



# RURAL-URBAN INEQUALITIES AND SPATIAL JUSTICE IN EUROPE

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**Abstract.** This paper examines patterns of rural-urban inequality in Europe. Econometric analysis of quantitative data, new large-n survey data, and stakeholder interviews are utilised, revealing a broad trajectory of convergence between rural and urban areas that is cross-cut by pockets of persistent disadvantage and by contrasts between different parts of Europe. The paper employs the concept of spatial justice to consider the factors shaping these patterns and their political effects. It shows that while EU programmes have had some impact on material measures of inequality, perceived spatial injustice remains, creating opportunities for disruptive political movements.

**Keywords:** Europe, inequality, mixed methods, rural, spatial justice.

## Introduction

In 2021, the European Union (EU) launched its Long Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA). The culmination of an extensive process of public consultation and expert engagement, the broad-ranging plan set out policy measures and mechanisms through which the EU might support the sustainability of rural economies and societies and their adaptation to climate change and other future challenges. The impetus for the LTVRA was recognition of rural-urban differences in Europe and that rural areas face distinctive challenges, including from population decline and ageing, the erosion of rural infrastructure and service provision, shrinking employment opportunities, and limited transport and digital connectivity (EC, 2021, p. 1).

Rural-urban disparities and the specific challenges faced by rural communities are not new and have been comprehensively documented by rural research over several decades (see for example, Hoggart et al., 1995; Schmied, 2005; McDonagh et al., 2014). Since the mid-2010s, however, the perceived relative disadvantage of rural regions in Europe has been afforded with renewed political significance by the rise of populist and disruptive political movements that have drawn disproportionate support from disaffected rural voters (Strijker et al., 2015; Essletzbachler et al., 2018; Rodriguez-Pose, 2018; Mamonova & Franquesa, 2019; Fortner et al., 2021). As populist claims and campaigns threaten several aspects of the EU project, including the agenda of territorial cohesion, the need to address rural concerns assumed a political as well as a policy imperative. One rhetorical feature of the LTVRA has been to re-emphasize the centrality of rural regions

to the EU and the principle of rural-urban coherence, with the Commission President Ursula von der Leyen stating in a webinar for Rural Vision Week that ‘Europe would not be whole without its countryside’ (von der Leyen, 2021).

Accordingly, the uneven development of rural and urban areas has been reframed as not only as question of spatial inequality, but also a question of spatial injustice. As the Commission’s Communication on the LTVRA outlined (EC, 2021, p. 1):

*There is a growing understanding, that the role and importance of rural areas is under-appreciated and insufficiently rewarded. Almost 40% of those who replied to the public consultation organised in preparation of this Communication said they felt left behind by society and policy-makers. This perception and the factors driving it need to be addressed.*

Arguably, these observations reflect a failure of EU policy to date. The reduction of regional disparities has long been a core objective of the EU and its predecessors, with the principle of territorial cohesion formally enshrined in Article 174 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (and previously in Article 158 of the Treaty on the European Community). Moreover, this Article specifically instructs that ‘particular attention shall be paid to rural areas, areas affected by industrial transition, and regions which suffer from severe and permanent natural or demographic handicaps such as the northernmost regions with very low population density and island, cross-border and mountain regions’ (EU, 2012, p. 127). Yet, although lagging rural regions have benefited from European Regional Development Funds, there has not been a concerted effort to consider collective rural challenges or disadvantages within EU regional policy. Rather, rural development has been treated as an adjunct of agricultural policy, with rural development funding primarily supporting the diversification of rural economies away from farming. While effective in some respects, this approach positioned rural areas in a certain way and militated against the formulation of holistic, integrated perspectives that could also encompass challenges such as demographic ageing and erosion of public services highlighted in the LTVRA.

This paper aims to delve deeper into the dynamics of rural-urban inequalities and injustice in Europe by drawing on analysis conducted as part of the Horizon 2020 IMAJINE project, which involved Konrad Czapiewski, to whom this Special Issue is dedicated. IMAJINE adopted a multi-disciplinary and mixed-methods approach, combining econometric analysis, a large-n survey, qualitative interviews, focus groups, textual analysis and scenario-building, as described further in the methods section below. It aimed to document the drivers, patterns and consequences of regional inequalities in Europe and to assess the efficacy of actions to address territorial disparities. In an innovative departure, these processes were analysed through the framework of spatial justice, borrowing a concept that has roots in urban geography and urban sociology but elaborating it to elucidate multiple dimensions that enable exploration not only of observed quantitative disparities, but also of perceived fairness or unfairness in the distribution of resources, of underlying political processes, of individual rights to space, and of normative ideals.

The next section of the paper briefly outlines the existing state of knowledge on rural-urban disparities and introduces the concept of spatial justice in a rural context. Following a short description of research methods and data sources, the main part of the paper is structured in three parts. The first part details quantitative evidence of rural-urban inequalities, addressing the research questions, (i) ‘how have patterns of rural-urban inequalities developed over time?’; (ii) ‘to what extent are patterns of rural-urban inequalities reconfigured with changes in the spatial scale of analysis?’; and (iii) ‘what factors are significant in explaining patterns of rural-urban inequality?’. The second part explores public perceptions of these inequalities and claims to spatial injustice, drawing primarily on evidence from a large-n survey. This discussion

examines the research question of ‘are there differences between rural-urban settings in resident’s perceptions of quality of life, economic opportunities and the standard of public services?’, and additionally incorporates evidence from semi-structured interviews to consider the further question of ‘how are perceived rural-urban differences framed and explained?’. The third part discusses policy and political responses to rural-urban inequalities, engaging the concept of spatial justice to interrogate questions including ‘do rural residents consider their regions to be fairly treated by policy?’, and ‘are there rural-urban differences in political trust?’.

## Rural-Urban Inequalities and Rural Spatial Justice

The measurement of rural-urban inequalities in Europe is hindered by a number of methodological factors. Regional datasets spanning Europe tend to be collated at spatial scales that encompass both urban and rural areas, making disaggregation of data along the rural-urban continuum and recombination for rural districts as an overarching category difficult; data collected at the local scale and indicators used vary between countries, especially in relation to social exclusion and poverty; and there are debates around the appropriateness of key indicators such as GDP, benefit claimants, or unemployment for capturing deprivation in rural areas (Commins, 2004; Milbourne, 2004). Accordingly, in comparison with work in North America or in the Global South, the literature on rural-urban disparities in Europe is relatively limited and tends to provide insights in certain indicators of inequality at certain points of time rather than a comprehensive and dynamic overview. These shortcomings may have contributed to the apparent lack of attention paid to rural-urban inequalities in policy discourse.

Furthermore, studies that have been conducted reveal considerable divergence in the degree of rural-urban inequalities between different EU member states. Shucksmith et al.’s (2009) analysis of the 2003 European Quality of Life Survey, for example, found that there was little difference in income-related deprivation between rural and urban households at the aggregate level across Europe, but revealed significantly wider gaps in member states with lower GDP. Analysis of EU-SILC data by Bernard (2019) similarly recorded higher levels of deprivation in urban areas than in rural areas in a small number of countries including Austria, Belgium, Luxembourg, and the UK, but substantially greater rural deprivation than urban deprivation in many countries in southern and eastern Europe, including Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Poland, Romania and Spain.

Bernard (2019) proposes four potential explanations for the observed rural-urban inequalities, which he suggests might also account for variations between countries: i) *settlement structure and population density*, with sparsely-populated rural regions associated with higher deprivation due to limited opportunities for employment, career advancement and business innovation, depressing wages; ii) *share of agricultural employment*, especially in regions where farm holdings are small, with precarity of incomes, low wages, seasonal work, self-employment and poor productivity all contributing to deprivation; iii) *legacies of post-socialist restructuring* in central and eastern Europe, which tended to widen urban-rural inequalities as inward investment was concentrated on cities and agricultural reforms prompted out-migration from rural districts; and iv) *level of national economic growth*, with development theory indicating that rural-urban inequalities should decrease with the overall economic growth of a country, as expanded labour markets support commuting and increased incomes generated in urban economies flow into rural communities. Bernard finds support for each of these hypotheses in his analysis, but notes that ‘national economic development, expressed by GDP per capita, appears to be the essential factor behind rural disadvantage in more detailed analyses’ (Bernard, 2019, p. 386).

An interesting observation of both these studies is that rural areas either perform on a par with urban areas, or better, in terms of economic deprivation, in several northern European countries that have also tended to dominate the Anglophone literature in European rural studies, including the UK, Sweden and the Netherlands. It has been suggested that this pattern may explain the relative neglect of work on rural-urban disparities in Europe (Védrine & Woods, 2020). Certainly, in Britain, middle class counterurbanization combined with urban deindustrialization in the 1980s and 1990s reinforced the popular perception that rural areas were more affluent than urban areas. Subsequent research has challenged this assumption, documenting evidence of 'hidden' rural poverty, disguised in official statistics by the inadequacy of standard indicators and by the mingled residential geographies of rural communities, such that territorial inequality is less pronounced than in more urbanized regions (Milbourne, 2004).

Discrepancies between objective and subjective measures of relative disadvantage are also observed by Sørensen (2014), using data on satisfaction with quality of life from the 2008 European Values Study. Sørensen's analysis showed that life satisfaction was highest in small and medium towns (5,001 to 100,000 population), with satisfaction in rural areas and in cities being broadly similar, despite differences in objective indicators. Furthermore, in apparent contradiction to analyses of material measures of deprivation, Sørensen found that there was no statistical difference in life satisfaction between urban and rural areas in countries with low GDP, whereas higher national GDP was associated with higher life satisfaction cities and towns than in rural areas.

The nuances revealed in these studies all point to the limitations of only focusing on quantitative evidence of spatial inequality in understanding rural-urban dynamics and the need to also engage with the more qualitative, subjective perspectives that are captured in the concept of spatial (in)justice.

Spatial justice, as analytical framework, has twin roots in the Marxist urban geography of David Harvey, including concerns with 'territorial justice' in the distribution of resources, and in the radical urban sociology of Henri Lefebvre, particularly his notion of the 'right to the city' that focuses more on questions of justice in the participation of individuals in the production of space. These two dimensions were woven together in later work by geographers including Gordon Pirie (1983), Mustafa Dikeç (2001), and especially Ed Soja (2009, 2010). Throughout this evolution, the primary focus of spatial justice scholarship remained on the city, which Soja (2010) positioned as the crucible of struggles over social justice embedded in uneven geographies. However, recent contributions have extended the application of spatial justice to analysis of regional inequalities and capacities (Jones et al., 2020; Weckroth & Moio, 2020; Demeterova et al., 2022; Evrard, 2022; Madanipour et al., 2022; Petrakos et al., 2022; Weck et al., 2022;), and into rural contexts (Nordberg, 2020, 2021; Johansen et al., 2021; Shucksmith et al., 2021; Woods, 2023).

The expansion of spatial justice into new geographical scales and settings has been accompanied by an elaboration of the analytical potential of the framework that has drawn out its multiple dimensions (Woods, 2023). In addition to questions around geographical unevenness in the distribution of resources and on inequalities in the production of space, recent research employing spatial justice has emphasized the importance of perceived injustices as well as material disparities, issues of access to space, spatial biases in the policy process and in political-economic structures, and the articulation of spatial justice as a normative ideal. The emergent literature on rural spatial justice has tended to adopt a Lefebvrian approach in focusing on the production of rural space and the capacities of rural communities (Nordberg, 2020, 2021; Shucksmith et al., 2021).

In seeking to examine urban-rural disparities through the lens of spatial justice, this paper has a different emphasis, but engages several of the dimensions of spatial justice identified in Woods

(2023). It starts with evidence for geographical inequalities between rural and urban areas in the distribution of material resources and of economic opportunities. It proceeds to explore perceptions of spatial justice from rural standpoints, and finally considers responses to rural spatial (in)justice in individual and collective actions that are informed by normative ideals.

## Methods

This paper presents research undertaken in the IMAJINE project, which investigated patterns and processes of territorial inequalities in Europe in relation to concepts of spatial justice. IMAJINE employed a multi-disciplinary, mixed methods approach, with work packages variously using qualitative and quantitative methods, with both primary and secondary data, for a variety of scales from local case studies to Europe-wide analysis, undertaken by different project partners. Several of these elements are drawn on for this paper.

The analysis of evidence relating to material disparities between rural and urban areas draws on estimates of local scale data for territorial inequality generated using the general cross entropy method with data on household incomes, education level, and the AROPE 'at risk of poverty or exclusion' index from the EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) database, combined with local area population profiles obtained from national statistical institutes. This work was led by IMAJINE partners at the Universidad de Oviedo, with contributions from economists at Aberystwyth University and the Università degli Studi 'G. D'Annunzio' Chieti-Pescara (see Fernandez-Vazquez et al., 2018, for full technical details).<sup>1</sup> The local data estimates were subsequently employed in analysis by INRAe and AgroSup Dijon of spatial temporal variations in household incomes between rural, urban and periurban areas using Oaxaca-Blinder decomposition and quantile decomposition methods (see Védrine & Woods, 2020, for technical details).<sup>2</sup> The local data were further incorporated into a geographically weighted principal component analysis (PCA) of composite indicators of local territorial inequality, undertaken by Università degli Studi 'G. D'Annunzio' Chieti-Pescara and the Universidad de Oviedo. Variables incorporated into this analysis at the municipal scale include average disposable household income ('wealth', weighted 0.496 in the PCA), the proportion of households with a disposable income before social transfers that is below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold ('aro', weighted 0.628), the proportion of residents without formal education ('edu', weighted 0.528), the local unemployment rate ('lab', weighted 0.219), and the share of agricultural employment in the local workforce ('agr', weighted 0.178) (see Cartone et al., 2020, for full technical details). Rural and urban classifications referred to in the quantitative analysis follow Eurostat's categorisation of rurality and urbanity for NUTS 2 and NUTS 3 level regions, and national definitions for sub-NUTS 3 local data.

Evidence of perceptions of spatial justice and injustice are sourced from an experimental online survey led by Università di Siena.<sup>3</sup> The survey employed a non-probability sampling design using an opt-in online panel administered by sub-contractor Toluna. A quota sampling approach with frequency matching was used, aiming for a target of 170 respondents in each NUTS 1 region of eight study countries. A total of 18,204 participants completed the survey in France (2152 participants), Germany (2318), Italy (2599), the Netherlands (1991), Poland (2530), Romania (1930), Spain (2458)

<sup>1</sup> This work was undertaken by Alfredo Cartone, Esteban Fernandez-Vazquez, Domenica Panzera, Maria Plotnikova, Paolo Postiglione, Fernando Rubiera-Morollon and Ana Viñuela.

<sup>2</sup> This work, and the analysis of impacts of Structural Funds programmes, was undertaken by Lionel Védrine and Julie Le Gallo.

<sup>3</sup> The IMAJINE survey was designed, led and analysed by Linda Basile.

and the United Kingdom (2226), over four weeks in September and October 2020. Weight calibration adjustments were applied to the data using STATA package IPFRAKING. This paper discusses results from selected questions in the survey, notably questions asking about perceptions of economic opportunities, quality of public services, regional and personal economic situation, trust in levels of government, and satisfaction with the functioning of democracy at various scales. In this paper, the survey responses are analysed according to a four-way categorisation of 'open countryside', 'village or small town', 'medium or large town', or 'city', with self-identification by survey respondents answering the question 'Would you consider the city or town where you live to be...' with the listed options. For further technical information on the survey see Basile (2021).

Discussion of spatial justice in responses to rural-urban inequalities utilises both quantitative and qualitative data and techniques. The efficacy of policy interventions has been examined through analysis of the composition effects of EU Cohesion Policy spending on within-region household income disparities and on regional growth in GDP over the period 2000-2006. This used a generalised propensity score approach with data at NUTS 3 scale on spending by Structural Funds instrument compiled by SWECO for the European Commission and contextual data compiled by Cambridge Econometrics and ESPON. The analysis was conducted by IMAJINE researchers at INRAe and AgroSup Dijon (for technical details see Védrine et al., 2021)

Exploration of perceptions of spatial (in)justice and responses to rural-urban differences also involved qualitative data collection and analysis. Interviews with 68 European, national and regional stakeholders were conducted in 2017 and 2018 in Brussels, Finland, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy and the UK by IMAJINE researchers at Aberystwyth University, Helsinki University, Leibniz Institut für Länderkunde (IfL), Harokopio University Athens, University of Galway, and Università di Siena.<sup>4</sup> The interview schedules were primarily focused on stakeholder perceptions of territorial inequalities and of national and EU cohesion policies. Evidence has also been drawn from a further set of 13 interviews undertaken with national and regional stakeholders in Ireland, Poland, Spain and the UK in 2020 by the University of Galway, with discussion of drivers of inequalities, policy responses and potential future trajectories informed by the emerging IMAJINE findings.

## Patterns of Rural-Urban Disparities in Europe

The conventional wisdom in Europe and in much of the world is that urban regions are wealthier than rural regions. Cities have traditionally been identified as centres of economic income and growth, generating stable incomes for urban dwellers and creating opportunities for individual enrichment, whereas rural districts have been associated with less innovative industries, lower productivity, limited opportunities, and socially stratified populations in which incomes produced by agriculture or other primary industries have been concentrated with landowners. In the late twentieth century, the trend of middle class counterurbanization combined with urban deindustrialization reversed the perceived polarity in several countries, including Britain, with affluence associated with rural and periurban districts within commuting distance of major towns and cities. Yet, in general across Europe, rural household incomes have on average remained lower than those in urban areas.

<sup>4</sup> The interviews and analysis were undertaken by Marie Mahon, Mikko Weckroth, Sami Moisio, Apostolos Papadopoulos, Loukia-Maria Fratsea, Rhys Jones, Bryonny Goodwin-Hawkins, Frank Mayer, Judith Miggelbrink and Linda Basile.

There is however evidence of the gap closing. Econometric analysis reveals a decrease in the disparity between the income of rural and urban households over the period from 2004 to 2014, against a background of increasing overall socio-economic inequality in this period. In 2004, the average income of rural households was 12% lower than that of urban households, but by 2014, the gap had narrowed to 5% (Védrine & Woods, 2020). At the beginning of the period, the explanation for the difference can be broken down equally between structural factors and differences in the characteristics of households. However, when households of similar characteristics are compared the income gap is fairly stable over the period from 2004 to 2014 at around per cent. As such, the reduction in the income disparity between rural and urban households can be attributed mainly to a closing in the differences between the characteristics of rural and urban households. In other words, rural households are getting more like urban households and this is removing some of the structural and locational factors that distorted comparisons of income (e.g. agricultural employment, settlement structure, legacies of the post-socialist transition).

However, the overall trend of decreasing rural-urban inequalities is not consistent across countries. The IMAJINE analysis identifies four clusters of countries exhibiting different patterns. The first group follows the overall trajectory, with lower incomes for rural households catching up with urban incomes over the period (Védrine & Woods, 2020). This group includes Ireland, Italy, Greece, Latvia, Lithuania and Portugal. The second group, however, departs from the overall pattern with lower incomes for rural households than for urban households, but no significant reduction in the gap over the period analysed. This group includes Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Spain. The third cluster includes countries where the difference between rural and urban household incomes was already not significant at the start of the period in 2004 and remained largely stable through the period. These include France, Denmark and the United Kingdom. The final group is comprised by countries in which average rural household incomes are higher than those for urban households and includes Austria, Belgium, Luxembourg and Germany. With the exception of Germany, the higher average income for rural households in these countries is explained by differences in household characteristics.

Moreover, the closing of the rural-urban income disparity has been driven by changes for higher income households. For households with the lowest incomes, the inequality between rural and urban households has increased. Rural households in the first decile of income distribution report incomes that are 20 to 40% lower than the income for equivalent urban households (Védrine & Woods, 2020). Moreover, this gap has not closed along with the overall income disparity, but rather there is evidence that the difference between urban and rural household incomes for these households with the lowest incomes has increased since 2008. In other words, the poorest rural households have not benefited from overall income convergence, which appears to be driven by improvements for higher income households.

The difference in the rural-urban income gap between the bottom and top of the income distribution tends to be more prominent for countries in central and eastern Europe such as Bulgaria, Croatia and Poland, than in countries such as Denmark and Ireland, where the gap is fairly consistent across the income distribution. France stands out as an exception, with a greater gap between rural and urban household incomes for higher income households than for lower income households.

Just as differing trajectories can be observed for the evolution of rural-urban income disparities in different EU member states, so differentiated patterns exist at local scale within regions, with notable contrasts between provincial towns and cities and their rural hinterlands, as well as varying patterns for different types and settings of rural areas. Identifying local scale territorial inequalities can be challenging due to the paucity and inconsistency of available data and this in it-

self can contribute to the under-recognition of pockets of deprivation and poverty in rural areas. The estimation of local scale data in IMAJINE using spatial data disaggregation techniques attempted to overcome this obstacle and the results reveal more nuanced profiles of local scale deprivation, in which rural-urban differences are evident (Cartone et al., 2020; Díaz Dapena et al., 2020).

In France, for example, communes with the highest levels of deprivation can be observed to be clustered in mountain and peripheral rural areas including the Massif Central, Pyrenees, Jura, and parts of Corsica, Normandy and Picardy, while more urbanized regions show less deprivation on a composite indicator. Similarly, in Spain, a strong north-south cleavage in relative deprivation is supplemented by a secondary rural-urban pattern, with cities such as Almeria, Badajoz, Cordoba, Malaga, Murcia, Granada, and Seville standing out as less deprived than the surround rural areas in Andalusia, Murcia and Extremadura. Accordingly, the IMAJINE analysis indicates that national and regional differences may be most significant in shaping patterns of territorial inequality in Europe, but that these may be intensified or disrupted by rural-urban disparities at more sub-regional, local scales – a nuance that can be lost in official statistics and maps that focus on data for higher tier regions.

Rural-urban disparities do not only exist for economic measures. There are notable variations in average levels of education within regions, with educational attainment generally lower in rural areas than in urban districts. This rural-urban differentiation is particularly evident in France, Italy and Spain, but it is also evident in countries with higher levels of education overall, such as Finland and Sweden (Fernandez-Vazquez et al., 2018). Inequalities in education are important not only for the different capacities that they afford to individuals for social mobility, but also as factors in the capacity of localities for economic development. Principal component analysis reveals the level of education to be the most significant variable in explaining local scale inequalities for 1002 municipalities in Spain and 4684 municipalities in Italy. In both cases, the significance of education as an explanation for local inequalities is pronounced in rural areas than in urban areas (Cartone et al., 2020).

The association is reinforced by evidence from interviews with regional stakeholders, especially in Spain, where lack of educational opportunities in rural districts was viewed not only as a major source of inequality between rural and urban areas, but also as an instance of policy failing rural communities. It was argued that education and training policies viewed the population as a homogenous group, applying standardized centrally-determined programmes with no variation to reflect local labour needs and employment opportunities. One stakeholder cited training for motor mechanics as an example, noting that rural areas routinely filled the quota or employment opportunities available in local garages for trainees. As such, it was indicated, rural areas faced spatial injustice from ill-designed policies that failed to address rural labour needs but rather prepared young people for jobs elsewhere, fuelling out-migration.

More broadly, stakeholders commonly described rural inequalities in relation to uneven access to services more than economic disparities. These included education, health, welfare, postal and banking services, as well as communications and transport infrastructure, with disparities across these domains combining to produce specific intensities of rural disadvantage. For example, a stakeholder in Ireland highlighted problems of sourcing information on health services in rural areas, especially communities with limited access to the internet and digital media. Assumptions by government about the universality of information, it was suggested, misunderstood the realities of many rural communities and produced a form of spatial inequality for remote, rural localities whereby the right to services was compromised by a failure of authorities to act with a duty of care to inform individuals of their rights. Similarly, disparities in public transport between urban and rural areas were noted in several countries, reflecting budget cuts under austerity measures and the tendering out of bus services. Centralized policies that were not tailored to rural situations



were argued to create uneven provision with knock-on effects, such as the ability of rural residents to get to hospital appointments.

Furthermore, the aggregation of economic and infrastructural disparities was noted by stakeholders to accentuated inequalities within rural regions, as some social groups are more severely affected than others. Limited public transport services and the costs of running private transport for low income households were noted to have a gendered impact by a stakeholder interviewed in Scotland, who explained that women with childcare responsibilities had more complex daily mobility patterns, needing to move between childminders, employment, services and facilities in non-linear ways and frequently over wider distances than in urban areas. Disabled rural residents were also identified as being particularly disadvantaged, with for example centrally-prescribed moves away from institutional care to 'care in the community' having unintended consequences in remoter rural areas where limited infrastructure compromises the objective of promoting freedom, choice and independence for individuals (see also Mahon et al., 2021).

## Perceptions of Rural-Urban Injustice

The quantitative and qualitative evidence discussed above documents the patterns of inequality that are experienced materially by residents of rural regions in Europe and captured in official statistics. Commentaries from stakeholders further begin to interpret these observed disparities in terms of spatial injustice – attributing rural disadvantage to policies that they consider to be failing rural populations. It is such perceptions, rather than the raw numerical data, that are arguably more significant politically. Indeed, our expanded framework of spatial justice emphasizes perceptions of inequality and unfairness as much as recorded material disparities.

The IMAJINE survey of participants in eight European countries show that residents in areas self-described as rural or small towns rated economic opportunities in their region lower than residents in larger towns and cities (see also Basile, 2021). A weighted aggregated index combining scores (from 0 (very bad) to 10 (very good)) assessing the current situation for 'doing business', 'getting a job' and 'finding housing at an affordable price' shows a mean score of 4.77 given by residents living in the 'open countryside' compared to a mean score of 5.19 given by residents of cities (Table 1).

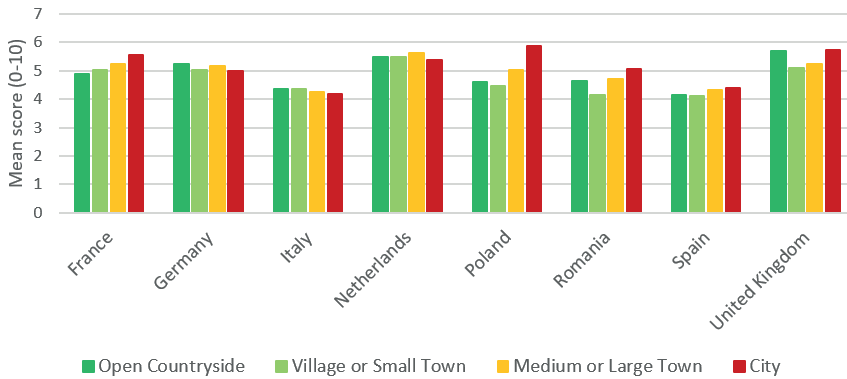
There is however variation in the rural-urban differentiation of responses between the countries surveyed. The gap in perception of economic opportunities between urban and rural areas was greatest in Poland, Romania and France, with little difference in Spain and the Netherlands. In Germany and Italy, rural areas were perceived to be better for economic opportunities than cities. In the United Kingdom, economic opportunities in cities are rated notably higher than those in small towns, but there is perceived to be little difference in economic opportunities between residents of cities and residents living in 'open countryside' (Fig. 1).

The disaggregation of the figures by the three components of doing business, getting a job and finding housing show that the perceived rural-urban inequalities are greatest with respect to prospects of getting a job appropriate to an individual's level of education or training. Conditions for 'doing business' (including starting a business, installing utilities, dealing with planning and building permits) are also perceived to be better in larger towns and cities than in rural areas. There is no significant difference however in respondents' perceptions of access to affordable housing between rural and urban areas, with residents of 'open countryside' giving slightly higher scores, probably as a reflection of lower property prices in rural areas in most of Europe (Fig. 2).

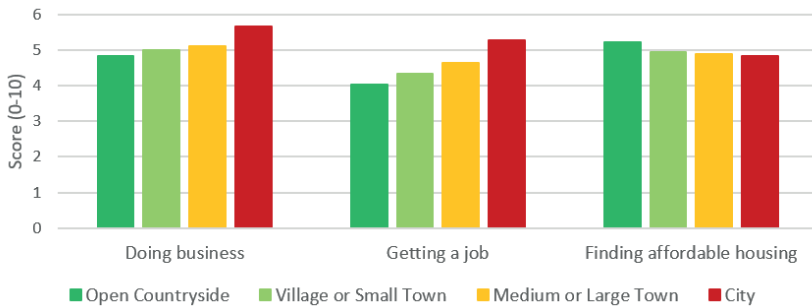
**Table 1.** Aggregated scores for current situation for economic opportunities in region of respondent, by type of location of residence.

Type of area	Lowest score	Highest score	Mean score	Standard Deviation	Number of responses
Open countryside	0	10	4.77	2.24	2094
Village or small town	0	10	4.77	2.07	5556
Medium or large town	0	10	4.89	2.12	6161
City or suburb	0	10	5.19	2.22	4391
Total	0	10	4.93	2.15	18202

Source: IMAJINE survey.



**Figure 1.** Residents’ scores for aggregated economic opportunities in region, by type of area of residence and country (0 = very bad, 10 = very good)  
Source: IMAJINE survey.



**Figure 2.** Residents’ scores for economic opportunities in region, by type of area of residence (0 = very bad, 10 = very good)  
Source: IMAJINE survey.

Similarly, rural and small town residents tend to rate the quality of public services in their region lower than residents living in larger towns or cities (Table 2), but again the scale of difference varies between country. The largest differences in scores for the quality of public services between rural and urban areas were in Poland, France and Spain, with the smallest difference in Italy. Respondents in all countries rated public services in larger towns and cities above those in rural

areas, however in Germany and the UK respondents living in ‘open countryside’ on average gave higher scores for the quality of public services than those living in villages and small towns. There is also notable variation in the scores given to public services in rural areas between the countries, ranging for ‘open countryside’ from 4.77 in Romania to 6.4 in the Netherlands, and for ‘villages and small towns’ from 5.04 in Romania to 6.62 in the Netherlands (Fig. 3).

**Table 2.** Aggregated scores for quality of public services in region of respondent, by type of location of residence.

Type of area	Lowest score	Highest score	Mean score	Standard Deviation	Number of responses
Open countryside	0	10	5.37	2.02	2094
Village or small town	0	10	5.80	1.83	5556
Medium or large town	0	10	6.23	1.79	6161
City or suburb	0	10	6.70	1.86	4391
Total	0	10	6.13	1.905	18202

Source: IMAJINE survey.



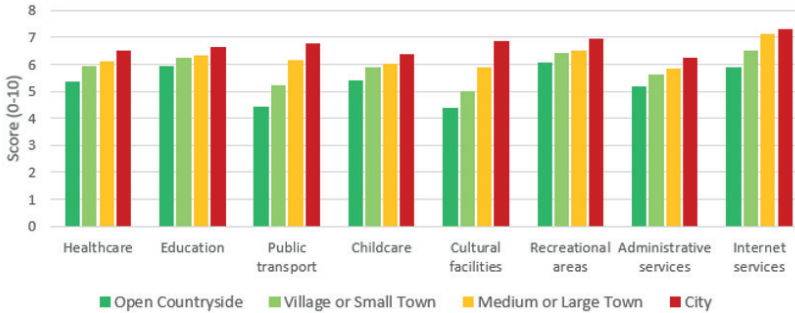
**Figure 3.** Residents' scores for aggregated quality of public services in region, by type of area of residence and country (0 = very bad, 10 = very good)

Source: IMAJINE survey.

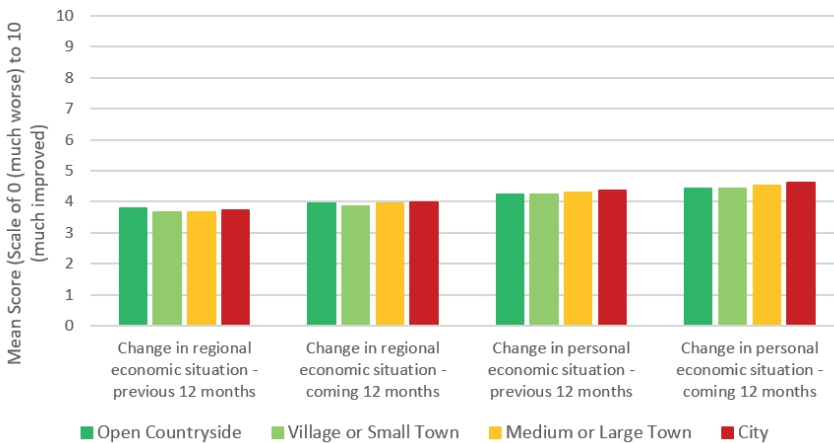
The perceived difference in quality of public services between urban and rural areas further varies in relation to the service concerned. The gap is largest for cultural facilities, public transport and internet services, and smallest for education. For all eight service types, quality was scored progressively higher with increasing scales of urbanization. It is also notable that internet connectivity is no longer perceived as a major weakness of rural areas, with residents in ‘open countryside’ rating internet services higher than healthcare, public transport, childcare, cultural facilities and public administration services (Fig. 4).<sup>5</sup>

Interestingly, however, there is no significant difference in the economic outlook of residents in rural areas compared with residents in urban areas. When asked to assess how the regional economic situation had changed over the previous 12 months on a scale of 0 (worsened a lot) to 10 (improved a lot), residents living the open countryside were very marginally more positive on average than those living in villages and small towns, medium and large towns and cities, with a mean score of 3.78 compared with 3.65 awarded by village and small town residents. Respondents in all areas awarded marginally high scores on average for their anticipated change to the regional economy over the coming 12 months, but overall expected a further deterioration in the situation with mean scores ranging from 3.84 from residents of villages and small towns, to 3.96 for resi-

dents of open countryside, to 3.98 for city residents (Fig. 5). In contrast, residents living in open countryside scored the change in their personal economic situation over the previous 12 months marginally more negatively (4.24) than those in other areas and were also marginally more pessimistic about the anticipated change over the coming 12 months, giving an average score of 4.38 compared to 4.61 for city dwellers.



**Figure 4.** Residents' scores for quality of selected public services in region, by type of area of residence (0 = very bad, 10 = very good)  
Source: IMAJINE survey.



**Figure 5.** Perceptions of changes in regional and personal economic situation, scored on scale of 0 (much worse) to 10 (much improved), by type of area of residence  
Source: IMAJINE survey.

What these figures indicate is that there is a general perception across Europe that rural areas are disadvantaged relative to urban areas in economic opportunities and in public service provision, but that these perceptions are shaped by national contexts. In Germany, Italy and the UK, rural communities are perceived to be better positioned economically than urban areas – a pattern that is often either not present or not evident in official statistics. Moreover, the economic outlook results suggest that residents do not feel disproportionately disadvantaged by recent economic trends (the survey was conducted shortly after the first COVID-19 lockdowns) but neither do they anticipate an improvement that might narrow the gap with urban areas. In other words, there may be evidence here for an acceptance of inequality rather than a burning sense of spatial injustice.

At the same time, however, discourses of rural-urban inequality and of the unfair treatment of rural areas are reinforced by the media, influencing public views. Several stakeholders argued that the media uncritically accepted the ideas that economic growth is linked to agglomeration benefits and that rural to urban migration is inevitable. Stakeholders in Germany observed that disparities between rural and urban areas in terms of economic performance and unemployment (especially in eastern Germany) were embellished in the public imagination by negative portrayals in the media with the effect of intensifying trends of net out-migration from depressed rural areas. In Finland, one interviewee from a regional council similarly contended that regional development was made more difficult by media stories that emphasized a narrative of declining peripheral regions and the 'natural' tendency of urbanization (Weckroth et al., 2018).

The language of spatial injustice was also articulated by stakeholders in describing their own perceptions of rural-urban differences. Several observed that rural regions were implicitly positioned in policy discourses as lagging or disadvantaged territories. In Poland, for example, a representative of a cross-border regional group defined rural areas in terms of the specific challenges that they were considered to face with regard to transport, limited high-speed internet connectivity and digital skills, and a 'brain drain' resulting from out-migration. In Greece and in Wales, 'rural' and 'peripheral' were used by stakeholders as synonyms for disadvantage when discussing territorial disparities (along with ex-industrial districts in Wales). In Greece in particular, terms such as peripheral and semi-peripheral regions, which were closely linked to ideas of rurality and insularity, were used as means of defining and targeting regions for policy interventions in preference to categorizations framed explicitly with reference to poverty or levels of development (Weckroth et al., 2018).

Such framings may plausibly be interpreted either as reflecting a sense of spatial justice in identifying lagging regions for intervention, or as reproducing spatial injustice through the repetition of stigmatizing terminology. Either way, stakeholders evoked spatial injustice to argue that austerity measures introduced by national governments in the late 2000s and early 2010s had had a disproportionate impact on rural areas, widening rural-urban inequalities. This trend was especially noted by stakeholders in Greece, Ireland and Spain, countries in that had adopted some of the strongest austerity policies in Europe. In Greece, cuts to public service provision were noted to have deepened existing territorial inequalities to the detriment of rural areas, with a civil servant from the Ministry of Rural Development and Food observing that:

*The crisis reduced public spending and subsequently this caused serious problems in the public services such as schools, hospitals, police departments. Various services were shut down. The crisis also affected the private sector.... [All these] intensified spatial inequalities, and more particularly those among urban and rural areas (Civil servant from the Greek Ministry of Rural Development and Food) (from Weckroth et al., 2018).*

In Ireland, stakeholders cited austerity policies in respect to the withdrawal of funding for rural and regional development projects and infrastructure schemes, including planned investment in third-level education and support for pathways to sustainable employment in more rural areas. A rise in unemployment in rural districts and increased out-migration from these areas were also identified by regional stakeholders in Ireland as major effects of the post-2008 recession and austerity policies for rural areas. Moreover, stakeholders in the Asturias region of Spain described a shift in emphasis in understanding of deprivation with the austerity programme. Stakeholders explained that prior to 2008, deprivation was primarily understood in Spain as concerned with poverty alleviation, but that as a consequence of the economic crisis and austerity measures, issues of rural deprivation associated with unequal access to services has been highlighted, notably affordable transport and its importance for accessing employment opportunities.

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## Responding to Rural Spatial Injustice

If policies that reinforce rural-urban inequalities may be regarded as examples of spatial injustice, then policies aimed at reducing territorial disparities may be positioned as expressions of desire for spatial justice as a normative ideal. Both the EU and individual member states have implemented numerous regional development programmes aimed at strengthening territorial cohesion. These have had a demonstrable impact in reducing measured socio-economic disparities between regions, and rural areas have been among the beneficiaries, yet they have only rarely been specifically designed to address rural-urban inequalities. More commonly they have targeted territories identified as lagging according to indicators such as GDP per capita evaluated at a regional scale that encompasses both urban and rural areas. As noted earlier, this approach can produce biases against rural areas by failing to accurately identify rural disadvantage, and thus can itself be considered as an instance of spatial injustice.

Prior to 2000, EU Structural Funds included a measure (Objective 5b) directed at restructuring rural areas. In 2000, this was subsumed into a wider objective of revitalizing areas facing structural difficulties, which nevertheless included specific qualification criteria for lagging rural areas, based on population density and evolution, agricultural employment, and unemployment rates. Subsequently, however, the EU Structural Funds moved to a simplified structure determined by GDP per capita, and nuances of rural disadvantage were lost. Reforms for the 2021-27 programming period have introduced supplementary criteria, some of which are more attuned to rural challenges, but stop short of explicitly addressing rural-urban disparities.

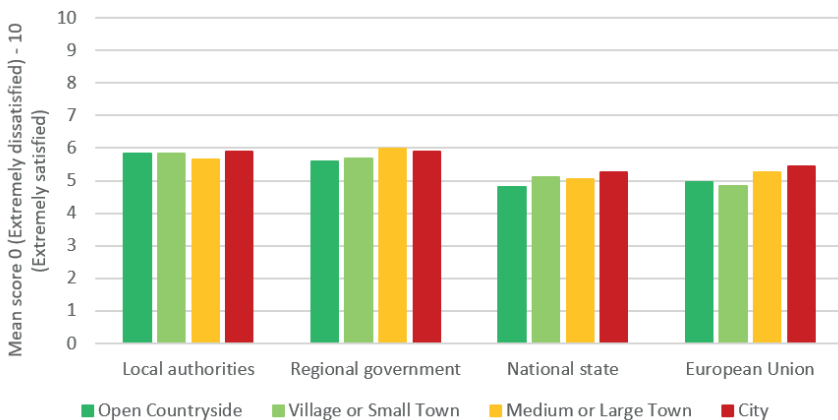
At the same time, support from the EU for 'rural development' is positioned as an adjunct to agricultural policy, resourced through the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and delivered through national Rural Development Plans and initiatives such as LEADER. These programmes are framed in terms of reorienting rural economies away from primary industries, and while indicators such as job creation may be evaluated as measures of success, the reduction of rural-urban inequalities is not the driving objective. The alignment of rural development policy with agriculture also produces disconnects with sectors that are frequently cited in descriptions of rural inequality, such as education, healthcare, and transport. With limited funds, schemes like LEADER tend to focus on the 'soft infrastructure' of rural community life, rather than on major hard infrastructure that is more directly instrumental in uneven economic development and experiences of material disadvantage.

The compartmentalization of regional and rural development matters because different programmes have varying levels of success in shifting indicators of spatial inequality. Econometric analysis to model the effects of spending under different Structural Funds (relative to GDP) on inequalities within regions and on regional economic growth indicate that spend from Cohesion Funds, the European Social Fund (ESF) and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) have impacts in reducing in-region inequalities and increasing regional growth, but that spending from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) has less discernible effect. The analysis shows no significant effect from EAFRD spend on regional disparities, and is negatively correlated with economic growth for regions in post-2004 new member states (Védrine et al., 2021).

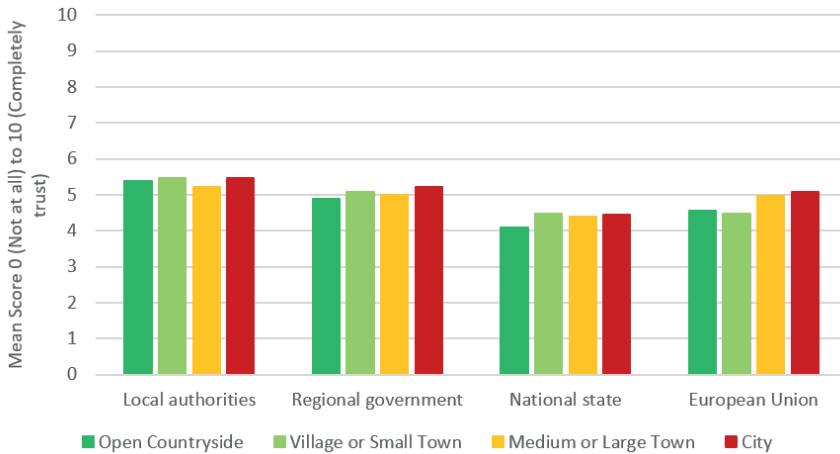
Even where regions have been targeted by EU Structural Funds, and where quantifiable impacts have been achieved on measures such as GDP, this is not necessarily reflected in public perceptions of spatial (in)justice. The IMAJINE survey also asked participants whether they thought

that their region had benefited more, less or the same from EU regional development funds. A majority of respondents in 13 regions that had received the highest level of EU Convergence Funds in the 2014-20 period replied that they thought their region had benefited less than other EU regions or not at all. These included sizeable areas of southern Italy, eastern Poland, Romania and Extremadura in Spain. Several of these regions contain substantial rural populations, including Puglia in Italy, Lubelskie and Podlaskie in Poland, and the North-East, South-East, South and South-West macroregions of Romania (Basile, 2021).

Perceptions that rural regions are not being treated fairly by government policies, or are not receiving a 'fair share' of support for economic development, can be manifested in lower satisfaction and less trust in government institutions. The IMAJINE survey found that there is little difference in levels of satisfaction with local and regional government between urban and rural residents, but that rural residents expressed greater dissatisfaction with national and EU institutions. Asked to indicate their satisfaction with how democracy works at various levels of governance on a scale of 0 (extremely dissatisfied) to 10 (extremely satisfied), respondents living in open countryside gave national state institutions a mean score of 4.8 and respondents in villages and small towns a score of 5.11, compared with a score of 5.27 awarded by city residents; whilst the EU was given a mean score of 4.97 by residents of open countryside, and 4.81 by residents of small towns and villages, but 5.43 by respondents living in cities. Respondents in all areas expressed more satisfaction with the operation of democracy at local and regional scales than at national and EU levels (Fig. 6). Similarly, residents living in open countryside and in villages and small towns had less trust in EU institutions than urban residents, but there was less difference in trust for local, regional and national authorities, with residents of villages and small towns marginally having greater trust in national governments than other categories (Fig. 7).



**Figure 6.** Mean satisfaction with how democracy works at different scales of government, by type of area of residence of respondent, on scale of 0 (extremely dissatisfied) to 10 (extremely satisfied)  
Source: IMAJINE survey.



**Figure 7.** Mean trust in different scales of government, by type of area of residence of respondent, on scale of 0 (do not trust at all) to 10 (completely trust)  
Source: IMAJINE survey.

Regional stakeholders provided context for these results by expressing frustration at efforts to influence regional, national and EU policy-makers on rural dimensions of issues including housing, transport, health, education and social welfare. In Spain, in particular, some stakeholders identified a lack of trust in regional government with a perceived lack of trust and one-party dominance that was associated more with urban areas than with rural districts. At the same time, several stakeholders also articulated concerns about the capacity of rural civil society to participate in the development process and effectively engage with policy and funding opportunities. In some cases, stakeholders noted variations in social capital and the capacity of civil society actors between different rural areas, observing for example that social capital and capacity had been weakened in areas experiencing significant out-migration and that targeted and sustained forms of capacity-building were required in these districts. More remote, sparsely populated, rural areas with ageing populations were also cited by some interviewees as lacking expertise and a critical mass of active and engaged citizens, with an associated absence of participation in rural development programmes. One Polish stakeholder observed that relative success in obtaining EU funding or not was visible when travelling through different rural regions (Mahon et al., 2021).

It is sentiments such as these that make rural regions potential reservoirs of support for disruptive political movements that weaponize feelings of spatial injustice, from nationalist and separatist parties, to populist, Eurosceptic and far-right parties and movements. Analyses have identified disproportionate support from rural voters to be significant in electoral advances for the Rassemblement National in France, the Allianz für Deutschland in Germany, Law and Justice (PiS) in Poland, the Freedom Party (FPÖ) in Austria, the Boer Burger Beweging (Farmer-Citizen Movement) (BBB) in the Netherlands, the Sweden Democrats, and others, as well as in Britain's vote to leave the EU (Ivaldi & Gombin, 2015; Gavenda & Umit, 2016; Essletzbichler et al., 2018; Aylott & Bolin, 2019; Grabowski, 2019; Fortner et al., 2021; Engelen, 2023; Mauger & Pelletier, 2023). Studies have put forward various explanations for rural support for disruptive political movements, including economic disadvantage, but also declining trust in mainstream politics, and perceptions that rural interests are not being accommodated in policies on the net zero



transition, conservation, immigration or social issues (Essletzbichler et al., 2018; Mamonova & Franquesa, 2019; Brooks, 2020; Fortner et al., 2021; May et al., 2021; Mitsch et al., 2021; Rodriguez-Pose, 2018; Schraff, 2019; van der Ploeg, 2020). These sentiments all reflect aspects of perceived spatial injustice and find resonance in populist rhetoric of them and us, pitting rural people against distant metropolitan elites (Nilsson & Lundgren, 2019; Valero, 2022; Woods, 2022).

## Conclusion

In producing its Long Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA), the EU signalled a concern with the future of rural regions in Europe and with rural-urban inequalities. The vision and its supporting documents outline many of the distinctive challenges that are faced by localities stemming from their rurality or peripherality, not just as components in wider regions. As such, the LTVRA is an implicit acknowledgement that despite decades of EU territorial cohesion policies, disparities between urban and rural regions remain. The IMAJINE analysis summarised in this paper provides evidence that interventions through the ERDF and other programmes have contributed to narrowing rural-urban inequalities in some member states, but shows that they have continued to be stubbornly present – and even in some cases widening – in parts of central, eastern and southern Europe and for the most remote and peripheral rural regions. Moreover, the disaggregation of regional data to local scale undertaken in IMAJINE reveals a much more nuanced pattern, including local disparities between towns and rural hinterlands that are commonly disguised in the higher-scale datasets employed to inform policy. Combining quantitative and qualitative data from IMAJINE research additionally indicates that the factors explaining local-scale variations are complex, and that spatial disadvantages can be further amplified for certain social groups within rural localities.

The renewed policy focus on rural areas by the European Commission is welcome, however if the LTVRA is to achieve its aim of levelling socio-economic differences between urban and rural areas the EU needs to think not only in terms of spatial inequalities – a quantitative measure – but also in terms of spatial justice and injustice – a qualitative assessment. Adopting an expanded spatial justice framework recognizes the multiple and multi-layered ways in which inequalities are experienced and interpreted by rural residents. It reveals that patterns of rural-urban disparities differ according to the indicators and scales of analysis employed, noting that the criteria commonly emphasized in policy measures, such as GDP, may not be the primary lens through which rural residents experience and understand relative disadvantage. The choice of methodology for mapping and monitoring spatial inequalities and allocating resources can therefore in itself be an act of spatial injustice, implicitly and often unintentionally disadvantaging rural regions. Indeed, the spatial justice framework calls attention more broadly to processes that produce uneven development and the mechanisms that shape policy responses, as well as to whether these are perceived as fair or unfair by rural residents.

Perceptions of inequality are also highlighted by a spatial justice framework and these may not necessarily map onto measured disparities. Evidence from the IMAJINE survey presented in this paper shows that there is a general perception that rural areas offer fewer economic opportunities than urban areas, have a poorer standard of public services and infrastructure, and are lagging in socio-economic development. These perceptions are reinforced by media representations and inform policy programmes. They can lead to rural areas being ‘written off’ and to a resigned acceptance of restricted opportunities by rural residents, suppressing local action, but they can also accumulate into resentment at spatial injustice that is open to exploitation

by disruptive and populist political movements, which in turn challenge the ideals of the European project. Rodríguez-Pose's (2018) characterization of populism as 'the revenge of the places that don't matter' speaks to this association, and in more subtle ways that is commonly credited. It is not Rodríguez-Pose's assertion that lagging rural (and ex-industrial) places don't matter, nor even that it is demonstrated that they don't matter to policymakers. It is rather that people living in such places think that they don't matter to metropolitan decision-makers and respond accordingly. This is what spatial injustice means in practice and it's why thinking about rural spatial justice is important to European territorial cohesion and achieving a just and sustainable future for the European countryside.

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