

Demographic trends in EU regions

SUMMARY

The European Union has seen its population grow substantially – by around a quarter in the five and a half decades since 1960 – to a current level of over 500 million people. However, this population is now growing too slowly, and is even expected to decline in the longer term.

Issues of demography are likely to have a considerable impact on EU society. Most models used for analysing population trends suggest that, in the coming years, the EU's population will continue to age as a result of consistently low levels of fertility and extended longevity. Although migration may play an important role in the population dynamics within many of the EU Member States, it is unlikely that it can reverse the ongoing trend of population ageing.

Demographic developments have various implications for European regions. Some of them, especially rural and remote ones, are experiencing a considerable decline in population numbers. This situation may further exacerbate the economic decline regions are already facing, and thereby widen the gap between wealthy and poor ones. Therefore, demography also severely affects the social, economic and territorial cohesion of the EU. On the other hand, the heavy concentration of population in urban centres also creates certain negative consequences, such as pollution and lack of affordable housing. Recent migration trends have improved the demographic balance in various EU regions; that said, migration affects EU regions in an uneven manner.

The European structural and investment funds are mainly used for boosting economic growth in European regions, but they may also serve, in combination with other EU funds, to address issues stemming from demographic challenges. The EU also uses a number of instruments to address migration-related issues in its territories most affected by the issue.



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Introduction

The European Union (EU) has seen its population grow substantially – by around a quarter in the five and a half decades since 1960 – to the current level of over 500 million people. However, this population is now growing too slowly and is even expected to decline in the longer term. At just 6.9 % today, the EU represents an ever-shrinking proportion of the world population; this proportion is projected to fall further, to a mere 4.1 % by the end of this century.¹

Demographic decline, which is usually defined as decline of the total number of inhabitants over a certain period of time and within a certain geographical area, has a sizeable impact on various European regions. All EU regions are affected by demographic impacts, such as the ageing of the population driven by longer life-spans and low levels of fertility, yet some – especially remote, rural and/or border regions that face massive depopulation – experience these impacts much more strongly than others.

As part of another ongoing trend, people – particularly younger and economically productive people of a child-bearing age – have been moving to the cities, towns or suburbs in ever growing numbers. This trend has had a twofold impact on the regions that have been losing their young people: a population decline and a change in the make-up of the remaining population (faster ageing). Conversely, places that have been receiving younger people have seen a reversal in the local ageing trend. Recent migration trends have also improved the demographic dynamics of certain EU regions. However, migration on its own will not be enough to reverse the trends of population decline in the EU.

Demographic trends in EU regions

Demographic trends affect EU regions in a variety of ways. While there is no 'one size fits all' description of these trends, a few basic generalisations can be made.

Europe is ageing dramatically; this process is driven by a significant increase in life expectancy and lower birth rates. For instance, the median age in the EU-28 rose from 38.3 years in 2001 to 42.6 in 2016, a 4.3-year increase in just 15 years.² The proportion of people aged 80 or over in the EU-28 population is expected to more than double by 2050 (from 5.4 % of the population in 2016 to 11.4 % in 2050).³ Therefore, sooner than later, ageing is likely to affect all EU regions.

According to a [European Parliament study](#), one in three regions is projected to experience a population decline over the 2008-2030 period. According to [Eurostat](#) data, population decline can be observed across many parts of the Baltic and Nordic countries, but also in Bulgaria, Romania, eastern Germany, Portugal, Greece, Spain, Italy, Croatia and the central regions of France. However, recent migration trends stemming from non-EU countries have altered the demographic balance in various EU regions (e.g. an increase in the population of certain German and Swedish regions).

Significant demographic contrasts can be observed between the core and the periphery, both in the EU and within EU Member States. In the EU, considerable population growth has been recorded in eastern Ireland, the southern part of the United Kingdom, Belgium, the Netherlands, Austria and in metropolitan centres such as Paris and London. Parts of western Germany also seem to have benefited from population growth, as have northern Italy and Scandinavia. Overall, [trends](#) show that there is an increasing concentration of population in certain urban areas (especially capital cities) and a concurrent depopulation of some rural, sparsely populated areas, and that (mostly southern European) coastal areas have also seen a population increase.

Peripheral and rural areas, as well as industrial areas in decline, tend to be more at risk of depopulation. Towns, cities and conurbations in EU regions that are lagging behind economically, tend to lose parts of their population too. However, rural areas that are close to dynamic urban centres, as well as areas that are within commuting distance of such centres or enjoy good transport connections with them, can experience a positive population development. Regions with high

unemployment may also experience declining and ageing populations, as their highly skilled professionals are often attracted to regions of considerable economic growth.

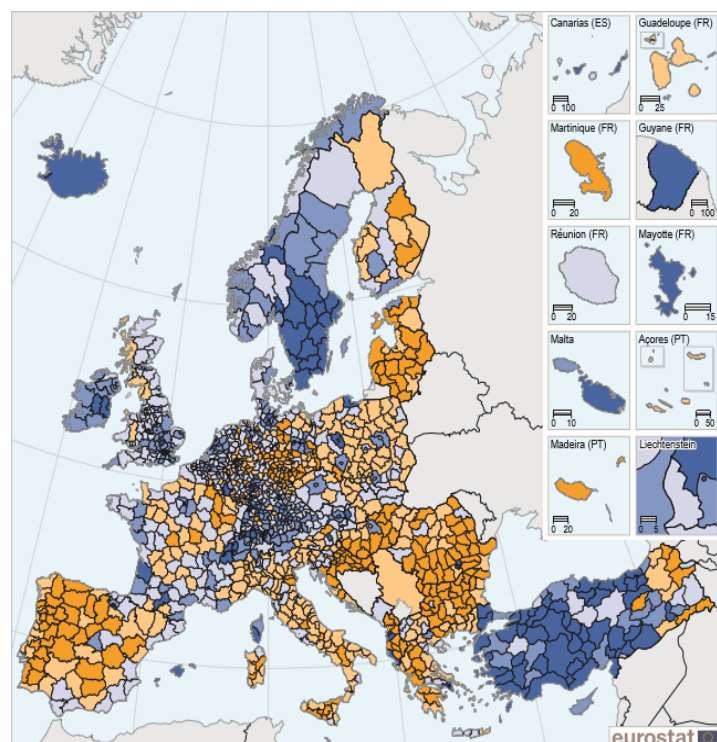
Overall, people tend to move to wherever there are jobs, career opportunities and favourable economic prospects. For instance, within Europe, movements of young educated professionals from southern Europe to north-western Europe have been recorded since the beginning of the economic crisis. In addition, the preferred destinations of migrants from outside the EU also tend to be the wealthiest European regions, in particular the urban centres. According to [Eurostat](#), about 3.1 million first residence permits were issued to non-EU citizens in the EU in 2017. One out of five first residence permits was issued in Poland (or 22 % of total permits issued in the EU, mainly due to migration from Ukraine), followed by Germany (17 %), the United Kingdom (16 %), France (8 %), Spain (7 %), Italy (6 %) and Sweden (4 %).

However, the migration trend is uneven and is primarily directed towards certain EU Member States, as illustrated by Map 1, on which areas enjoying a population increase are marked in lighter to dark blue, and those affected by a population decrease are marked in lighter to dark yellow. In 2016, the fastest expanding populations were often concentrated in eastern Ireland, western Germany and southern Sweden. Nevertheless, the arrival of migrants to the EU may only temporarily ease the problem of ageing in certain regions, as in the long term these migrants themselves will gradually age.

The [attractiveness](#) of a particular region matters when it comes to retaining existing inhabitants and bringing in new ones. For instance, regions that offer good job opportunities and enjoy prospects of economic growth are appealing to young professionals and therefore have a high degree of attractiveness. However, attractiveness is also determined by broader 'quality of life' factors related to education, jobs, social experience, culture, sports and leisure facilities, environment and urban safety. For instance, various parts of the Mediterranean, such as coastal towns and tourist resorts, have been successful in increasing their share of the population even though they did not constitute poles of economic growth. Yet again, attractiveness may differ from one age group to another. For instance, Eurostat's [Urban Europe statistics on cities, towns and suburbs](#) suggests that a high proportion of Europe's ageing population lives in relatively small towns and cities (with a preference for living on the coast), whereas younger people are more likely to live in the suburbs, within close proximity of the capital or other large cities.

Last but not least, it is worth mentioning that other less predictable factors, such as [natural disasters and climate change](#), may have a considerable impact on the population of EU regions in the future.

Map 1 – Crude rate of total population change in NUTS 3 regions, 2016



Source: [Eurostat Regional Yearbook 2018](#).

Rural areas

The degree of urbanisation⁴ is a classification that indicates the character of an area. Based on the share of the local population living in urban clusters and urban centres, Eurostat classifies local administrative units belonging to level 2 territorial divisions ([LAU2](#)) into three types of areas: rural (thinly populated); towns and suburbs/small urban areas (intermediate density areas), and cities/large urban areas (densely populated areas).

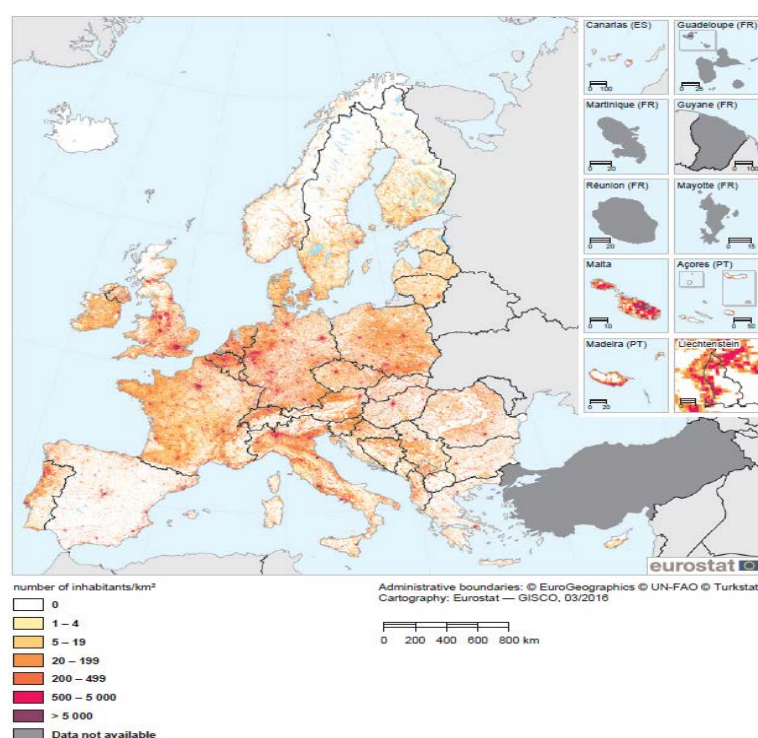
According to [Eurostat](#) data from 2015, 28.0 % of the EU's population lives in rural areas. From 2010 to 2015, there was a gradual increase in the number of people living in rural areas across the EU-28, with their relative share of the total number of inhabitants rising by 1.7 percentage points. The increase in the share of the population living in towns and suburbs was even greater (rising by 4.7 percentage points), while the share of people living in cities declined (especially in inner cities). These [patterns](#) may possibly reflect the trend of Europeans leaving inner city areas in search of more (affordable) space in suburbia, towns or the countryside. Cities are indeed attracting people, but because of the high costs of urban living, these same people may settle in nearby towns, suburbs or small urban/rural areas.

There are a number of advantages that may attract people to live in rural areas. These include lower housing and living costs, more available space, a less polluted environment and a less stressful lifestyle. For instance, according to [Eurostat](#), when it comes to housing, the EU-28 [housing cost overburden rate](#) in 2015 was lowest in rural areas (9.1 %), with a slightly higher rate recorded for people living in towns and suburbs (10.6 %), and a peak among those living in cities (13.3 %).

Nevertheless, not all rural areas saw an inflow of population. Rural areas that are closer to cities/urban centres tend to benefit more, whereas remote, border areas tend to suffer from population decline. Map 2 shows the areas of population density in EU regions; the darker the colour, the more populated the area is. A number of areas with very low population density can be observed in various EU countries (e.g. Spain, Greece, Bulgaria, Portugal, Romania and the Nordic countries).

A number of issues may force rural inhabitants to leave their areas or discourage others from moving into such areas. These issues include: fewer local education or job opportunities/choices, difficulties in accessing public services or transport services, inadequate health coverage or a lack of cultural venues/leisure activities. These drawbacks affect the long-term prospects of certain regions, as economic and social development requires adequate

Map 2 – Population density based on the GEOSTAT population grid, 2011 (number of inhabitants/km²)



Source: Eurostat, [Urban Europe, 2016](#).

infrastructure, including fast broadband services and a modern transport network – things that are sometimes lacking in them.

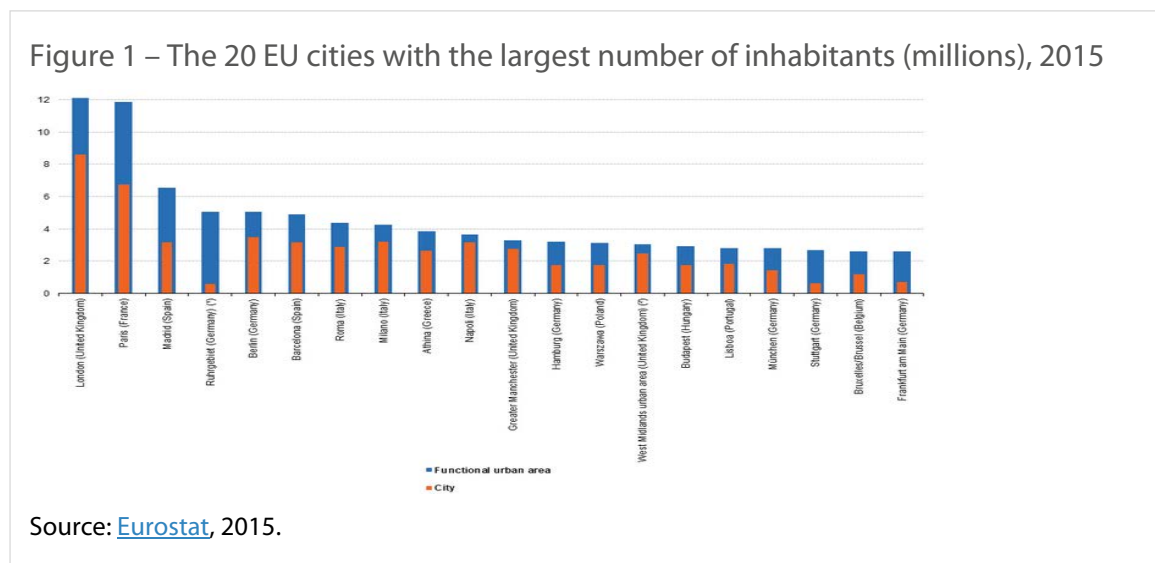
In particular, certain rural areas that suffer from [depopulation](#) may enter into a 'vicious circle of decline', as more people will need to migrate in search of better job prospects and provision of public/private services. In addition, some of these areas may face issues of inadequate health coverage, as public health provision tends to decline and private health service practitioners find operations in these areas unprofitable, thus moving to other areas. Areas suffering from depopulation may also see a decrease in transport services and a closure of public services (e.g. schools).⁵

Certain trends in some rural areas may hamper the opportunities available to their population. People living in rural areas are generally more inclined to leave education or training early. The share of young people (aged 18 to 24) who were living in rural areas of the EU and were neither in employment nor in further education or training, was 3.7 percentage points higher than for their peers in the cities ([Eurostat](#), 2015). In addition, according to the same source, for all but three of the EU Member States, the lowest proportion of people making use of the internet on a daily basis was recorded in rural areas.

Lack of job opportunities and career prospects as well as underperforming local economies may also have a detrimental effect on the personal development and well-being of the rural population. In 2015, just over one quarter (25.5 %) of the rural population was at risk of poverty or social exclusion, while relatively lower shares were recorded for people living in cities (24.0 %). According to [Eurostat](#) figures from 2016, this trend had deepened further, and now a higher proportion of the EU-28 population living in rural areas (compared with urban areas) faced the risk of poverty or social exclusion.

Urban areas

The EU has become more urban⁶ over the past 50 years, although the speed of urbanisation has slowed down.⁷ Nevertheless, an increasing share of the EU population lives and works in urban areas. It is widely expected that these patterns will continue, as urban areas account for a greater share of activity. According to [Eurostat](#), 17.8 % of the EU's total population lives in a [functional urban area](#) belonging to one of the 20 largest cities (for a list of the EU largest twenty cities see Figure 1).



A higher share of EU-28 population lives in towns and suburbs (31.6 %), while the biggest share lives in cities (40.4 %). Across the EU, there is a diverse mix of cities: at one end of the scale are the global metropolises of London and Paris, while approximately half of the cities in the EU have a relatively

small urban centre of between 50 000 and 100 000 inhabitants. A feature of European cities is their relatively smaller size. Only Paris and London, with their populations of just over 10 million, can be considered megacities. Although population numbers are falling in some cities that could be characterised as former industrial heartlands, most of the rest (when measured with their surrounding suburbs) are expanding.

Cities and urban areas are often seen as centres of economic growth, providing opportunities for study, innovation and employment. EU urban areas are often characterised by high concentrations of economic activity, employment and wealth, with the daily flow of commuters into many of Europe's largest cities suggesting that opportunities abound in these hubs of innovation, distribution and consumption. The good and dense transport system they offer encourages mobility and all forms of transactions. Cities, especially larger ones and capitals, tend to have a more highly educated population, more innovation and higher productivity. They also benefit from agglomeration economies. Specialisation and innovation generate a demand for a highly educated labour force, which encourages city residents to gain qualifications and attracts qualified people from elsewhere.

However, not all cities or urban areas are success stories. For instance, according to Eurostat's 2016 [State of European Cities](#) report, the high- and very high-income cities in Europe have generated the highest GDP and employment growth, which has led to higher population growth. Low-income cities are catching up by registering the highest GDP-per-capita growth, but so far, they have experienced very little population growth. Economic growth in medium-income cities is lower than the EU average, which raises the concern that some of these cities may be caught up in a 'middle-income trap' problem, with stiff competition from lower-cost locations in other parts of the world.

According to the same source, working-age people in particular tend to move to urban areas, looking for education and job opportunities, while those over 65 tend to move to less expensive locations (towns, suburbs or rural areas). Relatively high house prices in some city centre locations, coupled with improvements in transport and communication infrastructures, have encouraged some people to consider moving to suburban or rural areas. City dwellers tend to be younger and projections indicate that demographic ageing among city populations is lower. Many of the EU's largest cities (especially capital cities) attract both EU internal and external migrants, and their population numbers therefore tend to increase at a faster pace than national averages.

Nevertheless, because of the high concentration of their population, many urban areas are exposed to a range of environmental issues that may have an impact upon their sustainability and the quality of life of those living and/or working in them. For instance, overconcentration of the population in certain urban areas has already led to undesirable side-effects, such as congestion, rising housing/transport prices, pollution, deterioration of the quality of life, and urban sprawl. Despite improvements over the past decade, many urban areas still have to make significant investments to promote green transport, recycle more of their solid waste, reduce their landfills and collect and treat their waste water appropriately. [Air pollution](#) in many European cities still remains a health risk and does not comply with EU air quality directives. More ambitious actions will need to be implemented in order to meet the ambitious [EU goal](#) of cutting greenhouse gas emissions by 80 % by 2050.

In addition, urban areas face a range of complex social challenges: exclusion of less well-off people and families from the city centres and expensive suburbs, issues relating to social cohesion, supply of affordable housing or the provision of efficient/affordable transport services. The highest risk of poverty or social exclusion in most of the western and northern Member States is recorded for people living in cities. Cities in western Europe are often found to be among the least inclusive, as witnessed by their relatively high share of people living at risk of poverty or in low work-intensity households, and high unemployment rates. On the other hand, the highest risk of poverty or social exclusion for many of the eastern, southern and Baltic Member States is usually recorded among rural populations.⁸

Migration

There are two types of migratory movements within the EU: migratory flows of EU citizens to a different country from that of their own origin, and migratory flows from non-EU countries. According to [Eurostat](#), a total of 4.7 million people migrated to one of the 28 EU Member States in 2015. This figure includes both migration from outside the EU and migration flows of EU citizens to another EU country. Of these migrants, half (2.4 million or 50 %) were citizens of non-EU countries, 1.4 million (30 %) had citizenship of a different EU Member State from the one to which they migrated, 0.9 million (19 %) migrated to an EU Member State of which they had citizenship (for example, returning nationals), and some 19 000 (less than 1 %) were stateless.

According to a 2016 European Committee of the Regions ([CoR](#)) [study](#), migratory movements between European countries are mostly driven by opportunity differentials (employment and education opportunities, differences in wage levels), but also by family reasons. An [analysis on the selective migration and unbalanced sex ratio in rural regions \(SEMIGRA\)](#), carried out by the European Territorial Observatory Network (ESPON), concludes that young and highly educated women are among those leaving the peripheral regions, and that this trend results in an unbalanced population base. In addition, another [ESPON study](#) claims that since the economic crisis began, within the boundaries of the EU there has been a decrease in mobility from the east to the west and an increase from the south to the north.

In recent years, the EU has witnessed increased levels of [migration from outside its borders](#). The inflow of migrants also has a significant territorial impact and brings both [opportunities and challenges](#) to EU regions. If migration is managed successfully, it may bring a number of benefits to the ageing EU regions. It can help to reduce demographic imbalances and boost labour markets, which in turn creates a benefit for the economy. However, migrants coming from non-EU countries are a very diverse group in terms of education, skills, culture and language. A number of short-term and long-term policies are needed in order to achieve their integration into society. Without measures leading to proper support and integration, negative exclusionary developments may emerge that could have counter-productive results in society.

Local and regional authorities have been tasked with managing the reception of asylum seekers in various ways (e.g. provision of temporary accommodation, support and integration measures). However, according to an [ESPON](#) policy brief, refugee flows are mainly destined to countries with favourable economic conditions, such as strong job markets and attractive integration policies. The same study also states that small islands, municipalities and cities in border regions face major challenges when it comes to handling large inflows of migrants. On the other hand, concerns related to migration in larger cities are more closely related to housing, access to school and ethnic segregation. The same study also claims that early investment in measures boosting the integration of migrants is essential and has proven to pay off in the long-run. Without proper integration support, negative developments may evolve that will make long-term integration harder to achieve. Nevertheless, despite economic recovery, public services and budgets are still under a lot of pressure, hindering the capacity to finance effective integration efforts. The study also states that competition between recognised refugees and locals, all looking for affordable housing, seems to be a particular issue for consideration.

Support for EU regions

Support for EU regions is promoted as part of a broader EU investment strategy by the European structural and investment funds ([ESI funds](#)): the Cohesion Fund ([CF](#)), the European Regional Development Fund ([ERDF](#)), the European Social Fund ([ESF](#)), the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development ([EAFRD](#)) and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund ([EMFF](#)). The common agricultural policy ([CAP](#)) also provides support to farmers throughout the EU through direct payments. All these funds may help to empower EU regions, thus ensuring better living conditions for their inhabitants.

The EU has recognised the importance of demographic challenges, and challenges posed by the geography of certain areas. [Article 174](#) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) clearly stipulates that 'in order to strengthen its economic, social and territorial cohesion, the Union is to aim at reducing disparities between the levels of development of the various regions and the backwardness of the least favoured regions or islands, and that particular attention is to be paid to rural areas, areas affected by industrial transition, and regions which suffer from severe and permanent natural or demographic handicaps'.

Furthermore, the EU has established its own [Urban Agenda](#) that identifies major priority themes and actions for EU cities and disposes of a number of [funds and instruments](#) aimed at easing issues stemming from migration and promoting integration.

In May 2018, the Commission presented a number of [proposals](#) that will underpin the future cohesion policy for the new programming period (2021-2027). Brexit has placed an additional strain on the EU budget, which will have to function with fewer resources. This also has a severe impact on all EU funds, including the ESI funds, as they will have to achieve 'more with less'. Nevertheless, under the current Commission proposals, it is expected that cohesion policy instruments will be more flexible to respond to new future challenges. It is also expected that a process of simplification will contribute to managing financial resources more easily and to establishing synergies amongst the various EU funds. According to the Commission, Member States will have more flexibility to set their own priorities through the drafting of operational programmes. This flexibility may help them to prioritise further regional needs that they deem to be of importance, such as, for instance, issues stemming from demography, urban challenges and migration.

The role of the European Parliament

The Parliament's 2018 [resolution](#) on strengthening economic, social and territorial cohesion in the European Union: the seventh report of the European Commission (rapporteur: Marc Joulaud, EPP, France) emphasises that efforts to consolidate the territorial dimension of cohesion policy require that greater attention be paid to peri-urban and rural problems. It stresses the importance of supporting rural areas in all their diversity, by valuing their potential and encouraging investment in projects that support local economies while also ensuring better transport connectivity, accessibility and very high-speed broadband. It insists on assisting those areas in meeting the challenges they face, namely rural desertification; social exclusion; lack of job opportunities, entrepreneurship incentives and affordable housing; population loss; the destruction of city-centre communities; and lack of healthcare provision in certain areas. It highlights the importance of the second pillar of the CAP in promoting sustainable rural development.

The resolution notes that urban areas combine, on the one hand, major growth, investment and innovation opportunities, and, on the other, various environmental, economic and social challenges, because of the concentration of people and the existence of pockets of poverty, including in relatively prosperous cities. It stresses, therefore, that the risk of poverty or social exclusion remains a key challenge. It considers that the introduction of integrated strategies for sustainable urban development has been a success and should therefore be strengthened.

The resolution calls for the ESI funds to be used to address demographic challenges (ageing, population loss, demographic pressure, inability to attract or retain adequate human capital) in a sustainable manner, and underlines in particular the need to provide adequate support to territories such as certain [outermost regions](#). Regarding indicators complementary to per-capita GDP, it supports the use of social, environmental and demographic criteria. It considers that cohesion policy can help to meet new challenges, such as the security or the integration of refugees under international protection, but stresses that cohesion policy cannot be the solution to all crises. Therefore, it opposes the use of cohesion policy funds to cover short-term financing needs outside the policy's scope, recalling that its aim is to assist the socio-economic development of the EU in the medium and long term.

In its 2017 [resolution](#) on the deployment of cohesion policy instruments by regions to address demographic change (rapporteur: Iratxe García Pérez, S&D, Spain), the Parliament stresses the need to promote small and medium-sized mountain and rural farms, and asks for the gender dimension of demographic change to be taken into account. Furthermore, it highlights the importance of universal access to high-quality and affordable public services (including digital ones) and infrastructures. It also stresses the importance of providing new opportunities for paid employment, particularly in areas at risk of depopulation, and considers that the EU should support migration and inclusion policies in the Member States. It underscores the significant role of family-creating and family-supporting policies, and supports the role that local/regional authorities should play to address demographic challenges. It stresses that cohesion policy should promote employability and inclusion of women, and that particular attention should be paid to rural areas facing demographic problems.

The resolution calls for an effective use and greater coordination of EU funds to ensure a more comprehensive approach to demographic change; it also calls for a review of existing EU policies. It welcomes the efforts made to maximise synergies amongst different EU funds and calls on the Commission to propose a strategy on demographic change. It provides ideas for an effective use of the ERDF, the ESF and the Cohesion Fund in order to tackle problems related to depopulation. It states that the European Fund for Strategic Investments ([EFSI](#)) should benefit regions with the most unfavourable demographic dynamics. It takes the view that consideration of a special status for demographically disadvantaged regions should be discussed in the post-2020 cohesion policy and highlights that it is important for the EU to incorporate demographic considerations throughout its policy spectrum. It believes that cohesion policy should play a more prominent role in supporting regions that face demographic challenges and states that the future MFF should also give an impetus to efforts addressing demographic change.

The Parliament's 2017 [resolution](#) on building blocks for a post-2020 EU cohesion policy (rapporteur: Kerstin Westphal, S&D, Germany), stresses that the reception of migrants and refugees under international protection as well as their social and economic integration require a coherent transnational approach, which should also be addressed through the current and future EU cohesion policy. It states that a demographic indicator should be evaluated and considered in this context in order to provide a comprehensive picture of regional development, and suggests a better use of ESI funds in order to tackle demographic change and its regional and local consequences. In the case of regions facing challenges such as depopulation, the ESI funds should be optimally targeted to create jobs and growth. The resolution also notes the increasing importance of successful rural-urban partnerships. It welcomes the better recognition accorded to the role of cities and urban areas in European policy-making. It underlines the enhanced urban dimension of cohesion policy in the form of specific provisions for sustainable urban development and urban innovative actions, and encourages the Commission to improve the coordination between the various measures aimed at cities, in order to enhance the direct support to local governments.

In 2015, the Parliament adopted a [resolution](#) on the urban dimension of EU policies (rapporteur: Kerstin Westphal, S&D, Germany). The resolution stresses that the Urban Agenda should involve the local level more closely at all stages of the policy cycle. It calls for an early-warning mechanism to allow local authorities to check compliance with the subsidiarity and proportionality principles, and argues that the Urban Agenda should strive to gain the best leverage from invested funds by creating synergies between EU programmes and national and private-sector funding. Parliament also calls for: territorial impact assessments to ensure the feasibility of relevant EU policy initiatives at the local level; the appointment of a special EU urban coordinator to monitor the coordination of policies with an urban dimension; and the creation of a one-stop shop on urban policies. It highlights the need for more detailed urban data and regular urban policy summits, noting that the Urban Agenda should be in line with the EU's overall objectives, particularly the EU 2020 strategy, and be part of the Commission's annual work programme.

In 2014, MEPs launched an Intergroup on Rural, Mountainous and Remote Areas ([RUMRA](#)) which aims to promote solutions for the challenges that affect these types of areas. Another Parliamentary intergroup, the [Urban Intergroup](#), monitors the progress of the Urban Agenda for the EU and is actively engaged in addressing various issues related to the development of urban areas.

The views of the advisory bodies of the EU

In its [opinion](#) on the EU response to the demographic challenge, the CoR suggests that this response is currently limited and poorly developed, and indicates that cohesion policy should play a more critical role in this respect. It suggests that the EU should seek to mainstream demographic considerations across all policy areas and include budget headings with a view to enabling the further development of these policies. More use could be made of the ERDF, the ESF and the ESI funds in general to tackle demographic challenges. The opinion calls for measures to fight transport isolation and the digital backwardness of rural, peripheral and remote areas.

In 2016, the CoR published a [study](#) on the impact of demographic change on European regions, underlining the challenges and opportunities for regions that are expected to face demographic problems.

In 2018, the CoR adopted an [opinion](#) (implementation assessment) on the Urban Agenda for the EU. In 2017, it adopted an [opinion](#) on the revitalisation of rural areas through the Smart Villages initiative. Other opinions, such as the one on [active ageing: innovation – smart health – better lives](#) and on [boosting broadband connectivity](#) in Europe, also touch upon demographic issues.

In its 2017 [opinion](#) on villages and small towns as catalysts for rural development, the European Economic and Social Committee ([EESC](#)) considers the root causes of the negative impact on rural areas and highlights the best initiatives to re-energise communities through rural development measures and other support initiatives. The EESC also highlights its rural development priorities in its [opinion](#) dedicated to translating the decisions under the Cork 2.0 Declaration into concrete actions. In its opinions on the [EU Urban Agenda](#) and on [the future of the EU Urban Agenda](#), the EESC welcomes the EU Urban Agenda and states its main priorities regarding the urban dimension of EU policies.

Outlook for the EU regions

According to [Eurostat](#) projections, the EU-28's population, which numbered 508.5 million on 1 January 2015, will grow slowly over the years (by 17.1 million persons, or 3.4 %), and will reach a peak of 525.6 million in 2048; afterwards, it will drop slightly to 525.5 million by 2050.

According to an [ESPON](#) briefing, by 2050, the population of Europe's urban regions is projected to increase by 24.1 million persons and to serve as home to almost half of the EU's population. By contrast, the population of predominantly rural regions is projected to fall by 7.9 million.

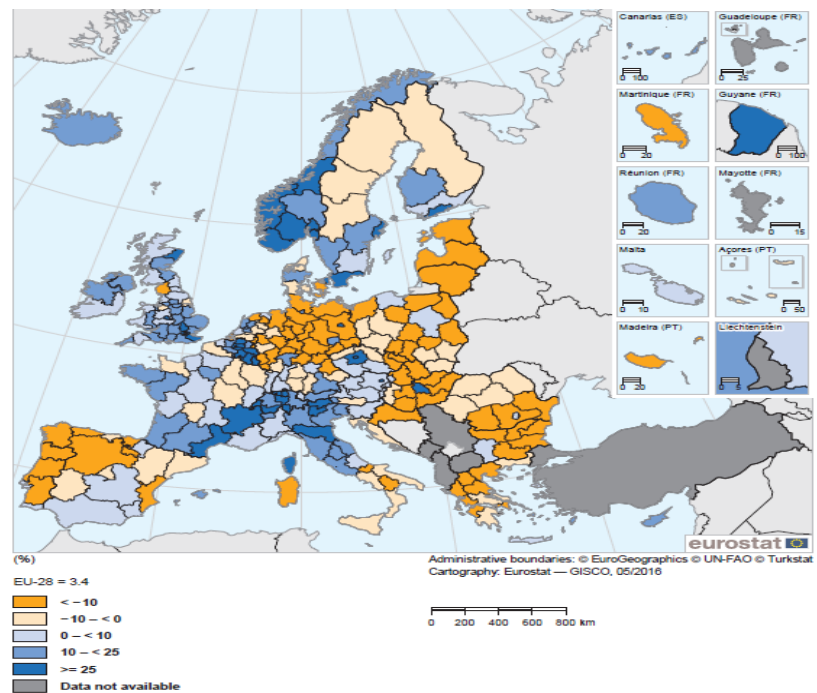
Future demographic changes will have a considerable impact both on Member States and their regions. In its 2015-2050 projections, Eurostat provides a number of examples in this regard, specifically for the regions. For instance, low fertility rates will lead to a reduction in the number of students in education. There will be fewer working-age persons to support the remainder of the population, and a higher proportion of elderly persons. The high proportion of elderly people means that additional infrastructure – healthcare services and adapted housing – will be needed. These structural demographic changes could have an impact on the capacity of governments to raise tax revenue, balance their own finances, and provide adequate pensions and healthcare services. Therefore, regional governments with tax revenue powers will also be affected.

Among the 273 NUTS level 2 regions, 132 are projected to have a lower population in 2050 compared to 2015 (as shown by the darker and lighter orange shades in Map 3), while 141 regions are projected to have a higher population (as shown by the lighter to darker shades of blue in the map) over the same period.

The depopulation of certain regions will have a detrimental effect on the provision of public and private services within their territories. Certain EU regions may be caught up in an irreversible process of constant population decline. Demographic changes may also weaken territorial cohesion within the EU.

Cities are often seen as centres of economic growth, providing opportunities for study, innovation and employment; and as poles of economic activity that attract a broad spectrum of people (be they national or international migrants). This trend is likely to continue. Certain urban areas will see an increase in their population, which unless carefully managed, will have a negative impact on their quality of life (environmental degradation, urban sprawl, air pollution, traffic congestion, housing costs, etc.).

Map 3 – Projected percentage change of the population by NUTS2 regions 2015-2050



Source: [Eurostat Regional Yearbook 2016](#).

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ For more information, see [Demographic Outlook for the European Union](#), in-depth analysis, EPRS, p. 1.
- ² Source: [Eurostat population structure and ageing](#), 2017.
- ³ Source: [Eurostat](#), 2017.
- ⁴ According to [Eurostat](#): 'rural areas' are all of the areas lying outside the urban clusters. 'Urban clusters' are clusters of contiguous grid cells of 1 km² with a density of at least 300 inhabitants per km² and a minimum population of 5 000. NUTS 3 regions are classified on the basis of the share of their population in rural areas, as follows: 'predominantly rural', if the share of the population living in rural areas is higher than 50; 'intermediate', if the share of the population living in rural areas is between 20 and 50; and 'predominantly urban', if the share of the population living in rural areas is below 20. For more information regarding this classification, see the following Eurostat [definitions](#).
- ⁵ For more statistical data on rural areas in health, education, housing, poverty and social exclusion, see: Eurostat's [Statistics on rural areas in the EU](#).
- ⁶ Eurostat gives the following definition of cities, towns and suburbs: 'cities' are local administrative units with more than 50 % of their population living in an urban centre; 'towns and suburbs' are local administrative units with more than 50 % of their population living in urban clusters, but less than 50 % living in an urban centre; 'rural areas' are local administrative units with more than 50 % of their population living in rural grid cells. For more information, see the following Eurostat [definitions](#).
- ⁷ Between 1961 and 1991, the population share of urban areas (cities, towns and suburbs) in the EU-28 increased from 65 % to 71 %. However, this share only grew by one percentage point over the past two decades. Cities accounted for 37 % of the population in 1961, growing to 40 % in 1981 and staying there. Towns and suburbs, on the other hand, consistently increased their population share over these five decades due to population shifts from cities into suburbs and from rural areas into towns (see [The State of European Cities Report](#), 2016, p. 36).
- ⁸ See Eurostat, [Our lives in the city](#), 2018.

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