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## Shrinking Population and Shrinking Democratic Space? Demography and democracy at the local level

**By the numbers:** Data from Eurofound highlight sharp territorial inequalities and divides – half of rural EU residents say their communities are ignored by governments, and satisfaction with democracy in rural areas is much lower than the EU average and in cities.

**Quote:** *'The feeling of being left behind is not just a sentiment; it reflects the stark reality of depopulation, economic vulnerability, and a growing urban-rural divide.'* Bettina Bock, Professor for Inclusive Rural Development, Wageningen University & Research

**Challenge:** Perceptions of territorial injustice can fuel support for disruptive political movements, making it crucial for policymakers to address these grievances. Community divisions and the loss of spaces for diverse interactions exacerbate polarisation within shrinking regions.

**Message:** The link between shrinking regions and support for extremism and populism is neither universal nor inevitable. Endorsing positive narratives about rural regions, embracing the diverse characteristics of rural communities and maintaining openness towards newcomers can be effective methods in countering both populism and stereotypes.

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The year 2024 has been marked as a significant election year, with more than 60 countries around the globe holding elections, representing almost half of the world's population. It is also an important year for European democracy, not simply because of the European Parliament elections taking place in June, but also because of the alarming rise in dissatisfaction with democratic and political institutions in recent years. In addition to long-term territorial inequalities and demographic changes, the lack of economic and political stability in the face of "polycrises" (Tooze 2022) such as the Covid-19 pandemic, wars in Ukraine and Gaza could indeed challenge democracy and social cohesion. For 2024, the burning question remains: to what extent can growing dissatisfaction with political institutions and uncertainty about the future further divide and polarise European societies and reinforce anti-democratic and extremist attitudes?

In 2023, the project "[Regional Population Diversity and Social Cohesion in the Local Context](#)" brought together experts from across Europe, who work in academia, politics and civil society, to discuss the relationship between demographic change, territorial inequalities and the rise of anti-democratic attitudes. In a series of online workshops, experts discussed the concerning support for populist parties in different European regions as a form of "protest" against current living conditions and the effective (counter) measures taken by civil society at the local level. The aim of this policy brief is to highlight the timely and policy-relevant results of this transdisciplinary and transnational dialogue, based on the latest scientific data and practical knowledge shared by eminent experts and practitioners.

## Spatial injustice and demographic "divides"

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The long-standing social and political concerns of shrinking and rural communities have been high on the agenda of policymakers and experts across Europe (COM (2021) 345 final). They recognise that many rural areas, economically marginalised towns and smaller cities are caught in a vicious cycle of depopulation, reduction in available resources, and the withdrawal of the public, cultural and health services needed to serve their fast ageing populations. The public and private sectors are also affected by population decline, as it can be increasingly difficult to attract people with the skills they need. Indeed, the populations of rural and shrinking regions also become more vulnerable when there are reductions in services, long travel times to obtain healthcare and education, and decreasing levels of well-being compared to urban counterparts.

In addition, residents of these underserved regions can feel that their voices and concerns are not being heard by decision-makers, especially as their electoral and political influence may be reduced due to their shrinking populations. This discontent is increasingly reflected by the declining trust in national governments and the dissatisfaction with democracy of rural residents across the EU (Eurofound, 2022). In the Netherlands, for example, peripheral regions such as Zeeuws-Vlaanderen, the Veenkoloniën, Kop van Noord-Holland and Parkstad Limburg suffer from demographic imbalances and a reduction in services, and trust in institutions and politics is lower than in the rest of the country (Council for the Environment and Infrastructure, Council for Public Administration, Council for Public Health & Society, 2023). Similarly, in many shrinking and underserved regions in Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Poland and Romania, trust in institutions and voter turnout are alarmingly low compared to urban centres, with rural youth in particular abstaining from voting (Slavkova et. al., 2022).

## Territorial inequalities and the political offering: Who is going to represent local interests?

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A growing number of voters in economically and socially marginalised regions feel ignored and abandoned by traditional parties and political structures (Rodriguez-Pose, 2018; Dijkstra et. al., 2019). In turn, traditional parties are losing many local members and supporters. In this context, populist and extremist movements can appeal to local dissatisfaction by presenting themselves as the voices of local people speaking out against the perceived dominance of (urban) elites. The electoral success of the Farmer-Citizen Movement (BBB) in the 2023 provincial elections in the Netherlands illustrates how both economic and cultural factors are behind the rise of populist movements in rural and shrinking regions. They present themselves as the voice of the countryside and rural people whose way of life and identity are otherwise overlooked.

Indeed, in many shrinking regions, local residents perceive that they have a lack of opportunities for participation and civic engagement. In the absence of physical and organisational structures, civil society groups outside urban centres across Europe are finding it more difficult to organise and sustain civic participation (Muti, 2023; Slavkova et. al., 2022). Due to austerity measures and skills shortages, many smaller communities and cities lack the necessary number of volunteers, experienced civic actors, or educators with the knowledge and skills to contribute to positive

change in their communities. It remains a challenge for civil society organisations to activate community members and to engage younger residents, who may be at higher risk of political radicalisation, especially when they are underfunded. Young men in particular are often stigmatised as “left behind” in shrinking regions, while others have the opportunity to leave – and are thus frequently associated with extremist ideologies and targeted by disruptive political movements.

## Civil society and social spaces can counter populism and polarisation

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Civil society can play a crucial role in strengthening participation, inclusion and social cohesion at the local level. Many shrinking communities are losing social spaces where different community members can meet and interact. Given the highly polarising effect of disruptive politics, the loss of social spaces reinforces divisions and mistrust within communities. With less interaction and exchange of different viewpoints, there is a danger that the narrowing circle of local civil society will become trapped in echo chambers of like-minded people. In addition, local issues and discussions, such as transitions to green energy and infrastructure projects, can be co-opted by disruptive politics, and existing social spaces and clubs can be hijacked by extremist ideologies and groups, such as youth centres or sports clubs.

However, civil society can find ways to bring people together and counter polarisation and division. [The Talking Shop](#), a disused shop turned into a meeting point and information centre in an old mining community in South Wales, is a good example. Offering a wide range of creative programmes run by artists, partner organisations and professionals, as well as tea and coffee, the space is free from political bias or party affiliation and is designed to facilitate conversations about the most pressing social and political issues, such as loneliness, intergenerational conflict or urban regeneration. This successful participatory model is also being taken to smaller towns and villages as “mobile Talking Shops”, encouraging more collaboration and conversation.

Collaboration and continuity are crucial to social cohesion. Long-term funding is vital for civil society to sustain these places, to build their networks, and for gaining and improving knowledge and skills. Civil society can counter polarisation and extremism by fostering communication between community members, acting as moderator for

others to engage in dialogue, and building trust between local authorities and communities. Fostering respectful and permanent relationship with civil society through regular meetings or established networks of NGO’s and community leaders can help local authorities to engage in difficult conversations about the most pressing local and regional issues.

## New narratives of social cohesion and inclusion

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Supporting local civil society also means supporting local identities and ways of life. In recent debates, rural or shrinking areas are often associated with extremism and racism, while their inhabitants are stigmatised as “lagging behind” in various ways. In addition to economic marginalisation, generalisations about these areas can be a strong “push” factor for younger residents or newcomers to leave. However, many rural and smaller urban areas are successful in attracting newcomers for short periods or long-term settlement and as a result, such places are home to a variety of cultures and practices. Accordingly, local initiatives can highlight the daily experiences of local cosmopolitanism and the economic and social benefits of cultural diversity and international networks.

For example, [the Gaelic Sports Club](#), an association promoting traditional Gaelic sports, in Ballyhaunis, a small rural town in Ireland, uses local identity and traditions to bring community members together while also welcoming newcomers. Once a shrinking region due to youth emigration, the town and surrounding villages have successfully implemented programmes to welcome refugees and to attract migrants since the early 2000s. Ballyhaunis has made national and international media headlines for its overall success in population and economic growth and the integration of newcomers into “local” life. Through targeted interventions such as the organisation of “inclusion teams” and events to promote traditional sports among newcomers, the club has succeeded in keeping local identity and life vibrant, while allowing newer and older residents to support common goals and to feel part of the same community.

An LGBTIQ+ festival in A Ulloa, a shrinking community made up of three municipalities in Galicia, Spain, is another example of embracing diversity as part of local development and life. [The Agrocuir Festival](#), a local initiative that began as a private celebration of Pride Day, has become an international celebration of rural diversity. Local residents and visitors enjoy local musical traditions alongside perfor-

mances from national and international artists, while the local community organises a wide range of initiatives and talks during the festival on the commons, food sovereignty or the protection of local heritage.

Negative attitudes towards newcomers and migration are strongly linked to a perceived lack of integration between existing community members and newcomers. Limited economic and human capital can be a real challenge for local authorities when designing and implementing evidence-based policies to improve integration. However, multi-level governance structures, international and national cooperation, and collaboration with civil society, resource-sharing initiatives and forward-looking ideas can help municipalities overcome structural barriers (Yilmaz and Conte, 2024). For example, despite its shrinking population and economy, the city of Dessau-Roßlau, in Germany has achieved positive integration goals thanks to its policy implementation, cooperation with national and regional administrations, and the involvement of civil society. An initiative of the local government, civil society and private actors, the "[Vielfalts-gestalter\\*innen](#)" alliance, addresses demographic diversity (age, ethnicity, education, gender and sexual identity), provides diversity training to the local government and large employers, and facilitates social and cultural events that bring people together.

Indeed, the involvement of private actors, such as businesses, in integration and inclusion can be beneficial for local communities: the workplace can play a crucial role in supporting the participation and adjustment of newcomers to communities if companies and employers can effectively manage diversity in the workplace and implement joint initiatives with civil society and local government. [The Civics Scout at Work](#) programme, of the CIVICS Innovation Hub, is a good example of how employers and employees can become active drivers of change in this way, by offering targeted elements of civic education designed to promote empowerment, anti-discrimination and intercultural competences.

The link between territorial inequalities and support for disruptive and populist policies is not inevitable or unchangeable. In Austria, for instance, there is no clear correlation between the electoral success of populist movements and votes from border areas and de-industrialized cities, which are often referred to as "left behind" in policy-making. Similarly, in recent local and national elections in Sweden, support for populist and anti-immigrant parties and candidates was kept low in many shrinking regions thanks to local initiatives and strategies. In a more recent election in 2024, an alliance of local civil society organisations and lo-

cal activists called "Dorfliebe für Alle" (Village Love for All) managed to mobilise voters in the eastern German district of Saale Orla against the right-wing extremist candidate for the state parliament with a record turnout.

## Policy and advocacy recommendations

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- Pay greater attention to "civic cohesion": efforts to promote civic activities and engagement are often overlooked in discussions on social and territorial cohesion. EU and national policies and funding programmes should include and support civic initiatives as an important component of social cohesion.
- Prioritise integration and inclusion policies: the fragmentation of integration policies and efforts across regions is a challenge for administrations and communities with few resources. Local strategies should be supported by regional administrations and governments with clear integration and inclusion objectives.
- Avoid generalisations: stereotypes and generalisations about rural areas overlook the diverse characteristics and sense of belonging of local communities. Terms such as "left behind" can perpetuate stigma and the "urban-rural divide", while also failing to capture territorial inequalities within cities and factors such as social class, gender, race and migration.
- Bring politics back to the local level: independent lists and coalitions with civil society at the local level can capture voter sentiment for social cohesion and offer an alternative to disruptive politics.
- Train local authorities and civil society actors how to counter right-wing populism in local contexts. Administrations and employers can benefit from diversity and anti-discrimination programs offered by regional or national associations and organizations.

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