



# Opportunities and challenges for remote rural areas in the European Union

## HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ In the EU, 37 million inhabitants live in remote rural areas. This is 9% of the EU population. Remote rural areas also cover almost half of all the land in the EU (177 million ha), which corresponds to 32% of the EU's municipalities.
- ▶ Natural resources and ecosystem services are more abundant in remote rural areas than in other areas. Remote rural areas can support and benefit from the EU's green transition by preserving biodiversity, enhancing ecosystem services, fostering sustainable industries and investing in climate change adaptation and mitigation.
- ▶ In some remote rural areas, tourism is an important economic sector. In particular, areas of mountain and nature tourism and certain coastal areas and islands have a high tourist accommodation capacity, which helps these areas to diversify their economy.
- ▶ Despite these opportunities, more than half (54%) of the EU's remote rural areas are characterised as socioeconomically weak areas. These areas host almost 17 million people, who face a range of challenges such as a declining and ageing population, poor digital connections, long distances to services and lower levels of household income.
- ▶ By contrast, only 2% of the remote rural areas are characterised as having good socioeconomic conditions and are well-connected areas. These remote areas host 1.2 million people, located mainly in coastal areas and on islands, in mountainous tourist areas or in groups of remote rural communities.
- ▶ Overall, remote rural areas have a lower level of socioeconomic development than rural areas close to a city. Lower broadband speeds, lower road transport performance, larger population reductions, longer road distances to schools and health services and limited economic performance in comparison with other areas are the major challenges that remote rural areas face.

# INTRODUCTION

## MOTIVATION

Remote rural areas benefit from two major EU spending policies. The rural development policy, the second pillar of the common agricultural policy, sets higher European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development contribution rates for investment in less-developed regions, outermost regions and small Aegean islands to mitigate specific constraints related to their levels of development, remoteness and insularity. EU cohesion policy, through its funds, also supports the development of rural areas and less-developed regions to reduce territorial disparities. In 2018, the European Parliament called for the coordination of EU policies to address the specific needs of rural, mountainous and remote areas. Recently, a European Commission communication set out a long-term vision for the EU's rural areas up to 2040<sup>(1)</sup>, in which remote rural areas are highlighted as facing issues different to those of rural areas close to a city.

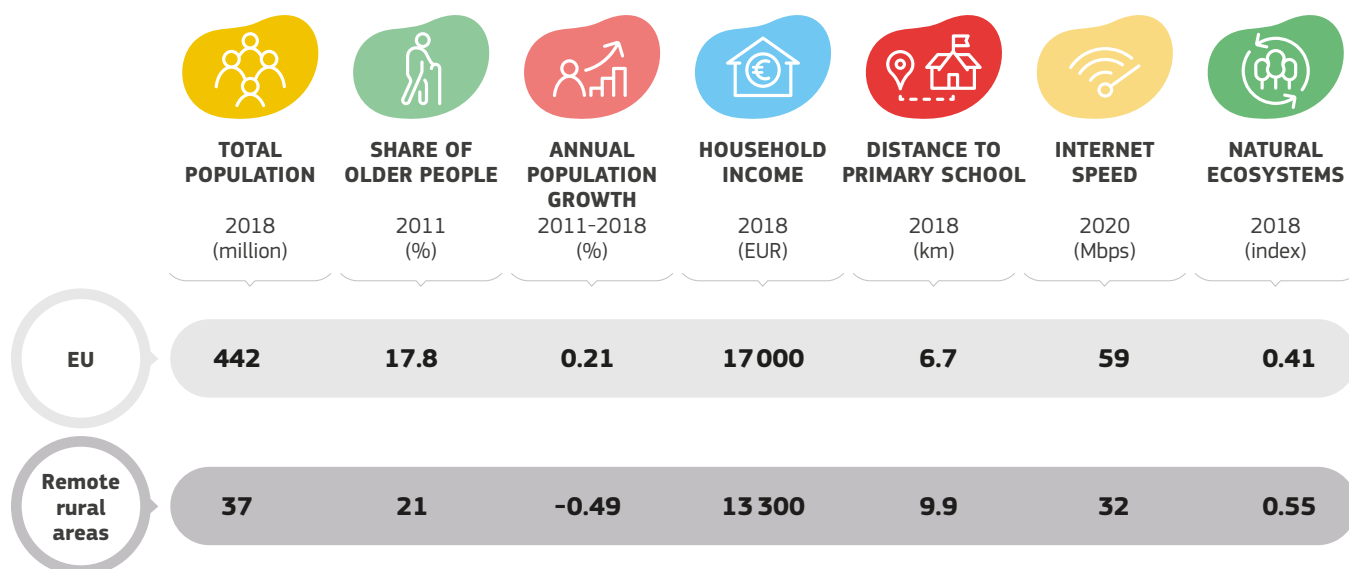
In support of the rural vision, this policy brief was developed in cooperation with the Directorate-General (DG) for Agriculture and Rural Development and the DG for Regional and Urban Policy of the European Commission. The brief describes the EU's remote rural areas, showing how remoteness can increase territorial disparities across the urban-rural continuum. Remote rural areas differ from non-remote ones in key areas such as demography, economy, service provision, connectivity, biodiversity and geographic context.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF REMOTENESS

Municipalities can be classified by their degree of urbanisation, on the basis of their population density and size, as 'cities', 'towns and suburbs' or 'rural areas'. In remote rural areas and remote towns and suburbs, at least half of the residents live further than a 45 minute drive from the nearest city. The other rural areas and towns and suburbs fall under the category 'close to a city'. According to this classification, rural areas represent 83% of EU territory (412 million ha) and host 31% (137 million inhabitants) of the EU population. More than half of this rural land is remote, and 9% (37 million inhabitants) of the EU population live in these remote areas<sup>(1)</sup>.

Rural areas close to a city can benefit from agglomeration economies, which boost productivity and the provision of (specialised) services. Proximity to cities can also allow rural residents to work in a city while living in the nearby rural areas, benefiting from a larger labour market, lower housing costs and greater proximity to natural amenities. Remote rural areas face a different set of challenges and opportunities. This policy brief is based on the analysis performed by Perpiña Castillo et al. (forthcoming)<sup>(2)</sup>, presenting the most relevant findings of that analysis. **Figure 1** presents some of the socioeconomic and environmental indicator results for the EU and remote rural areas.

**Figure 1.** Results of socioeconomic and environmental indicators for the EU and remote rural areas



<sup>1</sup> European Commission (2021). Commission communication – A long-term vision for the EU's rural areas – Towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040, COM(2021) 345 final.

<sup>2</sup> Perpiña Castillo, C. et al. (forthcoming). 'Are remote rural areas in Europe remarkable? Challenges and opportunities'. *Journal of Rural Studies*.

# REMOTE RURAL AREAS: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

## POPULATION REDUCTIONS AND AGEING

Between 2011 and 2018, remote rural areas experienced larger population reductions and more rapid ageing than other areas (Figure 2). The population in remote rural areas decreased by 0.49% per year, totalling a reduction of 1.2 million inhabitants during that period. Depopulation<sup>(3)</sup> affected more than 20% of all EU municipalities, half of them located in remote rural areas. In addition, the ageing ratio<sup>(4)</sup> in remote rural areas (1 young person per 2.3 senior residents) is more than double that of cities and towns, which means that without immigration the remote rural population will continue to shrink. The EU total age dependency ratio<sup>(5)</sup> is 1.85 working-age people per dependent person. Remote rural areas have fewer working-age people per dependent person (1.6, on average) than other rural areas (1.9), cities (2.1) and towns and suburbs (2.0). More than 8000 rural municipalities, half of them remote, are affected by all three phenomena<sup>(6)</sup>, with an impact on more than 8.3 million inhabitants. Rural areas close to a city face similar challenges, but typically less acutely than remote rural areas. Depopulation and ageing particularly affect the remote municipalities in Bulgaria, Greece, Spain, Italy and Portugal, where their rates are well above the EU average.

## SERVICES FURTHER AWAY

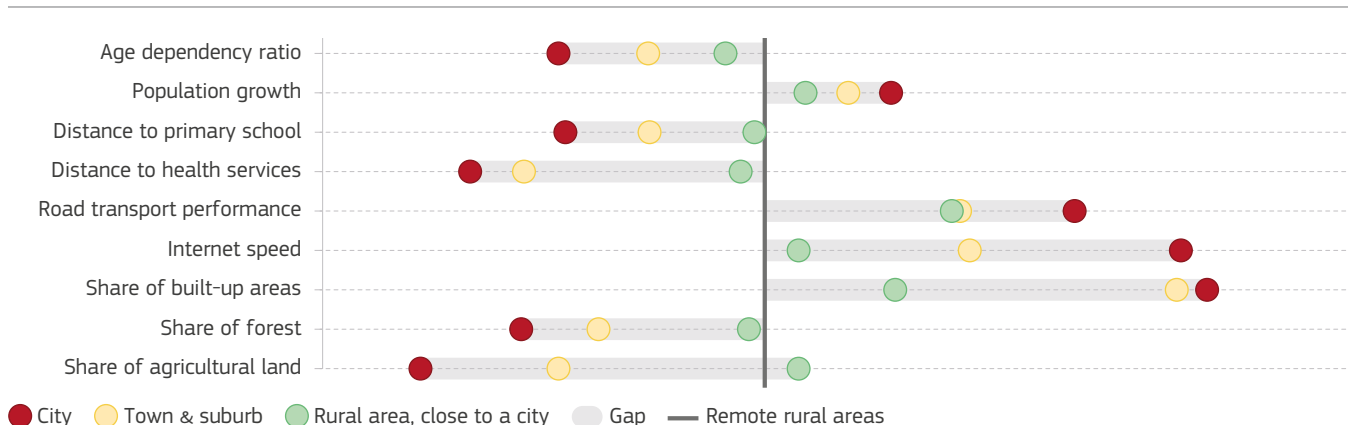
The loss of population also makes the provision of public and private services more difficult in these areas, exacerbating territorial disparities. Overall, urban residents are closer

to education and health services than to rural residents. In the EU's cities, the average distance to the nearest primary school and health service is 2 km and 5 km, respectively. People living in remote rural areas need to cover a distance five times longer to reach these public services than city residents (Figure 3). 39% of the municipalities in remote rural areas are confronted with distances to services that are much longer than the EU average. However, rural areas, close to a city and remote, do not differ significantly in this respect for primary schools (Figure 2). Long distances to these services affect more than 13 million inhabitants, especially in Bulgaria, Greece, Spain, Portugal, Romania and Baltic and Nordic countries. The limited access to healthcare and educational services in rural areas may reduce local attractiveness and hence reinforce population losses.

## LOWER LEVEL OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Remote rural areas tend to have lower levels of gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, lower productivity and a less diversified economy. The GDP per capita in remote rural regions increased from EUR 18 545 in 2008 to EUR 20 817 in 2018, representing a 12% increase compared with 20% in non-remote regions. The annual GDP growth was negative in Greece, and in remote regions in Ireland, Spain, France, Croatia, Italy and Portugal. In the same period, household income per capita increased by 13% in remote regions compared with 18% in non-remote ones. Remote regions in Austria, Finland, Germany, Greece, Spain, Portugal and Slovakia showed the highest household income increases.

Figure 2. Comparison of urbanisation categories per indicator analysed, with remote rural areas as the reference class



**Note:** The dark grey line represents remote rural areas, the reference from which the gap analysis for the other categories is measured. The gap analysis is based on the coefficients (dimensionless) from the multivariate analysis. For instance, population growth is higher in cities, towns and rural areas close to a city than in remote rural areas, while the share of forest is lower in the three non-remote categories than in remote rural areas.

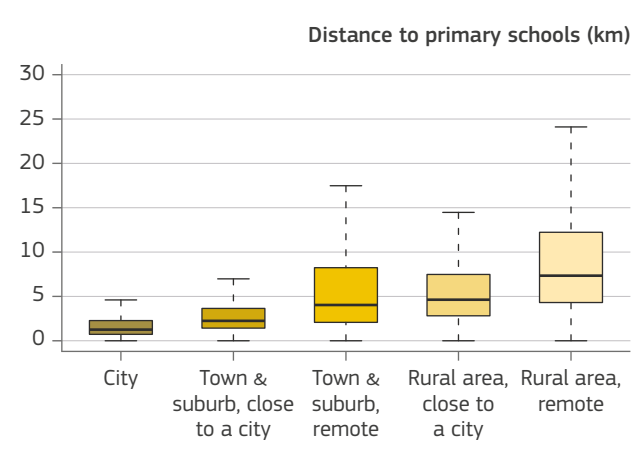
<sup>3</sup> Depopulation is defined as an average annual population change of less than -1 % between 2011 and 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Ratio of older people (65+) to younger people (≤ 15 years), as an indicator of longer-term demographic prospects.

<sup>5</sup> An index that measures the ratio between the population of younger and older people (≤ 15 or ≥ 65 years old) and the working-age population (> 15 and < 65 years old).

<sup>6</sup> A declining population, an ageing ratio and an age dependency ratio above certain thresholds.

**Figure 3.** Examples of the situation across the urban-rural continuum for the four areas of action of the rural vision



**STRONGER RURAL AREAS**  
Access to primary schools



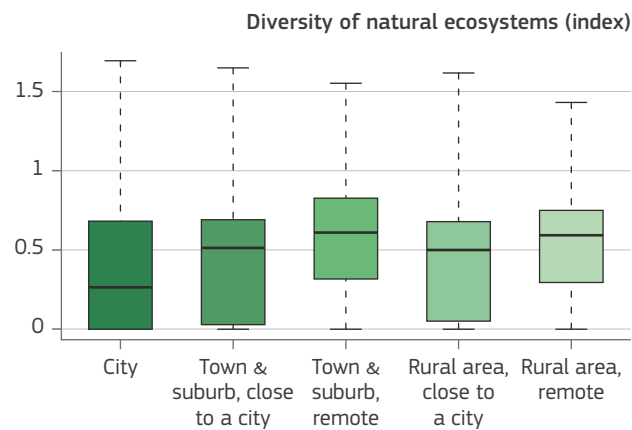
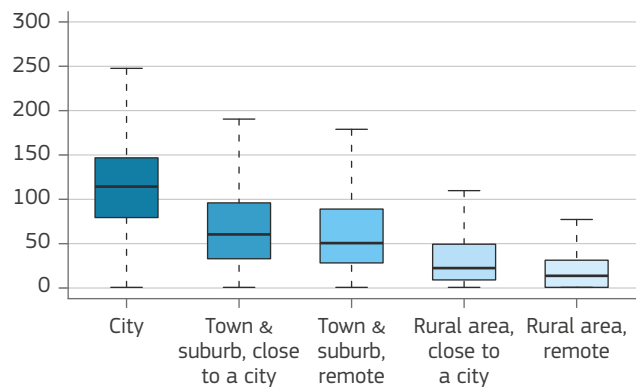
Demographic change has an impact on rural areas, both remote and close to a city, which both have long distances to primary schools. The population in most remote rural areas is shrinking and ageing, which puts further pressure on the provision of public services. The decline in the number of children in remote and rural areas might lead authorities to close some schools, increasing the distance to the nearest school.



**CONNECTED RURAL AREAS**  
Access to high-speed broadband

Broadband speed is still quite low in rural areas and especially in remote rural areas, while cities enjoy very high speeds (> 100 Mbps). In 2020, 8.5% of rural households were not yet covered by any fixed broadband. Furthermore, less than 40% did not have access to high-speed broadband. Good-quality internet connection is a crucial feature of making the most of the digital transition.

**Broadband speed (Mbps)**



**MORE RESILIENT RURAL AREAS**  
Preserving natural ecosystems



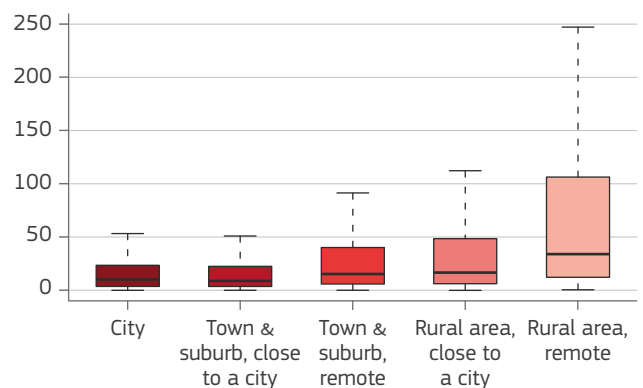
The diversity of natural ecosystems is higher in areas classified as remote, both towns and suburbs and rural areas. Thus, remote areas can contribute to and benefit from the green transition and can mitigate climate change. Considering the broad range of ecosystem services that remote areas provide, valorising natural capital seems a promising way forward.



**PROSPEROUS RURAL AREAS**  
Supporting economic diversification

The majority of remote and rural regions have a high share of employment in agriculture. Diversifying their economic structure towards other sectors (e.g. services, manufacturing, agrifood) may broaden the range of opportunities. Sustainable tourism can help to develop and regenerate remote territories through the preservation of cultural heritage and environmental conservation, while also being complementary to farming activities.

**Tourist accommodation per 1000 inhabitants**



**Note:** The complete list of indicators analysed, their graphs and maps can be found in Perpiña Castillo, C. et al. (forthcoming). 'Are remote rural areas in Europe remarkable? Challenges and opportunities'. *Journal of Rural Studies*.

Overall, remote regions performed economically worse than their non-remote counterparts in all economic sectors, with the exception of tourism. Mountain and nature tourism, linked to seasonality peaks, is an important source of income for some remote rural areas. Considering population, remote rural areas have the highest tourism capacity (140 rooms per 1 000 inhabitants) (**Figure 3**), particularly in municipalities in the Pyrenees, in the Alps, in coastal areas (e.g. the Bay of Biscay in France, Croatia) and on islands such as Corsica and Crete and those in the Balearic Islands and the Cyclades.

### POOR PHYSICAL AND DIGITAL CONNECTIVITY

Transport and digital infrastructure facilitate the connections among rural areas and to urban centres. However, in 2019, rural and remote areas did not have the broadband connection speeds that cities, towns and suburbs enjoy (**Figures 2 and 3**). More than 45% of rural areas do not reach the EU target of 30 Mbps, and half of those are remote areas. Almost 16 million inhabitants in remote rural areas only have access to low internet speeds. Only in Denmark, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Sweden do the majority of rural residents have access to high-speed broadband. In the same vein, road transport performance in remote rural areas is generally lower than in the other areas (**Figure 2**), mainly due to a more dispersed population distribution.

71% of remote rural areas have lower transport performance than the EU average, particularly in municipalities in the inner parts of Bulgaria, Greece, Spain, Poland, Romania and the Baltic and Nordic countries. Rural areas close to a city, however, show better performance in the majority of the municipalities (60% of this category).

### AN INTENSE COMPETITION FOR LAND WHILE PRESERVING NATURAL CAPITAL

Agriculture is the main land use in rural areas close to city (53 %) and provides a range of key ecosystem services (e.g. soil health, food production). In remote rural areas most of the territory is composed of forests and natural areas (54 %), whereas agriculture is slightly less prominent, probably due to long distances to markets or due to less favourable topographic (i.e. steep slopes and areas facing natural constraints) and climate conditions hindering farming activities. The value of natural capital is reflected in the highest diversity of natural ecosystems being in remote rural areas, while cities and areas close to a city show lower diversity (**Figure 3**). This diversity is likely to increase the resilience of the services these ecosystems provide. Nevertheless, these regions should remain alert to threats to these ecosystems due to, for example, intensification of agriculture or increases in soil sealing.

---

## COMBINED CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FACING REMOTE AREAS IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

The combination of the existing challenges and opportunities presented in this brief allows the remote rural areas in the EU to be characterised according to three territorial clusters (**Figure 4**):

- **cluster A** – good socioeconomic conditions and well-connected areas with low natural capital assets (socioeconomically strong cluster);
- **cluster B** – intermediate situation for socioeconomic conditions, with a predominance of agrarian landscapes (socioeconomically intermediate cluster);
- **cluster C** – shrinking population and poorly connected areas with important natural capital assets (socioeconomically weak cluster).

More than half of the EU's remote rural areas are characterised as socioeconomically weak areas (cluster C). These areas, hosting almost 17 million inhabitants, face major challenges related to declining and ageing populations, poor digital connections, long distances to services and lower levels of household income. Counterbalancing these challenges, their diversity of natural ecosystems appears to be

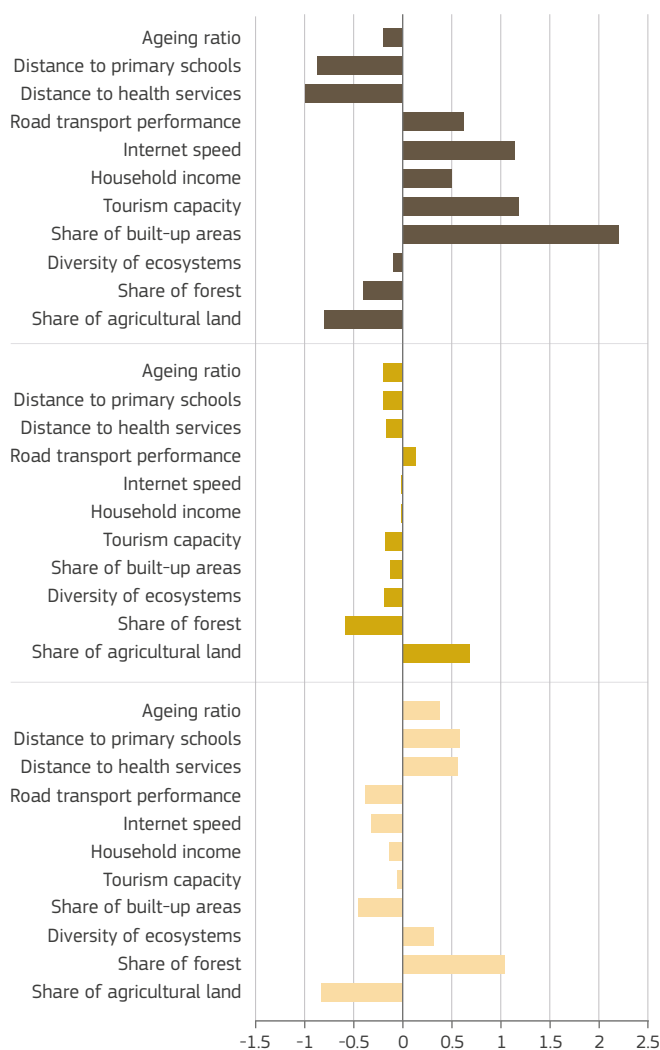
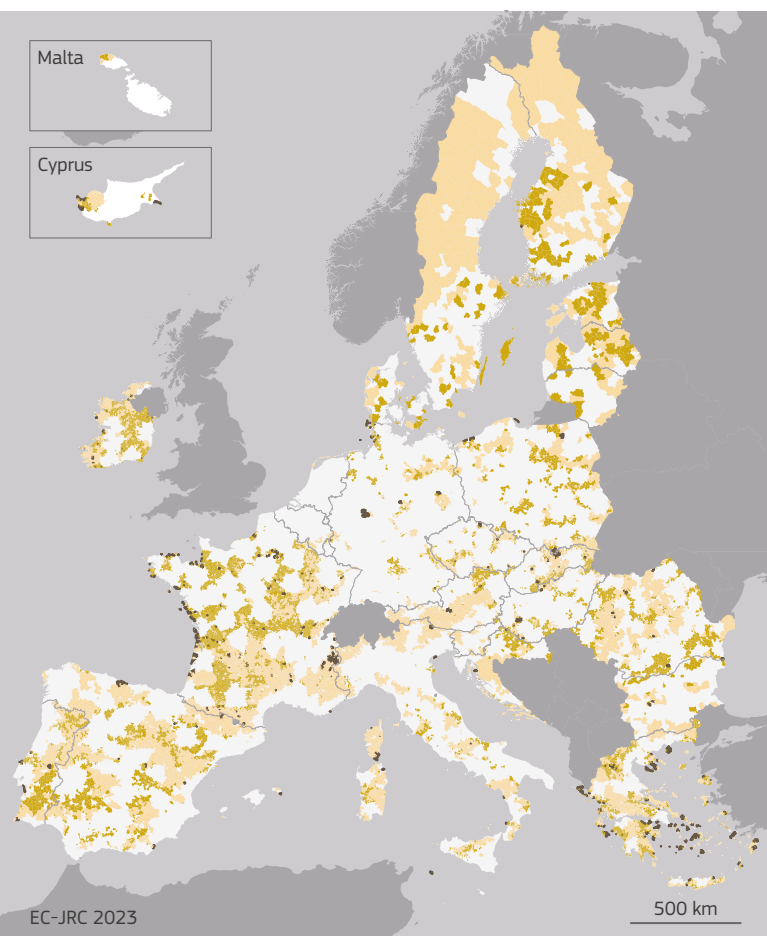
a key opportunity for the preservation of biodiversity and for ecosystem service delivery. As these areas tend to have greater proportions of forest lands, and natural and mountainous areas, sustainable tourism might be a promising way to diversify their economies.

In contrast, only 2% of the EU's remote rural areas are characterised as strong socioeconomic areas (cluster A). These remote areas, home to 1.2 million people, present substantial socioeconomic advantages (e.g. higher levels of household income) and good connectivity (e.g. better broadband speed), with a low presence of natural ecosystems and agriculture. They are mainly located in coastal areas and on islands, in mountainous places or in groups of remote rural communities.

Finally, remote rural areas assigned to cluster B have average socioeconomic conditions. The predominance of agricultural land in these remote rural areas can in some cases boost the competitiveness of the agrifood sector while contributing to EU climate and environment objectives and fostering rural development.

**Figure 4.** Spatial clustering of the EU's remote rural areas based on socioeconomic and environmental indicators at the municipality level

- Cluster A: strong remote rural areas
- Cluster B: intermediate remote rural areas
- Cluster C: weak remote rural areas



**Note:** In each cluster, the standardised values of each indicator represent the deviation when the EU average mean is centred to 0. Clusters are defined based on all the EU local administrative units; remote rural areas were selected for mapping visualisation purposes.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study was conducted by the Territorial Development Unit (European Commission – Joint Research Centre) under the Rural Observatory framework of the EU rural vision (<https://rural-vision.europa.eu>). The authors would like to thank colleagues from DG for Regional and Urban Policy, DG for Agriculture and Rural Development and the Joint Research Centre for their contributions. Special thanks go to Alexia Rouby, Marina Royo de Blas, Joachim Maes and Clara Hormigos Feliu for reviewing and commenting the brief.

## DISCLAIMER

The views expressed are purely those of the authors and may not in any circumstances be regarded as stating an official position of the European Commission.

## SUGGESTED CITATION

Perpiña Castillo, C., Jacobs-Crisioni, C., Barranco, R., Curtale, R., Kompil, M., Vallecillo, S., Auteri, D. and Dijkstra, L. (2023). *Opportunities and challenges for remote rural areas in the European Union*. European Commission, Joint Research Centre, JRC135398.

## CONTACT INFORMATION

Lewis Dijkstra ([lewis.dijkstra@ec.europa.eu](mailto:lewis.dijkstra@ec.europa.eu))  
 Davide Auteri ([davide.auteri@ec.europa.eu](mailto:davide.auteri@ec.europa.eu))  
<https://observatory.rural-vision.europa.eu>

© European Union 2023  
 All content © European Union, 2023, except:  
 banner image © Branko Srot – stock.adobe.com