



Institute for European  
Analysis and Policy

## **Europe's polarization: from selective deafness to furious voices**

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Around a third of European Union citizens live in regions or provinces where the average income today is lower than it was twenty years ago. Their economic conditions have progressively detached them from those of the rest of European citizens and, in many cases, this has contributed to a diminished sense of belonging to the European project. In the same period, a very aggressive political language developed, which made the democratic debate more polarized. The tone of public discourse has become hostile against the elites and Brussels and the electoral base of Eurosceptic parties has grown. In the next European elections of June 6-9, 2024, populist and anti-European parties are expected to post big gains.

The regional or sub-regional character of the European malaise has so far been particularly difficult to understand even for traditional parties, focused as they are on the representation of individual countries' interests through national governments and on the modalities of cooperation between national governments in Europe. Anyone considering the distance in average incomes between the member states of the European Union would also see that the gaps have been progressively narrowing. This justifies the rhetoric of traditional parties regarding the effectiveness of common policies in reducing distances between states and resulting in mutual convenience.

If one looks closer at the citizens, i.e., at the sub-regional level, one will see that a number between 135 million<sup>1</sup> and 145 million<sup>2</sup> inhabitants, approximately one-third of the total population of the EU, feels estranged from European "convergence" and, indeed, is falling behind other European citizens.

Fig. 1<sup>3</sup> shows that income per capita disparities between the national average levels (orange dashed lines) and those between the different regional (left-hand panel) or sub-regional (right-hand panel) areas move in the opposite direction. Data referred to the euro area are very explicit in showing the same pattern: as nations grow closer, provinces and local communities grow apart.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, the discomfort felt in several local communities is lost in the statistics on the convergence between member states and struggles to be heard at the national and European levels.

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<sup>1</sup> EU Commission: "Forging a sustainable Future Together" <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2776/974536>

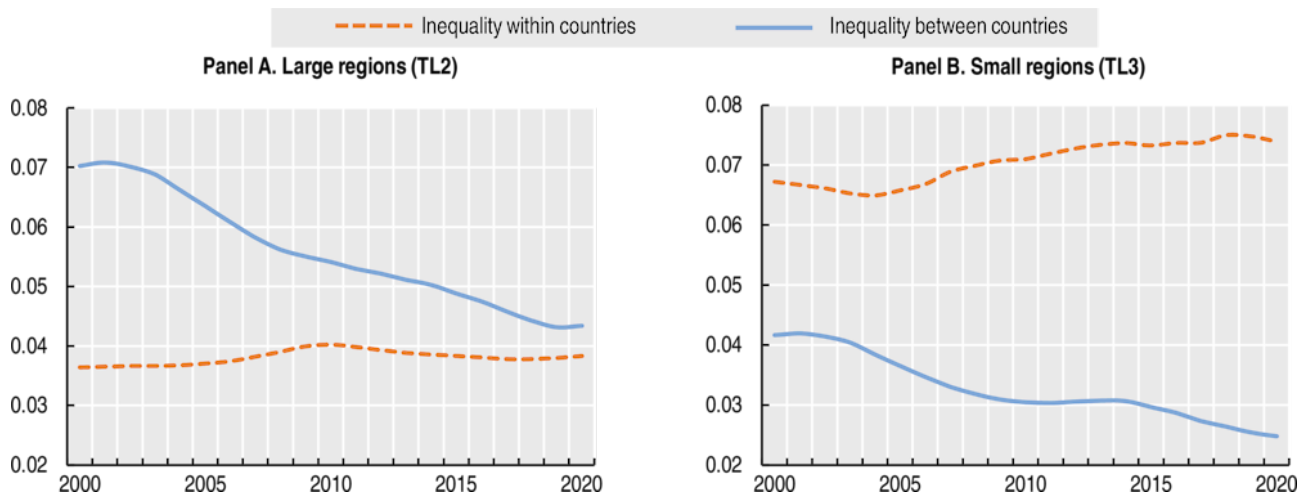
<sup>2</sup> Istat "La politica di coesione e il Mezzogiorno, vent'anni di mancata convergenza" 13 June 2023.

<sup>3</sup> OECD: Regions and Cities at a glance Fig 1.7 <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/14108660-en/1/3/1/2/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/14108660-en&csp=355ee23bb469df35bc8b9adb40cbfd3d&itemIGO=oecd&itemContentType=book>

<sup>4</sup> C. Bastasin: "Secular Divergence" Brookings 2019

[https://www.brookings.edu/wpcontent/uploads/2019/05/FP\\_20190516\\_secular\\_divergence\\_bastasin.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wpcontent/uploads/2019/05/FP_20190516_secular_divergence_bastasin.pdf)

## The Inequality Index 2000-2020



This phenomenon of "selective deafness" has created a gap between the language of national and European elites and that of "left-behind" citizens. Parts of European society no longer seem to know how to communicate with each other. Before the euro crisis, reflections based on the 'dialogical' theory of politics<sup>5</sup> advanced a vision of Europe as a "public sphere" capable of mediating between political authority and the people, thanks to a multiplicity of continuous and simultaneous civic dialogues conducted across cultural and national borders. The divergence of single subregional areas within national constituencies has been obscured by the antagonistic rhetoric between member states during the euro crisis, weakening and distorting the role of Europe's public sphere as a mediator with European citizens.

New political actors emerged exploiting the malaise by radicalizing important sections of the electorate who had until then remained in the background. The exasperated dialectic has shifted the issue of economic hardship towards the issue of political identity, intensifying the polarization of society. On sensitive issues such as the opening of borders, the defense of democracy, gender and even the EU's relationship with immigration, the political conflict has exasperated the modest identarian differences of society, leveraging the economic discomfort of the left-behind. The repercussions on the stability of democracy are strong.

### Divergence vs. Inequality

Almost one European in three feels that they are part of an area that has been slipping to the economic and political margins of the common European project. It is not surprising that over the last twenty years a double-edged anti-European sentiment has developed, one that concerns both those who feel their living conditions have been irreversibly deteriorating for too long and those who find themselves in the opposite situation, that is, they see their well-being as dissonant from the surrounding conditions, and they do not want to share the

<sup>5</sup> Patrizia Nanz: "Europolis - un'idea controcorrente di integrazione" - Feltrinelli (2009).

bad luck of the neighboring communities. Besides the “left-behind”, a different category of citizens, the “not-with-them”, has assumed a political voice.

This phenomenon of “divergence”, i.e., detachment from the average conditions of societies that lasts for decades, should be considered carefully to understand the risks that democracy is running in Europe. Divergence, accelerated by the technological and geo-economic transformations underway, is often confused with the generic inequality of citizens’ economic conditions. If the problem is inequality, it would be enough for citizens to choose the government that guarantees them their preferred income distribution: raising taxes on the rich, if they think there is too much inequality; or by doing the opposite, if they believe that incentives for the dynamism of the most enterprising are necessary. When the problem is one of inequality, political systems can offer the response preferred by citizens and then perhaps change it in the next electoral round. But if the problem is divergence, that is, a structural and decades-long dynamic of impoverishment (or enrichment) of a geographical area, an industrial sector, or a profession, the traditional democratic systems of “redistributive alternance” can be of little use and a language of mistrust, anti-system, anti-European, and often anti-democratic ideas develops. This rhetoric can shape politics and influence society, making it increasingly polarized.<sup>6</sup>

## The role of polarized political language

To counteract divergence, it is not enough to rebalance the distribution of income; instead, long-term political and economic commitments are needed that credibly link the malaise of some to the well-being of others. In fact, divergence is a very insidious disease and not even major structural interventions are guaranteed to work. In eastern Germany, almost 1,700 billion euros have been invested, very modern activities have been created, the income of citizens has increased dramatically, and their freedom to choose their destiny has grown. However, the discontent has remained, as if the “identity wound” of those who are considered at the social rearguard requires generations to be cured or, in the meantime, needs to seek retribution, placing the blame for their discomfort on some groups of individuals who are even lower in the perceived hierarchy of society. Hence, the paradox of antimigrant rhetoric being so virulent in areas almost devoid of migration. Tones and language in the political debate have exceptional responsibility in these cases because they represent the medium between reality and the way politics presents it to the citizens.

While the average incomes of eastern German citizens have increased, albeit without managing to converge entirely towards those of their western compatriots, in other European regions the decline is much more noticeable and the sense of backwardness more justified. They are not only the citizens of some regions of Mediterranean Europe, among which the Southern Italian ones stand out, but, according to calculations by the European Commission, also the inhabitants of French regions such as Lorraine and Picardy, Belgian Wallonia, Slavonia, and the internal regions of Croatia. At the end of 2023, a protest arose in many rural provinces of France, Belgium, Germany, Poland, Austria, and other countries, against - in a way that is both

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<sup>6</sup> Steffen Mau “Triggerpunkte”: Konsens und Konflikt in der Gegenwartsgesellschaft | Warum Gendersternchen und Lastenfahrräder so viele Menschen trigger – Suhrkamp Verlag 2023.

irrational and obvious due to its symbolic character - those common European institutions that guarantee European farmers protection from the global market.

At the same time, even developed urban areas, which should be considered among the winners, want to protect their advantages because they fear setbacks. They often find themselves simultaneously at the heart of the national production system and on the margins of global technological development. A dangerous dynamic has set in since the vorticose digital transformation of economic structures jeopardized traditional productions. According to a recent report by the European Commission on cohesion policies, even some provinces in Lombardy, a part of Piedmont, the Irish Midlands, or the areas around Lisbon in Portugal are losing pace and are transforming from being attractors of industrial development to not cutting-edge service areas, if not rent extractors. The structural transformation has had an impact on citizens' perception of their future, either in the weaker or the stronger areas. Eventually, in an ultimate paradoxical twist, *divergent* citizens - either the left-behind, or the not-with-them - *converge* in the fear of their future, compounded by dramatic military and strategic challenges at Europe's borders. The political consequences of these different forms of decline in the heart of Western democracies will be measured in June when the results of the European elections are counted.

## **Divergence and polarization in the European elections**

The sense of decline among European citizens is likely to have significant repercussions on the June 6-9 elections for the renewal of the European Parliament. Center-right and Far-right parties, traditionally resisting institutional integration and common policies, are likely to achieve significant success. It is still unlikely that the right-wing parties will succeed in obtaining the relevant number of seats that would make them indispensable for any ruling coalition. Polls are not unanimous on this account, and much will depend on the hardly predictable electoral turnout.

The size of the electoral upturns of the right-wing parties will determine whether the legislative majority that controls the EU Parliament replicates the traditional grand coalition, formed by the European People's Party and the Social Democrats, alongside centrist parties such as Renew and the Greens. The European Popular Party's internal dispute between two longstanding German rivals, current EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and EPP President Manfred Weber will be key in tilting the balance between the two options: center-right plus right or grand coalition. Von der Leyen is courting on the right the president of the European Conservative and Reformists, Giorgia Meloni, while Weber, who in the past entertained a dialogue in Bavaria with the extreme right, has now moved closer to the center.

If the grand coalition option is defeated, the European Parliament would emerge much more contentious and polarized. This is likely to radicalize political language and transpose antagonism and confrontation also to the European level.

From the age of "selective deafness" Europe is likely to enter an age of "furious voices". In this case, a further radicalization of the two divergent categories, the "left-behind" and the "not-with-them", seems inevitable.