

# Urban-rural Europe - introduction

Statistics Explained

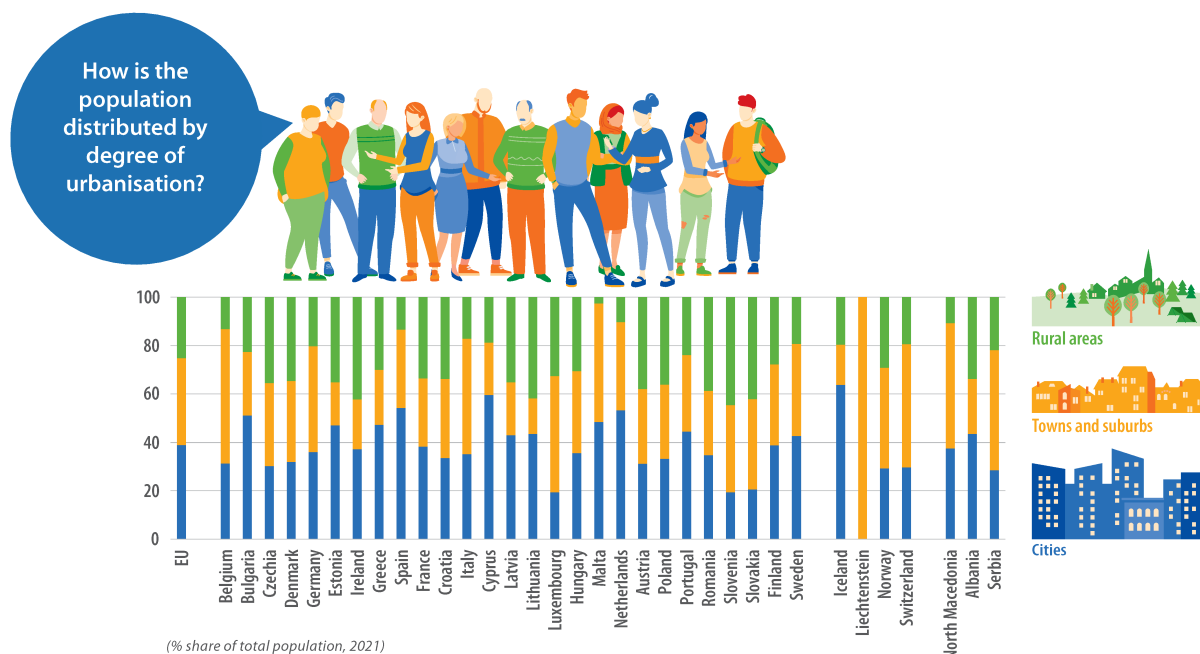
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" At their most basic level, Eurostat's territorial concepts can be split into three different groups: grid typologies, local typologies and regional typologies. "

" In 2021, some 38.9 % of the EU population was living in a city, with lower shares living in towns and suburbs (35.9 %) and in rural areas (25.2 %). "

Designing effective policies requires a good understanding of the socioeconomic conditions that exist in urban and rural areas, which in turn depends on building a solid base of knowledge about people, their activities, communities, well-being and interaction with the environment. Reliable, timely and comparable datasets can only be produced on the basis of a coherent and harmonised methodology that delineates cities, urban and rural areas in a consistent manner. This article provides a general introduction detailing the principal statistical building blocks for compiling subnational statistics that can then be used to analyse a broad range of issues impacting rural areas, towns and suburbs, and cities of the [European Union \(EU\)](#) .



Source: Eurostat, JRC and European Commission Directorate-General for Regional Policy

This article forms part of Eurostat's sister publications on [Rural Europe](#) and [Urban Europe](#) .

## Introduction to territorial typologies

Location is a key attribute to virtually all official statistics. Most economic, social and environmental situations and developments have a specific territorial dimension. In other words, they are located in a fixed place. This is dependent, to some degree, upon a range of territorial resources, for example, transport or communications networks, access to services, as well as natural and human resources. Such geospatial diversity makes analysing different territories a complex task. In order to cast some light on territorial patterns, Eurostat has expanded its range of subnational statistics to cover a wide range of different territorial typologies; these are designed to provide reliable and comparable data.

Towards the end of 2017, there was an important milestone concerning legislative developments of subnational statistics:

- an [amending Regulation \(EU\) 2017/2391](#) of the European Parliament and of the Council was adopted on 12 December 2017 as regards territorial typologies (Tercet);
- followed on 18 January 2018 by a [consolidated and amended version of Regulation \(EC\) No 1059/2003](#) of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of a common classification of territorial units for statistics ( NUTS ).

Prior to this, different territorial typologies and their related methodologies did not have a legal basis and they were, as such, not formally recognised by the [European statistical system \(ESS\)](#) . Since the end of 2017, subnational statistics have a legal basis that is developed around a set of impartial and transparent territorial typologies. The main objectives of Tercet included, among others:

- establishing a legal recognition of territorial typologies for the purpose of European statistics by laying down core definitions and statistical criteria;
- integrating territorial typologies into the NUTS Regulation so that specific types of territory could be referred to in thematic statistical regulations or policy initiatives without the need to (re-)define terminology such as metropolitan regions, predominantly urban or rural regions;
- ensuring methodological transparency and stability by clearly promoting how to update the typologies.

**Figure 1: Territorial typologies – an overview**

	Geographical level	Basic territorial typologies	Urban typologies	Coastal typology	Border typology	Island typology	Mountain typology
Regional typologies:	NUTS 1 regions						
	NUTS 2 regions						
	NUTS 3 regions	Urban–rural typology: predominantly urban regions; intermediate regions; predominantly rural regions	Metropolitan regions	Coastal regions	Border regions	Island regions	Mountain regions
Local typologies:	Local administrative units (LAU)	Degree of urbanisation (*): cities; towns and suburbs; rural areas	City definitions: cities; functional urban areas (FUA) = cities and their commuting zones	Coastal areas			
Grid typologies:	Grid cells (1 km <sup>2</sup> )	Cluster types: urban centre; urban clusters; rural grid cells	Urban clusters and urban centres				

**Key:**

	Individual codes and labels (based on geographical entity)
	Three categories per country (aggregated)
	Combination of individual codes and aggregation
	Two categories per country (aggregated)
	Technical level
	As defined in Regulation (EC) No 1059/2003 on the establishment of a common classification of territorial units for statistics (NUTS).

(\*) Within the degree of urbanisation typology the aggregation of cities with towns and suburbs is referred to as urban areas.

Source: Eurostat, Regulation (EC) No 1059/2003

**Figure 1: Territorial typologies – an overview Source: Eurostat, Regulation (EC) No 1059/2003**

Figure 1 presents an overview of the main territorial typologies that have been developed, often in conjunction with other [European Commission](#) services and/or other international organisations. At the most basic level, these concepts can be split into three different groups: grid typologies, local typologies and regional typologies.

**Grid typologies:** Eurostat collects population statistics based on 1 km<sup>2</sup> grid cells. These very detailed statistics are used to establish various cluster types – namely, urban centres, urban clusters and rural grid cells.

**Local typologies:** based on statistics for [local administrative units \(LAUs\)](#) which generally comprise municipalities or communes across the EU. Statistics for LAUs may be used to establish local typologies, including:

- the [degree of urbanisation](#) that identifies [cities](#) , [towns and suburbs](#) , and [rural areas](#) ;
- [functional urban areas](#) , which comprise cities and their surrounding [commuting zones](#) .

**Regional typologies:** statistics that are grouped according to the classification of territorial units for statistics (NUTS). These provide information at a relatively aggregated level of detail, with data presented for NUTS level 1, level 2 and level 3 regions, detailing larger to smaller territorial units, respectively. The most detailed statistics (at NUTS level 3) are used as building blocks to establish, among other classifications:

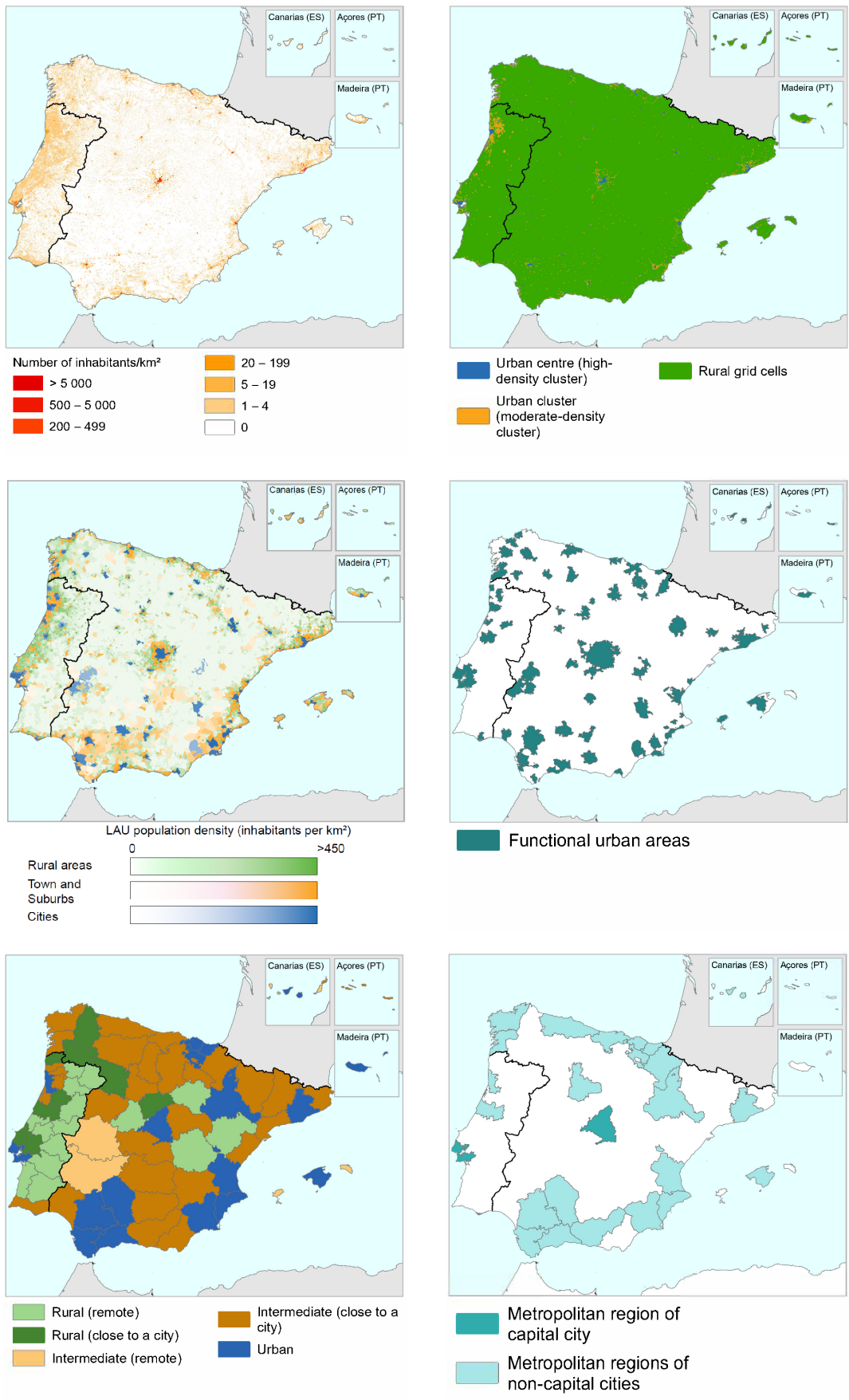
- the [urban–rural typology](#) , which identifies [predominantly urban regions](#) , [intermediate regions](#) , and [predominantly rural regions](#) ;
- the [metropolitan](#) typology, which identifies metropolitan and non-metropolitan regions.

These three different types of territorial typologies – grid, local and regional – are closely interlinked, as they are based on the same basic building blocks, namely, classifying population grid cells to different cluster types and then aggregating this information either by LAU or by region to produce statistics for a wide variety of different typologies.

### **An example for Spain and Portugal**

This section provides a practical illustration of the different territorial typologies, as applied to the Iberian Peninsula as an example. Map 1 shows for Spain and Portugal the different territorial typologies that are used within the main body of this online publication; they illustrate the broad range of potential analyses that may be carried out when using Eurostat's subnational statistics.

The first map shows that the vast majority of the population in mainland Spain and Portugal is concentrated in areas that are close to the coastline, with relatively high population density in north-west and north-east Spain and northern Portugal. The principal urban centres – composed of high-density clusters – are shown in the second map (including Madrid, Barcelona and Valencia in Spain as well as Lisbon and Porto in Portugal). The third and fourth maps are based on local typologies: the former highlights that large swathes of the interior of Spain and Portugal are rural areas with relatively low levels of population density; the latter underscores that commuting zones surrounding cities in Spain and Portugal are often relatively small with the exceptions of both capital cities. Indeed, contrary to cities in many other EU Member States, many Iberian cities are characterised by highly concentrated city centres that remain relatively compact, with relatively clear boundaries dividing cities and sparsely-populated, surrounding areas. The two remaining maps present information for regional typologies (based on NUTS level 3 regions). The first of these shows the urban–rural typology, with the vast majority of regions in Portugal characterised as being predominantly rural. By contrast, intermediate regions account for a majority of the NUTS level 3 regions in Spain. The final map shows that most metropolitan regions of Spain and Portugal are located around their coastlines, with a few notable exceptions in Spain (in particular, for the capital city).

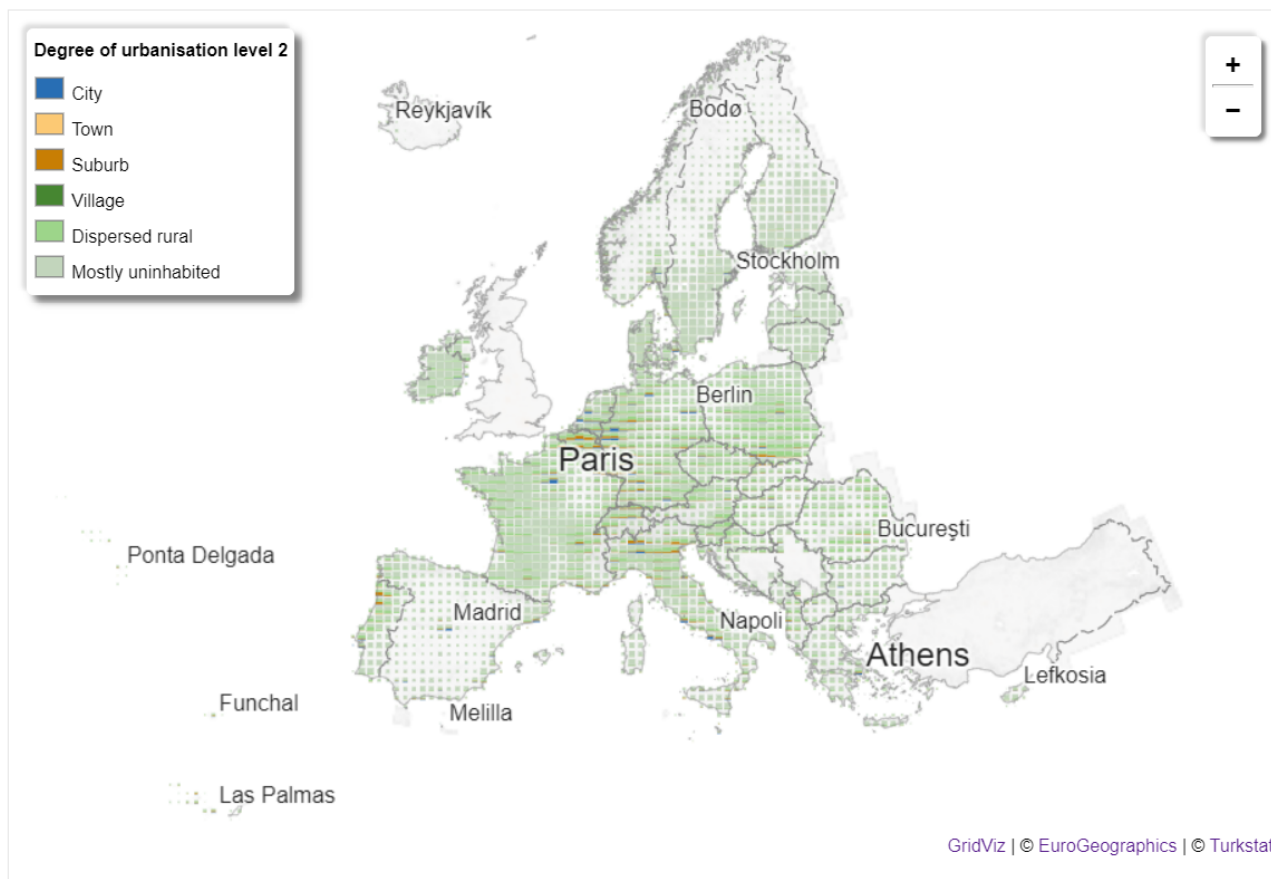


**Map 1: Territorial typologies – an example for Spain and Portugal Source: Eurostat (GISCO)**

## The degree of urbanisation: cities, towns and suburbs, and rural areas

The degree of urbanisation is a local typology that, at a first level, identifies cities, towns and suburbs, and rural areas (based on information for population grids); statistics using this classification are one of the two principal sources used in this publication.

Although cities are clearly defined settlements, the other two classes in the classification are quite heterogeneous. For example, the first level of the degree of urbanisation classification does not separate villages from thinly or non-populated areas. As such, a second level of the classification was introduced to capture the hierarchy of settlements in a more nuanced manner, detailing cities, towns, suburbs, villages, dispersed rural areas, and mostly uninhabited areas (see Map 2).



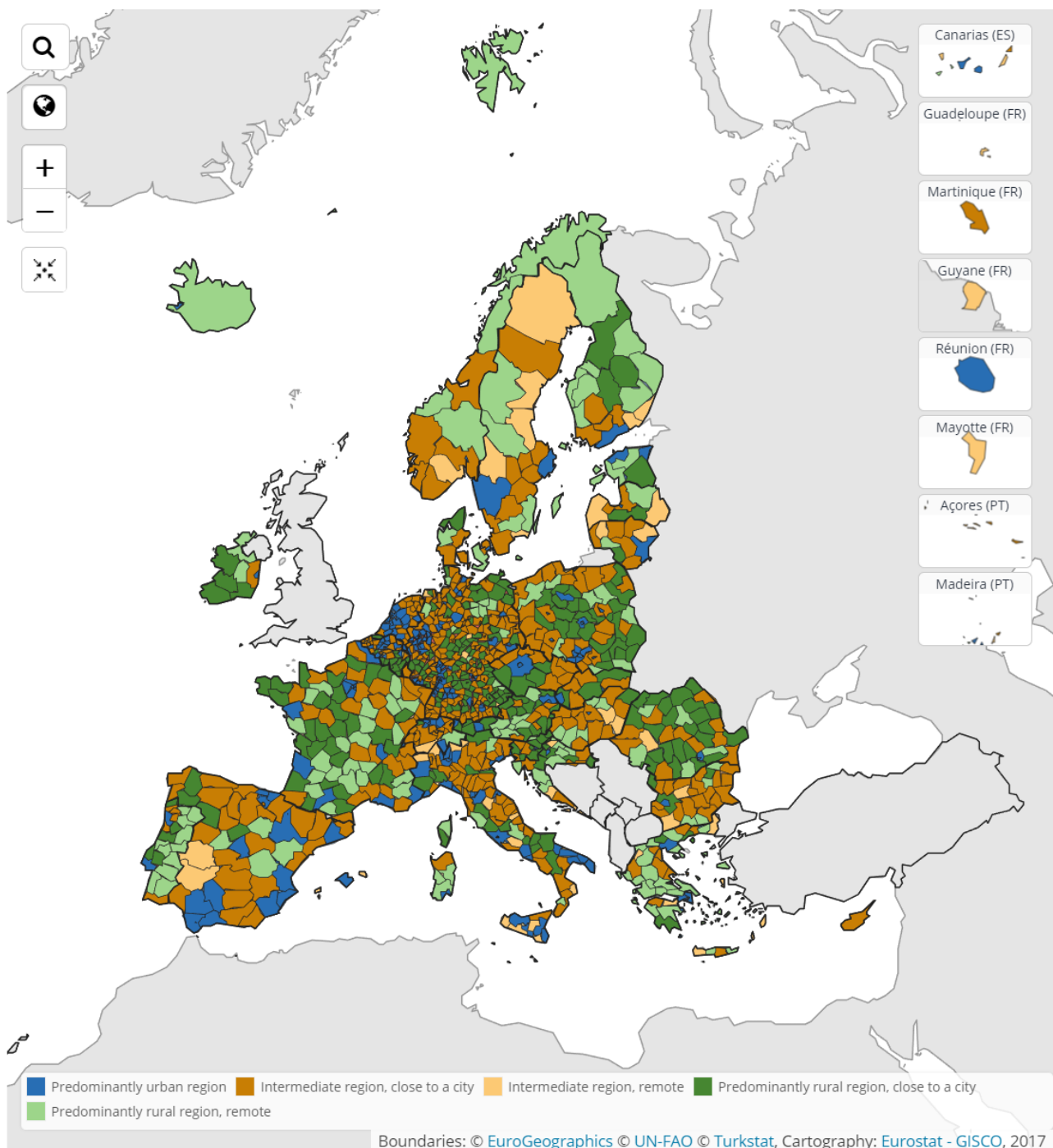
**Map 2: Degree of urbanisation level 2, 2021 Kosovo\*:** this designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence. Source: Eurostat (GISCO), JRC and European Commission Directorate-General for Regional Policy

The final map in this introductory section shows the urban–rural typology. As noted above, this is a regional typology (based on aggregating information for 1 km<sup>2</sup> grid cells up to NUTS level 3 regions), whereby:

- predominantly urban regions are NUTS level 3 regions where more than 80 % of the population live in urban clusters;
- intermediate regions are NUTS level 3 regions where more than 50 % and up to 80 % of the population live in urban clusters;
- predominantly rural regions are NUTS level 3 regions where at least 50 % of the population live in rural grid cells.

Statistics based on this classification are the second of the two principal sources used within this publication. The urban–rural typology has been extended to include the concept of remoteness, identifying intermediate and predominantly rural regions where less than half of the local population can drive to the centre of a city of at least

50 000 inhabitants within 45 minutes. As such, the second level of the classification identifies predominantly urban regions, intermediate regions (close to a city), remote intermediate regions, predominantly rural regions (close to a city), and remote predominantly rural regions (see Map 3).



**Map 3: Urban-rural typology including remoteness, 2021 Kosovo\*:** this designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence. Source: Eurostat

## Area and population

This section provides some basic statistics that underpin much of the information presented within [Rural Europe](#) and [Urban Europe](#) ; it analyses the distribution of the area and number of inhabitants according to the different



territorial typologies described above.

The EU covers 4.2 million km<sup>2</sup> and had a population of 447.2 million inhabitants as of 1 January 2021. By area, France was the largest EU Member State (15.1 % of the total area of the EU), followed by Spain (12.0 %) and Sweden (10.6 %). At the other end of the scale, Malta was the smallest EU Member State (316 km<sup>2</sup> or 0.01 % of the EU total).

#### Distribution of area according to various typologies, 2021

(% share of total area)

	Degree of urbanisation grid level (*)			Degree of urbanisation LAU level			Urban–rural typology		
	Urban centre	Urban clusters	Rural grid cells	Cities	Towns and suburbs	Rural areas	Predominantly urban regions	Intermediate regions	Predominantly rural regions
<b>EU</b>	0.7	3.6	96.4	3.6	20.5	75.8	9.9	45.4	44.7
Belgium	2.7	21.4	78.6	5.8	47.3	46.8	23.8	42.5	33.7
Bulgaria	0.4	1.6	98.4	10.4	33.0	56.6	1.2	76.7	22.1
Czechia	0.7	4.3	95.7	2.7	13.1	84.2	14.5	48.7	36.8
Denmark	0.8	5.0	95.0	5.5	27.4	67.1	1.2	47.4	51.4
Germany	2.0	9.4	90.6	5.0	32.2	62.8	11.8	49.7	38.6
Estonia	0.2	0.8	99.2	1.2	7.5	91.3	17.2	–	82.8
Ireland	0.6	1.8	98.2	2.3	15.6	82.1	1.3	9.8	88.8
Greece	0.4	1.8	98.2	1.0	6.0	93.0	5.7	31.7	62.6
Spain	0.5	2.0	98.0	5.0	21.7	73.3	23.3	59.8	16.9
France	0.7	3.2	96.8	1.5	9.8	88.6	7.9	40.5	51.6
Croatia	0.3	2.5	97.5	2.2	18.7	79.1	1.1	35.9	62.9
Italy	1.4	7.8	92.2	6.1	33.0	61.0	21.0	51.4	27.6
Cyprus	1.5	4.1	95.9	5.0	6.5	57.1	–	100.0	–
Latvia	0.2	1.0	99.0	0.8	9.9	89.3	0.5	59.3	40.2
Lithuania	0.3	1.2	98.8	1.3	16.0	82.8	14.9	71.5	13.6
Luxembourg	1.6	9.8	90.2	2.0	19.8	78.2	–	100.0	–
Hungary	0.7	3.7	96.3	4.1	23.8	72.1	0.6	71.8	27.6
Malta	18.4	49.5	50.5	15.9	70.5	13.5	100.0	–	–
Netherlands	5.2	15.9	84.1	18.3	47.0	34.7	51.3	46.7	2.0
Austria	0.6	3.5	96.5	1.1	12.3	86.6	7.1	17.6	75.3
Poland	0.7	3.9	96.1	2.3	17.0	80.7	4.5	42.0	53.5
Portugal	0.8	5.0	95.0	4.8	13.8	81.4	6.4	14.7	79.0
Romania	0.4	2.0	98.0	1.6	13.2	85.2	0.8	31.4	67.8
Slovenia	0.4	3.8	96.2	2.1	22.6	75.3	–	27.2	72.8
Slovakia	0.3	3.2	96.8	2.3	14.3	83.5	4.2	49.8	46.0
Finland	0.1	0.8	99.2	3.3	15.7	81.0	2.8	14.8	82.4
Sweden	0.2	0.9	99.1	3.8	32.2	64.0	8.0	67.8	24.2
Iceland	0.0	0.1	99.9	0.7	0.4	98.8	1.0	–	99.0
Liechtenstein	0.0	24.1	75.9	–	100.0	–	100.0	–	–
Norway	0.1	0.6	99.4	0.8	12.0	87.2	0.1	37.0	62.9
Switzerland	1.6	9.9	90.1	2.7	27.0	70.4	18.9	61.8	19.2
Montenegro	0.3	2.3	97.7	–	–	–	–	100.0	–
North Macedonia	0.6	2.9	97.1	12.0	48.5	39.5	39.7	60.3	–
Albania	0.5	3.4	96.6	13.6	16.8	69.7	5.7	27.9	66.4
Serbia	0.6	3.4	96.6	6.9	53.7	39.4	4.2	76.6	19.2
Türkiye	–	–	–	–	–	–	20.6	74.2	5.2

Note: for the degree of urbanisation: there are no cities or rural areas for Liechtenstein. Within the urban–rural typology: there are no predominantly urban regions for Cyprus, Luxembourg, Slovenia and Montenegro; there are no intermediate regions for Estonia, Malta, Iceland and Liechtenstein; there are no predominantly rural regions for Cyprus, Luxembourg, Malta, Liechtenstein, Montenegro and North Macedonia.

(\*) 2018.

Source: Eurostat (online data code: urt\_d3area), JRC and European Commission Directorate-General for Regional Policy



**Table 1: Distribution of area according to various typologies, 2021 (% share of total area) Source: Eurostat (urt\_d3area), JRC and European Commission Directorate-General for Regional Policy**

The vast majority of individual 1 km<sup>2</sup> grid cells are rural grid cells; they account for 96.4 % of the total number of cells covering the EU, while urban clusters (3.6 %) and urban centres (0.7 %) have much lower shares (see Table 1). Aggregating this information at a local level, rural areas account for just over three quarters (75.8 %) of the EU's total area, with approximately one fifth (20.5 %) defined as towns and suburbs, and 3.6 % as cities. At a more aggregated regional level, intermediate regions account for 45.4 % of the EU's total area, with a similar share for predominantly rural regions (44.7 %); predominantly urban regions had a share that was just under one tenth (9.9 %).

All of the EU Member States follow the general pattern observed across the EU, with a majority of their grid cells classified as rural. Rural grid cells account for more than 90.0 % of the total number of grid cells in most Member States, the only exceptions being the Netherlands (84.1 %), Belgium (78.6 %) and Malta (50.5 %). In a similar vein, more than half of the total area is composed of rural areas in 24 of the Member States, with lower shares recorded (once again) in Belgium (46.8 %), the Netherlands (34.7 %) and Malta (13.5 %). At a regional level, it is important to note that three of the Member States – Cyprus, Luxembourg and Malta – are composed of single NUTS level 3

regions. This explains why all of the area of Cyprus and Luxembourg is classified as an intermediate region and all of the area of Malta is classified as a predominantly urban region. Aside from Malta, the Netherlands is the only other Member State where predominantly urban regions account for an absolute majority (51.3 %) of the national territory. At the other end of the range, predominantly rural regions account for more than four fifths of the total area in Finland (82.4 %), Estonia (82.8 %) and Ireland (88.8 %).

The most populous EU Member State is Germany, with an estimated 83.2 million inhabitants on 1 January 2021, while the least populous Member State was Malta (516 000 inhabitants). Table 2 shows a quite different picture to the information presented above (for the distribution of area), insofar as around 7 out of 10 (70.4 %) people across the EU lived in an urban cluster, with the remaining 29.6 % living in rural grid cells; note the totals shown for urban clusters in Table 2 include the shares of urban centres. An absolute majority of the population in each of the Member States was living in an urban cluster, with particularly high shares recorded in Spain (83.3 %), the Netherlands (86.5 %) and Malta (96.8 %).

#### Distribution of population according to various typologies, 2021

(% share of total population)

	Degree of urbanisation grid level (*)			Degree of urbanisation LAU level			Urban–rural typology		
	Urban centre	Urban clusters	Rural grid cells	Cities	Towns and suburbs	Rural areas	Predominantly urban regions	Intermediate regions	Predominantly rural regions
<b>EU</b>	<b>34.8</b>	<b>70.4</b>	<b>29.6</b>	<b>38.9</b>	<b>35.9</b>	<b>25.2</b>	<b>40.5</b>	<b>38.7</b>	<b>20.8</b>
Belgium	30.6	79.6	20.4	31.3	55.6	13.1	53.5	38.1	8.4
Bulgaria	35.6	66.8	33.2	51.2	26.2	22.6	18.9	67.9	13.1
Czechia	23.3	61.1	38.9	30.2	34.2	35.6	25.5	53.3	21.2
Denmark	23.1	65.2	34.8	32.0	33.4	34.6	23.1	48.7	28.2
Germany	32.4	73.7	26.3	36.1	43.7	20.3	43.6	40.8	15.6
Estonia	39.3	63.8	36.2	47.1	17.6	35.2	56.0	–	44.0
Ireland	30.4	55.7	44.3	37.2	20.5	42.3	28.4	14.7	56.8
Greece	44.1	68.1	31.9	47.3	22.7	30.0	45.3	23.6	31.2
Spain	49.8	83.3	16.7	54.2	32.5	13.3	63.5	33.2	3.3
France	35.0	63.4	36.6	38.3	28.1	33.6	35.5	36.7	27.9
Croatia	25.8	59.0	41.0	33.6	32.7	33.7	20.0	37.5	42.4
Italy	34.2	77.2	22.8	35.2	47.7	17.1	47.9	41.7	10.4
Cyprus	49.0	76.9	23.1	59.5	21.7	18.7	–	100.0	–
Latvia	34.3	64.8	35.2	43.0	21.8	35.2	32.5	45.8	21.7
Lithuania	30.8	62.7	37.3	43.6	14.7	41.8	29.7	62.3	8.0
Luxembourg	21.4	67.0	33.0	19.5	47.9	32.6	–	100.0	–
Hungary	28.3	64.8	35.2	35.7	33.8	30.5	17.7	63.7	18.5
Malta	61.8	96.8	3.2	48.5	49.0	2.5	100.0	–	–
Netherlands	48.0	86.5	13.5	53.2	36.5	10.3	74.3	25.1	0.6
Austria	31.5	60.0	40.0	31.2	30.8	38.1	32.2	27.7	40.1
Poland	28.9	61.2	38.8	33.3	30.6	36.1	25.4	39.0	35.6
Portugal	33.0	70.5	29.5	44.6	31.5	23.9	47.1	22.1	30.8
Romania	34.5	58.3	41.7	34.8	26.4	38.8	12.1	35.0	52.9
Slovenia	14.9	51.0	49.0	19.4	36.1	44.5	–	42.0	58.0
Slovakia	13.6	55.7	44.3	20.6	37.3	42.1	12.4	50.3	37.3
Finland	27.7	64.2	35.8	38.9	33.4	27.8	30.8	30.1	39.1
Sweden	33.6	68.7	31.3	42.7	38.0	19.3	39.8	51.3	8.9
Iceland	39.3	76.5	23.5	63.8	16.6	19.6	64.1	–	35.9
Liechtenstein	0.0	94.8	5.2	–	100.0	–	100.0	–	–
Norway (*)	23.6	63.0	37.0	29.3	41.5	29.3	24.7	49.8	25.5
Switzerland	30.9	79.3	20.7	29.7	50.8	19.5	46.1	50.7	3.2
Montenegro	20.2	80.3	19.7	–	–	–	–	100.0	–
North Macedonia	31.3	74.5	25.5	37.6	51.6	10.8	63.0	37.0	–
Albania	31.9	63.1	36.9	43.6	22.7	33.8	32.2	23.9	43.8
Serbia	25.9	67.1	32.9	28.5	49.6	22.0	24.6	60.7	14.6
Türkiye	–	–	–	–	–	–	55.5	43.3	1.1

Note: for the degree of urbanisation: there are no cities or rural areas for Liechtenstein. Within the urban–rural typology: there are no predominantly urban regions for Cyprus, Luxembourg, Slovenia and Montenegro; there are no intermediate regions for Estonia, Malta, Iceland and Liechtenstein; there are no predominantly rural regions for Cyprus, Luxembourg, Malta, Liechtenstein, Montenegro and North Macedonia.

(\*) 2018.

(\*) Urban–rural typology: 2020.

Source: Eurostat (online data code: urt\_pjanaggr3)

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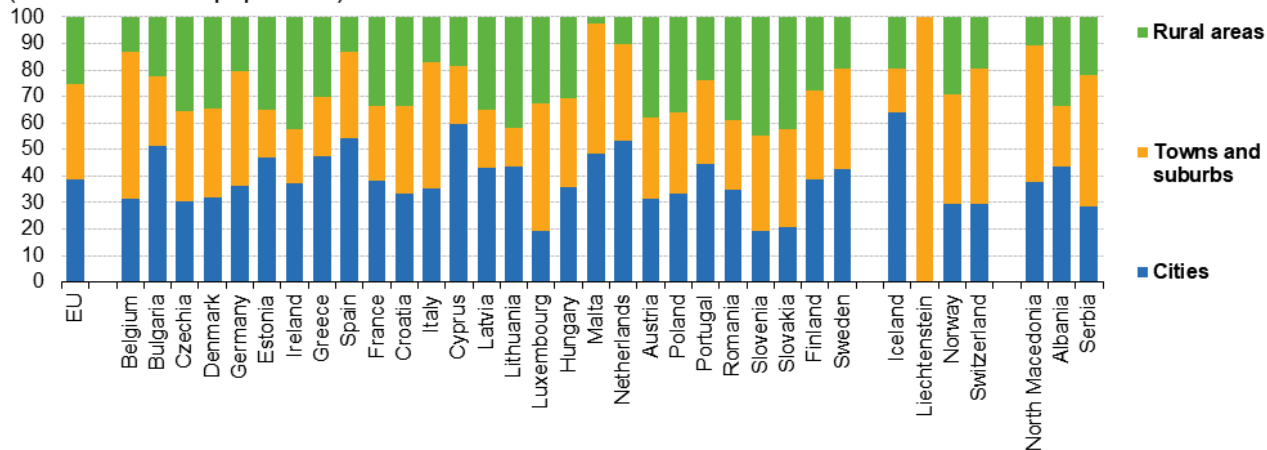
**Table 2: Distribution of population according to various typologies, 2021 (% share of total population)**  
Source: Eurostat (urt\_pjanaggr3)

In 2021, some 38.9 % of the EU population was living in a city, with lower shares living in towns and suburbs (35.9 %) and in rural areas (25.2 %); see Figure 2. A particularly high concentration of people – more than half – were living in the cities of Cyprus, Spain, the Netherlands, Lithuania and Bulgaria. By contrast, 44.5 % of the population in Slovenia was living in a rural area, with shares of more than 40.0 % also recorded in Ireland, Slovakia and Lithuania.



## Distribution of population according to degree of urbanisation, 2021

(% share of total population)



Note: there are no cities or rural areas for Liechtenstein.

Source: Eurostat, JRC and European Commission Directorate-General for Regional Policy

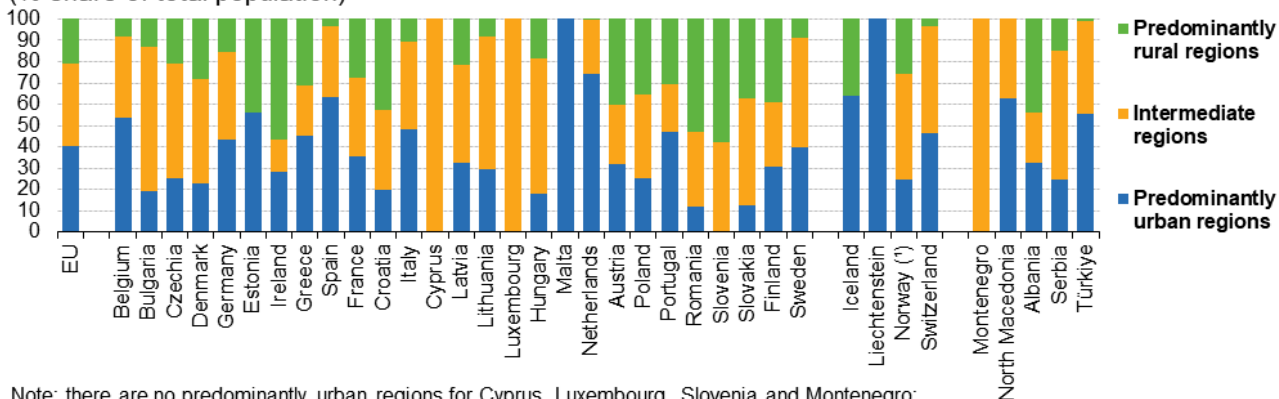
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Figure 2: Distribution of population according to degree of urbanisation, 2021 (% share of total population)

Source: Eurostat, JRC and European Commission Directorate-General for Regional Policy

## Distribution of population according to the urban–rural typology, 2021

(% share of total population)



Note: there are no predominantly urban regions for Cyprus, Luxembourg, Slovenia and Montenegro; there are no intermediate regions for Estonia, Malta, Iceland and Liechtenstein; there are no predominantly rural regions for Cyprus, Luxembourg, Malta, Liechtenstein, Montenegro and North Macedonia.

(\*) 2020.

Source: Eurostat (online data code: urt\_pjanaggr3)

eurostat

Figure 3: Distribution of population according to the urban–rural typology, 2021 (% share of total population)

Source: Eurostat (urt\_pjanaggr3)

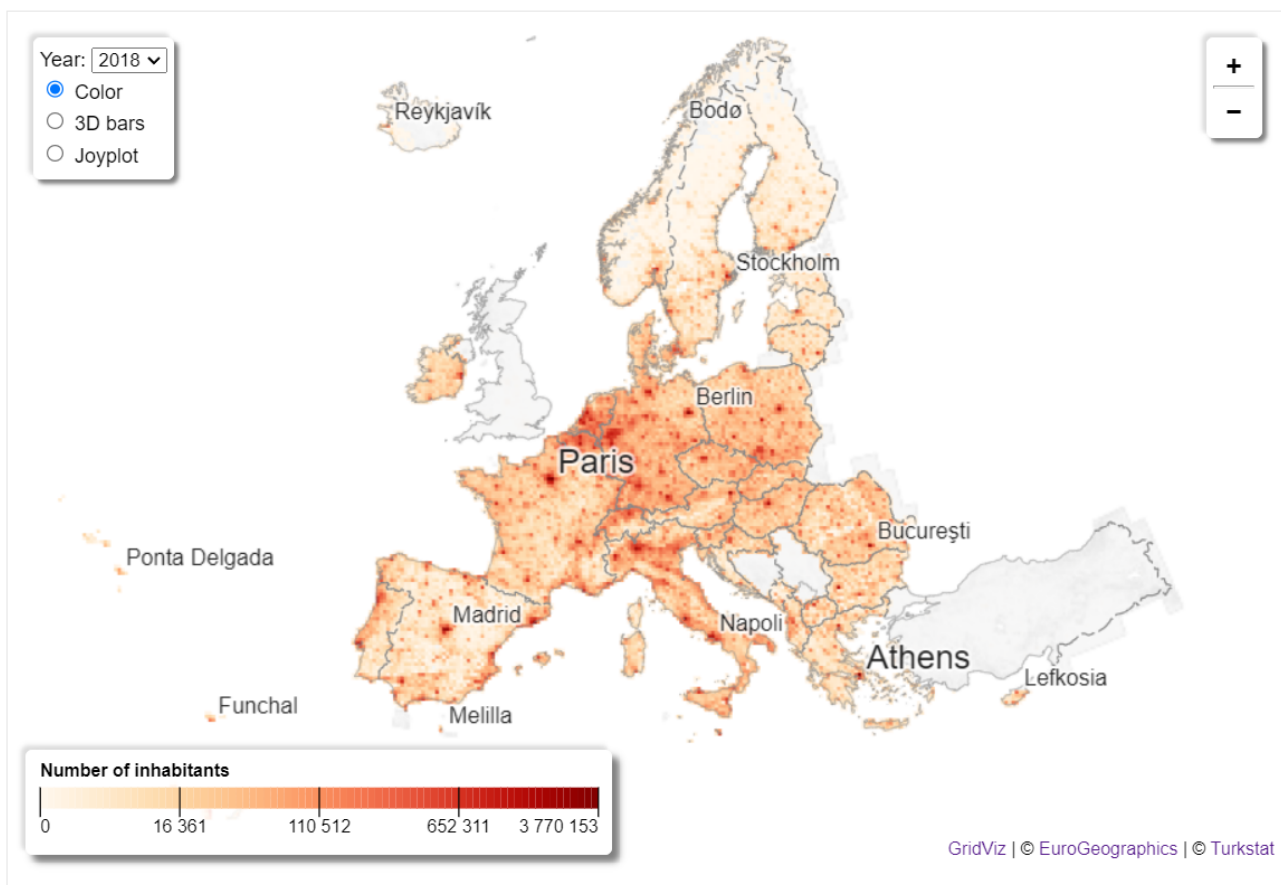
Figure 3 shows a similar analysis of population distribution based on the urban–rural typology. In 2021, broadly similar shares of the EU population were living in predominantly urban regions (40.5 %) and intermediate regions (38.7 %), while the remaining fifth (20.8 %) of the EU population lived in predominantly rural regions. There were five EU Member States where more than half of the population resided in predominantly urban regions: aside from the special case of Malta (100 %), the highest share was recorded in the Netherlands, where approximately three quarters (74.3 %) of the population lived in a predominantly urban region. At the other end of the scale, there were three Member States where more than half of the population lived in a predominantly rural region. This was the case in Romania (52.9 %) and Ireland (56.8 %), with a peak of 58.0 % in Slovenia.

## Population density

Combining information on population numbers and area, this section focuses on **population density** – the number of inhabitants living in a particular area (generally expressed in terms of inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>).

As people tend to congregate together living in clusters (often surrounded by wide expanses of sparsely populated areas), national and highly aggregated regional information may fail to capture the true distribution of populations. Looking generally across the EU, the largest concentration of densely populated areas stretched from north-eastern France, into Belgium, the Netherlands and western Germany, while there was also a concentration of densely populated areas in northern Italy. By contrast, the most sparsely populated areas were in the north of Finland and Sweden, as well interior areas of Spain and Portugal.

Map 4 shows how the EU's population was distributed at a 1 km<sup>2</sup> resolution (when zooming in at the most detailed level). In 2018, there were a number of grid cells which counted more than 50 000 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>, for example in central Paris or in the suburbs to the north and south of Barcelona. By contrast, there were almost 3 million grid cells which were uninhabited.



**Map 4: Population density based on the GEOSTAT population grid, 2018 Kosovo\*: this designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence. Source: Eurostat (GISCO), JRC and European Commission Directorate-General for Regional Policy**

On average, population density in the EU was 109 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup> in 2021. The lowest national population density figures – less than half the EU average – were recorded in the three **Baltic Member States**, with even lower values in two of the three **Nordic Member States**: Sweden (25 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>) and Finland (18 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>). The highest ratios were in Malta (1 649 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>) and the three **Benelux Member States**: the Netherlands (511 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>), Belgium (379 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>) and Luxembourg (245 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>).

Table 3 also provides information for the population density based on different urban–rural typologies. It shows, for

example, that while the overall population density of Hungary (107 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>) was close to the EU average, the ratio among people living in predominantly urban regions of Hungary (3 380 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>) was 7.5 times as high as the EU average for the same subpopulation (450 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>). There were also very high ratios of population density – more than 2 300 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup> – among people living in the predominantly urban regions of Denmark and Latvia. A comparison of the latest ratios for predominantly urban and predominantly rural regions shows that the largest variation in population density was recorded in Latvia, with almost 150 times as many people living in each square kilometre of predominantly urban regions. There were also relatively large differences recorded in Hungary (47 times as many people living in predominantly urban regions), Denmark (35 times as many) and Ireland (33 times as many). By contrast, the lowest variations were observed for Slovakia, Lithuania and Czechia, where the population density of predominantly urban regions was less than 4.0 times as high as that recorded for predominantly rural regions.

### Population density by urban–rural typology, 2021

(inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>)

	All regions	Predominantly urban regions	Intermediate – total	Intermediate – close to a city	Intermediate – remote	Predominantly rural – total	Predominantly rural – close to a city	Predominantly rural – remote
EU	109	450	93	112	26	51	70	30
Belgium	379	862	339	339	–	94	94	–
Bulgaria	63	1 002	56	58	40	37	35	40
Czechia	139	244	151	151	–	80	80	–
Denmark	139	2 678	143	143	–	76	77	76
Germany	235	874	193	195	135	95	101	65
Estonia	31	103	–	–	–	16	20	13
Ireland	73	1 541	108	108	–	47	49	40
Greece	82	658	61	64	55	41	41	41
Spain	94	257	52	55	34	18	28	12
France	107	484	97	139	12	58	71	40
Croatia	72	1 276	76	80	65	49	63	41
Italy	199	458	161	173	106	75	87	53
Cyprus	97	–	97	97	–	–	–	–
Latvia	30	2 382	23	38	18	16	21	12
Lithuania	45	88	39	44	23	26	31	21
Luxembourg	245	–	245	245	–	–	–	–
Hungary	107	3 380	94	101	63	72	93	66
Malta	1 649	1 649	–	–	–	–	–	–
Netherlands	511	765	266	266	–	142	142	–
Austria	108	495	170	170	–	58	71	34
Poland	123	690	115	115	–	82	88	64
Portugal	113	861	170	170	–	44	94	30
Romania	82	1 327	91	95	53	64	68	47
Slovenia	105	–	161	161	–	84	85	68
Slovakia	112	335	113	113	–	91	91	–
Finland	18	187	38	41	28	9	13	7
Sweden	25	136	19	34	8	9	–	9
Iceland	4	229	–	–	–	1	–	1
Liechtenstein	247	247	–	–	–	–	–	–
Norway (*)	15	1 636	27	27	26	7	–	–
Switzerland	218	529	180	211	67	35	88	28
Montenegro	46	–	46	–	–	–	–	–
North Macedonia	83	130	52	–	–	–	–	–
Albania	101	556	88	–	–	66	–	–
Türkiye	109	293	64	–	–	23	–	–

(\*) Predominantly rural regions: 2020.

Source: Eurostat (online data code: urt\_d3dens)

eurostat 

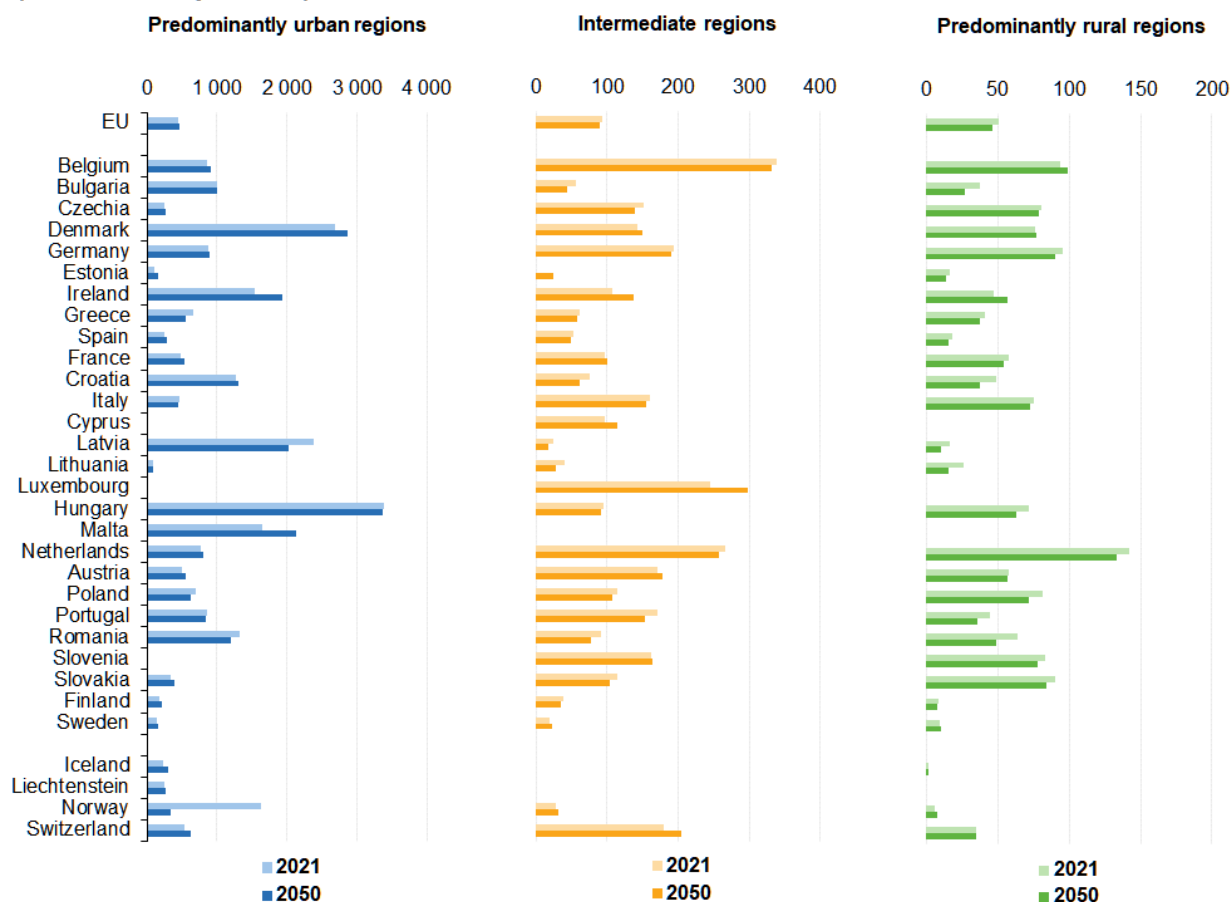
**Table 3: Population density by urban–rural typology, 2021 (inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>) Source: Eurostat (urt\_d3dens), (urt\_pjanagr3) and (urt\_d3area)**

The EU faces a number of challenges in relation to its demographic future. The number of inhabitants is projected to peak in 2026, after which population numbers are projected to fall each and every year through to 2050.

Figure 4 shows the projected development of population density figures between 2021 and 2050. Across the EU, this ratio is projected to rise within predominantly urban regions, with a growing share of the EU's population concentrated in these regions. By contrast, population density is projected to fall in both intermediate and predominantly rural regions during the period under consideration. A more detailed analysis reveals that population density in predominantly urban regions is projected to rise in 16 out of 24 EU Member States for which data are available, the exceptions being in eastern, southern or Baltic Member States (where overall population numbers are projected to decline at the most rapid pace). By contrast, there were four Member States where the population

density of predominantly rural regions is projected to rise: Sweden, Denmark, Belgium and Ireland. Denmark, Ireland and Sweden are the only Member States where this ratio is projected to rise for all three categories of the urban–rural typology between 2021 and 2050.

### Population density by urban–rural typology, 2021 and 2050 (inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>)



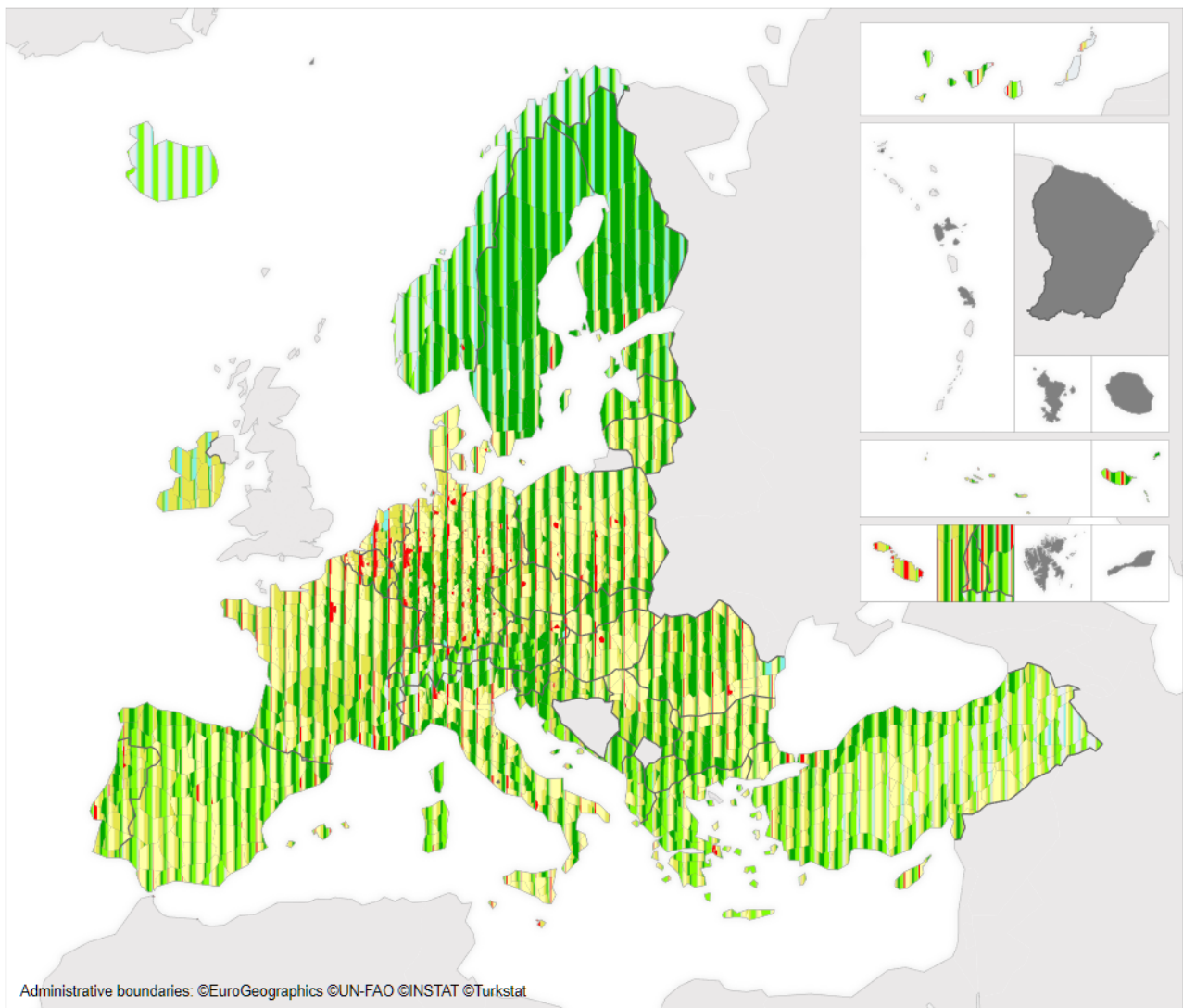
Note: different scales are used for the axes. There are no predominantly urban regions for Cyprus, Luxembourg, Slovenia and Montenegro; there are no intermediate regions for Estonia, Malta, Iceland and Liechtenstein; there are no predominantly rural regions for Cyprus, Luxembourg, Malta, Liechtenstein, Montenegro and North Macedonia.  
 Source: Eurostat (online data codes: urt\_pjanaggr3, urt\_d3area, proj\_19rp3 and reg\_area3)



**Figure 4: Population density by urban–rural typology, 2021 and 2050 (inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>)** Source: Eurostat (urt\_pjanaggr3), (urt\_d3area), (proj\_19rp3) and (reg\_area3)

### Land cover

Land cover refers to the observed biophysical cover of the Earth’s surface; it can be measured in various ways, including field visits, aerial photographs or satellite sensors. Land cover changes provide information for assessing, among other issues, climate change impacts on biodiversity and natural resources. Map 5 shows land cover across the EU in 2018, based on information from the [Corine land cover inventory](#) that defines a total of 44 different classes; the information presented in the map has been aggregated to make it easier to see the main patterns.



- Artificial areas
- Arable land and permanent crop
- Pasture and heterogeneous agricultural areas
- Forest
- Shrub
- Open spaces with little or no vegetation
- Wetlands and water bodies
- No data

**Map 5: Land cover, 2018 Source: Corine land cover 2018**

## Source data for tables and graphs

- [Introduction: tables and figures](#)

## Context

The integration of a broad range of territorial typologies into the NUTS Regulation in December 2017 underlines the importance of subnational statistics as an instrument for targeted policymaking and as a tool for understanding and quantifying the impact of policy decisions for specific types of territories. The availability of these typologies and related data have in turn encouraged questions such as: does it make sense to have the same policy target for pollution in a city centre as in an area of natural beauty? or does it make sense to have the same policy target for



educational attainment in a capital city as in a remote, sparsely-populated rural area?

Analyses such as these have led to a territorial dimension being introduced into a range of EU policy areas. Grouping different types of regions and/or areas according to territorial characteristics can help in understanding common patterns. For example, while urban areas/regions generally perform better in economic terms and may act as hubs for innovation and education, at the same time, they may also face a range of challenges related to congestion, pollution or housing.

Eurostat publishes EU statistics at a subnational level for a range of topics: these data are widely used in the context of EU regional policy. The Tercet initiative established legal recognition for territorial typologies by integrating them into the NUTS Regulation and its implementing provisions, thereby promoting a set of harmonised definitions that are based on methodological transparency and core definitions; this integration also established criteria for creating and updating each typology (as required). In turn, this has made it possible for thematic statistical and policy-based regulations to refer directly to the territorial typologies when legislating for subnational statistics.

## European policy background

European policymaking is inherently multidimensional: on the one hand, it has to encompass a broad framework providing objectives for the EU as a whole, while on the other it needs to acknowledge the often specific needs of national and subnational territories. Recent challenges such as the global financial and economic crisis, security concerns from terror attacks, the refugee crisis, the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the EU (Brexit), the COVID-19 pandemic (and associated measures), the war in Ukraine, energy security or the cost-of-living crisis provide a few examples of the two-sided nature of delivering both EU-wide and local solutions in a coherent manner.

One of the EU's main challenges is to ensure that policy developments are scrutinised to ensure that they take account of the considerable geographical diversity within the EU. The territorial dimension of EU policy is increasingly recognised underlining the need to make the best use of all assets while ensuring that common resources are employed in a coordinated and sustainable way.

## Cohesion policy

EU cohesion policy is designed to promote harmonious development within the EU by strengthening economic, social and territorial cohesion. In doing so, it aims to promote job creation, business competitiveness, economic growth and [sustainable development](#), thereby improving the overall quality of life experienced by people in the EU.

During the period 2021–2027, the framework for regional development and cohesion policy provides support to all EU regions, while focusing on less developed regions. The policy targets five key investment priorities:

- smarter Europe, through innovation, digitalisation, economic transformation and support to small and medium-sized businesses;
- a greener, carbon-free Europe, implementing the [Paris Agreement](#) and investing in energy transition, renewables and the fight against climate change;
- a more connected Europe, with strategic transport and digital networks;
- a more social Europe, delivering on the [European pillar of social rights](#) and supporting quality employment, education, skills, social inclusion and equal access to healthcare;
- a Europe closer to citizens, by supporting locally-led development strategies and sustainable urban development across the EU.

The total budget for cohesion policy and the rules associated with its allocation are jointly decided by the [Council](#) and the [European Parliament](#). A total of € 377.5 billion allocated in the multiannual financial framework is available for programming between 2021 and 2027. A large part of this budget is provided to regions whose development lags behind the EU average, in particular less developed regions predominantly located in the south or the east of the EU, the Baltic Member States and several outermost regions.

Regional policy and funding help deliver many of the EU's overall policy objectives. Cohesion policy programming is embedded within overall economic policy coordination, in particular the [European Semester](#), the digital transition, [A European Green Deal](#) and the promotion of the [European pillar of social rights](#). These links between cohesion policy and broader reforms have been strengthened such that the European Commission may suspend regional funding to any EU Member State which does not comply with the EU's economic rules.

## Urban development policy in the EU

The various dimensions of urban life – economic, social, cultural and environmental – are closely inter-related. Successful urban developments are often based on coordinated/integrated approaches that seek to balance these dimensions through a range of policy measures such as urban renewal, increasing education opportunities, preventing crime, encouraging social inclusion or environmental protection.

At the end of May 2016, a meeting of ministers responsible for urban matters was held in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. It reached an agreement on an [Urban Agenda for the EU](#) as established by the [Pact of Amsterdam](#). This agreement sets out the development of 12 priority areas for partnerships between EU institutions, EU Member States, cities and other stakeholders. These priority areas are: the inclusion of migrants and refugees; air quality; urban poverty; housing; the circular economy; jobs and skills in the local economy; climate adaptation; energy transition; sustainable land use; urban mobility; digital transition; public procurement.

EU policymakers recognise the important role that may be played by the urban dimension of regional policy, in particular concerning measures designed to reduce poverty and social exclusion. In doing so, the urban dimension of cohesion policy will be strengthened during the period 2021–2027, with a minimum of 6 % of the [European Regional Development Fund \(ERDF\)](#) dedicated to sustainable urban development strategies, alongside a new [European Urban Initiative \(EUI\)](#).

## Rural development policy in the EU

The European Commission is implementing a [long-term vision for EU's rural areas](#) that aims for stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040. The vision comes with an [EU rural action plan](#), designed to help rural areas meet a wide range of economic, social and environmental challenges. Under this long-term vision, the European Commission has proposed [the Rural Pact](#), a framework for cooperation that facilitates interaction on rural matters between public authorities and stakeholders and invites them to act on [a set of 10 shared goals](#) of the rural vision and to help rural communities and businesses reach their full potential.

The [European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development \(EAFRD\)](#) is intended to help develop farming and rural areas by providing a competitive and innovative stimulus at the same time as seeking to protect biodiversity and the natural environment. There are six priority areas, namely to promote: knowledge transfer and innovation in agriculture and forestry; the viability and competitiveness of all types of agriculture and support sustainable forest management; the organisation of the food production chain, animal welfare and risk management in farming; the restoration, preservation and enhancement of agricultural and forest ecosystems; the efficient use of natural resources and support the transition to a low-carbon economy; social inclusion, poverty reduction and economic development in rural areas.

At the end of 2021, a political agreement was reached on a [new common agricultural policy for the period 2023–2027](#). This legislation aims to make the [common agricultural policy \(CAP\)](#) more responsive to future challenges, while continuing to support EU farmers within a sustainable and competitive agricultural sector. The new policy is built around 10 key objectives that are focused on social, environmental and economic goals: ensure a fair income for farmers; increase competitiveness; improve the position of farmers in the food chain; climate change action; environmental care; preserve landscapes and biodiversity; support generational renewal; vibrant rural areas; protect food and health quality; foster knowledge and innovation.

Following the allocation of the EU's long-term budget – the multiannual financial framework (2021–2027) – a [transitional regulation](#) intended to ensure continued support for agriculture, forestry and rural areas was agreed concerning funding for 2021 and 2022. This extends most of the rules relating to the CAP that were in place during the 2014–2020 period, while also including new elements to encompass stronger green ambitions. In total, some € 387 billion of funding has been allocated to the CAP for the period 2021–2027. This comes from two different funds: € 291 billion from the European agricultural guarantee fund (EAGF) and € 96 billion from the [European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development \(EAFRD\)](#).

## See also

### Online publications

- [Eurostat regional yearbook](#)
- [Rural Europe](#)
- [Urban Europe](#)

### **Methodological publications**

- [Applying the Degree of Urbanisation](#) – 2021 edition
- [City statistics manual](#) – 2020 edition
- [Methodological manual on territorial typologies](#) – 2018 edition

### **Background articles**

- [Geographical information system of the Commission \(GISCO\)](#)

## **Publications**

### **Statistical publications**

- [Eurostat regional yearbook](#) – 2022 edition
- [Urban Europe – statistics on cities, towns and suburbs](#) – 2016 edition

### **Methodological publications**

- [Applying the Degree of Urbanisation – A methodological manual to define cities, towns and rural areas for international comparisons](#) – 2021 edition
- [Methodological manual on territorial typologies](#) – 2018 edition

## **Database**

- [City statistics \(urb\)](#) , see:

Cities and greater cities (urb\_cgc)

Functional urban areas (urb\_luz)

Perception survey results (urb\_percep)

- [Degree of urbanisation \(degurb\)](#)
- [Metropolitan regions \(met\)](#)
- [Other typologies \(urt\)](#)
- [Regional statistics by NUTS classification \(reg\)](#)

### **Dedicated section**

- [Cities](#)
- [Degree of urbanisation](#)
- [Metropolitan regions](#)
- [NUTS – Nomenclature of territorial units for statistics](#)
- [Regions](#)
- [Rural development](#)

## Methodology

- [Applying the degree of urbanisation – A methodological manual to define cities, towns and rural areas for international comparisons – 2021 edition](#)
- [Methodological manual on city statistics – 2017 edition](#)
- [Methodological manual on territorial typologies – 2018 edition](#)
- [Statistical regions in the European Union and partner countries: NUTS and statistical regions 2021 – 2022 edition](#)

## Legislation

### Statistical legislation

- [Regulation \(EU\) 2017/2391](#) of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 December 2017 amending Regulation (EC) No 1059/2003 as regards the territorial typologies (Tercet)
- [Consolidated and amended version of Regulation \(EC\) No 1059/2003](#) of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of a common classification of territorial units for statistics (NUTS)

### Policy legislation

- [Commission Delegated Regulation \(EU\) No 522/2014](#) of 11 March 2014 supplementing Regulation (EU) No 1301/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council with regard to the detailed rules concerning the principles for the selection and management of innovative actions in the area of sustainable urban development to be supported by the European Regional Development Fund
- [Regulation \(EU\) No 1305/2013](#) of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD)
- [Regulation \(EU\) No 1310/2013](#) of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 laying down certain transitional provisions on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD)

## Visualisations

- [Regions and cities illustrated \(RCI\) – Cities](#)
- [Regions and cities illustrated \(RCI\) – Degree of urbanisation](#)
- [Regions and cities illustrated \(RCI\) – Metropolitan regions](#)
- [Regions and cities illustrated \(RCI\) – Urban–rural typology](#)

## External links

### European Commission

- [Urban Agenda for the EU](#)

### European Commission – Directorate-General Agriculture and rural development

- [Rural development](#)
- [The new Common Agricultural Policy: 2023–27](#)

### European Commission – Directorate-General Regional and Urban Policy

- [Cities and urban development](#)
- [Cohesion in Europe towards 2050; eighth report on economic, social and territorial cohesion](#)
- [Territorial cohesion](#)
- [Urban–rural linkages](#)

### **European Committee of the Regions**

- [European Committee of the Regions](#)

### **European networks**

- [European Network for Rural Development](#)
- [European Urban Initiative](#)

### **United Nations**

- [Habitat III – The new Urban Agenda](#)
- [Sustainable development goals – Rural development](#)