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Addressing the urban-rural divide in the European Union. Fostering solidarity by helping rural areas to catch up

David Piesk

Master's student, Institut Barcelona d'Estudis Internacionals*

Introduction

The term *solidarity* is anchored in the preamble of the European Treaties and is considered a driving force to further the European Union (EU) integration process. Originally stemming from the Latin word *solidus* (unbroken/whole), the term received its current meaning by the French word *solidarité* referring to *mutual responsibility*.¹ However, recent events such as the so-called migration crisis and the rise of anti-European parties in the Member States of the EU reveal that solidarity appears a rather scarce resource these days. This problem becomes particularly visible regarding the urban-rural divide which has shaped identity politics in the last years.

Despite a variety of explanatory factors, this development, describing an increasing sociocultural

and economic gap between urban and rural areas, has two underlying forces, namely *globalisation* and *digitalisation*. Due to globalisation, firms have been specialising and agglomerating, resulting in greater returns and larger profits from economies of scale, i.e. “it is now even more attractive for firms to locate in better connected urban regions”². In the same vein, digitalisation has been changing the labour market in that there is a growing demand of high-skilled labour, which increasingly moves towards urban regions – a trend at the expense of low-skilled workers in rural areas suffering from a *brain drain*. Due to the loss of high-skilled labour, rural regions face lower income rates than their urban counterparts. This, in turn, creates a vicious cycle as precarious income situations entail *precarious governance*, i.e. “shrinkage places substantial

¹ https://www.etymonline.com/word/solidarity#%20etymonline_%20v_23854

² Kastrop et al. (2019), p.4

pressure on public budgets, which are simultaneously burdened with reduced fiscal income, rising costs and higher social expenditure".³ Consequently, rural areas lack access to infrastructures such as public transport, cultural or banking facilities, grocery shops, and health, with some areas in (pre-dominantly Eastern) Europe even suffering poverty.⁴ Therefore, it should be no surprise that parts of Europe's rural population feel left behind and that recent elections within the Member States have been decided along the line between urban and rural voters. As recent research⁵ has also proven that urban and rural population differ along their identities, the need for supporting rural areas to revive a common sense of mutual solidarity appears quite urgent, especially given the recent rise of populist parties declaring a withdraw from the EU as one of their main goals – Brexit should serve here as a cautionary example. Against this background, certain measures on EU, Member State and societal level appear well suited to address current challenges.

1. Provide rural areas with far-reaching (digital) infrastructure

In 2017, with the *EU Action For Smart Villages*, the EU started a series of initiatives within rural development, research, transport, energy, and digital policies to tackle the above-mentioned challenges.⁶ However, there is still a lack of digital infrastructure

in rural areas as access to broadband internet is not widely available.⁷ The provision of basic infrastructure (e.g. public transport, health, etc.) is a further condition to draw level with urban regions.

Member State level: Governments on both federal and state level should prioritise the provision of digital infrastructure to attract firms.⁸ Regarding mobility, a pilot project run by the city of Warsaw (co-financed by the EU) has illustrated how large investment in rural infrastructure improves rural mobility while people rely less on own passenger cars.⁹

EU level: Since 2018, the European Commission considers broadband and connectivity "a first crucial step in digitalising rural areas".¹⁰ It should, therefore, provide more funding (using funding schemes such as the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, the European Regional Development Fund, or the European Social Fund) to promote and accompany further initiatives like Smart Villages or projects seeking to improve rural infrastructure.

Societal level: Local training programmes could further digital skills among rural population including (also urban) volunteers taking responsibility for their fellow citizens as a vivid example of solidarity.

³ EPSON (2017)

⁴ Kastrop et. al (2019)

⁵ Thompson (2013)

⁶ European Commission (2017)

⁷ European Commission (2018)

⁸ Kastrop et. al (2019)

⁹ Bundesministerium für Verkehr, Bau und Stadtentwicklung (2012)

¹⁰ European Commission (2018)

2. Foster policies aiming at innovative and sustainable business strategies

Implement policies targeting innovation and local participation

Member State level: Given an expected decline of the traditional rural labour force due to automation in the future, rural economies rely on innovative business strategies. It is therefore crucial that on a policy level, Member States set the course for co-operation between firms and universities allowing for a rural start-up industry to emerge.¹¹ Moreover, local politics should include rural communities in policy-making processes by providing them with a platform in the context of community-led local development. In this way, they can articulate their ideas and concerns and bring up their experience while social cohesion is fostered in an inclusive way.

Fostering green economy business and tourism

The EU's Common Agricultural Policy has traditionally focused on output rather than on wealth and income levels for local farmers. Consequently, trading large quantities of agricultural goods over long distances inside the EU might have been efficient from a competition perspective but also came at environmental (acid soils, high carbon emissions) and social (low wages) costs.¹² A future European rural economy able to catch up socio-economically on urban businesses should, therefore, invest in the

development of a BioEconomy allowing for regional production and retailing structures (nutrient cycles).¹³ Besides sustainable agriculture, another sector worth being addressed is tourism. Certain pilot projects like the MORO-project in Hamburg¹⁴ or a project by the Devetashko Plateau Association¹⁵ in Bulgaria linking cities with the countryside could present first successes by increasing rural employment throughout tourism projects and making remote areas attractive resorts of recovery for the urban population. These examples further show how regional marketing and retailing structures can be rebuilt.

Member State level: Policymakers should consider allowing local groups to participate in the governance system of different EU funds so that funding reaches most disadvantaged groups.¹⁶

EU level: The EU should concentrate and extend the rural funding on the BioEconomy to further sustainable economic growth and new employment opportunities in structurally weak regions.

Societal level: Civil society actors should encourage citizens to take responsibility for their rural environment and "co-ordinate [...] exchange visits with young people to build an understanding between urban and rural populations and promote cultural exchange."¹⁷

¹¹ Kastrop et al. (2019)

¹² Heinrich Böll Stiftung (2011)

¹³ Bundesministerium für Verkehr, Bau und Stadtentwicklung (2012)

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ Volonteuropa (2016)

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ *ibid.*

3. Ensure social protection

As urbanisation entails a structural change “that benefits urban areas at the expense of rural areas and exacerbates the gap between the two sets of regions”,¹⁸ rural areas must enjoy social protection so long as training programs and new economic environments have not offered new employment opportunities. Moreover, migrant rural workers often work without a social safety net, i.e. they are paid low and with no pension entitlement. A forward-looking and sustainable agricultural economy, however, should ensure workers a decent living by adequate incomes.¹⁹

EU level: Given the expected rise of rural unemployment, solidary concepts like common European unemployment insurance should be re-assessed. Furthermore, European voluntary projects should intensify their dialogue with local civil society actors to ensure target-oriented assistance.

Member State Level: Governments should implement policies granting protection for both those who are currently working in the rural economy and those who are lacking the opportunity.

Outlook

In light of the above-mentioned trends, the increasing gap between cities and the countryside represents one of the biggest current challenges for Europe in the context of social cohesion. If the EU wants to stay a community where its own proclaimed values²⁰ of freedom, equality and human dignity matter, it is crucial that policymakers on European and national level as well as civil society translate these values into policies allowing rural areas to catch up and to be part of an EU integration project that puts solidarity – socially and economically – at the core of its agenda.

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¹⁸ Kastrop et al. (2019), p.7

¹⁹ Heinrich Böll Stiftung (2011)

²⁰ European Union (2019)

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Trans European Policy Studies Association

Rue d'Egmont 11, B-1000
Brussels, Belgium

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