

Transport infrastructure in low-density and depopulating areas

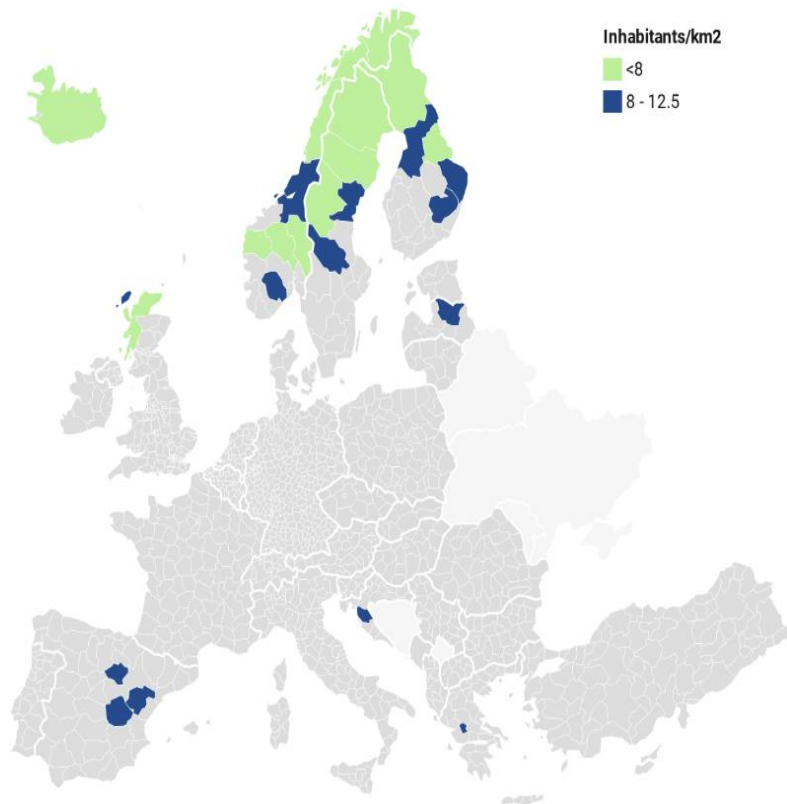


Transport and Tourism

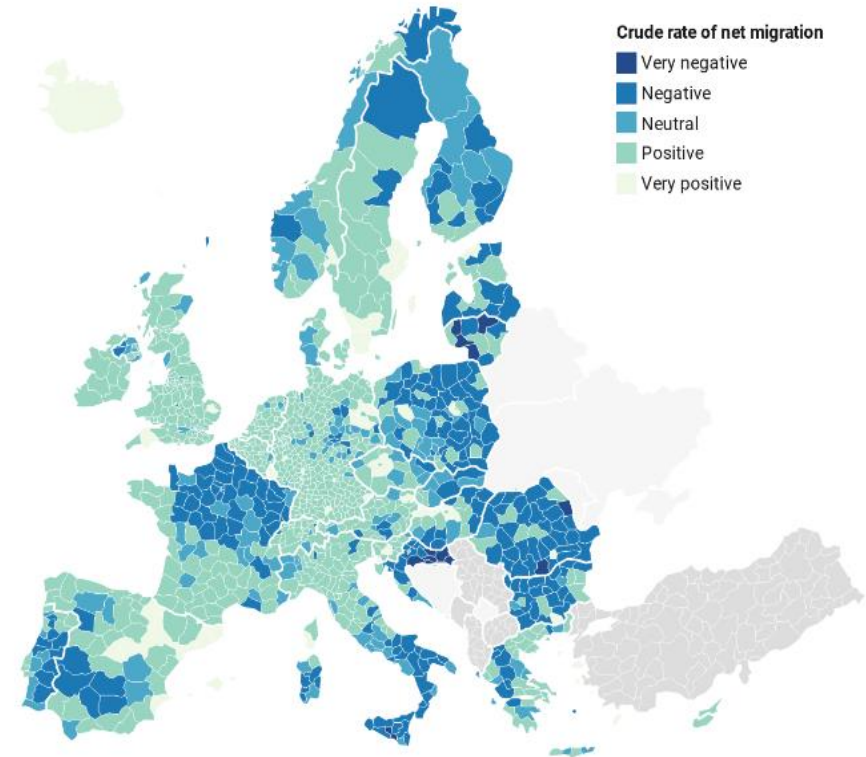
VVA Economics & Policy Transport & Environmental Policy Research

Defining low density and depopulating areas

Low density and sparsely populated areas (TFEU, Art. 174)

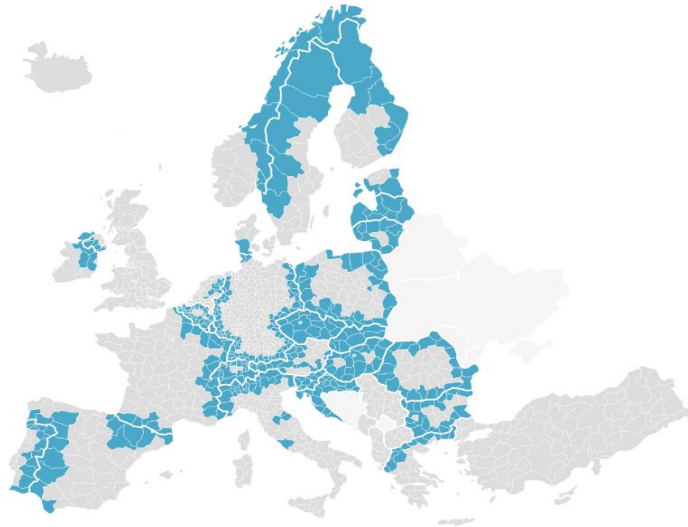


Depopulating areas (CEDDAR)

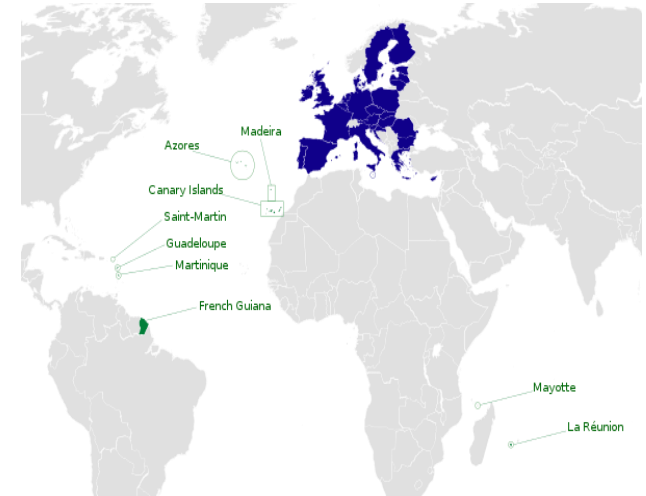


Regions with geographical features

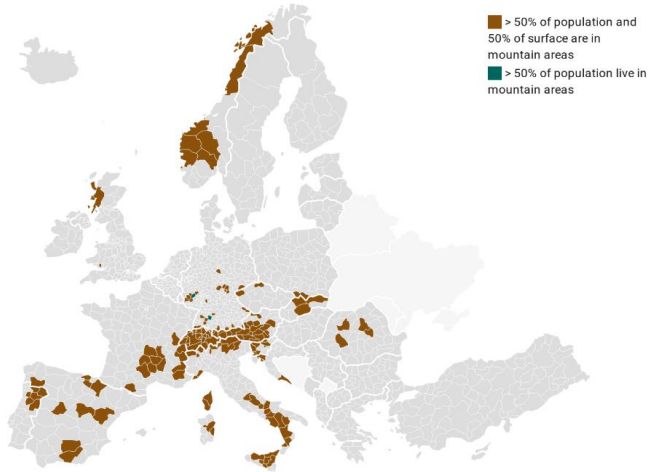
Border regions



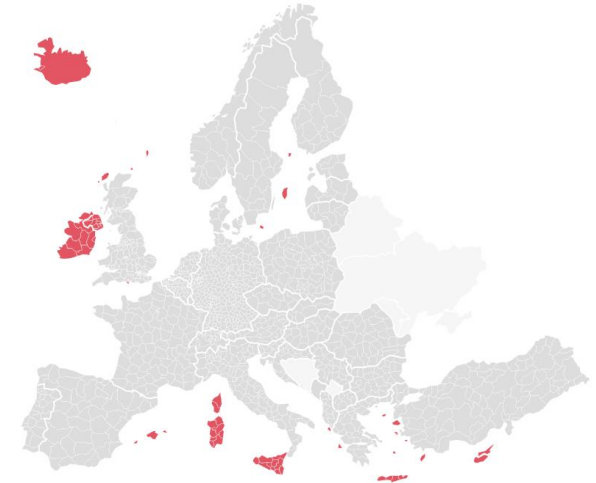
Outermost regions



Mountains regions



Island regions



Defining low density and depopulating areas

Interplay between different features

- Specific geographic features are likely to affect local demographics which may determine the economic context and transport needs. **The interplay of these factors is hardly captured by the existing definitions.**
- Regions belonging to the same category may display **significant differences** in terms of demography, socio-economic context and transport needs.
- Strict classifications may **fail to capture the uniqueness** of many low-density and depopulating regions.
- According to several local stakeholders, the uniqueness of these regions should not be overlooked. Rather than focusing on classifications, **policymakers should analyse local needs which are deeply interconnected to their specific features.**

Transport trends and challenges in low-density and depopulating areas (1/2)

- The European Commission's framework for the development of transport policy in the EU over the last decade - the 2011 White Paper - makes **few relevant references to the needs of 'low-density or depopulating'** regions, although it contains policies that are of importance to such regions.
- The main challenges for transport for the next decade were set out in the 2019 European Green Deal, including the need to significantly reduce transport's greenhouse gas emissions and support for the digitalisation of transport.
- Transport in low-density or depopulating regions faces issues resulting from **the low and dispersed nature of the population, which makes providing conventional public transport challenging.**
- **The distances between such regions and the centres of economic activity** increases the costs of providing public transport services to these regions.

Transport trends and challenges in low-density and depopulating areas (2/2)

- The importance of improving infrastructure and services within low-density or depopulating regions has been underlined by a number of authors.
- **The digitalisation of services** more generally and of transport in particular has the **potential to improve the accessibility of low-density or depopulating regions.**
- This includes improving access to services online, and so reducing the need to travel, and improving **access to a range of transport services**, including on-demand and shared transport services that will be able to complement conventional public transport services.

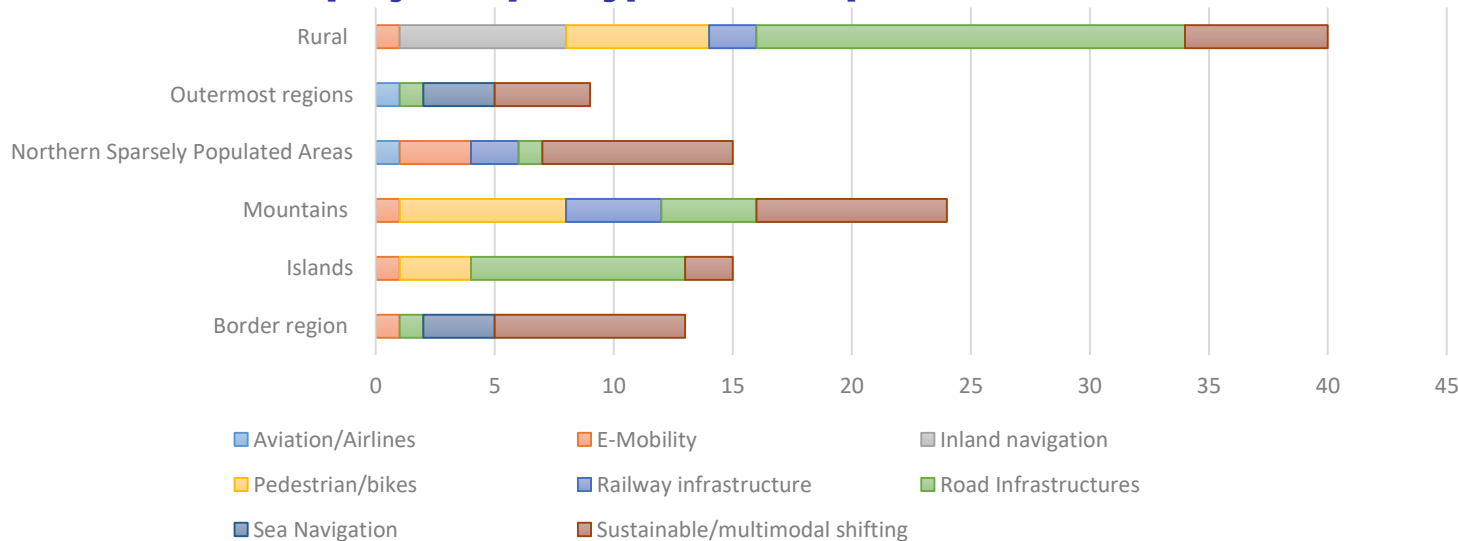
Combining efficiency and equity: assessing EU and national policy (1/3)

- Regional and Cohesion Policy are the bulk of EU support to transport policies and projects in low-density and depopulating areas, especially through the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF).
- Except some references and exemptions granted to sparsely populated areas and outermost regions, **EU Regional Policy does not have a specific approach** to low density and depopulating areas. In fact, most of them are included in larger Operational Programmes addressing the whole NUTS 2 region.
- The **level of economic development appears to be more important to the definition of objectives** and the selection of projects than demographic and geographical considerations. Indeed, demographic and geographical considerations appear to have limited importance.

Combining efficiency and equity: assessing EU and national policy (2/3)

- Road infrastructure receives the highest share of EU funding – both in terms of total and average budget. In the frame of Cohesion and Regional Policy, traditional transports still have a significant weight in EU policies in low density and depopulating regions.
- It is hard to identify a common approach in terms of types of projects for all types of low-density and depopulating regions.

Number of projects per type of transport mode



Source: Mapping of 19 Relevant OPs (Authors)

Combining efficiency and equity: assessing EU and national policy (3/3)

- Policies focusing on efficiency rather than equity aspects impact greatly on social groups that are already disadvantaged, such as students, the unemployed and the elderly.
- The consideration of equity in EU and national policymaking tends to have a limited scope: in transport policy, **investments are often made based on the number of potential consumers in a certain area.**
- **Green mobility** could be an effective solution to tackle issues in relevant regions, especially if combined with **flexible and demand-responsive transport systems.**

Policy recommendations (EU Level)

- Ensure that **local needs are better addressed through Cohesion Policy and other EU funds** through the design of specific applications of EU policy to low-density and depopulating areas. Two immediate actions can be taken:
 - 1) to clearly mention specific needs and features of low density and depopulating areas in the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF);
 - 2) to make the most of the proposed Digital Europe Programme's reference to smart rural areas.
- **Prioritise the revitalisation of existing transport infrastructure and the provision of links to the TEN-T** in order to close the gap between low-density and depopulating areas and other regions. This should be done through substantial improvement of local infrastructure and by focusing on local needs rather than favouring tourism and long-distance travel.

Policy recommendations (Regional Policy)

- **Consider a NUTS 3** (sub-regional administrative units, such as provinces or departments) **approach to designing transport policies for low-density and depopulating areas**, thus ensuring policymaking is more relevant for their specific needs.
- An alternative approach would be to **better exploit the opportunities of Interreg Programmes**, which often directly cover low-density and depopulating regions.
- Allow the use of **ERDF funding to cover operational costs due to specific demographic and geographical issues in order to partly offset transport inequalities**. This would allow EU funds to finance extraordinary maintenance rather than focusing on flagship investments which are often more expensive and less effective.

Policy recommendations (Regional Policy)

- Introduce **“equity”** as a **horizontal principle in transport policies**, leading policymakers and evaluators to expand the criteria for project appraisal which are too focused on efficiency and disregard distributional effects.
- Focus on **on-demand and shared transport services** to complement conventional public transport. These services seem to be best placed to meet the current needs of the citizens living in these areas and they are also considered to be comparatively cost-effective.

Thank you for your attention

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