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RURAL OBSERVATORY

Trust in EU rural areas

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Executive summary

POLICY CONTEXT AND OBJECTIVES

In 2021, the European Commission (EC) put forward its Long-Term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas, which recognises the role of rural areas as a part of Europe's identity and economic potential, as well as the need to preserve them and invest in their future (EC, 2021). Consultations in the context of the Rural Vision revealed that 40% of rural residents feel left behind, with this share rising to 60% for those in remote rural areas. In terms of trust in institutions, rural residents are more likely to trust their regional and local authorities, but trust towards the EU is lower than in cities and towns (EC, 2024). Lower levels of education, an older population and economic challenges have been associated with a higher anti-EU vote in rural areas (de Dominicis et al., 2022). Regions in 'development traps' characterised by a decline in economic growth, employment, and productivity are also more likely to oppose European integration (EC, 2023).

In this work, we aim to assess the trends and territorial patterns of trust in institutions among rural citizens (rural trust), and to identify socioeconomic and demographic drivers of trust towards the EU across its urban-rural continuum. Instead of studying voting patterns, we rely on respondent-level data from the Standard Eurobarometer surveys, which allows us to correlate the opinions of citizens of their local, national and EU governments with their financial circumstances and education, among others. Understanding the connections between these factors can help address territorial disparities and strengthen European cohesion.

KEY CONCLUSIONS

Trust in the EU is lowest in rural areas, and the urban-rural gap has been widening in recent years. Less education, financial difficulties and less qualified jobs, which are more common in rural areas, are associated with a lower trust towards the EU. After controlling for socioeconomic and demographic factors, however, rurality is still significantly associated with lower trust the EU. On the other hand, citizens in rural areas place high levels of trust in their regional and local authorities (even higher than cities), independently of their feelings towards the EU.

MAIN FINDINGS

Trust in the EU has risen over the last ten years, and today it is at its highest point since the financial crisis of 2008. Still, our results reveal a considerable urban-rural gap, which has increased in recent years. In spring 2024, **48% of rural residents tended to trust the EU, 12 percentage points less than in cities (60%)**, and 4 percentage points below towns and suburbs (52%).

Across Member States, trust in institutions can deviate substantially from EU-wide trends. For instance, rural trust in the EU ranges from only 35% in France to 75% in Lithuania.

National governments in the EU have experienced a decrease in trust in recent years. **Citizens tend to trust their national governments less than the EU across the classes of the degree of urbanisation** (cities, towns and suburbs and rural areas), and urban-rural gaps for trust in national governments are smaller: in 2024, 37% of respondents in cities affirmed their trust in national governments, followed by towns and suburbs (35%), and rural areas (34%). In Member States where trust in the EU is high, trust in the national government tends to be higher as well, especially in cities.

Since 2015, trust in regional and local authorities has steadily increased in the three classes of the degree of Urbanisation, reaching 65% in rural areas in 2024, followed by cities (64%) and towns and suburbs (61%). **Rural trust in regional and local authorities is strong**, consistently higher than in cities at the EU level. Regardless of their feelings towards the EU, a high share of rural citizens (more than 50%) tend to trust the regional and local authorities in most Member States. The fact that rural citizens continue to place their trust in regional and local authorities, but are less inclined to trust the EU or the national governments than those residing in cities or towns, highlights the importance of having decisions taken closer to them.

Exploring socioeconomic and demographic characteristics and trust in institutions, we find that **financial difficulties and lower education levels are associated with less trust in the EU**. Only 24% of those who declare being in a very bad financial situation tend to trust the EU, while among the people who enjoy a very good financial situation the share who tend to trust the EU is almost three times higher (71%). Students and people who ended their education later (20 years or older) are more likely to trust the EU (61% or above) than those who never received a full-time education or who stopped at 15 or younger (41%). Lower educational attainment in rural areas, where the share of people with tertiary education falls 17 percentage points below cities, together with lower rural incomes, constitute potential challenges for trust in the EU. We also find that younger people and citizens with certain occupations (managers, students and white-collar workers) are more likely to trust the EU.

Furthermore, we find that **rurality is associated with lower trust in the EU even when socioeconomic and demographic factors are controlled for**. This suggests that discontent towards the EU in rural areas goes beyond individual circumstances, and could be connected to the feeling of being left behind as territories. In this context, and considering rural citizens' higher trust in their local authorities, policies that promote economic development, employment and education with a place-based mindset and a focus on local development may improve the trust in the EU in rural areas and strengthen territorial cohesion.

Limitations of this analysis include the lack of further factors that have been connected to trust in institutions, such as immigration, depopulation trends or local economic conditions. Furthermore, our analysis on potential drivers of trust in the EU is based on respondents from all the EU-27. As our results show that national and territorial patterns can differ substantially from EU trends, further analyses at a more granular level would be needed to assess challenges more locally.

1 Introduction

Territorial disparities can pose risks to social cohesion and trust in democratic institutions and processes in the EU. In 2020, a public consultation in the context of the Rural Vision revealed that 40% of rural residents felt left behind, with this share rising to 60% for those in remote rural areas. Trust towards the EU is also lower in rural areas than in towns and suburbs or cities, with only 47% of rural respondents declaring that they tended to trust the EU in the Standard Eurobarometer survey[1] in 2023 (EC, 2024). Understanding the drivers of rural discontent and negative sentiment towards the EU can help identify challenges and advance towards the European Commission's Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas, which aims to deliver stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040 (EC, 2021).

Previous analyses of discontent towards the EU have shown that growth in unemployment, a low turnout and a larger share of people born outside the EU are associated with a higher anti-EU vote across Europe's territories, while challenges in economic development have been linked to anti-EU sentiment especially in rural areas (De Dominicis et al., 2020). At the regional level, a persistent decline in productivity, economic growth and employment relative to a region's neighbours, its country and its past economic trajectory (also known as a development trap) has been connected to higher political discontent and unrest. In regions with a lower share of population with higher education, support for Eurosceptic parties is also higher (Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2023; EC, 2023). On the other hand, analysing trust at different governance levels beyond the EU can also help identify patterns in citizens' perception towards their institutions. Trust in national governments has been found to be positively correlated with trust in the EU (Talvin et al., 2021), while increasing income inequality has been significantly associated with reduced trust in national governments (Palmisano et al., 2024). Furthermore, analyses based on the 2018 Flash Eurobarometer on Regions revealed that the urban-rural divide in trust towards the EU was more evident for a higher number of Member States as compared to trust in the national government (Scipioni et al., 2021).

In this report, we aim to provide a comprehensive assessment of rural trust in institutions, including recent trends, patterns across Member States and possible drivers. To derive indicators, we employ respondent-level data from the Standard Eurobarometer surveys, focusing on the opinions of citizens regarding the EU, their national governments and the regional and local authorities. We aim to determine whether trust in these institutions differs significantly across the EU's urban-rural continuum, as well as its evolution in recent years. Furthermore, we assess how rural trust is connected to demographic and socioeconomic factors, employing modelling tools to assess whether rurality is still a significant determinant of trust in institutions when other variables are controlled for.

[1] Information on Eurobarometer surveys can be found in https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/screen/home

The report is structured as follows: in **Chapter 2**, we analyse the evolution of trust in institutions in rural areas, towns and suburbs, and cities of the EU over the last 10 years and discuss the latest results in Member States. **Chapter 3** is dedicated to analysing linkages between socioeconomic and demographic factors, the degree of urbanisation[2] and trust in the EU, and in **Chapter 4** we conclude.

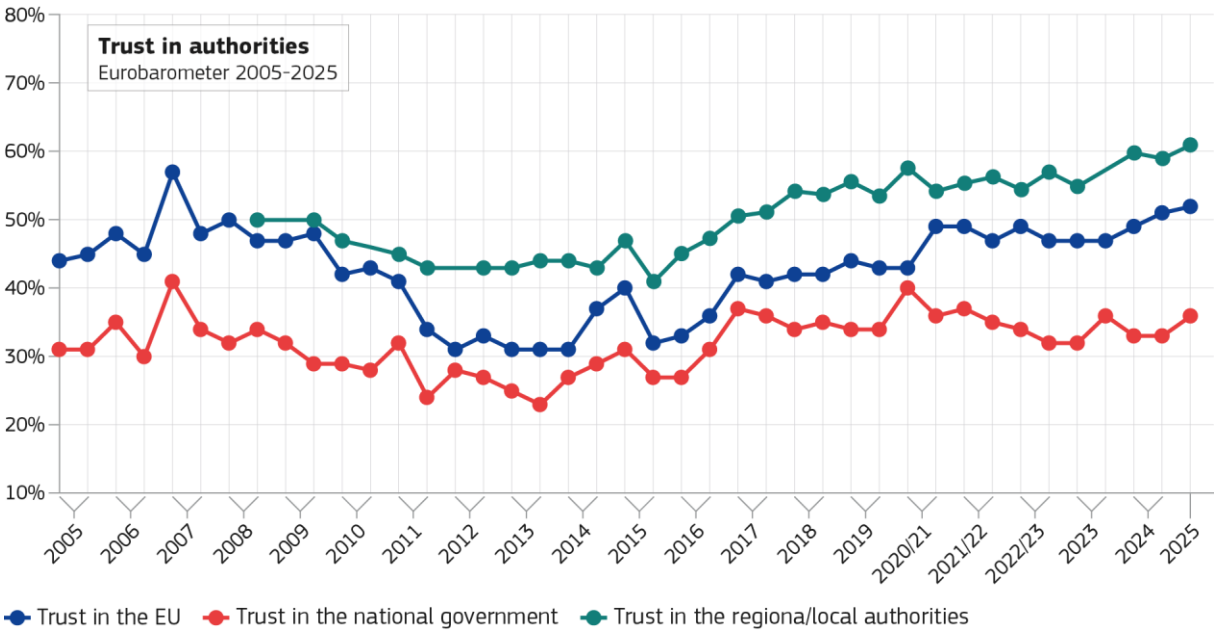
[2] The degree of urbanisation provides a standard methodology to identify cities, towns and suburbs, and rural areas (see https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/degree-of-urbanisation/methodology).

2 Rural trust in institutions: the EU, national governments and regional/local authorities

Citizen's trust in the European Union entered a period of decline at the end of 2007, coinciding with the onset of the financial crisis. During the spring of 2008, 50% of EU residents tended to trust the EU, a value which had dropped to 31% in 2013 - the lowest in the last 20 years (**Figure 1**). Today, **trust in the European Union is at its highest point since 2008**. In the Eurobarometer survey of spring 2025, 52% of Europeans declared that they tend to trust the EU, placing trust levels 21 percentage points (pp) above those of 2013. This trend is in line with median approval ratings of EU leadership, which have risen from 40% in 2012 up to 62% in 2024, according to Gallup surveys (Vigers, 2025).

Citizen's trust in their national governments has followed a similar pattern over the last two decades, but with a more reluctant recovery. In the fall of 2013, 23% of Europeans tended to trust their national governments, while the latest Eurobarometer survey shows an increase by only 13 pp (36% in 2025). From 2020 to early 2023, coinciding with the international public health emergency declaration by the World Health Organisation due to the COVID-19 pandemic, trust in national governments experienced a decrease of 5pp, while trust in the EU fluctuated only by 2pp.

Figure 1. Evolution of trust in the EU, the national government and the regional/local authorities.



Note: *Non-answered records are included.*
Source: *Own elaboration from Standard Eurobarometer, 2005-2025.*

Regional and local authorities in the EU, on the other hand, are consistently enjoying the highest levels of citizen's trust. In 2008 (first year with available data from the Standard Eurobarometer), 50% of Europeans declared they tended to trust their regional and local authorities, a figure which had dropped only by 7 pp by 2013. After more than a decade of a positive trend, in 2025 61% of EU citizens place their trust in regional and local authorities, the highest rating any government level has enjoyed since 2008, according to Eurobarometer data.

Trust in institutions can deviate significantly beyond average values across the EU's territories. In this section, we explore how trust levels have evolved and where they stand today in the EU's rural areas, towns and suburbs, and cities. Results are based on Standard Eurobarometer records for the 2015-2024 period, aggregated by degree of urbanisation for the EU-27 and for each Member State. In section 2.1, we study trends in the EU's rural areas, towns and cities during the last decade, and in section 2.2 we assess the latest results on trust in the EU's Member States. Section 2.3 analyses the relationship between trust in different levels of government, drawing patterns by degree of urbanisation based on the most recent Eurobarometer data.

2.1 TRUST IN THE EU IS AT ITS HIGHEST, BUT THE URBAN-RURAL DIVIDE IS GROWING

In this section we analyse the evolution of trust in different government levels in the EU's cities, towns and suburbs and rural areas. Results are based on individual records from Standard Eurobarometer surveys from the last ten years (2015-2024), including all respondents from EU-27 countries (data for the UK is not included at any point in the trend).[3]

For each survey, non-response records and 'Don't know' answers are discarded.[4] Responses are aggregated using population-size weights provided in the datasets, which ensures that each country is represented in proportion to the size of its population. Sample sizes vary with each survey wave, typically exceeding 6000 records for each category in the degree of urbanisation at the EU level. We estimate the maximum margin of error to be at 1% or lower (95% confidence interval) for each data point.

Our results show that over the past decade, **trust in the EU has been consistently higher in cities than in towns and suburbs or rural areas** (**Figure 2**). During the period 2015-2024, trust in the EU has increased in all three classes of the degree of urbanisation, with trust in the EU reaching 60% in cities in 2024, followed by towns and suburbs (52%), and rural areas (48%). Throughout the period, rural areas have often shown the lowest trust in the EU, and **urban-rural differences have increased in recent years**. In 2019, rural trust in the EU stood at 48%, only 2 pp below the level in cities, while in 2024 the urban-rural gap had widened to 12 pp.

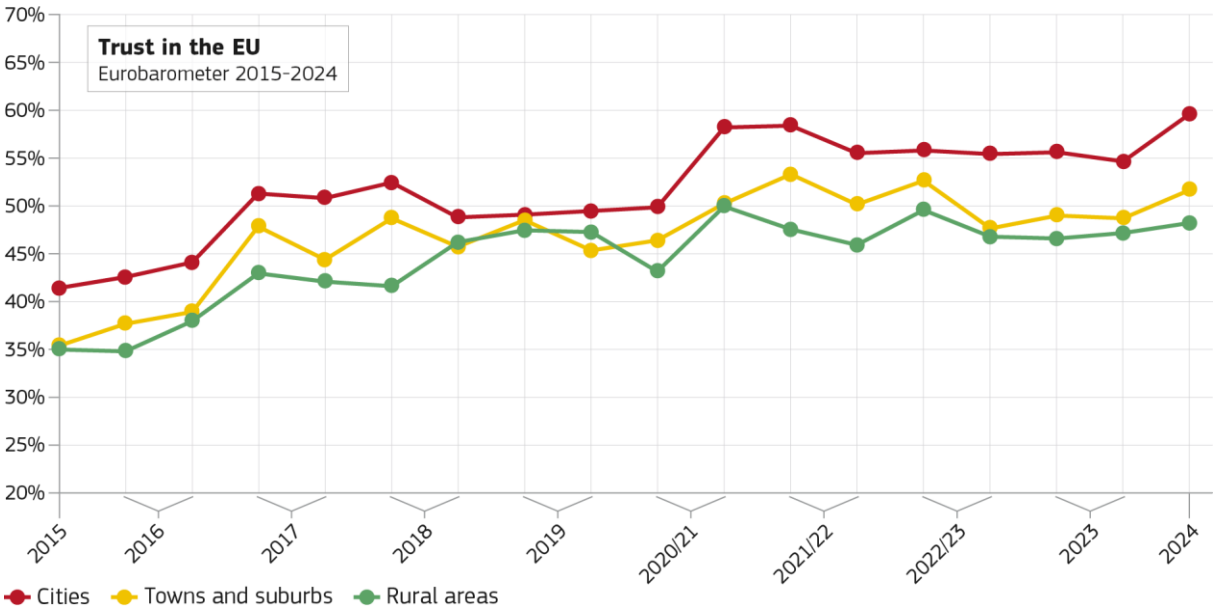
On the other hand, the evolution of **trust in national governments shows smaller differences by degree of urbanisation** (**Figure 3**). During the past ten years, rural areas have generally

[3] Individual records are publicly available for download at the GESIS portal of the Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences (*https://www.gesis.org/*),

[4] Respondents were posed the following question: *How much trust do you have in certain institutions? For each of the following institutions, do you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it?* Possible replies for each particular institution were *Tend to trust/Tend not to trust/Don't know*

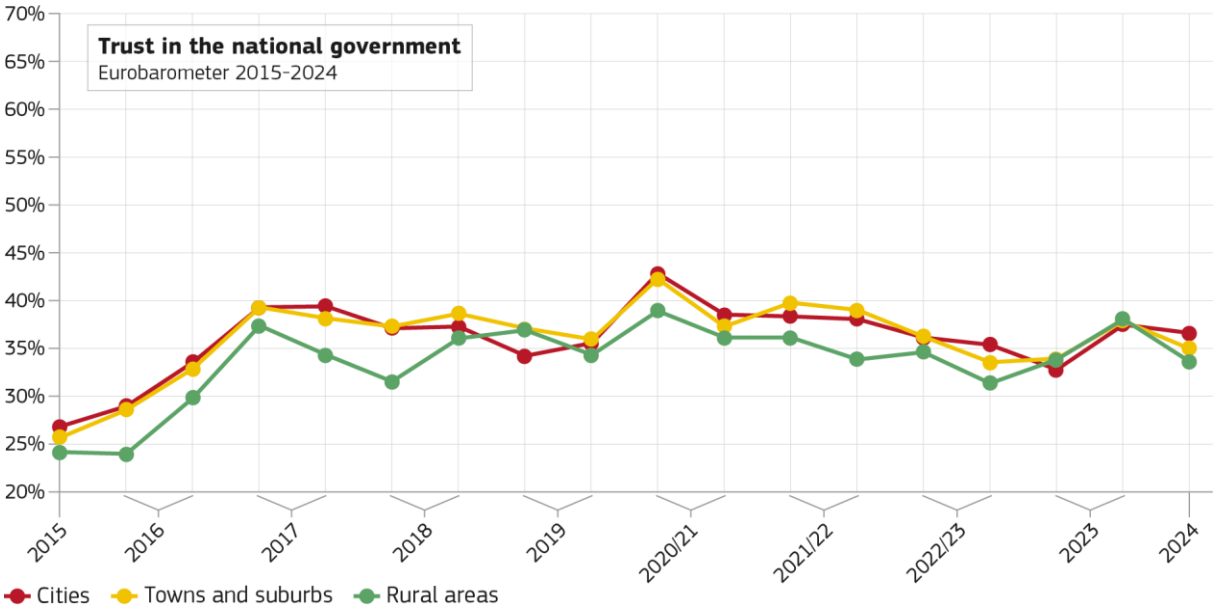
placed less trust in their national governments than cities, but the urban-rural gap has remained small (3 pp on average over the studied period). Despite a slow decrease in recent years, trust in national governments remains higher than 10 years ago across all three classes. In 2024, 37% of respondents in cities affirmed their trust for national governments, followed by towns and suburbs (35%), and rural areas (34%).

Figure 2. Trust in the EU by degree of urbanisation in EU Member States during the 2015-2024 period.



Source: *Own elaboration from Standard Eurobarometer individual records.*

Figure 3. Trust in the national (nationality) government by degree of urbanisation in EU Member States during the 2015-2024 period.

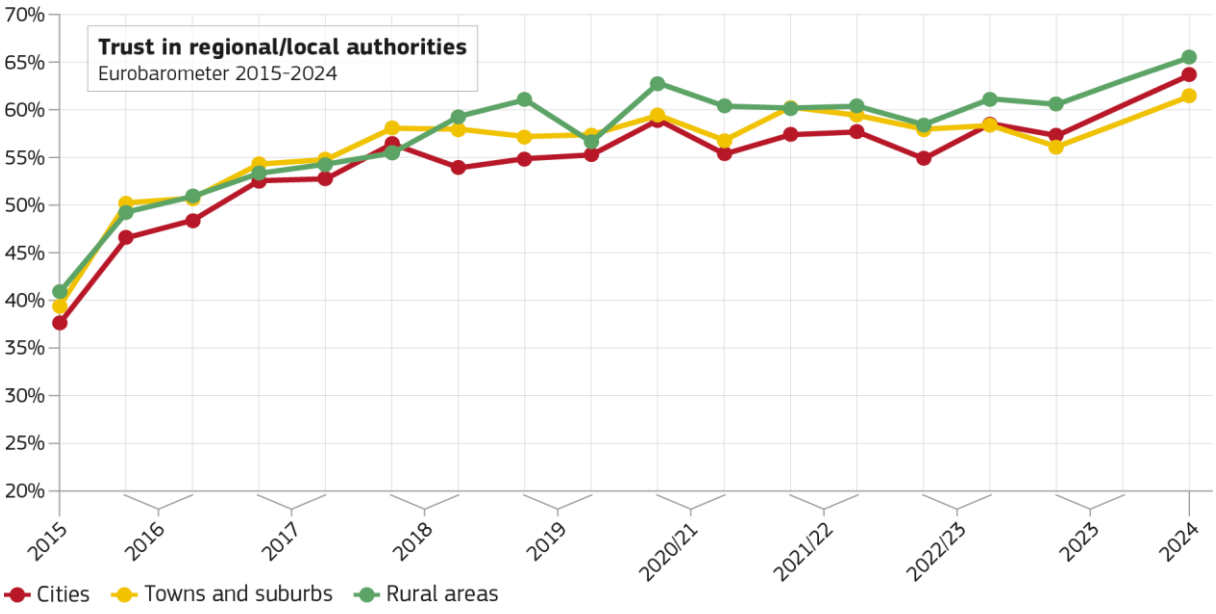


Source: *Own elaboration from Standard Eurobarometer individual records.*

In terms of regional and local authorities, trust from rural citizens is generally highest (**Figure 4**), even if differences between the three classes are small: during the last 10 years, rural trust has been higher compared to trust in cities and towns and suburbs by an average of 3 and 1 pp, respectively. Since 2015, trust in regional and local authorities has steadily increased, reaching 65% in rural areas in 2024, followed by cities (64%) and towns and suburbs (61%).

These trends highlight the importance of local and regional government in rural areas. While rural trust in the EU has increased over the past decade it remains lower than in cities and towns, but governance levels closest to their territories consistently enjoy high levels of trust in rural areas. Furthermore, data from the World Risk Poll[5] in 2023 shows that, in the EU's rural areas, more citizens feel that neighbours care a lot about them (24%), a share that is lower in towns and suburbs (22%) and cities (18%). This suggests that the involvement of local authorities and communities can be an important asset to develop and implement effective policies for rural development.

Figure 4. Trust in regional or local public authorities by degree of urbanisation in EU Member States during the 2015-2024 period.



Note: *no data for fall 2023.*
Source: *Own elaboration from Standard Eurobarometer individual records.*

2.2 RURAL TRUST IN GOVERNMENT SHOWS LARGE DIFFERENCES ACROSS MEMBER STATES

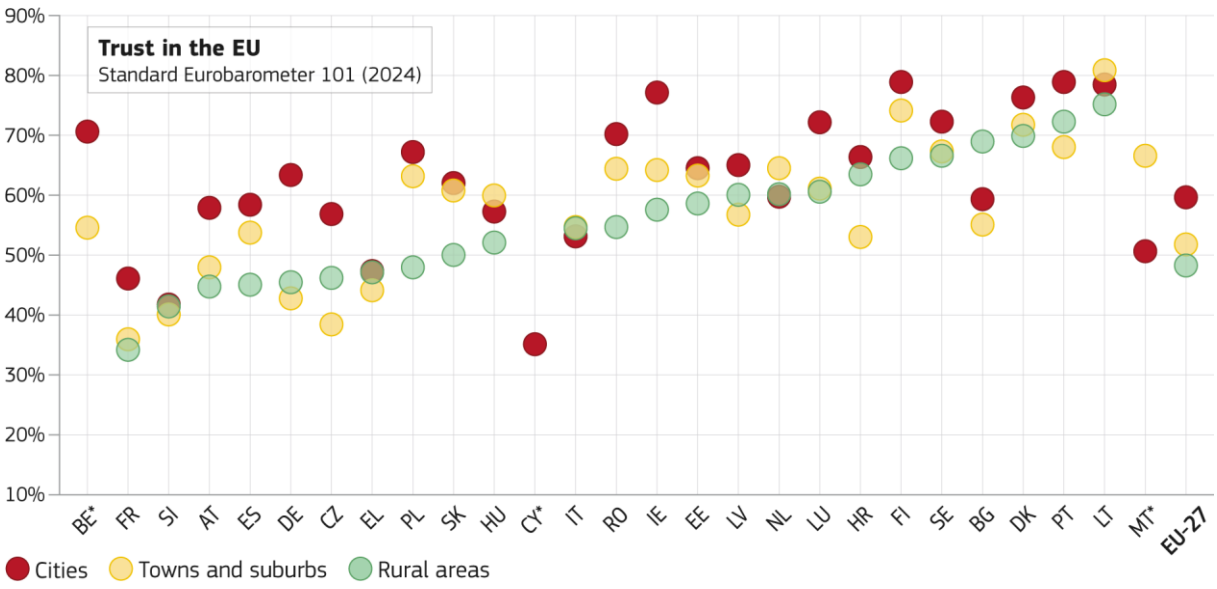
Trust in different levels of government can vary significantly between the EU's Member States and their rural areas, towns and suburbs, and cities. In this section, we evaluate these differences based on the latest available records of the Standard Eurobarometer at the time of this analysis (wave 101 of spring 2024). The dataset contains around 26 000 records for the 27 EU Member States.

[5] Data are available at https://www.lrfoundation.org.uk/wrp/world-risk-poll-data

The share of citizens who tend to trust the EU, their national government and the regional/local authorities is computed using population-size weights, non-response/don't know answers are discarded, and results are supressed for sample sizes below 100 records. With most data points being based on 200 to 500 observations, we estimate the maximum margin of error to be between 4 and 7 percentage points (95% confidence level).

Our results show that **trust in the EU presents large variations between rural citizens of different Member States**, ranging from 35% in France to 75% in Lithuania (**Figure 5**). Rural trust in the EU is also high in Portugal, Denmark, Bulgaria, Sweden and Finland, where more than 65% of rural respondents declared that they tend to trust the EU. At the other end, Slovenia, Austria, Spain and Germany show the lowest rural trust in the EU (45% or less). Considering survey respondents from all Member States, rural trust in the EU is lower in rural areas (48%) than in towns and suburbs (52%) or cities (60%), as discussed in section 2.1. In Ireland, Poland, Germany and Romania the urban-rural gap is largest, with rural trust falling more than 15 pp below trust in cities. Rural trust in the EU is at least 3 pp lower than in cities in all Member States with available data except in Slovenia, Italy, Greece, the Netherlands and Bulgaria. Notably, Bulgaria is the only Member State where rural trust is significantly higher than in cities and towns and suburbs (by 10 and 14 pp, respectively).

Figure 5. Trust in the EU in EU-27 Member States by degree of urbanisation (spring 2024).

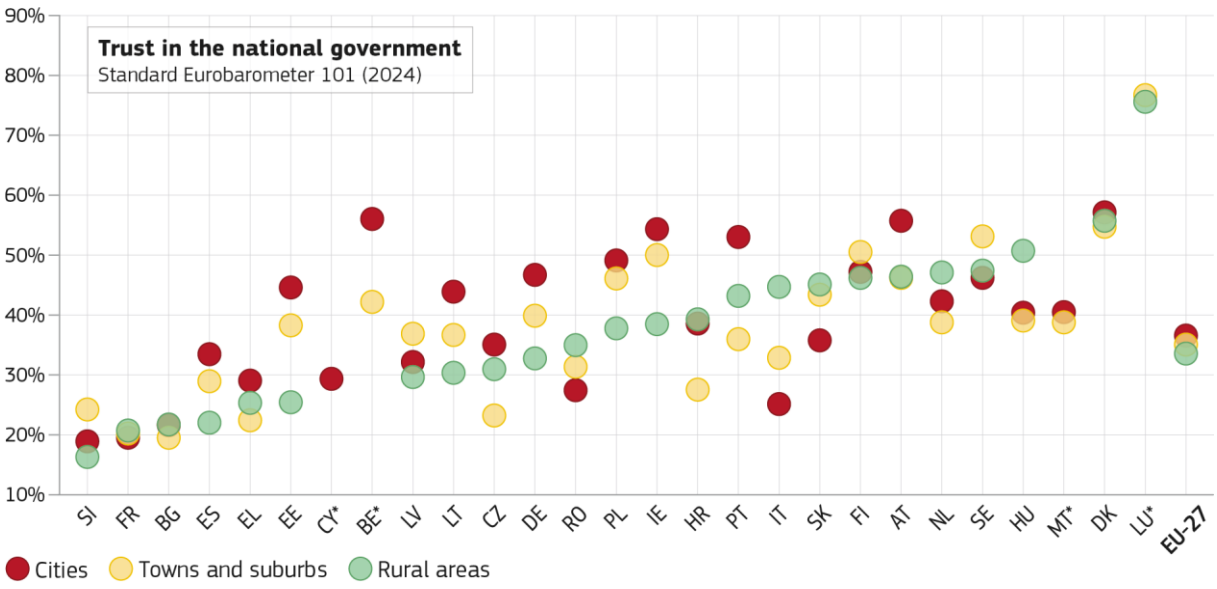


Note: *(*) Values supressed in some categories due to insufficient data (under 100 records).*
Source: *Own elaboration from Standard Eurobarometer 101 (2024) individual records.*

Trust in national governments also shows large differences between Member States, as it can be affected by specific circumstances in each country (**Figure 6**). Luxembourg stands out, with 76% of rural respondents declaring that they tend to trust their national government, followed by Denmark (56%) and Hungary (51%). Rural trust in the national government is lowest in Slovenia, France, Bulgaria and Spain, with levels below 25%. At the EU scale, cities lead in trust in their national governments (37%), followed by towns and suburbs (35%) and rural areas (34%). This urban-rural difference (3 pp in the EU-27) is however much larger in Greece, Lithuania, Germany, Spain and Portugal, where rural trust in national governments is at least 10 pp lower than in cities.

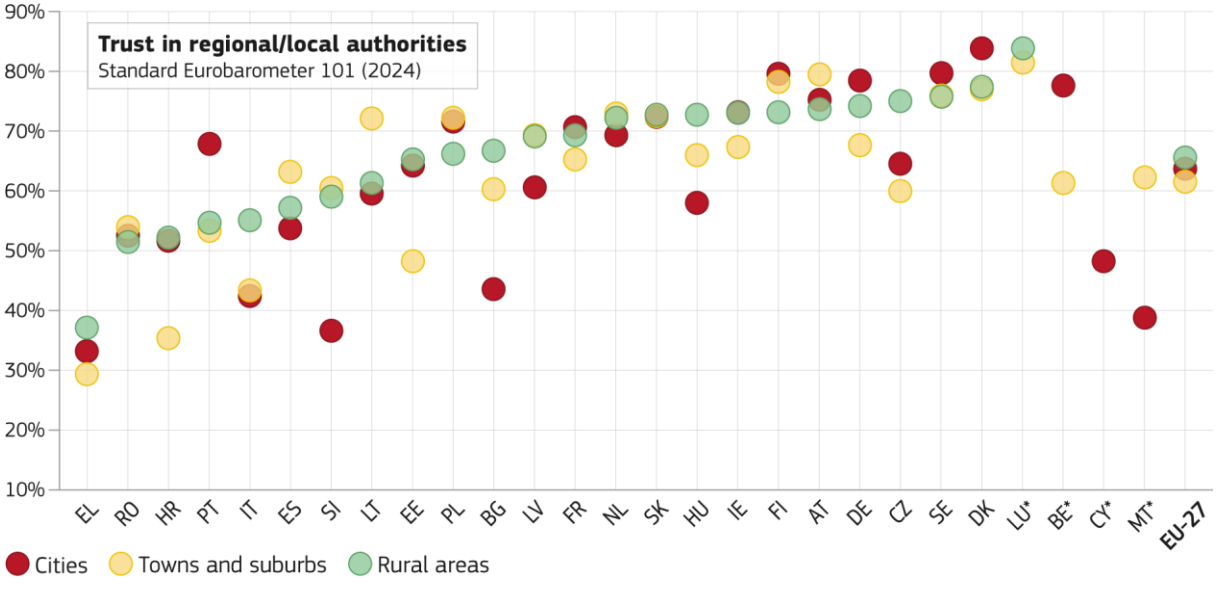
As seen in section 2.1, citizens in the EU's rural areas generally place higher trust in regional and local authorities compared to those in cities and towns and suburbs. We find that, at the Member State level, **rural trust in regional and local authorities is higher than 50% in all EU countries with available data except for Greece**, where it stands only at 37% (**Figure 7**). Luxembourg, Denmark, Sweden and Czechia lead in rural trust in regional and local authorities (75% or higher). Rural areas clearly outperform cities in Bulgaria, Slovenia, Hungary, Italy and Sweden, where rural trust in regional and local authorities is more than 10 pp higher than in cities.

Figure 6. Trust in the national government in EU-27 Member States by degree of urbanisation (spring 2024).



Note: *(*) Values supressed in some categories due to insufficient data (under 100 records).*
Source: *Own elaboration from Standard Eurobarometer 101 (2024) individual records.*

Figure 7. Trust in regional and local authorities in EU-27 Member States by degree of urbanisation (spring 2024).



Note: *(*) Values supressed in some categories due to insufficient data (under 100 records).*
Source: *Own elaboration from Standard Eurobarometer 101 (2024) individual records.*

The analysis of rural trust in the EU's Member States presented in this section reveals that citizen's opinions with respect to their governments vary substantially within the EU, and that large urban-rural gaps exist in some Member States. Similar conclusions were drawn by Luca and Kenny (2024), where political values across the urban-rural continuum were assessed based on the European Social Survey, and found to be very country-specific.

2.3 RURAL AREAS TRUST THEIR LOCAL AUTHORITIES REGARDLESS OF THEIR TRUST IN THE EU

Trust in different levels of government has been found to be correlated, with previous studies showing a positive correlation between trust in national governments and trust in the EU (Talvin et. al., 2021). In this section, we explore the relationship between trust in the EU, trust in national governments and trust in regional and local authorities, and whether it differs for cities, towns and suburbs, and rural areas. As in the previous section, we employ trust levels per Member States from the Standard Eurobarometer 101 (spring 2024).

Our results confirm a **positive correlation between citizens' trust in their national government and their trust in the EU** (**Figure 8**), indicating that Member States that tend to trust more their national government also tend to trust more the EU (or vice-versa). This correlation, however, is substantially stronger for cities (correlation coefficient r = 0.69) than for towns and suburbs (r = 0.53) or rural areas (r = 0.37). In all Member States with available data, except Austria and Luxembourg, rural trust in the EU is higher than trust in national governments. This is particularly true for the Baltic states and Bulgaria, where at most 30% of rural respondents affirmed their trust in the national government, while 59% or more tend to trust the EU. In these countries, votes for parties with a strong anti-EU message have been low during the 2010s,[6] especially in the case of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania (Dijkstra et. al., 2018). Rural areas of France, Slovenia, Spain and Greece show low trust both for the national governments (below 30%) and for the EU (below 50%), while in northern Europe rural trust is high both for the national governments and for the EU (**Figure 10**, top). These patterns have also been found in previous works exploring gaps in trust in different institutions in the EU (Arrighi et. al., 2022).

In the case of rural trust in regional and local authorities, its correlation with trust in the EU is almost negligible (r = 0.07) (**Figure 9**). **Rural citizens in most Member States tend to trust their regional and local authorities regardless of their opinions towards the EU**. Trust in regional and local authorities is higher than trust in the EU in the rural areas of most countries, with the exception of Greece, Portugal, Italy, Lithuania, Croatia, Romania and Bulgaria. The correlation between trust in the EU and trust in the regional and local authorities is somewhat stronger for towns and suburbs (r = 0.33) and even more so for cities (r = 0.62). Greece, Spain and Slovenia emerge as the only three Member States where rural trust in both the regional and local authorities and the EU is lower than the EU average of the trust by rural citizens in the respective institutions (**Figure 10**, bottom).

6 Based on voting patterns for the 2013-2018 period.

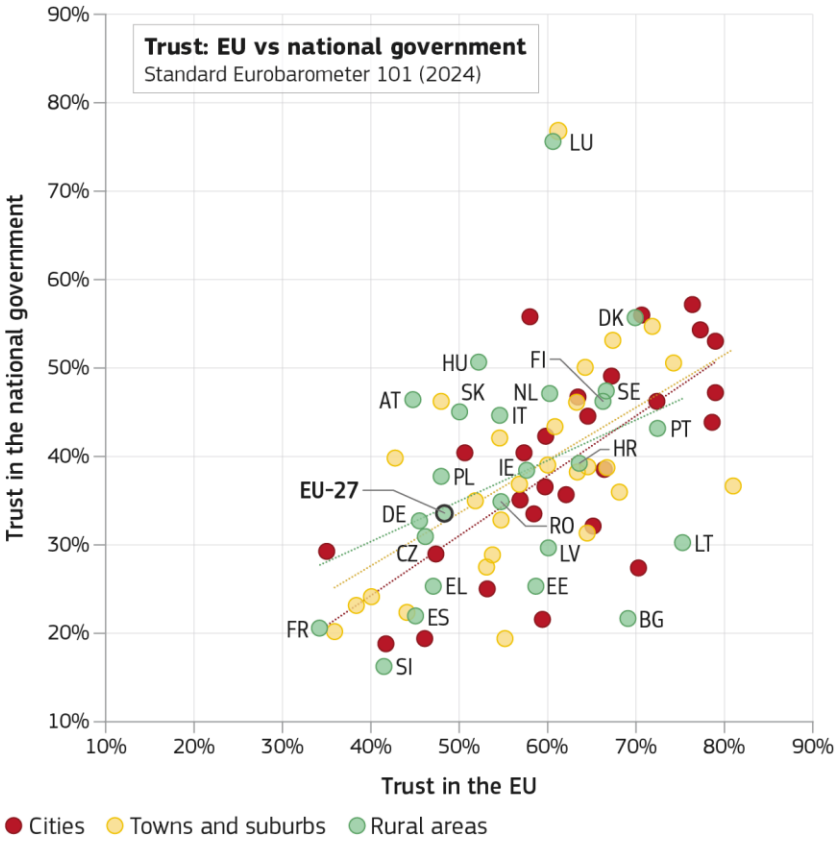


Figure 8. Relationship between trust in the EU and trust in the national government in EU-27 Member States by degree of urbanisation.

Note: *Country tags are shown for rural areas only.*
Source: *Own elaboration from Standard Eurobarometer 101 (spring 2024) individual records.*

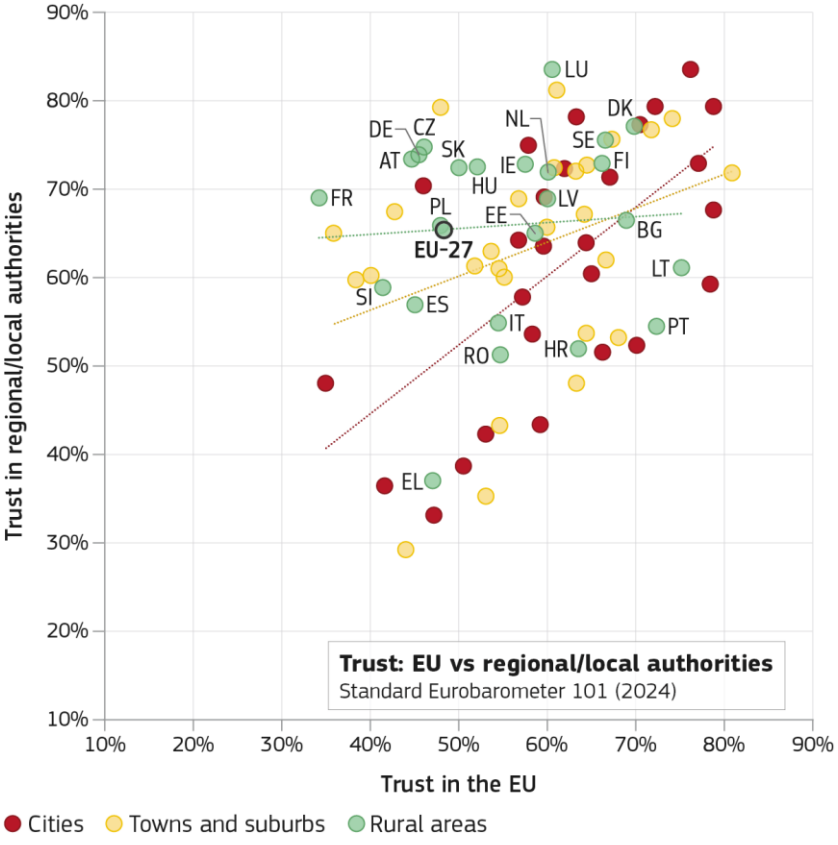


Figure 9. Relationship between trust in the EU and trust in the regional/local authorities in EU-27 Member States by degree of urbanisation.

Note: *country tags are shown for rural areas only.*
Source: *own elaboration from Standard Eurobarometer 101 (spring 2024) individual records.*

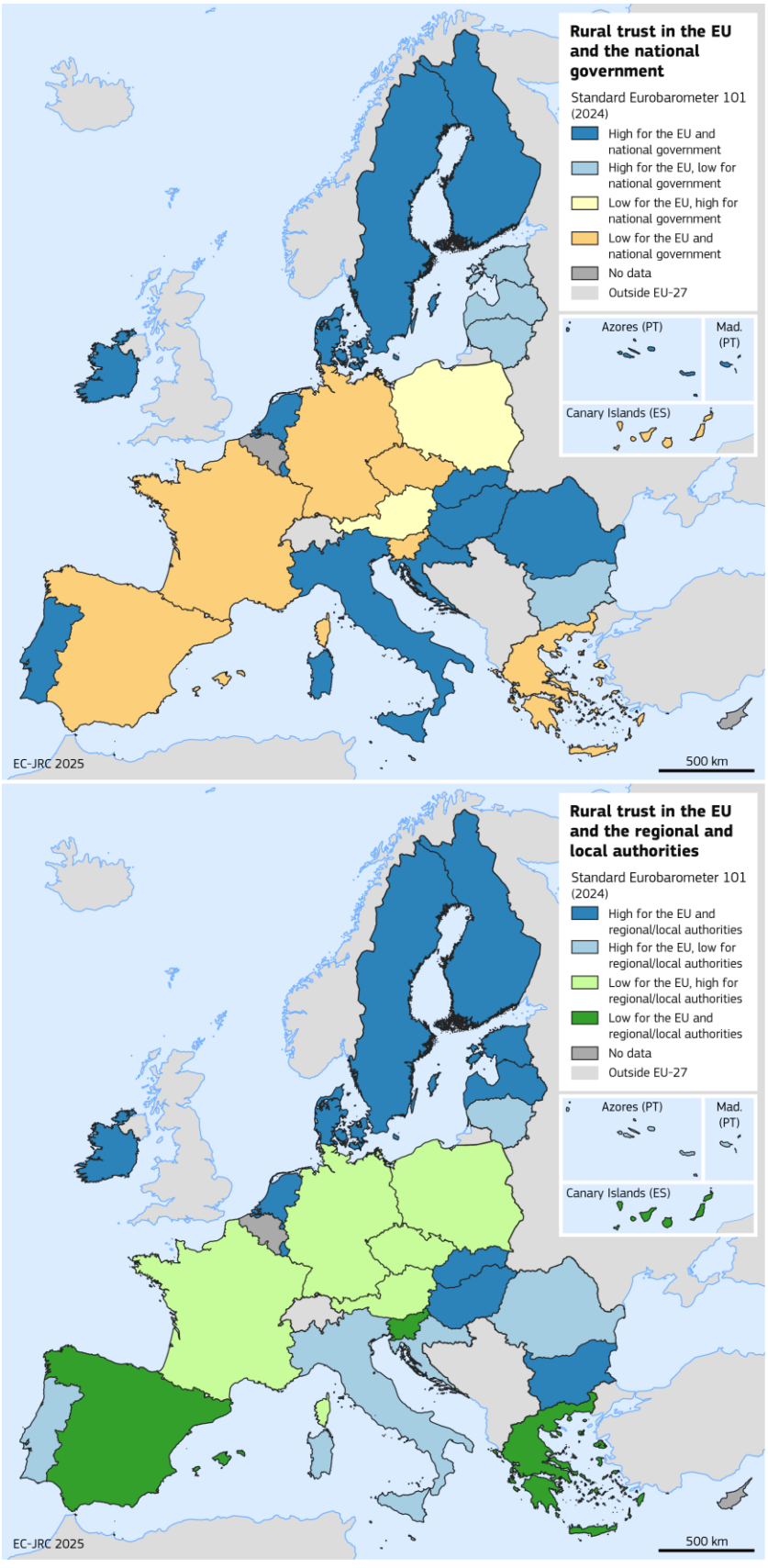


Figure 10. Rural trust in EU-27 Member States. Rural trust in the EU and in the national government (left) and the regional and local authorities (right) are shown in comparison to the rural EU averages.

Note: *High trust indicates values above 48%, 34% and 65% for the EU, the national government and regional/local authorities, respectively.*
Source: *Own elaboration from Standard Eurobarometer 101 (spring 2024) individual records.*

3 Socioeconomic linkages of trust

Citizens' inclinations to trust their institutions can depend on a variety of factors. A recent analysis of 30 global countries (including 18 EU Member States) showed that indeed socioeconomic conditions and demographic characteristics matter when it comes to trust in national governments, linking lower trust to financial insecurity, low levels of education and group discrimination, among other factors (OECD, 2024). In the European context, analyses on voting patterns have associated anti-EU sentiment with rising unemployment, low turnout, lower shares of population with higher education and higher shares of people born outside the EU (De Dominicis et al., 2020; Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2023).

Large gaps in trust have also been identified between citizens who feel they have a say in what their government does and those who do not (OECD, 2024). In the EU context, public consultations have shown that 40% of rural residents feel left behind (EC, 2024), while trust in the EU is consistently lower in rural areas than in cities (see **Figure 2**). Economic challenges, a less educated workforce and higher shares of middle-aged people in rural areas have also been associated to more support for Eurosceptic parties. Moreover, rurality has been linked with lower levels of trust in the EU even after controlling for economic and socio-demographic characteristics, hinting at an underlying 'rural effect' (De Dominicis et. al., 2022; Mitsch et. al., 2021).

Understanding the socioeconomic and demographic conditions that are connected to lower rural trust in the EU can help address this territorial divide and bolster territorial cohesion. In this section, we employ individual records of the Standard Eurobarometer to explore linkages between trust in institutions, territorial characteristics and socioeconomic factors. In section 3.1, we evaluate how trust in the EU changes for citizens with different financial situations, educational background, occupation, age and gender, focusing on how these factors may be connected to rural trust. To identify the most relevant variables, in section 3.2 we fit logistic models to predict trust in the EU. This also allows us to assess whether rurality and urbanity continue to be significant factors for trust in the EU after socioeconomic and demographic aspects are controlled for.

3.1 FINANCIAL DIFFICULTIES AND LOWER EDUCATION LEVELS ARE ASSOCIATED WITH A LACK OF TRUST IN THE EU

The Standard Eurobarometer contains a wealth of information that allows us to study the connections between citizen's trust in institutions and territorial, socioeconomic and demographic factors. Building on previous analyses, we identify age, gender, education, financial situation and occupation as relevant study variables in addition to the degree of urbanisation (**Table 1**). This section is devoted to studying how these factors are connected to trust in institutions, and more specifically to rural citizen's trust in the EU.

As in previous sections, we base this analysis on the spring 2024 survey (Standard Eurobarometer 101). We find that, for this sample, trust in the EU shows the strongest association with trust in the national government and trust in regional and local authorities (**Figure 11**). This is in line with our findings regarding patterns across Member States, which showed positive correlations of trust in different government levels (see section 2.3). In terms of socioeconomic and demographic variables, trust in the three levels of government shows the strongest association with the financial situation of households, followed by education, occupation, age and the degree of urbanisation (shown as *dgurba* in **Figure 11**).

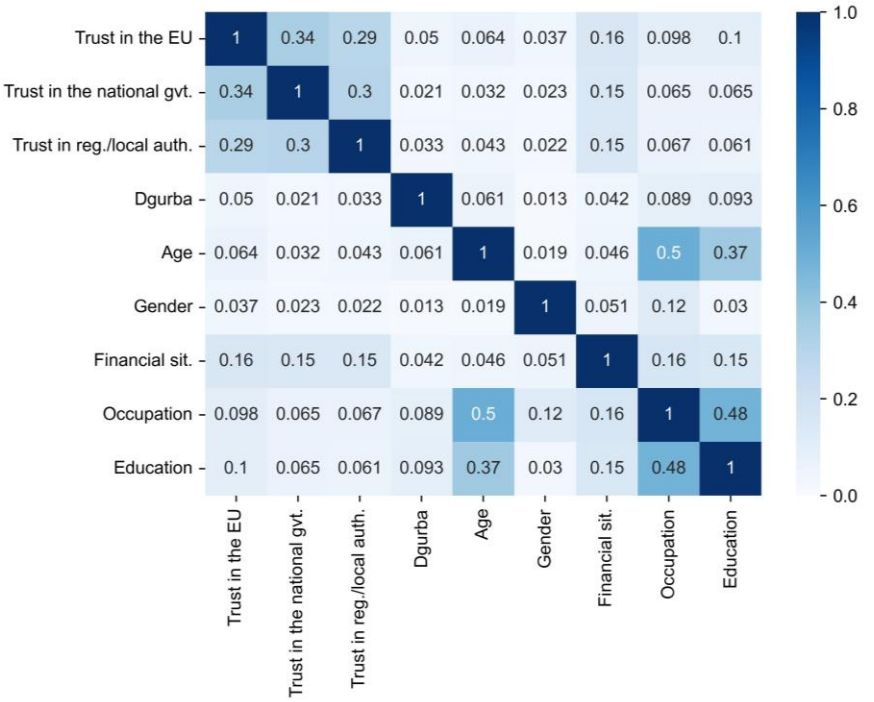


Figure 11. Cramer's V statistic (Chi-2 based) assessing the association between variables in the Standard Eurobarometer 101 (spring 2024).

Note: *Values closer to 1 indicate a stronger association.*
Source: *Own elaboration.*

Table 1. Selected variables in the Standard Eurobarometer and possible outcomes.

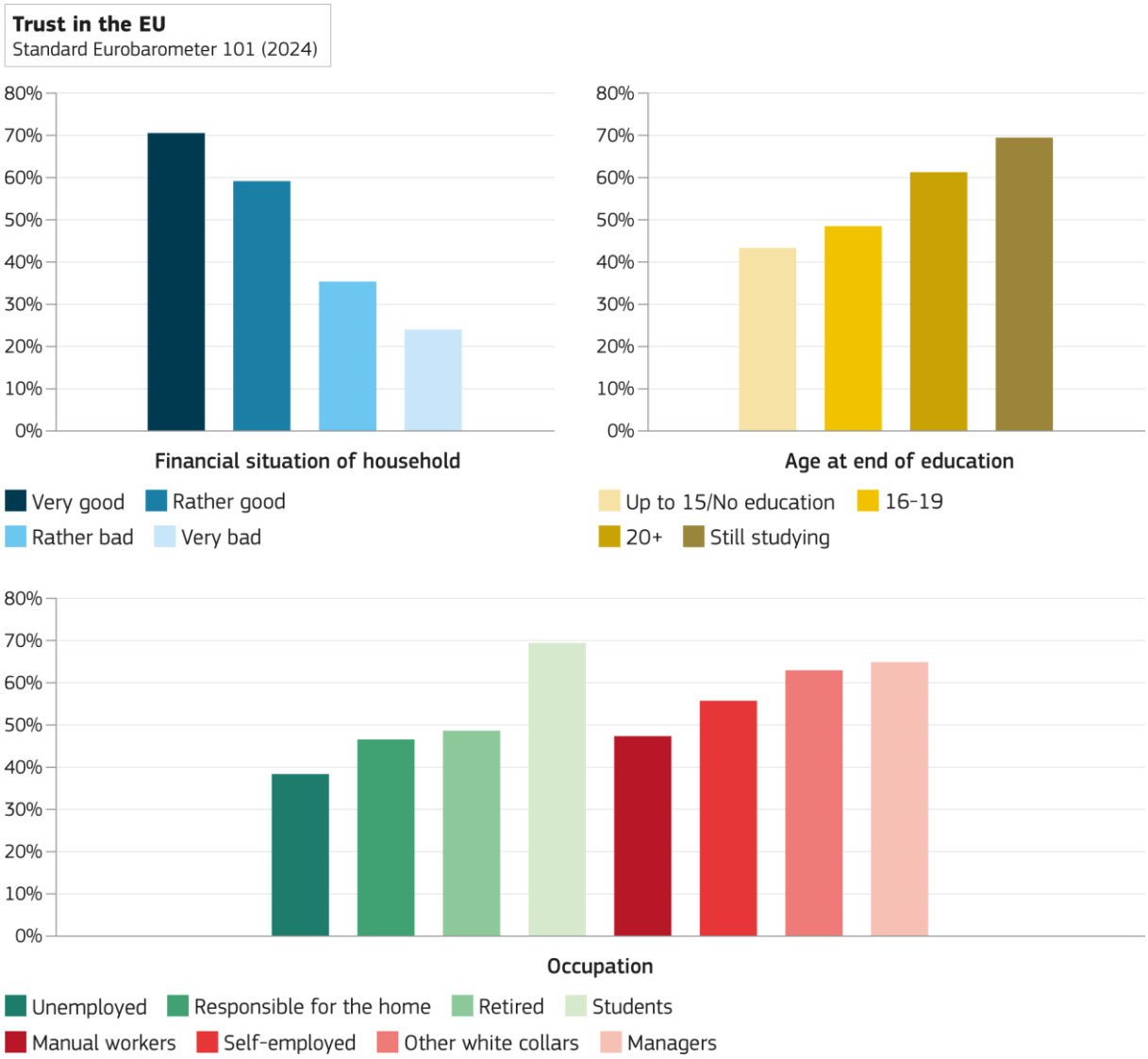
VARIABLE	OUTCOMES
Trust in the EU	Tend to trust, Tend not to trust
Trust in the national government	Tend to trust, Tend not to trust
Trust in regional and local authorities	Tend to trust, Tend not to trust
Degree of urbanisation (dgurba)	Cities, Towns and suburbs, Rural areas
Age group (age)	15-24, 25-39, 40-54, 55-98
Gender	Man, Woman, Other
Age at end of education (education)	No full-time education, Up to 15, 16-19, 20+, Still studying
Financial situation of the household	Very good/Rather good/Rather bad/Very bad
Occupation	Self-employed, Managers, Other white collars, Manual workers, Responsible for ordinary shopping and looking after the home (house person), Unemployed, Retired, Students

Note: *'Don't know'/non-response outcomes are also possible for all variables.*
Source: *Own elaboration from Standard Eurobarometer variable list.*

In terms of the financial situation of households, we find that **trust in the EU steadily decreases with more financial difficulties.** Among respondents who declared being in a very bad financial situation, only 24% tend to trust the EU. This share is almost three times higher for households in a very good financial situation, 71% of which tend to trust the EU (**Figure 12**, top left). Therefore, financial disadvantages in rural areas could have a negative impact on rural trust in the EU. At the EU level these effects are limited: 73% of rural respondents considered their financial situation to be very good or rather good (3 pp less than in cities), and the at-risk-of-poverty rate, which assesses the share of people with less than 60 % of the national median equivalised disposable income, is 1 point higher in the EU's rural areas than in its cities (17.1% of the EU's rural population in 2024) (Eurostat, 2024a). In some Member States, however, rural residents face many more financial difficulties: in Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary the at-risk-of-poverty rate in rural areas was more than 2 times the rate in cities in 2024.

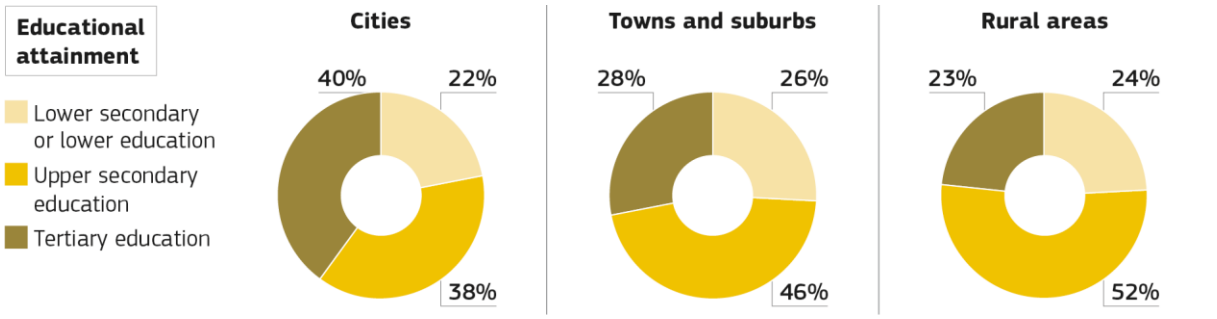
When it comes to **education**, those who ended their full-time education when they were 15 years old or younger and those who never received full-time education are least likely to trust the EU (43%) (**Figure 12**, top right). Trust increases with the age at the end of education, to 61% for those who ended their education at 20 or later, and to 69% for people who are still studying. Education levels are lower in the EU's rural areas, potentially undermining rural trust in the EU. The share of people with tertiary education is lowest in rural areas (23%), followed by towns and suburbs (28%) and cities (40%), as shown in **Figure 13** (Eurostat, 2024b).

Figure 12. Trust in the EU by financial situation of the household, age at the end of education and occupation.



Source: *Own elaboration from Standard Eurobarometer 101 (spring 2024) individual records.*

Figure 13. Share of population aged 15-64 by educational attainment level in cities, towns and suburbs and rural areas in 2024.



Source: Own elaboration from Eurostat (edat_lfs_9913).

When analysing trust in the EU for respondents with different **occupations**, we find that trust levels are lowest for unemployed respondents (38%), persons responsible for the home (46%) and manual workers (47%) (**Figure 12**, bottom). Students and managers are the most likely to trust the EU (69% and 64%, respectively). In rural areas, more residents are employed as manual workers (25%, 5 pp more than in cities), and the combined share of managers and students is 10 pp lower than in cities.

Trust in the EU also decreases with the **age** of respondents. 66% of people aged 15-24 declared that they tend to trust the EU, 16 pp more than those aged 55 or older. Age is however strongly correlated with both education and occupation (see **Figure 11**), which show larger variations in trust in the EU. We also find that 55% of women and 54% of men tend to trust the EU.[7]

The analysis laid out in this section shows that financial challenges, lower educational levels and employment distribution in rural areas create unfavourable conditions when it comes to trusting the EU. In the next section, we explore whether socioeconomic and demographic patterns are sufficient to explain differences in trust by degree of urbanisation, or if rurality is still a relevant factor once all other aspects are taken into account.

3.2 MODELLING TRUST IN THE EU

In this section we employ modelling tools to further assess the connection between trust in the EU, socioeconomic and demographic factors, and territorial specificities. We employ logistic (logit) models, which allow to predict a certain binary outcome based on a set of predictor variables, and identify the most relevant among these.

Here, we set our binary outcome to be trust in the EU (tend to trust/tend not to trust). As predictors, we employ socioeconomic and demographic variables (financial situation, education, occupation, age and gender; see **Table 1** for details), territorial variables (degree of urbanisation and country fixed effects) and trust in other levels of government (trust in the national government and trust in the regional and local authorities). To train and test the models, we combine records from the Standard Eurobarometer 99 (spring 2023) and 101 (spring 2024). The combined sample contains approximately 52 800 records for EU-27 countries, with at least 1000 records per country.
We employ 80% of the sample to train the model and test it with the remaining 20%. We fit three different models with different variable combinations: socioeconomic and demographic variables only (model L1), socioeconomic, demographic and territorial variables (L2), and all variables, including trust in other levels of government (L3).

We find that model L3 (all variables) is the most accurate, being able to correctly predict whether a respondent will tend or not to trust the EU in 74% of cases, followed by model L2 (65%) and L1 (63%). Therefore, the inclusion of territorial variables improves the accuracy of the classification, as well as the addition of trust in other levels of government. We also find that predictions are similarly accurate for respondents in the different classes (model L3 delivers a 75% accuracy for cities, and 73% for towns and suburbs and rural areas).

[7] Insufficient data (less than 50 records) is available for respondents who declared their gender as other (*None of the above/Non-binary/Do not recognise yourself in above categories/Prefer not to say*).

Model coefficients for the financial situation of the household, education and certain occupations (managers) are highly significant in all three models (p-value < 0.01), indicating that these parameters are important predictors of trust in the EU (**Table 2**). The occupations of 'Other white collars' and 'Students' also show predictive power (p-value <0.1 in all models). Gender and age are highly significant factors as well, with women and younger people being associated with higher trust in the EU.[8]

Table 2. Coefficients of logistic regression models fitted with Standard Eurobarometer records to predict trust in the EU.

VARIABLES	MODEL L1	MODEL L2	MODEL L3
Intercept (model constant)	0.12***	-0.051	-1.6***
Financial situation	-0.44***	-0.44***	-0.25***
Education (age at end of)	0.11***	0.088***	0.10***
Occupation: managers	0.25***	0.22***	0.20***
Occupation: other white collars	0.18***	0.14***	0.15**
Occupation: manual workers	-0.028	-0.10**	-0.097*
Occupation: house persons	0.027	0.006	-0.065
Occupation: unemployed	-0.076	-0.12*	-0.086
Occupation: retired	0.19***	0.15**	0.037
Occupation: students	0.35***	0.35***	0.20*
Age group	-0.047***	-0.066***	-0.11***
Gender: women	0.10***	0.077***	0.11***
Gender: other	-0.17	-0.28	0.0093
DGURBA: towns and suburbs		-0.16***	-0.17***
DGURBA: rural areas		-0.21***	-0.29***
Country		***	***
Trust in the national government			1.6***
Trust in regional/local authorities			1.1***
Pseudo-R2	0.045	0.075	0.22
Log-likelihood	-22660	-21956	-18415
Accuracy	**63%**	**65%**	**74%**

Note: **** p < 0.01, ** p < 0.05, * p < 0.1. Reference categories for categorical variables are 'self-employed' (occupation), 'male' (gender) and 'cities' (degree of urbanisation).*
Source: *Own elaboration.*

In models L2 and L3, territorial variables (degree of urbanisation and country) prove to be highly significant. Having set 'Cities' as the reference category for the degree of urbanisation, we find that both towns and suburbs and rural areas are associated with a lower likelihood of trusting the EU, with model coefficients reflecting a stronger effect for the case of rural areas. Given that relevant socioeconomic parameters are controlled for in our modelling scenarios, we conclude that **the degree of urbanisation, and more specifically rurality, is in itself associated with a lower trust in the EU**. Similar results were found in Mitsch et.al (2021), where trust in government is assessed based on data from the European Values Survey, and in Dominicis et, al. (2022), for the

[8] Age is highly correlated with education and occupation (see **Figure 11** for correlations in the Standard Eurobarometer 101). We find that removing age from model L3 leads to an increase in the significance of the occupations 'Student' and 'Other white collars', with only a mild decrease in model accuracy (-0.4 pp).

case of anti- EU vote. Furthermore, the country fixed effect proves to be highly significant for most Member States in both models where it was included, suggesting that national specificities are relevant for trust in the EU.

Trust in the national government and in the regional and local authorities also show high significance in model L3. The inclusion of these factors leads to a substantial improve in accuracy (+9 pp compared to model L2). This is in line with the country-level analysis shown in section 2.3, where we showed that positive correlations exist between trust in different levels of government.

Altogether, these results suggest that differences in urban and rural opinions towards the EU go beyond individual socioeconomic and demographic circumstances. Previous analyses point to a link between rural perceptions of economic, health and education disadvantages compared to urban areas and a feeling of being left behind, or of places that don't matter (Luca and Kenny, 2024; Rodriguez-Pose, 2018). In this context, policies that promote economic development, employment and education with a place-based mindset may improve trust in the EU in rural areas and strengthen territorial cohesion (De Dominicis et.al., 2022).

Limitations of this analysis include the lack of further factors that can impact trust in institutions, such as immigration, depopulation trends, cultural context and historical factors. We are also limited by the absence of more accurate economic data in the Standard Eurobarometer, such as income or level of economic development. Furthermore, our analysis is based on respondents from all the EU-27. As national and regional patterns can differ substantially from EU trends, as discussed in section 2.2, further analyses at a more granular level would be needed to disentangle local challenges and intra-country variations.

4 Conclusions

This work assessed urban-rural patterns of trust in institutions based on respondent-level data from the Standard Eurobarometer Surveys. Results show that, even if trust in the EU is at its highest point since 2008, a considerable urban-rural gap exists, which has increased in recent years (**Figure 2**). In spring 2024, 48% of rural residents tended to trust the EU, 12 percentage points less than in cities (60%), and 4 percentage points below towns and suburbs (52%). Trust in national governments has decreased in recent years, and is lower than trust in the EU in all three classes of the degree of urbanisation. Urban-rural gaps for trust in national governments are smaller: in 2024, 37% of respondents in cities affirmed their trust for national governments, followed by towns and suburbs (35%), and rural areas (34%).

Trust in regional and local authorities has grown considerably over the past decade. In rural areas, trust in these institutions is strong, consistently outperforming cities at the EU level, and reaching 65% in 2024. The fact that rural citizens continue to place their trust in regional and local authorities, but are less inclined to trust the EU or the national governments than those residing in cities or towns and suburbs, highlights the importance of local actors for rural communities.

Across Member States, trust in institutions can deviate substantially from EU-wide trends. For instance, rural trust in the EU ranges from only 35% in France to 75% in Lithuania (**Figure 5**). In Member States where trust in the EU is high, trust in the national government tends to be higher as well, especially in cities (**Figure 8**). A positive correlation also exists between trust in the EU and trust in regional and local authorities, but only for cities and towns and suburbs. In rural areas of most Member States, trust in regional and local authorities is high regardless of their feelings towards the EU.

Analysing correlations between respondent's trust in institutions and their socioeconomic circumstances, we find that financial difficulties and shorter educational periods are linked to lower trust in the EU (**Figure 12**). Only 24% of those who declare being in a very bad financial situation tend to trust the EU, around a third of those who enjoy a very good financial situation (71%). Students and people who ended their education later (20 years or older) are far more likely to trust the EU (61% or above) than those who never received a full-time education or who stopped at 15 or younger (41%). Lower educational levels in rural areas, where the share of people with tertiary education falls 17 percentage points below cities, together with lower rural incomes, constitute potential challenges for trust in the EU.

Furthermore, we find that rurality is associated with lower trust in the EU even when socioeconomic and demographic factors are controlled for. These findings stem from fitting logistic (logit) models to predict trust in the EU based on the financial situation, education, occupation, age, gender, country and degree of urbanisation of the respondents. In models where the degree of urbanisation is included, we find that belonging to a rural area constitutes a highly significant factor (p-value < 0.01) associated to lower probabilities to trust the EU (**Table 2**). This suggests that discontent towards the EU in rural areas goes beyond individual circumstances and could be connected to a feeling of being left behind as territories.

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List of abbreviations and definitions

ABBREVIATIONS	DEFINITIONS
EC	European Commission
EU	European Union
MS	Member State
pp	Percentage points

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