detail/-/content/die-europafreundlichen-deutschen>

<sup>70</sup> Das Erste, Panorama (2023). AfD-Umfragehoch: Nicht einer, sondern acht Gründe, 9 June 2023. <https://daserste.ndr.de/panorama/aktuell/AfD-Umfragehoch-Nicht-einer-sondern-acht-Grunde.afdanalyse102.html>

<sup>71</sup> Halasz, G. and Schmidt, M. (2023). Radikal ist auch egal. Tagesschau, 12 May 2023. <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/innenpolitik/afd-726.html>

more accepted nationwide<sup>72</sup>. However, recent polling data<sup>73</sup> show that three-quarters of Germans remain pro-European, with only 5% viewing German EU membership negatively. While AfD supporters are the only voters expressing concerns about EU membership, there is internal division, with only 42% in support of leaving the EU. Some 81% of AfD supporters have expressed reservations on the further promotion of European integration.

National and subnational election data are not always comparable. Given that voters' choices are strongly linked to the specific electoral context, voting preference at local level cannot be directly transferred to national level and vice versa, because voters are likely to have different priorities at regional and national level. An illustrative example is the COVID-19 crisis, which occurred between the subnational elections of Saxony and Thuringia and the 2021 national election. Indeed, following a 2021 policy brief from the European Council on Foreign Relations<sup>74</sup>, German politics is seeing a separation of two major positions due to the recent COVID-19 pandemic. While one side is oriented towards the EU and supports the integration of Germany with the institutions, the other targets a more national-interest-oriented government. The solution to align both could be to strengthen the representation of national interests at EU level, while emphasising the national benefits due to the EU.

### ***3.2.3 Conclusions***

The analysis of the regional elections in 2019 in Thuringia and Saxony and 2023 in Hessen identifies different voting patterns between east and west Germany, as well as between urban, rural, and intermediate areas. While Euroscepticism is stronger in less dense areas, the success of the AfD, especially in urban west Germany, remains low. The AfD is strongly represented in rural areas in Thuringia and Saxony. Nonetheless, recent voting outcomes in Hessen suggest that it is rising in rural areas of western Germany too.

The immigration crisis in 2015, especially in Germany, contributed to the rise of the AfD and therefore to extended Euroscepticism voting patterns. Experts identified the actions and well-functioning moments of governments as one of the most impactful reasons influencing voter behaviour towards or away from Euroscepticism.

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<sup>72</sup> Das Erste, Panorama (2023). AfD-Umfragehoch: Nicht einer, sondern acht Gründe, 9 June 2023. <https://daserste.ndr.de/panorama/aktuell/AfD-Umfragehoch-Nicht-einer-sondern-acht-Grunde.afdanalyse102.html>

<sup>73</sup> Neu, V. (2023). Die europafreundlichen Deutschen – Repräsentative Umfrage zu Einstellungen zu Europa in der deutschen Bevölkerung. Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. <https://www.kas.de/de/monitor-wahl-und-sozialforschung/detail/-/content/die-europafreundlichen-deutschen>

<sup>74</sup> Leonard, M. And Puglierin, J. (2021). How to Prevent Germany from becoming Eurosceptic. European Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep33813>

The main drivers for Euroscepticism today, particularly in the three regions analysed, Thuringia, Saxony and Hessen, are based less on specific events than reflective of an ongoing perceived uncertainty of future developments and the possible disadvantages citizens believe they face<sup>75</sup>. This case study shows that rural areas are generally more affected by Euroscepticism, possibly due to lower economic wealth and education standards, echoing some of the development trap indicators identified and associated with Euroscepticism by the DG REGIO 2023 study.

To avoid rising trends towards nationalism, some experts note that Euroscepticism must be taken seriously at national level and actively addressed through acknowledgment of voters' demands. For instance, placing national interests at the center of international negotiations will demonstrate the power of the EU, while reinforcing national priorities<sup>76</sup>.

### **3.3 Italy**

#### ***3.3.1 National election (2022)***

The 2022 national election saw the victory of the centre-right wing coalition of Fratelli d'Italia (FDI), Lega per Salvini Premier (Lega) and Forza Italia (FI). The elections eventually led to the formation of a government led by Giorgia Meloni, the party leader of FDI. The coalition is characterised by two hard Eurosceptic parties (FDI and Lega) and one non-Eurosceptic party (FI).

Overall, 81% of predominantly rural NUTS 3 regions gave a majority vote share to Eurosceptic parties. This constitutes a slightly higher overall share than that of intermediate regions (71% of which gave a majority vote share to hard and soft Eurosceptic parties) or predominantly urban areas (63%). The only rural NUTS 3 areas where Eurosceptic parties did not reach a 50% vote share were the autonomous province Bolzano, in the Südtirol region (21%), Siena province in Tuscany (42%), Benevento province in Campania (46%) and Vibo Valentia province in Calabria (46%).

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<sup>75</sup> Peters, B. (n.d.). 5 Reasons for the far right rising in Germany. *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*. <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/projekte/artikel/politik/afd-5-reasons-for-the-far-right-rising-in-germany-e403522/>

<sup>76</sup> Leonard, M and Puglierin, J. (2021). How to prevent Germany from becoming Eurosceptic. European Council on Foreign Relations, 9 June 2021. <https://ecfr.eu/publication/how-to-prevent-germany-from-becoming-eurosceptic/>

**Table 7 – Euroscepticism of political parties, Italian national elections, 2022**

Party	Position on EU integration
Lega per Salvini Premier (Lega)	1.7
Fratelli d'Italia (FDI)	1.9
Italexit per L'Italia (IpI)	2
Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S)	3.5
Forza Italia (FI)	4.9
Alleanza Verdi e Sinistra (AVS)	5.3
Südtiroler Volkspartei (Svp) - Patt	5.9
Azione - Italia Viva – Calenda (AZ-IV)	6
+Europa (+E)	6.8
Partito Democratico - Italia Democratica e Progressista (PD)	6.8

Source: *Milieu*, based on DG REGIO data (2023) and CHES data (2019).

### 3.3.2 Subnational elections (2022-2023)

Regional elections<sup>77</sup> are held every five years and take place at different times. They involve both the election of the regional council and the appointment of the President of the Region<sup>78</sup>. They are characterised by a proportional system, with a majority bonus for the winning party or coalition. This system incentivises the creation of multi-party coalitions. This analysis examines the elections in six different regions in 2022 and 2023, notably Sicily (September 2022), Lazio and Lombardy (February 2023), Friuli-Venezia Giulia (April 2023), Molise (June 2023), and the Autonomous Provinces of Trento and Bolzano (October 2023), which form the Trentino-Alto Adige/Südtirol region. The fact that these subnational elections occurred either in the same year or the year following the 2022 national parliamentary election provides an interesting case for comparison and possible trend analysis.

These six regions have distinctive traits, offering a variety of valuable insights and providing a comprehensive overview of the Italian territory and socioeconomic landscape. Sicily is one of the two regions belonging to the Islands macro-region and one of the five regions with a special statute. It has the lowest GDP per capita among these regions, and the second-lowest overall, after Calabria<sup>79</sup>. Regional elections were held simultaneously with the 2022 national election. Lombardy is the most populated region and historically one of the most dynamic from an economic standpoint, with the second-highest GDP per capita

<sup>77</sup> Administrative regions of Italy correspond to NUTS 2 level.

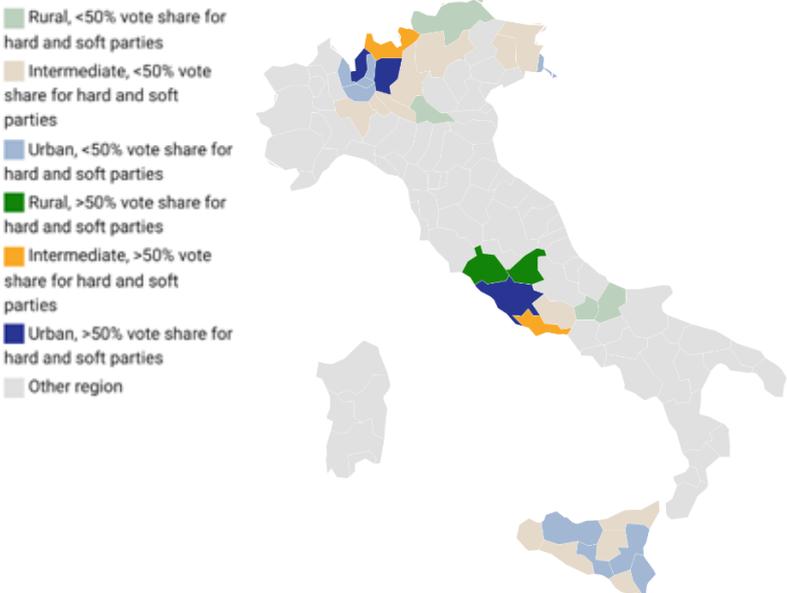
<sup>78</sup> Dipartimento per le riforme istituzionali (2020). Leggi regionali - il sistema elettorale, i costi della politica, la partecipazione dei cittadini alla vita politica, l'ordinamento degli enti locali. [https://www.riformeistituzionali.gov.it/media/1372/dossier-leggi-regionali-web-14dic\\_def.pdf](https://www.riformeistituzionali.gov.it/media/1372/dossier-leggi-regionali-web-14dic_def.pdf)

<sup>79</sup> Eurostat (2023). Gross domestic product (GDP) at current market prices by NUTS 2 regions. [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/nama\\_10r\\_2gdp\\_custom\\_8594081/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/nama_10r_2gdp_custom_8594081/default/table?lang=en)

in the country. Since 1994, it has been governed by centre right-wing coalitions. Lazio is the country's second most populous region, where Rome, the capital, is located. In contrast to Lombardy, it has been governed by different coalitions over the past three decades. Friuli-Venezia Giulia, located in the northeast of the country and having a special statute, contributes an extra layer of variation to the case selection. The same may be said of Molise, where each constituent province is classified as rural. Lastly, Trentino-Alto Adige, another region with a special statute, features a unique administrative system, as the only region in which the two constituent provinces, Trento and Bolzano, enjoy a special statute and hold separate elections. The Autonomous Province of Bolzano has the highest GDP per capita in the country and the majority of its population is part of the German-speaking minority. Overall, therefore, the six regions selected for analysis can be deemed representative of the Eurosceptic voting preferences in regional elections.

In the 2022-2023 subnational elections, centre-right wing coalitions emerged victorious across the board, with Bolzano Autonomous Province the only exception. These coalitions mainly comprised the hard Eurosceptic parties FDI and Lega, alongside the more moderate FI, other minor parties and, with different levels of importance, civic lists. These are lists established to participate in local elections. In regional elections, these lists are often run in tandem with other parties in support of a specific candidate. On the centre and left political spectrum, different coalitions were formed for elections. In Lazio and Trento Autonomous Province, the main centre-left party, the PD, ran in an alliance with AZ-IV; and in Lombardy and Molise, with the M5S, a soft Eurosceptic party. In Sicily, these three parties ran independently, as in the national election.

**Map 5 – Vote share for Eurosceptic parties (hard and soft), Italian subnational elections, 2022 and 2023**



Source: Milieu. For Sicily<sup>80</sup> and Molise<sup>81</sup>, data are taken from the regional website and are provisional. For Friuli-Venezia Giulia<sup>82</sup> and the Autonomous Provinces of Trento<sup>83</sup> and Bolzano<sup>84</sup>, results are taken from ad hoc websites created by the regional administrations. For Lombardy and Lazio, data come from Eligendo, the electoral portal of the Ministry of the Interior<sup>85</sup>.

The prevalence of Eurosceptic voting is lower in the selected NUTS 3 regions than in the 2022 national elections. The Eurosceptic vote share is above 50% in only seven of the 34 provinces. Additionally, an overall decline in Eurosceptic voting across the rural NUTS 3 regions is evident when comparing the national and regional elections. Indeed, while six of the seven rural regions had a percentage of Eurosceptic voting higher than 50%, this number decreased to two out seven in the subnational elections, with only Viterbo and Rieti having a Eurosceptic vote share above 50%. Rieti is the only NUTS 3 region where Eurosceptic voting increased (see Table 8).

**Table 8 – Eurosceptic voting in rural areas in Italy’s national and subnational elections**

Rural NUTS 3 region	Hard Eurosceptic parties - national (%)	Hard or soft Eurosceptic parties - national (%)	Soft Eurosceptic parties - national (%)	Hard Eurosceptic parties - subnational (%)	Hard or soft Eurosceptic parties - subnational (%)	Soft Eurosceptic parties - subnational (%)
Bolzano	17.03	20.84	0.21	9.00	9.70	0.70
Campobasso	28.74	54.66	25.91	24.91	32.70	7.79
Isernia	31.97	52.05	20.08	24.68	30.11	5.43
Mantova	44.61	52.64	8.02	42.67	46.99	4.32
Rieti	47.06	60.32	13.26	55.81	61.93	6.12
Viterbo	48.33	61.16	12.82	45.35	52.18	6.83

Source: Milieu, based on DG REGIO data (2023) and regional election data.

Several reasons could explain this trend. Firstly, regional civic lists supporting right-wing candidates may have taken votes away from the FDI and Lega. For example, in Molise, the region of Campobasso and Isernia, the centre-right list *Il Molise che Vogliamo* won 9.9% of the vote. In Mantova, the *Lombardia Ideale - Fontana Presidente* list, which supported the centre-right incumbent Attilio Fontana, won 6.7% of the vote. By contrast, in the provinces of Rieti and Viterbo, the only rural areas where the Eurosceptic vote was above 50%, the civic list supporting the centre-right candidate Francesco Rocca (*Lista Civica Francesco*

<sup>80</sup> Assessorato Regionale delle Autonomie Locali e della Funzione Pubblica (2022). Elezioni Regionali del 25 Settembre 2022 - Voti Liste Provinciali . [http://www.elezioni.regione.sicilia.it/regionali2022/rep\\_4/votiListeProvinciali.html](http://www.elezioni.regione.sicilia.it/regionali2022/rep_4/votiListeProvinciali.html)

<sup>81</sup> Regione Molise (2023). Elezioni regionali 2023. Dati aggiornati al 30/06/2023 14:29 (Dati Non Ufficiali). <https://elezioni2023.regione.molise.it>

<sup>82</sup> Regione Autonoma Friuli-Venezia Giulia (2023). Elezioni regionali del 2 e 3 Aprile 2023. [https://elezioni.regione.fvg.it/consultazioni/ELZ\\_REG/2023-04-02](https://elezioni.regione.fvg.it/consultazioni/ELZ_REG/2023-04-02)

<sup>83</sup> Provincia Autonoma di Trento (2023). Elezioni provinciali 22 Ottobre 2023. <https://www.elezioni-2023.provincia.tn.it/index.html>

<sup>84</sup> Provincia Autonoma di Bolzano (2023). Elezioni provinciali 2023. <https://elezioniprovinciali.provincia.bz.it/it/elected>

<sup>85</sup> Eligendo (n.d.). L’Archivio. <https://elezionistorico.interno.gov.it/index.php?tpel=R>

Rocca Presidente) achieved more modest results (3.4% and 3.7%, respectively).

A second reason for the decline in voting for Eurosceptic parties could be the generally poor performance of the M5S in the regional elections, especially in Isernia e Campobasso, where party support fell from 25.91% and 20.08% to 5.43% and 4.32%, respectively. It may also reflect the party's traditionally weak local roots, as some commentators have argued<sup>86</sup>.

Another factor explaining this trend could be low voter turnout. These subnational elections were characterised by low and decreasing turnout rates, ranging from 37.2% in Lazio<sup>87</sup> to 71.5% in Bolzano<sup>88</sup> (representing quite an outlier). The elections in Sicily alone showed increased turnout compared to the previous regional elections, albeit remaining quite low (48.6%)<sup>89</sup>. Electoral turnout decreased in all rural territories across the six regions, with the exception of Bolzano, where it increased (from 62.2% to 71.5%). Political scientist Roberto d'Alimonte highlights the issue of low turnout in his analysis of the results of the Lazio and Lombardia elections<sup>90</sup>. A poll by Demopolis<sup>91</sup> points to dissatisfaction and lack of trust in the current parties and candidates as the driving factor for the low turnout (51% of respondents), followed by the predictable victory of the centre-right in both regions (40% of respondents). These motivations may have discouraged Eurosceptic voters from participating in the local elections. Similar factors may also have depressed turnout in the other regions.

The Cattaneo Institute outlines the rural-urban divide in voting patterns in Lombardy<sup>92</sup>. Smaller towns tend to be more centre-right, while larger cities such as Milan tend to be more centre-left. There are no clear patterns in Lazio, according to the Institute.

### 3.3.3 Conclusions

Regional elections in 2022 and 2023 consistently saw centre-right coalitions emerging victorious, except for the unique case of Bolzano. This trend underscores a prevailing political landscape favouring the centre-right (which includes Lega and FDI, both hard Eurosceptic parties). The Eurosceptic vote in

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<sup>86</sup> Il Post (2020). Il Movimento 5 Stelle si è incartato. <https://www.ilpost.it/2020/01/08/crisi-movimento-5-stelle/>

<sup>87</sup> Eligendo (2023). Regionali 12/02/2023 Area ITALIA Regione LAZIO. <https://elezionistorico.interno.gov.it/index.php?tpel=R&dtel=12/02/2023&tpa=I&tpe=R&lev0=0&levsut0=0&levsut1=1&es0=S&es1=S&ms=S&ne1=12&lev1=12>

<sup>88</sup> Provincia Autonoma di Bolzano (2023). Elezioni provinciali 2023. <https://elezioniprovinciali.provincia.bz.it/it/turnout>

<sup>89</sup> Regione Siciliana (2022). Elezioni regionali, in Sicilia affluenza al 48,62%. Dalle 14 al via allo scrutinio. <https://www.regione.sicilia.it/la-regione-informa/elezioni-regionali-sicilia-affluenza-al-4862-dalle-14-allo-scrutinio#:~:text=Per%20le%20elezioni%20regionali%20in,stata%20del%2046%2C75%25>

<sup>90</sup> D'Alimonte, R. (2023). Elezioni regionali. Che cosa ha causato l'astensione record. *Cise*. <https://cise.luiss.it/cise/2023/02/17/regionali-2023-lombardia-e-lazio/>

<sup>91</sup> Demopolis (2023). Il voto alle Regionali in Lazio e Lombardia nell'analisi post elettorale di Demopolis. <https://www.demopolis.it/?p=10899>

<sup>92</sup> Istituto Cattaneo (2023). Elezioni regionali 2023. Cosa dice il recupero della Lega su FDI.

the regional elections was lower than in national elections, but Euroscepticism remains more prevalent in rural areas than in intermediate and urban ones. This trend may be influenced by various factors. Civic lists might have diverted votes from Eurosceptic parties, while dissatisfaction and lack of trust in current parties, which drove down turnout, may have discouraged Eurosceptic voters from participating, shaping electoral outcomes. Indeed, the subnational elections were generally characterised by low and declining turnout rates. The significant decrease in support for the M5S, specifically in Isernia and Campobasso, might also have impacted the Eurosceptic vote.

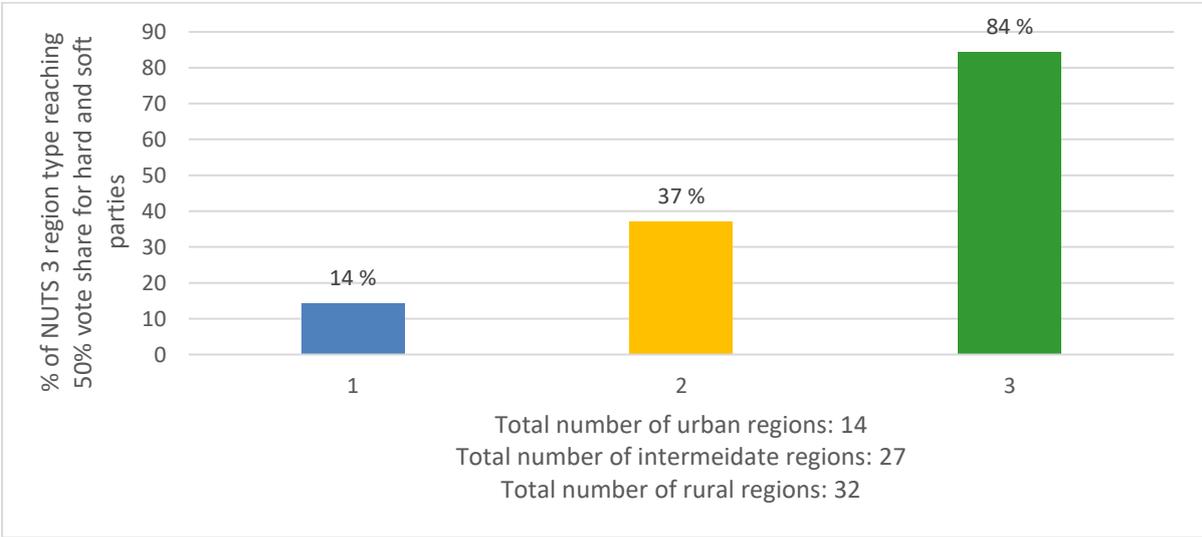
### 3.4 Poland

The Polish case study compares the 2019 national elections from a rural-urban perspective with the most recent 2023 national elections. In an interesting turn of events, the 2023 national elections had unprecedented voter turnout, with an opposition coalition government formed despite the governing Eurosceptic party winning the election. The 2023 national elections show a significant decline in support for Eurosceptic parties in Poland.

#### 3.4.1 National election (2019)

In Poland’s 2019 national elections, Eurosceptic parties reached a majority vote threshold in 84% of predominantly rural regions, compared to 37% and 14% of intermediate and predominantly urban regions, respectively. Eurosceptic regions were predominantly located in the southwestern half of the country. The Eurosceptic votes went mostly to the soft-coded Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS), compared to a smaller share of votes cast for the hard-coded Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość.

**Figure 1: Share of Eurosceptic NUTS 3 regions in Poland’s national elections, by urban-rural type, 2019**



Source: Milieu, based on DG REGIO data (2023) and CHES data (2019).

**Table 9 – Euroscepticism of political parties, Polish national elections, 2019**

Party	Position on EU integration
Komitet Wyborczy Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość	1.4
Komitet Wyborczy Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS)	3
Komitet Wyborczy Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe	5.1
Komitet Wyborczy Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej	6.6
Koalicyjny Komitet Wyborczy Koalicja Obywatelska PO, N, IPL, Zieloni	6.7

Source: Milieu, based on DG REGIO data (2023) and CHES data (2019).

### 3.4.2 National election (2023)

The 2023 national elections in Poland took place on 15 October 2023 and showed an unprecedented voting turnout of 74.4% (61.7% in 2019). The elections put the right-wing populist party, PiS, which had been governing for two consecutive terms, in a difficult position. PiS got 35.38% of votes in 2023, compared to 43.59% in 2019. Despite receiving the most votes in the 2023 elections, the ‘democratic opposition’ parties formed a coalition of the Koalicja Obywatelska<sup>93</sup>, Trzecia Droga<sup>94</sup> and Nowa Lewica<sup>95</sup> to establish a government. The coalition government intends to improve Poland’s relationship with the EU, which has been strained in recent years due to the previous government’s judicial policies, resulting in fines and frozen funds.

The lower house of the Polish parliament, Sejm, has 460 deputies and requires a 231 majority.

**Table 10 – Poland’s national election results, 2023**

Name of the committee	Percentage of votes	Number of mandates	Position on EU integration in 2019
Komitet Wyborczy PiS	35.4%	194	3.0
Koalicyjny Komitet Wyborczy Koalicja Obywatelska PO, N, IPL, Zieloni	30.7%	157	6.7
Koalicyjny Komitet Wyborczy Trzecia Droga Polska 2050 Szymona Hołowni, Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe	14.4%	65	New party (part of the alliance, Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe, scored 5.1)
Komitet Wyborczy Nowa Lewica	8.6%	26	6.6
Komitet Wyborczy Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość	7.2%	18	1.4

Source: CASE, based on National Electoral Commission.

During Poland’s 2023 national elections, Eurosceptic parties achieved a majority vote threshold in 63% of mainly rural regions, compared to 19% of intermediate

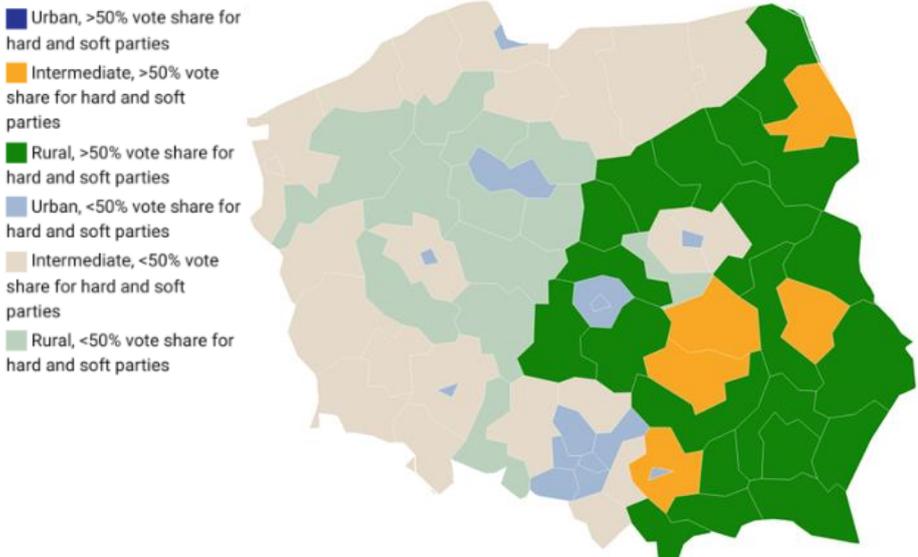
<sup>93</sup> Koalicja Obywatelska is a coalition of Koalicja Obywatelska PO, N, IPL, Zieloni.

<sup>94</sup> Trzecia Droga is a coalition of Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe and Polska 2050.

<sup>95</sup> Nowa Lewica is a coalition of Nowa Lewica, Polska Partia Socjalistyczna, Unia Pracy and Razem.

regions and none of the predominantly urban regions. The Eurosceptic regions were mainly located in the eastern part of the country (Podlaskie, Podkarpackie and Lubelskie Voivodeships). Similar to 2019, the majority of votes for Eurosceptic parties were cast for the soft-coded PiS, with a smaller share of votes going to the hard-coded party Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość. In 2023, the decline in Euroscepticism support in the predominantly rural regions is evident, falling to 63% from 84% in 2019.

**Map 6 – Vote share for Eurosceptic parties (hard and soft), Polish national elections, 2023**



Source: Milieu and CASE, based on National Electoral Commission.

This decline is closely linked to the overall decrease in support for the ruling soft Eurosceptic party, PiS, in all 32 primarily rural regions (-8.4%, on average). The most notable declines in support for PiS were observed in the Nowotarski region (-14.1%), and the Nowosądecki region (-13.3%), both in Małopolskie Voivodeship. Nonetheless, 20 of the 32 predominantly rural regions saw a majority of votes going to hard or soft Eurosceptic parties.

The hard Eurosceptic party, Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość, experienced a rise in support in most of the 32 rural regions, with only three regions recording no change compared to the previous election. On average, party support increased by 1.3%. The Łomżyński and Suwalski regions, both in Podlaskie Voivodeships, saw the highest increase in support for the hard Eurosceptic party, at 4.1% and 3.1%, respectively.

**Table 11 – Support for Eurosceptic parties, 2019 and 2023**

NUTS 3 region	Hard Eurosceptic party (Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość)	Soft Eurosceptic party (PiS)	Hard and soft Eurosceptic parties
Predominantly urban	-0.5%	-7%	-7.6%
Intermediate	+0.3%	-6.5%	-6.2%
Predominantly rural	+1.3%	-8.4%	-7.1%

Source: CASE, based on National Electoral Commission.

A 2023 study commissioned by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development found that if a referendum were held on Poland’s EU membership, 57.5% of citizens residing in rural areas would vote in favour of remaining in the EU, while 10.9% would vote against it. Of the respondents, 11% would abstain from voting, and 20.6% were uncertain about their stance<sup>96</sup>. Compared to the 2021 and 2022 Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development polls, the tendency to remain part of the EU is stable, while those opposing are in decline.

The PiS party’s stronghold in rural areas has been challenged by a series of controversial decisions by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development in recent years. In 2020, the current government tried to enforce a new piece of legislation, ‘Five for Animals’, to prohibit fur farming, ban the use of animals for entertainment purposes, or limit ritual slaughter for religious purposes as a step towards implementing the CAP, which includes animal welfare standards<sup>97</sup>. This has led to massive protests by Polish farmers, who felt themselves portrayed as backward, greedy, and cruel, resulting in the PiS abandoning the proposed legislation.

In 2023, farmers in Poland expressed their frustration over the 30-50% decrease in domestic grain prices, linked to an influx of grain from war-torn Ukraine<sup>98</sup>. Although the EU has placed a temporary embargo on Ukrainian grain import on five Ukrainian neighbours, including Poland, the situation forced farmers to sell the grain below value or store it for another season. The embargo was lifted in September 2023, just before the elections, and was portrayed by the ruling party

<sup>96</sup> Market Research World (2023). Polska wieś i rolnictwo 2023. <https://www.gov.pl/web/arimr/jak-rolnicy-oceniaja-arimr--raport-za-2023-rok-opublikowany>

<sup>97</sup> Michalski, B. (2020). Piątka dla zwierząt”. Ustawa dobra, ale. ... GazetaPrawna.pl, 17 September 2020. <https://prawo.gazetaprawna.pl/artykuly/1491087,piatka-dla-zwierzat-ochrona-zwierzat-uboj-rytualny-cyrki.html>

<sup>98</sup> Bartkiewicz, A. (2023). Kosiniak-Kamysz o poparciu wsi dla PiS: Jest 41 ise gospodarna I socjalna. Rzeczpospolita, 14 April 2023. <https://www.rp.pl/polityka/art38318581-kosiniak-kamysz-o-poparciu-wsi-dla-pis-jest-wies-gospodarna-i-socjalna>; Kowalczyk, G. (2023). Te wybory rozstrzygną się na wsi. ‘PiS nie czuje się już tak mocny’. *Business Insider*, 3 August 2023 <https://businessinsider.com.pl/gospodarka/te-wybory-rozstrzygna-sie-na-wsi-pis-nie-czuje-sie-juz-tak-mocny/tsypc8q>

as an EU decision harming Polish farmers<sup>99</sup>. The Ministry of Economic Development and Technology implemented a local legal act to ban the grains import, yet transit remains legal<sup>100</sup>.

While Euroscepticism and populism in the west of Europe tend to consolidate around market liberalism and currency integration, in eastern Europe, right-wing populists often reinforce the narrative of ‘national sovereignty’, particularly, national identity and culture, threatened by the supposed ‘imperialist nature’ of the EU<sup>101</sup>. This was evident during recent election campaigning in Poland. The president of the PiS party spoke in Przysuchy village about folk culture as an imperative part of the national culture<sup>102</sup>. The opposition leader, a former president of the Council of Europe, was portrayed as having German descent and being driven by the German and the EU agenda, rather than Polish national interest<sup>103</sup>.

The hard-coded party Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość appeals to those in the rural regions who are strongly discontent with the EU’s agricultural policy and the agrarian politics of the PiS. Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość is strongly opposed to any animal rights-related EU policies<sup>104</sup>. Politicians from Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość were present during farmers’ protests against Ukrainian grain imports and were received favourably by protesters<sup>105</sup>. Its position was also consistent with the party’s general anti-Ukrainian stance throughout the electoral campaign. However, Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość did not take all of the vote share lost by PiS; other parties, such as

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<sup>99</sup> Money.pl. (2023). Zakaz importu zboża z Ukrainy. Jest decyzja KE. [www.money.pl](https://www.money.pl/gospodarka/zakaz-importu-zboza-z-ukrainy-jest-decyzja-ke-6941769280412352a.html), 15 September 2023. <https://www.money.pl/gospodarka/zakaz-importu-zboza-z-ukrainy-jest-decyzja-ke-6941769280412352a.html>

<sup>100</sup> Żaczekiewicz-Zborska, K. (2023). Już obowiązuje nowe embargo na zboże z Ukrainy. Prawo.pl, 19 September 2023. <https://www.prawo.pl/biznes/obowiazuje-nowe-embargo-na-zboze-z-ukrainy,523113.html>

<sup>101</sup> Csehi, R. and Zgut, E. (2020). ‘We won’t let Brussels dictate us’: Eurosceptic populism in Hungary and Poland. *European Politics and Society*, 22(1), 53–68. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2020.1717064>

<sup>102</sup> PolskieRadio24.pl. (2023). Jarosław Kaczyński: Pis jest partią polskiej wsi. nie pozwolimy zrujnować polskiego rolnictwa. PolskieRadio24.pl, 9 October 2023. <https://polskieradio24.pl/5/1222/artykul/3257599,jaroslaw-kaczynski-pis-jest-partia-polskiej-wsi-nie- pozwolimy-zrujnowac-polskiego-rolnictwa>

<sup>103</sup> PolskieRadio24.pl. (2023). Konferencja PiS. Poręba: dlaczego Tusk brzmi po niemiecku? PolskieRadio24.pl, 22 March 2023. <https://polskieradio24.pl/5/1222/artykul/3138655,konferencja-pis-poreba-dlaczego-tusk-brzmi-po-niemiecku>

<sup>104</sup> GazetaPrawna.Pl. (2021). Konfederacja: Jeśli zostanie wprowadzony zakaz chowu klatkowego, to nasze rolnictwo zostanie wykończony. GazetaPrawna.pl, 2 July 2021. <https://www.gazetaprawna.pl/wiadomosci/kraj/artykuly/8202494,konfederacja-zakaz-chowu-klatkowego-rolnictwo.html>

<sup>105</sup> Gmiterek-Zabłocka (2023). Konfederacja kusi rolników. ‘W PiS widać marazm, a ci przynajmniej obiecują’. TOK FM, 6 April 2023. <https://www.tokfm.pl/Tokfm/7,189654,29635696,wieslaw-gryn-z-oszukanej-wsi-wielu-rolnikow-jest-za-konfederacja.html>

Christian democratic party, Trzecia Droga, also gained support<sup>106</sup>.

The 2023 elections highlighted the importance of votes from rural regions due to the potential threat to the ruling PiS. Rural regions were more likely to elect mandates from the ruling party, as two-thirds of rural area voters had voted in favour of the PiS during the 2019 elections. The -8.4% decline in support for the PiS party in the predominantly rural regions eventually led to fewer mandates from previously secure areas. Key issues linked to EU and national agricultural policies have been identified as drivers of this decline in support across rural areas.

### **3.4.3 Conclusions**

The 2023 national elections in the rural regions of Poland saw a decline in support for the soft-Eurosceptic ruling party PiS by an average of -8.4%, as well as an increase in support for the hard-Eurosceptic party Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość by an average of 1.3%. PiS supporters did not shift entirely to Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość; some also moved towards the Christian democratic party, Trzecia Droga.

Rural areas were key to the ruling party PiS, and such a significant decline in supporters had a profound impact on the election outcome. Support for Eurosceptic parties decreased by an average of -7,1% in predominantly rural regions. However, some of their more extreme opponents might radicalise due to a crisis among Polish farmers, which is associated with EU agrarian policies. Declines in votes for the ruling party in 2023 in rural areas reflect Polish agricultural politics, which is closely linked to EU policies. However, the support for EU membership among the rural population remains stable, with over 50% strongly in favour and only 11% strongly opposed<sup>107</sup>.

## **3.5 Slovakia**

### **3.5.1 National election (2020)**

No Slovakian NUTS 3 region reached a majority (50%) vote share in the 2020 national elections. However, lowering the threshold, Eurosceptic parties just surpassed a 25% vote share in three regions: Trenčiansky kraj (27%, intermediate), Žilinský kraj (26%, intermediate) and Banskobystrický kraj (26%, predominantly rural). In all three cases, vote shares were equally split between hard-coded Eurosceptic parties (Vlast; Ludova strana Nase Slovensko) and soft-

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<sup>106</sup> TVN24 (2023). Opozycja zmobilizowała niegłosujących. Na PiS głosował żelazny elektorat. 15 October 2023. <https://tvn24.pl/wybory-parlamentarne-2023/wybory-parlamentarne-2023-jak-glosowali-wyborcy-poszczegolnych-komitetow-z-2019-roku-7392891>

<sup>107</sup> Market Research World. (2023). Polska wieś i rolnictwo 2023. <https://www.gov.pl/web/arimr/jak-rolnicy-oceniaja-arimr--raport-za-2023-rok-opublikowany>

coded parties (Slovenska narodna strana; Sme Rodina - Boris Kollar).

Following the 2020 elections, a substantial shift occurred, with the previous governmental parties unable to establish a government and ultimately finding themselves in opposition. A new and highly significant party, HLAS-Social Democracy (HLAS-SD), emerged through the splintering of the formerly influential governmental party, SMER-Social Democracy (SMER-SD). The SMER-SD party began to embrace increasingly anti-European stances on diverse issues, such as vaccination, environmental protection, and migration policy, gradually evolving into a Eurosceptic party. It changed its name from SMER-SD to SMER - Slovak Social Democracy (SMER-SSD), signalling a shift towards Slovakia and away from the EU. Within the far-right spectrum of political parties, the former leader also experienced a split, giving rise to a new nationalist and strong Eurosceptic party, REPUBLIKA. Table 12 presents the new picture of Euroscepticism, grounded in the definitions of party Euroscepticism outlined by Taggart and Szczerbiak (2002). Parties recognised as soft or hard Eurosceptics are marked with 1, and non-Eurosceptics are marked with 0.

**Table 12 – Euroscepticism of political parties in Slovakian national elections 2020 and 2023, and 2022 subnational elections**

Party name	Position on EU integration (2020 elections)	Authors' expert judgement (2022 and 2023 elections)
Vlast	1	-
Ludova strana Nase Slovensko	1.3	1
Slovenska narodna strana S	3.1	1
Sme Rodina - Boris Kollar	3.1	1
Sloboda a Solidarita	4.1	0
Obycajni Ludia a Nezavisle Osobnosti	4.8	0
Krestanskodemocraticke hnutie	5.2	0
Smer - socialna demokracia (SMER-SD)	5.2	1
DV	6	-
MKO	6.1	-
ZA LUDI	6.5	0
MOST-HID	6.7	0
Spolu - občianska demokracia	6.9	-
REPUBLIKA	-	1
HLAS – SD	-	0
Progresívne Slovensko	-	0
ALIANCIA - Maďari. Národnosti. Regióny	-	0
Demokrati	-	0

Source: CASE, based on DG REGIO data (2023), CHES data (2019), Taggart and Szczerbiak (2002).

Note: Parties in table received 98.7% of votes in the national elections of 2023; ‘-’ indicates parties that did not participate in the given election.

Interestingly, the most recent national election outcomes in 2023 indicate a significant increase in Euroscepticism. Two main factors may explain this sudden rise: 1) the influence of Russian propaganda, which is particularly potent in Slovakia<sup>108</sup>, and 2) the populism of some parties, which elevated the anti-European movement as an election issue. This was evident in the 2023 exit polls, where 17% of respondents voted for SMER-SSD because they believed it would protect national interests. In addition, 7% of votes for HLAS-SD and 8% for KDH stemmed from the same reasoning. The remainder of the political parties elected to parliament (typically pro-European) achieved 1% or less of their vote shares based on protection of national interests reasoning.

**Table 13 – Eurosceptic vote shares, Slovakian national elections**

NUTS 3 Region	Urban-rural type	Share of Eurosceptic votes (2020)	Share of Eurosceptic votes (2023)
Bratislavský	Predominantly urban	15.6%	28.9%
Kosický	Intermediate	21.9%	34.6%
Nitrianský	Intermediate	21.0%	37.7%
Trenčiansky	Intermediate	26.5%	46.4%
Žilinský	Intermediate	26.5%	43.2%
Banskobystrický	Predominantly rural	25.6%	39.6%
Prešovský	Predominantly rural	24.1%	36.6%
Trnavský	Predominantly rural	18.4%	34.6%

Source: Milieu and CASE, based on Slovak Statistical Office (SSO) data and DG REGIO data (2023).

Further developments are uncertain, however, as some of the votes cast for Eurosceptic parties were protest votes against the previous government, rather than squarely rooted in Euroscepticism. This artificially overestimates the level of Euroscepticism. In addition, the HLAS-SD, as a member of the new governmental coalition, ensured that the new government's programme statement stated that the pro-European orientation of the country will continue. On the other hand, the same document mentions the introduction of 'the concept of a sovereign Slovak foreign policy while fully respecting the Slovak Republic's membership in the European Union'<sup>109</sup>. This creates some ambiguity about a future increase in Euroscepticism and underscores the importance of Eurosceptic votes for the implementation of Eurosceptic policies.

<sup>108</sup> Beňo, M. (2023). News digest: New Globsec survey confirms Slovak affinity for Russian propaganda. *The Slovak Spectator*, 31 May 2023. <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/23176148/news-digest-new-globsec-survey-confirms-slovak-affinity-for-russian-propaganda.html>

<sup>109</sup> Vláda Slovenskej republiky (2023). Programové Vyhlásenie Vlády Slovenskej Republiky 2023 – 2027. Lepšie, Pokojnejšie A Bezpečnejšie Žiť. <https://rokovania.gov.sk/download.dat?id=7B1CACA32A9047C2BA213ABA2CA73F0D-CDB47A73EBABAA5AD10EEC58538A591F>

### ***3.5.2 Subnational elections (2022)***

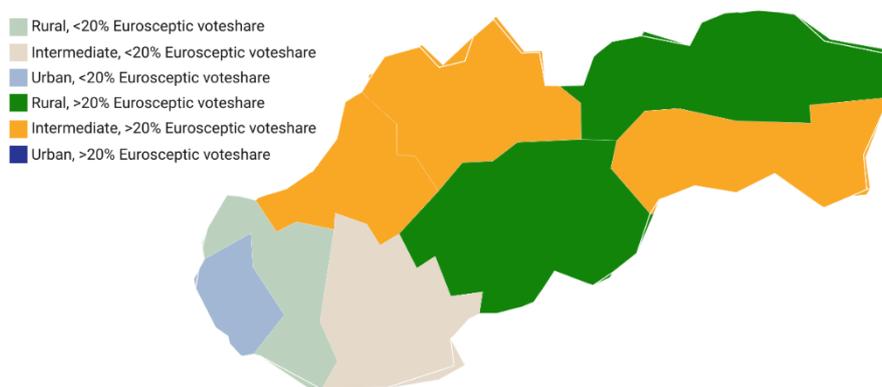
The Slovakian subnational elections of 2022 were distinctive in that they encompassed both regional elections (eight self-governing regions at NUTS 3 level) and elections for the administration of municipalities (2,928 local administrative units (LAU2)<sup>110</sup>). As the regional (NUTS 3) divisions in Slovakia are geographically vast, this case study includes the results of local municipal elections into aggregate voting outcomes to allow a more granular insight into how local and rural-urban voting patterns intersect. There were four different subnational elections: elections for the chair of the self-governing region and a separate vote for members of the self-governing region council, with a similar division for the election of the mayor of the municipality and members of the municipality councils.

The predominance of Eurosceptic parties was primarily concentrated in the central and eastern regions of Slovakia. The three regions of interest in the analysis of the 2020 national election demonstrated relatively consistent shares of Eurosceptic votes in the 2022 subnational elections. From the regional elections point of view, Trenčiansky kraj attained an even larger share of Eurosceptic votes in the regional elections, at 42%. However, the other two regions of interest, Žilinský kraj and Banskobystrický kraj achieved comparatively lower shares, at 21% and 19%, respectively. Similar shares of votes for Eurosceptic parties were attained in Košický kraj. In contrast, the Bratislavský kraj and Trnavský kraj – the most economically developed regions – recorded the lowest shares of Eurosceptic votes in the regional elections. At municipal election level, similar shares of Eurosceptic votes were obtained in all three regions of interest, ranging from 23% to 26%. However, even more pronounced results were achieved in the eastern part of country, in Prešovský kraj (30%) and Košický kraj (27%). These differences were mainly driven by the type of election victory in regions or municipalities: the Trenčiansky kraj at regional level, as well as Prešovský and Košický kraj at municipal level, had landslide victories, while in others the winners of elections were determined by small margins.

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<sup>110</sup> Eurostat maintains a system of local administrative units (LAUs), which are the building blocks of the NUTS. Level 2 LAUs consist of municipalities or equivalent units in the 27 EU Member States. <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/nuts/local-administrative-units>

## Map 7 – Eurosceptic vote shares, Slovak subnational elections, 2022



Source: CASE, based on SSO data.

The main distinction between the subnational and national elections is the reversed logic of the voting system. In Slovak national elections, the primary choice revolves around the party, followed by individual candidates. Conversely, in subnational elections, citizens are primarily running for positions, with the backing of political parties. Citizens also have the option to run for office in local or regional elections as independent candidates with no affiliation to a political party, with such candidates garnering more than 37% of votes in the subnational elections. In national elections, by contrast, citizens cannot run for office without being part of the candidate list of a political party.

The data used for the analysis were gathered by the SSO, which is responsible for calculating results for both the candidates<sup>111</sup> and parties<sup>112</sup>. As candidates were frequently supported by a coalition of parties, the analysis considered the candidate Eurosceptic if the majority of those parties were Eurosceptic. In the subnational elections, there is no threshold limiting the parties' involvement and almost 50 parties supported the candidates. This is almost double the number of parties running for national election in 2023.

Despite the distinct nature of the national and subnational elections, certain conclusions can be drawn. The trends observed in the 2020 national elections were mirrored in the 2022 subnational elections. Notwithstanding the limitations posed by the differing voting logic, it can be concluded that stated support for Eurosceptic parties slightly decreased in the subnational elections. This was partially due to the fact that more than one-third of votes were given to formally independent candidates. Looking solely at candidates supported by parties, the share for Eurosceptics was actually higher in the regions of interest. Nevertheless, the 2020 distribution of Eurosceptic votes across regions persisted in 2022. The outcomes of the 2023 national election showed a significant surge in support for

<sup>111</sup> Elections to bodies of self-governing regions 2022. <https://volby.statistics.sk/osk/osk2022/en/index.html>  
Elections to bodies of communal self-government 2022. <https://volby.statistics.sk/oso/oso2022/en/index.html>

<sup>112</sup> National elections 2023. [https://volby.statistics.sk/nrsr/nrsr2023/en/vysledky\\_hlasovania\\_strany.html](https://volby.statistics.sk/nrsr/nrsr2023/en/vysledky_hlasovania_strany.html)

Eurosceptic parties across all regions. The three regions of interest registered the highest proportion of Eurosceptic votes in both the 2022 subnational and 2023 national elections.

Banskobystrický kraj is a rural area facing structural economic challenges. The absence of infrastructure investment and limited job opportunities compel people to migrate from the region, often relocating to the capital, Bratislava, or other cities in the western part of the country. In the past, the self-governing region was led by far-right neo-Nazi politician Marián Kotleba, whose tenure halted access to the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESI Funds)<sup>113</sup>, fuelling further support for Eurosceptic parties in the region.

The other two regions of interest (Trenčiansky kraj and Žilinský kraj) are the centre of the manufacturing sector, transforming from agriculture to heavy industry pre-1989. Locals tend to attribute a lot of the successes in the regions to strong state intervention in the economy during that time. These regions are now in a development trap, as their convergence with the EU average has slowed; they are also growing at a much slower pace than in the first two decades of the 21st century. Paradoxically, these regions rely heavily on exporting the goods they produce (automotive parts), but prefer to vote for parties that are, in some areas, Eurosceptical.

The three regions of interest have maintained their position as leaders in Euroscepticism. Key factors influencing the level of Euroscepticism are:

- Shift of winning party SMER-SSD to a Eurosceptic party during its term in opposition (2020-2023);
- Lasting structural problems in some rural areas ('hunger valleys');
- Development trap of intermediate regions, as they fail to sustain the recent pace of growth in development;
- Tradition of strong government interference in past development of intermediate regions (rosy retrospection).

It can be expected that the national development in Euroscepticism will be mirrored regionally. The failure to address longstanding issues in specific regions may influence that proportion, but the primary factor shaping attitudes toward the EU will be determined at national level.

### ***3.5.3 Conclusions***

Success in local elections does not automatically translate into national election outcomes. Some parties that were successful in regional elections were unable to

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<sup>113</sup> Krbatová, L. (2015). Kotleba nečerpá eurofondy, vláda mu zoberie právomoci. *Pravda*, 25 February 2015. <https://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/346835-kotleba-mari-cerpanie-eurofondov-fico-zvazuje-ze-mu-vezme-pravomoci/>

secure seats in the national parliament. Additionally, the number of political parties participating in subnational elections (almost 50) is double that of parties running in the national election (25 parties). Arguably, regional elections are seen as less significant than national elections. This is evident in voter turnout, which is below 50% in regional elections, while national elections typically attract two-thirds of eligible voters. The narrative of national elections revolves around fundamental choices for the future development of the entire country and policy-setting, while regional elections are perceived as decisions about policy implementers at local level, with limited options for decision-making. This implies lower relevance of Eurosceptic votes at regional level.



## 4. Main conclusions and the way forward

This study investigated the growing tendency towards Eurosceptic and anti-EU voting in rural areas. It was mainly data driven, looking at voting patterns in recent national and subnational elections within EU regions. The findings were diverse across the Member States, reflecting varying national contexts. Country case studies explored results at subnational level and considered possible drivers of anti-EU voting within specific rural areas. The key findings and takeaways are presented below, followed by some considerations of the way forward, in light of ongoing efforts to better align EU policies with the reality in rural areas.

This issue is particularly important in a year of elections with the potential to reshape the EU. Accordingly, a series of questions for further reflection and debate aim to explore the reasons for the growth in anti-EU sentiment in some rural areas and possible actions to prevent political parties and their rural supporters from turning away from the EU as a solution to their problems.

### 4.1 Key findings and takeaways

**Eurosceptic parties with anti-EU platforms can be found across the political spectrum, from right to left, conservative to the more social democratic.** Euroscepticism emerges as a reaction to discontent with policies or practices associated with the EU, rather than with a certain political ideology. Euroscepticism manifests itself in different ways across the Member States, depending on history, culture, geography and socioeconomic conditions. The distinction between ‘hard’ Euroscepticism (parties that explicitly support national withdrawal from the EU or policies opposing the EU project) and ‘soft’ Euroscepticism (parties that are hesitant towards further European integration in specific policy areas) recognises key differences across the EU.

**The data analysed here show that electoral support for Eurosceptic parties is more likely to come from rural, rather than urban or intermediate areas. However, very different patterns emerge across the Member States.** This finding was previously identified in the literature and was validated by the results of recent elections across the EU, as well as subnational elections in four countries. The case studies identified several drivers of Eurosceptic voting at local level. These included limited economic opportunities and stagnant economic development (echoing DG REGIO’s development trap thesis), demographic challenges, high external migration, lower education and disinformation, and the appeal of nationalist agendas in times of crisis and uncertainty.

**In countries where Eurosceptic voting is common, voters in rural areas are**

**more likely to support and drive the Eurosceptic majorities.** This pattern is evident in Hungary, Poland and Italy in particular. In key national elections, anti-EU rhetoric has succeeded in echoing the concerns and priorities of rural voters.

**Eurosceptic voting can start at the subnational level and then gain wider national attention and support.** This case is best illustrated by Germany, where the AfD has recently gained popularity among rural voters throughout the country, despite having historically enjoyed success only in the eastern part of the country. Similar patterns have the potential to unfold in Portugal, Croatia, Spain, Latvia and Estonia, where recent national elections identified individual rural regions as ‘outlier’ supporters of Eurosceptic parties (see Map 2).

**The importance of subnational elections should not be overlooked.** Previous studies looked at national elections, but while elections at subnational level may be challenging to analyse due to their structure (particularly the presence of candidate lists), and the diverse levels of competence of local and regional elected bodies or officials, they nevertheless have the potential to drive Eurosceptic party consolidation of disaffected voters, very often in rural areas. In addition, where subnational entities have legislative powers, these elections have more potential to directly influence EU policies through the European Council.

**Existing political parties have the potential to alter their platforms, policy positions, ideological stance and priorities in response to evolving voter preferences, including discontent within rural areas.** Some political parties will naturally seek to capitalise on existing discontent for popular support and electoral gains. This was evident in Slovakia, where a formerly moderate, centrist party already in power (SMER-SD) shifted to adopt an anti-EU stance in response to discontent within primarily rural areas (SMER-SSD). Where a party already has mainstream voter support, this can lead to a rapid shift in national policy platforms.

**Some EU policies have inevitable disproportionate impacts on rural areas, driving discontent and giving governments the opportunity to blame difficult decisions on the EU.** Rural areas frequently depend on agriculture and the CAP has gone through a series of important revisions in recent years, linked to environmental and other challenges. Changes to rules on animal welfare stemming from the Farm to Fork Strategy under the European Green Deal and trade agreements with third countries also created complications for rural livelihoods. As seen in the France and Poland case studies, these policies can create socioeconomic, cultural and other challenges for rural areas, which can then be linked to Eurosceptic voting patterns. Without clear communication and remedies, it is natural for disaffected populations to view the EU as the source of their problems and respond to anti-EU messaging by political parties and candidates.

## 4.2 The way forward

Concerns about rural areas being left behind to deal with their unique social, cultural and economic challenges are not new, and several important EU initiatives seek to mitigate these persisting patterns of discontent. The Commission's long-term vision for the EU's rural areas 2040 provides a roadmap for addressing social and economic challenges in rural regions, preventing isolation and strengthening employment, digital connectivity, demography and development. The 2040 vision includes a Rural Pact to engage national, regional and local authorities in addressing unmet rural needs. Increasing synergies between national, regional and territorial governance actors through a strategic framework will provide the opportunity for all stakeholders to adapt actions to the needs and requirements of rural areas, translating EU initiatives into targeted and integrated support to those areas facing structural economic, social or demographic risks. One element is to include EU instruments that already provide key sources of support to rural areas, such as the CAP or Cohesion Policy funding.

The CoR's Logroño Declaration (2023) highlights the need to address the long-term structural challenges faced by rural areas and points to several tools for better targeted policy action. These include better quantitative monitoring of vulnerabilities in rural areas, taking a 'rural-proofing' approach in the development of EU policies, and placing rural areas at the forefront of the digital transition to increase their attractiveness to businesses, bridging the rural-urban digital divide to support education and connectivity. In line with the findings of this study, policy priorities include improving counterstrategies to online disinformation and a stronger role for citizens' dialogues in the decision-making process to ensure greater alignment and synergy between institutional policy-making, local needs and voter outlook. Such initiatives should be aligned with the Commission's pledge to strengthen the participation of citizens and civil society organisations in policy-making, as per the recently proposed Defence of Democracy package.

The findings of this study validate the concerns expressed in the ongoing initiatives and underscore their urgency, particularly in a year of important elections at EU, national and subnational level. For the CoR and its members, the findings and key conclusions, some of which directly relate to the current EU-wide protests, provide an opportunity to debate some critical questions about the rural dimensions of Eurosceptic and anti-EU sentiment, its origins and consequences, which impact not only the well-being of the EU's citizens, but the values and future of the EU itself.



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## Annex A

**Table 14 – Summary statistics: Population size, NUTS 3 areas, and number of Eurosceptic parties by Member State**

Member State	Population (2023)	Voter turnout (total valid votes, as a percentage of the electorate)	Number of NUTS 3 regions (2021 coding)	Number of urban NUTS 3	Number of intermediate NUTS 3	Number of rural NUTS 3	Year of national election	Total number of parties	Number of hard parties	Number of soft parties
AT	9,104,772	75.0	35	4	7	24	2019	5	1	0
BE	11,754,004	82.4	44	13	19	12	2019	20	1	4
BG	6,447,710	34.2	28	1	20	7	2022	28	5	0
CY	920,701	64.1	1	0	1	0	2021	10	0	1
CZ	10,827,529	64.7	14	2	8	4	2021	8	3	1
DE	5,932,654	75.6	401	95	196	110	2021	10	1	0
DK	84,358,845	83.6	11	2	5	4	2019	11	4	0
EE	1,365,884	59.9	5	2	0	3	2019	6	1	0
EL	10,394,055	55.0	52	8	15	29	2019	8	4	0
ES	48,059,777	63.0	59	17	32	10	2019	17	0	1
FI	5,563,970	65.9	19	1	6	12	2019	8	1	0

FR	68,070,697	47.7	101	15	33	53	2022	6	1	2
HR	3,850,894	43.9	21	1	7	13	2020	16	2	1
HU	9,597,085	68.6	20	1	13	6	2022	4	1	1
IE	5,194,336	62.6	8	1	1	6	2020	9	1	1
IT	58,850,717	60.5	107	30	56	21	2022	10	3	1
LT	2,857,279	43.9	10	1	7	2	2020	10	0	0
LU	660,809	83.2	1	0	1	0	2018	10	0	2
LV	1,883,008	60.4	6	1	3	2	2022	13	2	1
MT	542,051	84.1	2	2	0	0	2022	2	0	0
NL	17,811,291	78.8	40	22	17	1	2021	13	2	3
PL	36,753,736	59.4	73	14	27	32	2019	5	1	1
PT	10,467,366	54.1	25	3	6	16	2022	10	1	1
RO	19,051,562	30.5	42	2	12	28	2020	7	0	1
SE	10,521,556	80.9	21	2	14	5	2022	8	1	1
SI	2,116,792	69.2	12	0	3	9	2022	21	3	2
SK	5,428,792	65.1	8	1	4	3	2020	13	2	2

Source: Milieu, based on Eurostat and DG REGIO study data (based on the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) and DG REGIO data collection

## Annex B

**Table 15 – Timeline of selected national and subnational elections for case studies**

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
France	-	-	Regional elections (all administrative regions)	National parliamentary election	-
Germany	State parliamentary election (Saxony, Thuringia)	-	Federal parliamentary election	-	State parliamentary election (Hessen)
Italy	-	-	-	National parliamentary election Regional elections (Sicily)	Regional elections (Lombardia, Lazio, Friuli Venezia-Giulia, Molise, Trentino-Alto Adige)
Poland	National parliamentary election	-	-	-	National parliamentary election
Slovakia	-	National parliamentary election	-	-	Regional elections (all regions) and municipal administrations

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