

Eurostat: Stats in a Wrap

Rural Europe – a bucolic idyll or forgotten lands?

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SPEAKERS

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Stats in a Wrap, the podcast series from Eurostat.

Jonathan Elliott

Welcome to another episode of Stats in a Wrap, the podcast all about statistics from Eurostat, the statistical office of the European Union. If you've been listening to our podcasts, you'll know that we think data are delicious. And we like nothing better than to slice and dice and wrap them into bite-sized morsels whilst enjoying the intriguing stories, the fascinating conversations and startling truths about the everyday and not so everyday stats that surround us.

Today in the wrap café, we're going to be talking about what the data tells us about living in the countryside in the EU. Rural communities make up nearly 30% of the EU's population and account for around 80% of its territory. They're places of incredible diversity, from sprawling agricultural landscapes to smaller towns with their own unique economies and cultures. But the EU's rural areas are also often misunderstood. For some, they're romantic havens from the stress of city life.

For others, they're tough places to get work, healthcare and education. So, what can we say for sure about rural living in the EU? Is it a heavenly idyll or a struggle to survive? Time to call in the statisticians and find out what's really going on. So today, we're going to be looking at the data stories about rural Europe and to try to tease out the realities behind the numbers.

And to help us do that, we have 3 wonderfully well qualified experts who can bring complementary perspectives on the stats and what they tell us about the countryside in the EU. Marina Royo is part of the team that's implementing the long-term vision for rural areas at the European Commission. Marina, welcome!

Marina Royo de Blas

Hello, thank you very much. Very happy to be here to be talking about rural areas.

Jonathan Elliott

Lovely. Yes, indeed we are. And with us is Reka Fodor, who is from Eurostat, where she edits the recently released Urban Europe and Rural Europe publications. Reka, welcome to the podcast.

Reka Fodor

Hi, good morning. It's great to be here.

Jonathan Elliott

Lovely. And Lewis Dijkstra leads the Urban Territorial Analysis team at the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission. Lewis, welcome!

Lewis Dijkstra

Welcome. I'm very happy to be here. Thanks a lot.

Jonathan Elliott

Great. Well, look, thanks everyone for coming into the wrap café today. Before we get going in earnest, I have to ask the question that really everyone asks about living in the countryside versus the city, and that is, well, which is preferable? Would you prefer to be a country mouse or a town mouse?

As we have 3 people with us today who are eminently qualified to answer this very question, based on the data and their professional knowledge - which country, I'm going to ask them, would they personally prefer to live in in the EU and would it be in the countryside or the city? We'll give our guests a little time to ponder that one.

But while they're consulting their databases and their maps, let's step out of the café for a moment and ask some of our listeners on the street how they feel about the quality of life in the city compared to the countryside.

Person on Street 1

Definitely prefer to live in the city. I grew up in a suburb, which is sort of halfway in between a city and the countryside, and I had the choice to do more city or more countryside, and I chose more city.

Person on street 2

The countryside. Because it's more quiet and I need the open spaces around, and the garden.

Person on street 3

I've grown up in the countryside, actually, near Como in Italy. And I always thought, yes, I would like to live in this kind of place. But then I moved to Milano, and I understood I like to have the city there for me.

Jonathan Elliott

So those are some of the views from the streets there. Let's ask our panel: if someone asked you for your considered opinion, in all the 27 Member States, which one and whereabouts would you live if you had a completely free choice? Reka.

Reka Fodor

Yes. So, based on the data, the overall life satisfaction is the highest in Finland. But personally, I am very picky about having nice weather, so I would go for the south of France.

Jonathan Elliott

Ok, fine. Yeah, me too. Lewis, what about you?

Lewis Dijkstra

Well, I've just moved from Brussels, which is a city, to Besozzo in Italy, which is a town so...but my wife is still in Brussels, so I enjoy both sides of say, the degree of urbanisation. I love living in a city, but I also love living in a town surrounded by beautiful mountains.

Jonathan Elliott

That's cheating. You can't have two places, but anyway. You'll be allowed to have two places. I think everyone would rather...would like to have the choice of the two. Marina.

Marina Royo de Blas

Yeah, well...If we think about numbers, like the number of Member States with highest percentage of people living in a detached house (a house with a garden), it would be Slovakia. And if we focus on Member States with citizens not complaining about noises, in that case we go to Greece and Bulgaria.

However, being a Spanish, I have checked what are the best ranked regions in terms of the quality of life, and I will stay in my own region, La Rioja, which is among the best 3 regions with the highest quality of life in Spain.

Jonathan Elliott

Wow! Lots of pictures there, lots of lovely visions of lovely places to live. That's really helpful, thank you very much. Let's dive into the stats now and the data stories around rural Europe. A good place to start in all statistical challenges is definitions; and the definition of rural, as opposed to suburban or remote rural or urban, for example, has to be as scientific as possible.

In a collection of countries as huge and diverse as the EU, this is not as easy as it sounds. Reka, just give us a flavour of the challenges we face when we try to define 'rural Europe'.

Reka Fodor

So, we have to start with the definitions and why we need rural data. It's because national level data does not reveal the diversity of Europe and the realities of rural territories within. And to have the policymakers to tailor make their policies, Eurostat collects a wide range of data at subnational levels, regional and local levels. 'NUTS' is the abbreviation for statistical regions that we have 3 different levels of and going from less to a more granular one, I will explain each one.

So, to make it easier to understand: in the EU there are 92 NUTS 1 level of regions that they are major socio-economic regions. We have 244 NUTS 2 level regions - they are the base of regional policies such as cohesion policy. And we have over 1000 NUTS 3 level regions – they are small regions. At NUTS 3 level we have the so called urban-rural typology, having predominantly urban regions, intermediate and predominantly rural regions.

But we can get even more granular data. When we zoom further, we find communities and settlements, and in statistics, we call them local administrative units, LAU-s. In the EU we have nearly 100 000 LAU-s and when we aggregate these by the degree of urbanisation, there we can identify cities, towns and suburbs and rural areas - even these can be further defined.

Jonathan Elliott

Lewis, I'm going to turn to you. Tell me: why do we need all this detail?

Lewis Dijkstra

Well, urban and rural definitions actually spark a lot of emotion. People are fondly attached to it, they have strong opinions about it, and we have lots of discussions about whether poverty is higher in urban or rural settings, where people are...where unemployment is higher.

So, if you want to know the answer to those questions, you have to agree on what is urban and rural. And national definitions differ a lot. So, what we created was a harmonised definition that we could apply across the EU, even to the globe, to really make sure that we can compare the situations in rural areas of different countries.

Jonathan Elliott

Ah, so it's about comparability, then, and understanding, for example, that a hamlet in Spain can be compared to a hamlet in Austria, and you can weigh up their relative wealth, infrastructure opportunities and the things that they need, and make sure that there is a certain degree of parity between them. And this can be very potent politically, especially if funding is involved. So, the importance of doing it scientifically cannot be overstated.

Person on street 4

You know, in the countryside, we do not have as much job opportunities. We will get poorer and poorer all the time, and you know that will affect everything from health care to...to other things.

Person on street 5

In French countryside, like there is some area where there is no more doctors, so it's difficult, and even also the transportation. In the city, you can use public transportation. But in the countryside, either you have a car, either you are stuck in your...in your place because you cannot walk everywhere. In French countryside, there is like no train, no bus, like, or like few, and you don't know at what time they are arriving.

Jonathan Elliott

And the curious outcome of this increasingly nuanced understanding of the quality of life in rural areas is the end of a myth long held dear by some city people, and that is that the countryside is, generally speaking, a backward place that's in decline. Young people are leaving it. Local economies are stagnating and so on. Lewis, tell us more.

Lewis Dijkstra

The first thing to say about rural regions and rural areas is that they're incredibly diverse. So, you have a large variation. But on average, rural regions are converging, they're growing faster economically, their productivity is increasing, their employment rates are increasing. So actually, rural regions are generally doing better than they used to do. Also, broadband accessibility has been growing rapidly and converging to that of the EU as a whole. So, we see a lot of progress.

And so, I wouldn't characterise rural regions as stagnating at all. They have some catching up to do, but they are doing that. Then when I emphasise diversity - one of the things that makes a big difference is your proximity to other people, and especially your proximity to a city and a large city. If you look at rural regions, if they're close to a city, economically they're doing better. They are more productive, they're growing faster, they're catching up faster.

Jonathan Elliott

Because there are more opportunities, because people can commute, because the transport infrastructure is more dense, all those sorts of things?

Lewis Dijkstra

Yes, and access to services - in the remote regions, you know, the nearest hospital is going to be far away because there's very few people there, and the broadband is not going to be as good because there's a smaller market there. So, people tend to gravitate to areas close to cities - not just for employment reasons but also for access to amenities, for access to services, and being able to meet other people and find more opportunities.

Jonathan Elliott

And of course, as ever with stats, the more you look at them, the less clear-cut things seem. Reka, just tell us about all the different sets of data that you have on rural areas, which Eurostat has to pull together and keep consistent from a wide variety of sources. It's not always straightforward, is it?

Reka Fodor

Data collection, it's regulated for Eurostat. So, it's...there is a legislation of on what we collect and at what level we collect that. Based on this urban-rural typology, which is a regional typology, where we have these predominantly rural regions - on that one we have approximately 50 datasets, and the datasets are on the domain of demography, labour market, economic account, business demography, transport and so on.

And for the degree of urbanisation, when we categorize cities, towns, suburbs and rural areas, we currently disseminate close to 200 datasets using this breakdown.

Jonathan Elliot

Marina.

Marina Royo de Blas

Actually, in the context of the long-term vision Eurostat has been working a lot in improving all this amount of data and visibility that we have. And this is, in fact, one of the actions that we have in the rural action plan. And we have, I think - Reka, correct me if I'm wrong - 2 times the number of indicators that we have for DEGURBA typology.

Jonathan Elliott

DEGURBA is a technical term. It's an acronym which stands for the degree of urbanisation, and this is a classification system for cities, towns and urban areas. While we're at it, Marina, can you just tell our listeners to define also what the rural action plan is?

Marina Royo de Blas

The rural action plan is what the Commission is implementing to achieve the 10 shared goals set up in the communication. A long-term vision for EU rural areas. I usually explain the long-term vision as a long-term framework for the development of EU rural areas. And how do we arrive there. So, we have the EU rural action plan, what is what the Commission is implementing. We have different Commission directors general implementing certain actions.

And then we have what all the other levels are doing: national, regional and local. Because when it comes to rural development, different levels should contribute. This is why the long-term vision has put in place something called the 'rural pact' - a framework for collaboration between rural stakeholders, different levels of government and governance, institutions and academia.

Jonathan Elliott

The EU is doing a lot to get dialogue going, to have a long-term vision for rural areas and to strengthen rural policy, but the central question is what really needs to be done to make sure that no one is missing out on the essentials of modern life because of where they live. Before we talk to our experts about that, let's step out of the wrap café again and take a deep breath of city air before asking the people on the street how they feel about rural life compared to that of the cities.

Person on street 7

No! I would not live in the countryside if there is no internet, but...but again, we live in Denmark, there is almost internet everywhere, so...

Person on street 5

But I guess there is a certain age for everything, because I also enjoy the quietness of being more in the countryside, especially by the seaside.

Person on street 9

I think more and more young people move to the countryside for the same reasons as we talk about: the room and the opportunities for houses and stuff like that. Yeah.

Jonathan Elliott

The internet keeps popping up as the great game changer when it comes to rural living, and I guess for many people, especially if their work is online, as long as they have good Wi-Fi, their location is a secondary consideration. For digital nomads this may well be true, but is it really that simple? Lewis, I know you're a champion of rural broadband and celebrate the changes it has brought about. Can you tell us more?

Lewis Dijkstra

So broadband really is making it much easier to do business in rural areas, and the broadband accessibility and the speeds have been increasing dramatically, and they're catching up with the urban areas. And so, we really see a game changer there. So, I think it really helps to diversify, both professionally but also recreationally, what you can do in a rural area, and that opens up new opportunity for businesses and for fun to be had.

Jonathan Elliott

Another influential factor on the rural-urban split that we've not touched on is the comparative wealth of Member States. And there are, of course, distinctive variations between Northern and Southern Europe, as well as Eastern and Western Europe. Lewis, explain to us about how the simple fact of national affluence affects how urban and rural areas differ from country to country.

Lewis Dijkstra

Well, if we start with the eastern Member States, we can really see a very big divide between the cities and the rural areas. Rural areas there really have higher rates of poverty, far lower levels of income, of

productivity, poor access to services, the infrastructure is not so good. So there rural living is a bit rougher. It's tough. But if you move then, say, to north-west, if you look at the Netherlands or France or Sweden or Ireland, actually, you see that rural living provides an extremely high quality of life.

Life satisfaction in rural areas is as good, if not higher, than in urban areas. Southern Member States are mixed. Their incomes, their productivity is slightly lower than Northwestern Europe, but actually the quality of life in rural areas in general is very high. And you also see that in life satisfaction.

Marina Royo de Blas

But we also see that the quality of services in some rural areas in western Member States is decreasing. There is a deterioration in access to services, and we hear so from different actors. For example, the difficulty to access specialised medical services in rural areas. Also, GPs in rural areas are difficult to reach. And we see how rural schools are closing, and this is in somehow creating and refeeding the demographic challenge.

So, Member States and regions are putting in place policy measures to address these topics. But in general, it's very difficult because the population in those regions is getting older. We have also analysed that the population is not so much decreasing in these rural areas right now, because the exodus, the rural exodus, has already happened in previous generations. In general, they are getting older.

Jonathan Elliott

And that is not because all the young people are leaving, which is another myth - that all the opportunities are in the city and the old people are left to sort of rot in their little kind of fields, toiling away. And Lewis, once again, has got his myth busting hat on. Get in there, Lewis, tell us what's the truth about the demographic changes.

Lewis Dijkstra

I'm going to fully agree with Marina. I mean migration to rural regions in Europe over the past decade is positive. More people move in than move out. So, it's indeed a myth that rural regions are shrinking because of migration. What is happening is that you get selective movements. So young people, they want to go to university, they want to find their first job, they want to meet some people, maybe a partner. And that's easier to do in a big city than it is in a small village in the countryside.

So, you see a lot of people taking that first step, but that doesn't mean they're gone for good, right? I'm sure the heartstrings of the parents are affected by the departure of their kids...but many of them, later in life, when they have kids, or when they come closer to retirement, decide to move back to that part of the world or a different rural area in Europe.

So as a result, that's why net migration is a positive one, especially for rural regions close to a city. The remote ones, it's flat, it's zero. But still, it means that all the population reductions, because they're quite a few, are purely due to natural change, and so that means births minus deaths, and it's this older age group that's really driving the increase in natural population reductions.

Jonathan Elliott

For listeners whose appetites have been wetted by this talk of the data behind the comparative merits of rural and urban living, or perhaps you just want to know where best to locate your business or buy a

retirement property or raise your children, you could do a lot worse than make your way to the excellent Eurostat specialist website, Statistics Explained. Reka, tell us more. There are two e-publications on the site. Is that right? Urban Europe and Rural Europe?

Reka Fodor

This is a statistically explained article, and it's called Urban Europe and Rural Europe. This is a sister publication, and that means that we have several chapters together with the Urban Europe. And these chapters are: population projections, education, training, labour market, income and living conditions, digital society and economy.

And there are 3 chapters dedicated to the topics of rural Europe, and these are: the demographic developments in rural regions and areas, women and men living in rural areas, and the quality of life in rural areas. And we have just released it at the end of November.

Marina Royo de Blas

And I must add that, from a user point of view, I must say it's very useful, because you have a lot of information on EU average, on how rural areas are doing at EU level compared to cities and other categories. And at the same time, you find information on how Member States' rural areas are doing. So, a lot of insight. And each time they publish, I find new data and new information very relevant for my work.

Jonathan Elliott

Fantastic! Well, I'm going to round up now. We've run out of time, and you've been very generous. One last round of questions before we say goodbye. And I'm really going to start with Reka here. I want us all to think about: are we optimistic about the development of rural areas? Reka, I'm just going to ask you: do you feel optimistic when you get up and look at the dairy farm next door to you and you think about the lives of the community that you find yourself in? Is rural Europe getting better?

Reka Fodor

Based on my personal experience, I am optimistic about the future of rural areas. As you mentioned, I live next door to a dairy farm in a small agricultural village in Luxembourg, which is close to a city. This village has experienced a significant population growth over the last few years - but Luxembourg is a very special place.

It has free public transport, and since the pandemic, many companies allow teleworking. I believe that the key for prosperity of rural areas is to be connected, both physically and digitally.

Jonathan Elliott

Marina, are you optimistic?

Marina Royo de Blas

I live in Brussels, because it's true that my work is here, so there's not a lot of possibilities to live. However, I lived also in certain rural areas, in several, some in south of France, some in Spain, and I do feel positive. I know some of the rural areas, they would have difficulties to face in the upcoming years in terms of delivery of services.

However, I see a lot the power of community every day in my work. I see how these communities, they gather, they take action. They do change their rural areas on their own. So, I do trust, and I also have trust within the new Commission and all the new elements that we will set up. So, looking forward!

Jonathan Elliott

And Lewis, how about you?

Lewis Dijkstra

I have mixed feelings. On the one hand the data shows huge improvements over the past couple of decades. But there are still some big changes ahead of us, and I do sense that especially rural residents are worried about the demographic change, about the climate change, about the green transition, and also worried about their economic future.

So, I think it's mixed. I think people's quality of life has gotten better and in many countries as equal as in cities. But I think their worries about the future are real, and we need to address those. So, my hope for rural regions and areas is that they'll have less the fear, better quality of life, but there will be fewer of all of us, including in rural areas.

Jonathan Elliott

Fascinating. Well, this has been an absolutely engrossing and completely amazing podcast. We've barely scratched the surface, as we so often do. I do have to say a very big thank you to our three contributors who've brought amazing wealth of knowledge and experience to the subject. So, thank you, Marina Royo.

Marina Royo de Blas

Thank you very much for having us here today.

Jonathan Elliott

And Reka Fodor.

Reka Fodor

Thank you so much for inviting me.

Jonathan Elliott

And last but not least, Lewis Dijkstra, thank you for joining Stats in the Wrap today.

Lewis Dijkstra

It's been my absolute pleasure. I love talking about data.

Jonathan Elliott

If you've enjoyed Stats in the Wrap, don't forget to follow us on social media and share our adventures with friends and colleagues, where the show could be found, on Spotify, Apple and all the usual places. And if you'd like to know more about the topics covered in this podcast and practically every aspect of statistics in the EU you should make your way to Eurostat's amazing educational resource Statistics Explained which is packed with infographics, videos and explainers of all kinds.

It's really worth checking out. And of course, do join us for the next edition, when we'll be dishing out more flavoursome insights from Eurostat. But for now, goodbye.