

Promoting social cohesion and convergence

The political dimension of social cohesion in Europe



The political dimension of social cohesion in Europe



When citing this report, please use the following wording:

Eurofound (2024), *The political dimension of social cohesion in Europe*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

Authors: Arnstein Aassve, Alonso Román Amarales, Luciano Hultberg and Annapaola Zenato (Bocconi University, Milan)

Research manager: Daphne Ahrendt

Peer reviewers: Jan Delhey and Leonie Steckermeier (Otto von Guericke University Magdeburg)

Research project: Social cohesion and the impact of economic and social discontent

Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2024

Print: ISBN 978-92-897-2401-2 doi:10.2806/488083 TJ-09-24-212-EN-C

PDF: ISBN 978-92-897-2402-9 doi:10.2806/051385 TJ-09-24-212-EN-N

This report and any associated materials are available online at <https://eurofound.link/ef23012>

© European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2024

Reproduction is authorised provided the source is acknowledged.

For any use or reproduction of photos or other material that is not under the Eurofound copyright, permission must be sought directly from the copyright holders.

Cover image: © wetzka/Adobe Stock

Any queries on copyright must be addressed in writing to: copyright@eurofound.europa.eu

Research carried out prior to the UK's withdrawal from the European Union on 31 January 2020, and published subsequently, may include data relating to the 28 EU Member States. Following this date, research only takes into account the 27 EU Member States (EU28 minus the UK), unless specified otherwise.

The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound) is a tripartite European Union Agency established in 1975. Its role is to provide knowledge in the area of social, employment and work-related policies according to Regulation (EU) 2019/127.

European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions

Telephone: (+353 1) 204 31 00

Email: information@eurofound.europa.eu

Web: <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu>

Contents

	Executive summary	1
	Introduction	3
	Policy context	3
	Methodology	4
1.	Political dimensions of social cohesion	7
	Defining social cohesion	7
	Drivers of social cohesion	8
	Voice, exit and social cohesion	9
	Institutional legitimacy and social cohesion	10
2.	Voice and exit	11
	Measuring voice and exit	11
	Trends in voice and exit over the past 20 years	14
	Driving forces of voice and exit over the past 20 years	22
	Voice and exit during the COVID-19 pandemic	25
	Key takeaways on voice (protesting) and exit (not voting)	27
3.	Distrust and dissatisfaction	29
	Measuring distrust and dissatisfaction	29
	Trends in distrust and dissatisfaction over the past 20 years	29
	Distrust and dissatisfaction during the COVID-19 pandemic	38
	Key takeaways on distrust and dissatisfaction	41
4.	Institutional legitimacy, voice and exit: A new approach	43
	Determinants of distrust over the last 20 years	45
	Distrust and dissatisfaction during the pandemic	48
	Key takeaways on institutional legitimacy, voice and exit	53
5.	Conclusions	55
	Policy pointers	56
	References	57
	Annexes	59
	Annex 1: Determinants of voice and exit in the ESS	59
	Annex 2: Determinants of voice and exit in the <i>Living, working and COVID-19</i> e-survey	61
	Annex 3: Correlation of the components of distrust and dissatisfaction	62
	Annex 4: Correlations between and internal consistency of distrust and dissatisfaction	64
	Annex 5: Determinants of distrust and dissatisfaction in the ESS	65
	Annex 6: Determinants of distrust and dissatisfaction in the <i>Living, working and COVID-19</i> e-survey	67

Country clusters

Cluster	Countries
Nordic	Denmark, Finland, Sweden
Continental Europe and Ireland	Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, Netherlands
Western Mediterranean	Italy, Malta, Portugal, Spain
Central and eastern Europe	Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia
Eastern Mediterranean and Balkan	Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Romania

Source: Eurofound (2014a)

Executive summary

Introduction

In the past two decades, Europe has faced a series of challenges. The 2007–2008 financial crisis, which led to an economic recession and austerity, was followed by the European debt crisis in 2010, a migration crisis in 2015 and the Brexit referendum in 2016. More recently, Europe was hit by COVID-19, the worst pandemic since the Spanish flu, and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has resulted in a severe inflation crisis. In addition, important structural changes are ongoing: the population is ageing rapidly, challenging our social security systems and intergenerational solidarity; rapid digitalisation is changing labour markets; and the consequences of global warming are now starting to be felt on the European continent. Given these challenges, policymakers have begun worrying about the social relations that hold the EU together, partly because of the recent increase in political polarisation, the weakening of social cohesion and the increase in discontent with institutions across Europe.

Against this backdrop, it is important to investigate whether people who choose not to participate in the political process are more likely to express distrust in institutions. Are certain countries more likely to express dissatisfaction through stronger political activities? Do cohesive societies enable a climate of trust and participation? As social cohesion is characterised by togetherness, resilience and a focus on the common good, how does it affect political participation? Focusing on the political dimensions of social cohesion, this report demonstrates how social cohesion has evolved in Europe and, in particular, how political participation is directly related to the legitimacy of political institutions.

Policy context

Social cohesion is a challenging concept to define, but it is associated with strong social trust, well-functioning communities, political participation, engagement and social inclusion. Social cohesion comes with improving social trust, which is associated with high economic prosperity, low inequality and low corruption. The political dimensions of social cohesion include institutional legitimacy (how much citizens trust and approve of institutions) and citizens' political participation. Therefore, stronger cohesion is expressed through stronger institutional trust, which is important for a healthy functioning of democracy and hence fundamental to the EU, and citizens being politically engaged.

The onset of austerity after the 2007–2009 financial crisis was interpreted by many as an institutional failure, worsening the public's perception of politicians' management of public finances and their integrity. Globalisation has disrupted traditional industries in many European countries. In this new political landscape, many populists leveraged the increase in migration flows partly generated by the refugee crisis triggered by the conflict in Syria in 2015.

It is clear that the consequences of these crises have differed across the EU Member States. For instance, the austerity following the 2007–2008 financial crisis was far worse for some countries than for others. Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain experienced a dramatic surge in youth unemployment, and any reversal in that trend was hampered by the subsequent European debt crisis. Other countries, for example the Nordic countries, fared considerably better.

It is also clear that the crises have had different impacts on social cohesion. The economic recession of 2008 was different from the COVID-19 pandemic because blame attribution differed and these crises did not affect the same social strata of the European population.

Over the past two decades, Europe has seen a rise in political polarisation and populism, a trend that manifests, in part, through anti-establishment attitudes and, in some cases, a drift towards authoritarian rule. Several indicators suggest that trust in national establishments and institutions has eroded, which is usually accompanied by increased discontent.

Key findings

- There was no evidence of a decline in political social cohesion in the past 20 years in Europe. Despite the existing disaffection, citizens have consistently participated in the democratic process, including voting, over the past two decades. Their engagement appears to increase during times of crisis, such as during the financial crisis in 2007 and 2008, the European debt crisis of 2010–2012 and the COVID-19 crisis.
- Unemployment is a key factor in political participation. There are notable differences across Europe; for instance, unemployment does not result in stronger political participation in the Nordic, western Mediterranean and central and eastern European regions, whereas unemployment resulted in stronger political participation in continental Europe and Ireland.

- Unemployment is important for political engagement through protesting: the higher the unemployment rate, the higher the levels of protest.
- Political activity tends to be higher in areas where the population is older and better educated. Surprisingly, economic prosperity and migration rates do not seem to play a significant role, except in eastern Mediterranean and Balkan countries, where political engagement is notably higher.
- Electoral absenteeism, on the other hand, is influenced primarily by unemployment. Unemployed individuals are generally less likely to vote, and rural areas tend to have lower voter turnout.
- Electoral participation is closely linked to political legitimacy: citizens are more likely to vote when they have confidence in their political institutions.
- There is a tendency for regions with higher levels of protest to also have higher voter turnout, indicating a correlation between active engagement and voting behaviour. When there is a dip (at least a slight one) in non-voting, we see an increase in protest.
- Institutional distrust differs between regions. For example, those in Nordic countries show considerably less distrust in their institutions than those in continental Europe. Economic factors, such as economic development, tend to decrease institutional distrust, although the influence of unemployment is relatively minor.
- There is a positive connection between engagement in political activities and institutional trust. The effect of satisfaction with democracy and the government on voter absenteeism is six times larger than on political engagement. To put it simply, the connection between voter turnout and discontent is significantly more robust than the link between political involvement and discontent.
- When dissatisfaction in institutions goes up, so does distrust, and vice versa. In particular, distrust in institutions and dissatisfaction appear to increase during hardship, such as during the 2008 economic crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Policy pointers

- Staying employed and securing work opportunities are crucial factors. Unemployment stands out as the primary cause of reduced political involvement, which leads to dissatisfaction with institutions. While providing income support during economic shocks is essential for immediate relief, it is equally important to create employment opportunities.
- During crises, unemployment rates tend to rise more dramatically among young people. It is crucial for policymakers to focus their efforts on this group, as a lack of employment opportunities for young individuals can have lasting negative effects on their long-term political engagement.
- To ensure employment opportunities for young people during crises, we must enhance access to education to enable them to build resilience and better prepare themselves for navigating an increasingly uncertain future. A greater focus on addressing and developing job guarantee schemes is equally important.
- Creating a positive feedback loop between social cohesion and political participation is vital. Strengthening social cohesion increases political engagement and vice versa.
- There is no uniform trend of growing political discontent across Europe. Instead, there are significant variations between different nation states. Consequently, there is not a one-size-fits-all policy approach that can be effective everywhere.

Introduction

The last two decades have been turbulent ones for Europe. At the turn of the new millennium, there was an optimistic outlook within Europe as the new common currency was introduced, concomitant with reasonable economic progress and European enlargement. But Europe soon faced a series of challenges. The 2007–2008 financial crisis brought about an economic recession and austerity, and was followed by the European debt crisis in 2010. Europe then faced the 2015 migration crisis, rapidly followed by the Brexit referendum. More recently, Europe and the rest of the world were hit by the worst pandemic since the Spanish flu. As if that were not enough, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has resulted in an inflation crisis whose full consequences are yet to be seen. These events have happened in parallel with other structural changes. Europe's population is ageing, a phenomenon that is rapidly threatening our social security system and perhaps also intergenerational solidarity; a rapid process of digitalisation is changing European labour markets; and the consequences of global warming are starting to be felt in Europe. In the face of these challenges, scholars and policymakers are concerned about the social relations that hold the EU together. A new narrative has arisen – one of increased political polarisation, weakened social cohesion and strengthened discontent with institutions across Europe.

This report builds on and extends earlier analyses by Eurofound (2018) that provided a comprehensive overview of social cohesion in the EU Member States based on the European Quality of Life Survey and linked social cohesion with individual well-being and quality of life. This report adds to earlier work by looking at trends using survey data produced during the pandemic. It also offers an alternative angle to the concept of social cohesion: it uses the framework of Hirschman (1970), thereby focusing on the political side of social cohesion based on the concepts of 'voice' and 'exit'. 'Voice' captures citizens' engagement, as it reflects their willingness to protest against whatever issues they disagree with. If citizens use their voice, it is assumed that they feel it is worthwhile because they will be listened to. 'Exit' is measured by examining citizens' voting behaviour, where not voting is an expression of disengagement, and hence indicates a lack of cohesion. The section 'Voice, exit and social cohesion' in Chapter 1 provides details of how social cohesion is defined in Hirschman's framework.

This report addresses social cohesion based on the political dimensions of legitimacy/illegitimacy, which refers to the maintenance of the legitimacy of major political and social institutions – the state in particular – as mediators among individuals of different interests,

and participation/passivity (Jenson, 1998). It does so by analysing social cohesion based on the framework of exit, voice and loyalty developed by Hirschman (1970). Focusing on these political dimensions, the report seeks to understand how social cohesion has evolved in Europe as a means of holding our societies together and, in particular, how political participation (voice and exit) is directly related to the legitimacy of political systems and their institutions, such as the government, the legal system, the police and the national parliament. Cohesive societies enable a climate of legitimacy, trust and participation, reflected in citizens' political decisions regarding exit and voice. As Eurofound (2018, p. 7) describes, 'social cohesion implies a sense of togetherness, resilience and orientation towards the common good', and political participation is a clear example of that. Both voicing (protesting) and exiting (not voting) should be directly related to the levels of legitimacy in any society, and these components are clear indicators of how politically cohesive societies are.

The insights provided in this report are based on two sources of data. The first is the European Social Survey (ESS). This is a biennial survey that was first conducted in 2002 and gives us the opportunity to explore trends in social cohesion in accordance with the Hirschman (1970) framework. In particular, we identify trends in social cohesion measured through voice and exit for the subnational regions of Europe from 2002 to 2020. The second source is the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey, which consists of five survey rounds implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic. The main purpose of analysing the results of this survey is to understand individuals' expression of political cohesion during the pandemic.

Policy context

Social cohesion is a challenging concept to define, but it is associated with strong social trust, well-functioning communities, political participation, engagement and social inclusion. There is widespread concern about a decline in social cohesion across EU Member States. The worsening of social cohesion matters a great deal. It is closely related to social trust, which is associated with a range of positive societal characteristics, such as high economic prosperity, low inequality and a low level of corruption. However, there is less evidence for trends in the political aspects of social cohesion. This report deals with both the formal and the substantial aspects of the political features of social cohesion. The formal aspect relates to institutional legitimacy, which in the current analysis is measured through institutional distrust and

discontent, whereas the substantial aspect relates to voice and exit. Weaker cohesion would in this setting be expressed through less citizen participation and engagement, which is important because those factors are associated with the healthy functioning of democracy and hence fundamental to the EU. This report captures trends in voice and exit over the last two decades. This period includes several shocks, all of which have challenged the resolve not only of EU institutions but also of EU citizens. The COVID-19 pandemic brought about uncertainty and economic austerity for many. Yet it also highlighted the importance of togetherness, with European politicians coming together in solidarity through, for example, establishing the EU Recovery and Resilience Facility.

It is clear that the consequences of the crises have differed, sometimes rather substantially, across the EU Member States. For example, the austerity that followed the 2007–2008 financial crisis was far worse for some countries than others. Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain experienced a dramatic surge in youth unemployment, with any reversal in that trend hampered by the subsequent European debt crisis in 2010. Other countries, for example the Nordic countries, fared considerably better, as the negative effects were small and only temporary. This heterogeneity has had implications for intra-European migration flows, potentially adding to the damage in the worst-hit countries. Here young and skilled people constitute the majority of movers, sparking concerns about brain drain. In other words, although the crises of the past 20 years have had an impact on the political aspects of social cohesion and discontent, the effects have not been universal.

Over the past two decades, Europe has seen a rise in political polarisation and populism, a trend that manifests, in part, through anti-establishment attitudes and, in some cases, a drift towards authoritarian rule (Funke et al, 2020). Indeed, a host of indicators suggest that trust in national establishments and institutions have eroded in this period, a trend usually accompanied by increased discontent. There are several reasons for this. The onset of austerity has quite naturally been interpreted as an institutional failure, and therefore has worsened the public's perception of politicians' abilities, in terms of both managing public finances and their loyalty. Globalisation is another reason. International trade has disrupted traditional industries in many European countries. In this new political landscape, many populists have leveraged the steady increase in migration flows. The increase was in part generated by the refugee crisis, triggered by the conflict in Syria in 2015. Others have argued that there has been a backlash against cosmopolitan values, typically associated with the establishment of an elite class of people.

Whereas the number of studies linking crises to institutional distrust and discontent is substantial, less is known about national trends over the past 20 years. Moreover, as the natures of the crises were different, they may have had different impacts on social cohesion. The financial crisis of 2007–2008 was different from the COVID-19 pandemic because blame attribution was different and these crises did not affect the same social strata of the European population. This report makes an important contribution to identifying the differences in trends in the political aspects of social cohesion across countries and between regions within countries. At the same time, it establishes links between these political aspects and institutional discontent. In other words, the report answers the question of how countries differ in terms of social cohesion expressed through voice and exit, and the association of social cohesion with discontent over the past two decades and during the pandemic.

Methodology

Broadly speaking, social cohesion refers to the social functioning of communities, and as such it is a multidimensional concept. There is not much agreement on exactly which factors should be included in the measurement of social cohesion, nor on how those factors relate to cohesion. This report starts by reviewing the conceptualisation of social cohesion in the scholarly literature. It then defines social cohesion in accordance with the framework of Hirschman (1970), and subsequently sets out the way social cohesion is conceptualised in this report. Voice (active participation) and exit (disengagement in terms of voting) are key factors in measuring social cohesion. Importantly, the focus of this report is on the political dimensions of social cohesion (Broadhead, 2021). Chapter 1 covers features of the political dimension. The analysis in this report has two key parts. The first focuses on trends in social cohesion and discontent from 2002 to 2020, and the second examines trends in social cohesion and discontent during the pandemic. The first part of the analysis is based on the ESS, a survey that was first fielded in 2002 and for which the last round was completed in 2020. The observational unit in this part of the analysis is the EU subnational region, also known as nomenclature of territorial units for statistics (NUTS) 2 region. The measures of voice, exit and discontent are derived from individuals' responses to the ESS, resulting in a panel dataset containing repeated observations for the subnational regions. Voice is measured based on a set of items in the ESS that correspond to respondents' engagement in social and political activities. Exit is determined based on whether the respondents voted in the most recent election or not.

Finally, discontent is measured based on respondents' dissatisfaction with or trust in institutions. The second part of the analysis is based on the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey, which was organised by Eurofound and was fielded during the pandemic. In terms of measuring voice, exit and discontent, this survey is similar to the ESS. However, for this part of the analysis the unit of observation is the respondent.

The two surveys served two complementary purposes. The ESS was used to perform a descriptive analysis to identify country and subnational trends from 2002 to 2020. That analysis was concluded with a random effects regression analysis, to enable us to (i) identify the drivers of voice and exit and (ii) understand how the variations in exit and voice relate to discontent. The *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey was used to document the trends in exit and voice during the pandemic, and, again, through a regression analysis, we established the drivers of those trends.

1 Political dimensions of social cohesion

Strong social trust, well-functioning communities, participation, engagement and social inclusion are what we tend to think of when the phrase ‘social cohesion’ is mentioned. The concept has gained popularity in recent decades, not least because many worry that cohesion is weakening (Eurofound, 2018). From a policy point of view, this increasing interest has been associated with the uncertain economic outlook and the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated inequalities and discontent among the European population. Cohesion and trust are essential resources for recovery after any disaster, including the pandemic (Jewett et al, 2021). In particular, specific drivers have had a significant impact on social cohesion, including economic growth, the COVID-19 pandemic, political polarisation, migration and the impact of technological advancement (Broadhead, 2021; OECD, 2021).

Defining social cohesion

Social cohesion is a challenging concept to define, as it is defined differently in the various academic fields in which it is studied (psychology, sociology, political science, economics and public policy). Attempts to agree on a definition that includes important aspects from definitions in these various disciplines have been less successful. As a result, many consider the term a catchphrase-like concept or quasi-concept that is sufficiently flexible to accommodate the political conditions at any given time (Bernard, 1999; Chan et al, 2006).

Jenson (1998) was the first to generally conceptualise what social cohesion means in the different academic fields. Social cohesion is separated into five dimensions (affiliation/isolation, insertion/exclusion, participation/activity, acceptance/rejection and legitimacy/illegitimacy). Broadhead (2021) provided his adaptation of this typology, shown in Table 1, by separating the dimensions of social cohesion from the economic, social and political points of view. From an economic point of view, social cohesion reflects inclusion/exclusion and equality/inequality. The focus here is on equality of opportunity among citizens in economic terms – that is, the market. From a social point of view, social cohesion can be formally understood as the recognition/rejection of diversity in society. It is also often viewed through a belonging/isolation lens, relating to the existence or absence of shared values and a sense of identity.

Table 1: Typology of the dimensions of social cohesion

Dimensions of social cohesion	Formal	Substantial
Economic	Insertion/exclusion (labour market)	Equality/inequality
Political	Legitimacy/illegitimacy (of institutions)	Participation/passivity
Social	Recognition/rejection (tolerance of difference)	Belonging/isolation

Source: Broadhead (2021)

Finally, from a political point of view, the concept is described based on legitimacy/illegitimacy, referring to the maintenance of the legitimacy of major political and social institutions – the state in particular – as mediators among individuals of different interests. Essentially, social cohesion is considered as a measure of participation/passivity, relating to people’s political participation at both the central and the local levels of government.

Nevertheless, an understanding of social cohesion also depends on the perspective or level at which we analyse it. Building on the distinction Lockwood (1999) made between social integration (relationships between individuals or groups) and system integration (relationships between functional parts of a society), Chan et al (2006) define social cohesion as ‘a state of affairs concerning both the vertical and the horizontal interactions among members of society as characterised by a set of attitudes and norms that includes trust, a sense of belonging and the willingness to participate and help, as well as their behavioural manifestations’ (p. 290). Their framework, therefore, comprises two dimensions (horizontal and vertical) and two components (objective and subjective). The horizontal dimension focuses on the relationships between different individuals and groups in society, while the vertical dimension looks at the relationship between the state and civil society. As for the two components, the subjective component includes factors such as trust, sense of belonging and willingness to cooperate. The objective component includes actual cooperation and participation among members of society.

Independent of the actual definition of social cohesion, most scholars agree that cohesion is a desirable characteristic of a social entity and, as such, is not necessarily an individual trait. According to Schiefer and Noll (2017, p. 583), ‘social cohesion is typically seen as a multidimensional construct consisting of phenomena on the micro (for example, individual attitudes and orientations), meso (features of communities and groups), and macro (features of societal institutions) level[s]’. Fonseca et al (2018), in an extensive review of studies using this concept, confirm this three-level approach to defining social cohesion and identify shared characteristics in the approach many institutions and academia take to defining the concept. They generally have ‘commonalities such as well-being of the members of the group, shared values such as trust, and equal opportunities in society’ (Fonseca et al, 2018, p. 241).

Beyond the academic efforts to define social cohesion, the concept is approached more directly in policy documents where it is aligned to the policy objectives. The EU declared that Europe’s economic and social cohesion is a central policy goal. This was confirmed in the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 and reaffirmed by the Lisbon Agenda in 2000. For the EU, social cohesion is something to strive towards, created through the modernisation of social policies, regional redistribution and the establishment of new forms of governance involving more active citizenship and mechanisms for identifying best practices. Meanwhile, the Council of Europe (2010) defines social cohesion as ‘the capacity of a society to ensure the well-being of all its members – minimizing disparities and avoiding marginalisation – to manage differences and divisions and ensure the means of achieving welfare for all members. Social cohesion is a political concept that is essential for the fulfilment of the three core values of the Council of Europe: human rights, democracy, and the rule of law.’

Furthermore, the EU’s definition is more specific and is linked to funding policies aimed at tackling regional disparities between EU Member States. As van der Veen and Kooijman state, ‘the bulk of Cohesion Policy funding ... [is] concentrated on less developed European countries and regions in order to help them to catch up and to reduce the economic, social and territorial disparities that still exist in the EU’ (2019, p. 15). This approach to defining social cohesion focuses on economic indicators as primary drivers, particularly economic instability (Jeannotte, 2000; Hulse and Stone, 2007), in contrast to much of the academic literature considered.

Drivers of social cohesion

Although the literature and the relevant institutions tend to emphasise social cohesion as a desirable characteristic of a community, there is a firm belief that today’s societies display less cohesion than those in the past. Eurofound (2018, p. 3) states that this decline is ‘fuelled by mega-trends in the socioeconomic and cultural spheres of our societies, such as swings in the world economy, globalisation, and intensified migration flows’. We identify three categories of drivers of social cohesion: economic, social and political.

Economic drivers

Several studies relate the performance of the economy to the level of social cohesion in societies, recognising that social cohesion is declining as a consequence of employment crises and growing inequality specifically after the financial crisis of 2008–2009 (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2013; Eurofound, 2014b, 2018).

The process of globalisation, along with its associated economic changes, is often seen as a factor that can erode social cohesion. For instance, the OECD (2017) highlights that persistent unemployment poses a significant threat to social cohesion and can have lasting negative impacts on individuals’ lives. Globalisation is closely tied to the economic performance and growth of European countries. The process can therefore increase inequalities and, consequently, reduce social cohesion. Globalisation and its associated economic changes can exacerbate inequality by reducing social mobility, which, in turn, can reduce trust in institutions and contribute to political and social instability in various ways (OECD, 2017).

Jordahl (2007) argues that long-term economic inequality reduces levels of trust across countries, owing to the resulting disparities in economic status within social networks. This observation is supported by Uslaner (2002), who identifies a country’s economic equality as a key factor in determining levels of trust within societies. In general, people are more likely to trust others in societies with greater income equality (Kawachi et al, 1997; Uslaner and Brown, 2005).

However, Eurofound research (2018) shows that for Europe income inequality has less impact when controlling for other important factors, such as welfare systems and employment rates. Looking at how perceived societal tensions have changed in European societies from 2003 to 2016, Eurofound demonstrates that economic conditions, rather than inequality among members of the population, arise as a more relevant factor in determining economic discontent and social dissolution. If economic factors such as inequality are relevant to social cohesion, we expect that the COVID-19 pandemic had a great impact on social cohesion and trust. The pandemic has been widely recognised as having further exacerbated inequalities, with its

humanitarian and economic impacts dispersing to more vulnerable communities and groups.

Social drivers

In the context of globalisation, global migration and growing ethno-cultural diversity are seen by many as a threat to socially cohesive societies (Beauvais and Jenson, 2002; Chan et al, 2006; Cheong et al, 2007). Eurofound (2018, p. 54) states: 'Ethno-cultural tensions seem to have been intensified by the recent arrivals of large numbers of refugees and migrants in the EU'. These tensions are directly related to the ability of states to manage and integrate harmoniously with that population in society. However, there is also no consensus on how relevant this dimension is to social cohesion. Dennison and Dražanová (2018) undertook a meta-review of quantitative studies in 17 European countries on attitudes to immigration and emigration since 2010. The study found that despite the migration crisis of 2015, attitudes towards immigrants remained constant throughout the period analysed. If anything, in recent years they have become more positive. Europeans appear to want immigrants who can assimilate socially; labour market issues such as professional qualifications are considered important (though less so over time), while racial and religious backgrounds are considered unimportant. Despite this, political agendas are increasingly dominated by anti-immigrant views, which are volatile in nature.

Other social aspects, such as pervasive demographic change, also matter for social cohesion. Critical domains of cohesion include mobility, ageing and intergenerational divides (Broadhead, 2021). Internal migration from rural to urban areas can increase tension between a growing urban middle-class population and an increasingly left-behind rural population. Ageing societies and the intergenerational divide could also be reasons for weakening social cohesion. Finally, Eurofound (2018) also posits that other social factors, such as religion, are important in determining a country's social cohesion. According to Eurofound (2018), interpersonal trust is higher in secularised societies, and religion seems to be a 'tool for exclusion'.

Political drivers

It has been argued that political polarisation undermines social cohesion, particularly in the European context (Broadhead, 2021). According to Broadhead, this occurs in two ways: (i) polarisation reinforces and emphasises the existing divisions in society, and (ii) the polarising political environment challenges the established social norms and opens the door to divisive policies that could enable discrimination. Polarisation can vary from 'left' to 'right' in the economic dimension of politics, but also from 'open' to 'closed' in the social dimension, which puts patriotic citizens in opposition to cosmopolitan liberals.

This feature of polarisation is generally attributed to the use of social media and the development of new information and communications technology. These are often cited as driving social decline through a process of changing social relationships (Beauvais and Jenson, 2002). Tucker et al (2018) identify a triangle of self-reinforcing elements between polarisation, disinformation and social media use. However, Boxell et al (2017) demonstrated that, although mass political polarisation has increased in recent times, this increase was most prominent among citizens least likely to use the internet and social media (Boxell et al, 2017). This observation may not have been equally valid during the pandemic (Eurofound, 2022).

The OECD (2021) argues that other political factors, such as an absence of representation, contribute significantly to weakening social cohesion. Citizens are less likely to participate in society (vote) when they do not see their interests or their outlook represented by a political party, which diminishes their trust in institutions and their confidence in democracy. The OECD (2021) explained: 'They take to the streets to make their grievances heard because they lack alternative mechanisms'. When a political system excludes minorities, or part of the population is not fully represented, there is a lack of cooperation and a decline in social cohesion.

Voice, exit and social cohesion

The political dimension of social cohesion (see Table 1) can be analysed from the perspective of Hirschman's work on voice, exit and loyalty (Hirschman, 1970). From a political point of view, societies express connection through different levels of civic engagement. Voicing (protesting), exiting (not voting) and loyalty (voting) are clear indicators of how politically cohesive societies are.

Looking at these dimensions in the context of social cohesion, one would expect cohesive societies to use protesting as a constructive mechanism, rather than not voting, which is more destructive. Protesting is a clear example of expressing a collective desire to change things, with a shared future in mind. Protestors are confident that there is a political system capable of listening to their demands. On the contrary, exiting or not voting is an example of a group's expression of dissatisfaction with the idea that society will build a shared future together. In a democracy, citizens, and more precisely voters, can voice their unhappiness and threaten not to vote for any candidate who will not act to improve the quality of services. In this context, not voting can be seen as a form of exit. Therefore, a voter can push their political party to change by exiting – that is, voting for the other party or not voting. Alternatively, the voter can use their voice, complaining about the party's views in the hope of spurring reform through different actions. Such actions include protests and

other types of resistance (Dornschneider, 2021). In this report, collective voice is measured based on protest and political participation, and exit based on non-voting.

Institutional legitimacy and social cohesion

The second fundamental component of the political dimensions of social cohesion is institutional legitimacy. This legitimacy rests on individuals' trust in and satisfaction with institutions, and their perception of them as valid mediators for people with different interests. Despite its importance, there is a perception of rising citizens' discontent in European countries following the financial crisis in 2007 and 2008 and the COVID-19 pandemic, which is reflected at the institutional level in citizens' lack of satisfaction with and trust in institutions, the government and political leadership (OECD, 2021; Eurofound, 2022).

The personal frustrations due to these crises are more a collective phenomenon than an individual one, as we consider political trust to be a consequence of institutional performance rather than a characteristic that a person picks up early in life and keeps throughout their life (Mishler and Rose, 2001). Social trust is an example of a 'sticky' characteristic. It is therefore

suggested that there is no simple or quick way to increase it. Despite the differences between social trust and political trust, there is a long-standing notion that generalised social trust and political trust are connected in a mutually reinforcing relationship that helps sustain a healthy democracy (Zmerli and Newton, 2008; Newton et al, 2018; Dinesen et al, 2022).

The analysis presented in this report considers trust in and satisfaction with institutions as a measure of legitimacy when addressing the political dimensions of social cohesion. Chapter 3 of this report shows how distrust in and dissatisfaction with institutions have evolved in the past 20 years in Europe, and analyses how political trust (trust in politicians and institutions) relates to political participation during these years, specifically during economic and social crises. By examining existing research, the report investigates the correlation between institutional trust and political participation, where trustful and distrustful citizens participate differently. For example, Hooghe and Marien (2013) show that more distrustful citizens do not necessarily participate less, but they are more likely to participate through non-institutional engagement rather than formal methods of engagement, such as voting. These include participating in protests, taking part in boycotts, displaying badges and becoming members of specific associations.

2 | Voice and exit

Measuring voice and exit

To measure voice (protest) and exit (not voting) as political dimensions of social cohesion, key data on European voting behaviour and civic engagement are extracted from the ESS. The ESS is a cross-national survey of attitudes and behaviours representative of all people aged 15 and over (with no upper age limit) who are residents of private households in Europe, regardless of their nationality, citizenship or language. Individuals are selected using strict random probability sampling methods at every stage. This report considers the results for 25 EU Member States,¹ for all rounds of the ESS, conducted every two years from 2002 (round 1) to 2020 (round 10).

One of the advantages of the ESS is that it uses the same core module for all rounds, covering a wide range of socioeconomic questions. These include questions on participation in various activities, such as signing petitions, wearing campaign badges and taking part in public demonstrations, and questions on individual levels of trust and discontent. As we will highlight later, it enables us to capture data on not only indicators of political participation, such as voicing and exiting behaviours, but also variables related to legitimacy, such as institutional distrust and dissatisfaction with institutions.

To analyse the trends in political participation between 2002 and 2020, we built a panel aggregating the variables at regional level. We did so specifically using the NUTS classification² of the second hierarchical level (NUTS 2),³ except in particular cases.⁴ This classification was developed and is regulated by the EU for the European countries. The ESS is a cross-national survey, meaning that the respondents change over the rounds. The survey is therefore representative of all European countries involved in each round. Using NUTS 2 aggregate level, we obtained longitudinal information to map out regional trends and differences.

To build the panel, we aggregate each round's individual data at regional level, obtaining regional means for our variables of interest. The final dataset included data from 187 NUTS 2⁵ regions in 25 EU Member States,³ for a total of 1,244 observations over the 10 rounds. It is worth noting that the ESS does not necessarily survey all 25 countries in each round. Countries such as Ireland, Poland and Spain provide data for each round, but others, such as Belgium, Croatia and Italy, present data for fewer rounds. Table 2 shows information about the countries included, sample sizes and data availability for the ESS rounds.

Information on voting behaviour at individual level is provided in the ESS through a question asking respondents if they voted in their country's most recent national election, specifying the month/year of the election. The possible responses were (i) 'yes', (ii) 'no' and (iii) 'not eligible to vote'. We created one binary variable, which takes the value of one if the respondent did not vote (exit), and excluded those who are not eligible from the dataset. For voice, the ESS contains different variables providing information on active political participation. In particular, we build a voice index employing the binary variables for questions regarding if the respondent has ever (i) contacted a politician, (ii) worn a political campaign badge, (iii) signed a petition, (iv) taken part in a lawful public protest or (v) boycotted a particular product in the 12 months before the survey. The voice index is a binary variable that takes the value of one if at least one of the five activities was carried out by the individual. The responses are then aggregated at regional level to form a ratio measuring the proportion of inhabitants in a given region who had voiced or exited at any point during the 10 rounds of the survey, from 2002 to 2020.

1 The analysis is based on observations from 25 EU countries, including Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden. For Germany, observations are only available in the ESS at the NUTS 1 level, whereas for Malta no observations are available in the ESS.

2 The NUTS classification is a hierarchical system dividing the economic territories of the EU and the UK, identified by Eurostat.

3 Rounds 4 to 10 of the ESS collect information for NUTS 2 regions for individuals from specific countries. Countries for which only NUTS 1 information is available are excluded from the rounds' datasets. In countries where the NUTS 2 classification changed between 2008 and 2020, variables were harmonised with the 2021 versions. This is the case for Finland, France, Greece and Poland. In cases where the NUTS classification was amended to include new regions or to change the boundaries of existing ones, the classification was based on the information provided in the ESS for the region at individual level. Notwithstanding, for rounds 1 to 3 the NUTS 2 variable was manually added and harmonised with the classification, using the information from the ESS for the region where possible.

4 For some countries, the ESS only presents individual information for NUTS 1 regions, one hierarchical level higher than the NUTS 2 regions. For Germany, we employ the NUTS 1 classification to describe the trends. For Belgium, data at the NUTS 2 level are available from round 5 onwards.

5 The NUTS 2 regions ES13, ES22, ES23, ES63, ES64, FI20, FRI2, ITC2, ITH2 and ITI2 were excluded from the dataset, as they featured an average of fewer than 30 observations per ESS round.

To measure these variables in COVID-19 times and at individual level, we used data for the 27 EU Member States from the fourth round of Eurofound's *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey. The e-survey allowed people aged 18 or older with access to the internet to complete the questionnaire online. Unlike the ESS, the e-survey applied a non-probability sampling method. Survey participants were recruited using snowball sampling and social media advertisements.⁶ Eurofound launched this online survey on 9 April 2020, amid the first wave of the pandemic. It fielded a second round in June and July of that year, when the first wave had subsided. A third survey round was fielded from February to March 2021, when the pandemic was back in full force, and a fourth round was carried out from October to November 2021. The fifth survey round was fielded from March to May 2022, when the pandemic was ending and the social situation started returning to normal. The survey provides a large number of panel data at individual level from which it is possible to derive insights on distrust, dissatisfaction and political participation. Individuals responded about their basic sociodemographic characteristics, their well-being and levels of trust, their working situation (especially in relation to their work–life balance during the COVID-19 pandemic) and the quality of public services during the pandemic. The *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey provides a longitudinal dataset composed of 92,642 observations. However, as information from non-voters is available only for the last two rounds, while the dissatisfaction index is based only on the fourth round, we consider just the fourth round by treating the sample as a cross-sectional dataset and applying cross-sectional estimating methods.

From this survey, we build variables that capture voting behaviour and participation in political life. To measure exit, we use the following survey question: 'Some people do not vote nowadays for one reason or another. Did you vote in your country's last national election?' Exit is a binary variable equal to one if the individual did not vote, and zero otherwise. For voice, we created a variable using six questions regarding the individual's participation in political life. Participants stated whether they had (i) attended a meeting of a trade union, a political party or political action group, (ii) attended a protest or a demonstration, (iii) signed a petition (including an email or online petition), (iv) contacted a politician or public official (except as part of routine contact arising from the use of public services), (v) commented on a political or social issue online, or (vi) boycotted certain products or companies. Intending to create a unique index for voice, we implemented the two-step procedure used for the ESS sample. First, we created a categorical variable equal to zero if an individual had never participated in political life (that is, if all six variables are equal to zero), equal to one if the individual responded 'yes' to one of the six variables, equal to two if they responded 'yes' to two of the six variables, and so on. Hence, this categorical regressor takes values from zero to six. The second step consists of creating a binary variable from this new regressor, equal to one if the categorical variable is different from zero, meaning that individuals have participated in political life to some extent, and equal to zero otherwise.

⁶ Eurofound (2020, p. 7) highlights that while this method generates a sample that is not representative on its own, it is possible to align the sample's composition with the true population using known characteristics of the population. To ensure that data reflects the demographic makeup of both the entire EU and each individual Member State, the sample was weighted based on factors such as gender, age, education and self-reported urbanisation level. It is important to acknowledge that, although internet access is widespread among large segments of the population, individuals without internet access were unintentionally excluded from the sample. Internet penetration levels vary from country to country and are lower among specific demographic groups, including older people, individuals residing in remote areas and those with limited educational attainment. In addition, participating in an online survey requires digital literacy. Unfortunately, the bias introduced by these factors cannot be fully corrected.

Table 2: General characteristics of the European Social Survey and the Living, working and COVID-19 e-survey

Country	European Social Survey (2002–2020)									Living, working and COVID-19 e-survey (fourth round)
	Number of NUTS 2 regions	Number of ESS rounds	Year of first round available	Year of last round available	Total observations	Average observations per round	Average observations per round and NUTS 2 region	Minimum average observations per NUTS 2 region	Maximum average observations per NUTS 2 region	Total observations
Austria	9	9	2002	2020	19,739	2,193	244	78	446	455
Belgium	11	5	2010	2018	8,875	1,775	161	50	290	783
Bulgaria	6	5	2004	2018	10,522	2,104	351	271	514	931
Croatia	4	3	2008	2018	4,943	1,648	412	333	582	770
Cyprus	1	2	2004	2018	2,210	1,105	1,105	1,105	1,105	268
Czechia	8	8	2002	2018	17,704	2,213	277	233	359	742
Denmark	5	5	2008	2018	7,910	1,582	316	193	409	593
Estonia	1	8	2004	2018	16,856	2,107	2,107	1,914	1,914	515
Finland	6	8	2004	2018	15,907	1,988	284	87	527	466
France	20	6	2010	2020	11,670	1,945	93	35	285	445
Germany										1,152
Greece	13	5	2002	2020	12,558	2,512	193	41	871	1,521
Hungary	9	9	2002	2018	14,793	1,644	183	161	432	1,294
Ireland	5	9	2002	2018	20,463	2,274	455	149	1,038	1,693
Italy	17	4	2002	2016	9,908	2,477	124	32	582	757
Latvia	1	3	2004	2018	2,898	966	966	1,619	1,619	410
Lithuania	1	6	2008	2018	11,995	1,999	1,999	1,693	1,693	892
Luxembourg	1	1	2002	2002	1,552	1,552	1,552	1,552	1,552	200
Malta										254
Netherlands	12	10	2002	2020	18,329	1,833	153	39	362	329
Poland	16	10	2002	2020	17,689	1,769	111	43	246	356
Portugal	5	10	2002	2020	17,881	1,788	358	71	404	1,184
Romania	8	2	2006	2008	2,146	1,073	134	196	342	1,188
Slovakia	4	6	2004	2018	9,874	1,646	411	184	546	641
Slovenia	2	9	2002	2018	12,232	1,359	680	553	806	462
Spain	14	10	2002	2020	18,754	1,875	99	39	357	833
Sweden	8	10	2002	2020	18,216	1,822	228	87	365	413
Total	187	10	2002	2020	305,624					19,547

Notes: For the ESS, the table shows the number of NUTS 2 regions per country, the number of ESS rounds the country has participated in, the year of the first and last ESS rounds it participated in, the average number of observations per round, and the average number of observations per round and NUTS 2 region. For Germany, observations are only available in the ESS at the NUTS 1 level, whereas for Malta no observations are available in the ESS. For the Living, working and COVID-19 e-survey, the table shows the number of observations per country.

Source: Authors' own calculations, based on the ESS and the fourth round of the Living, working and COVID-19 e-survey (October–November 2021)

Trends in voice and exit over the past 20 years

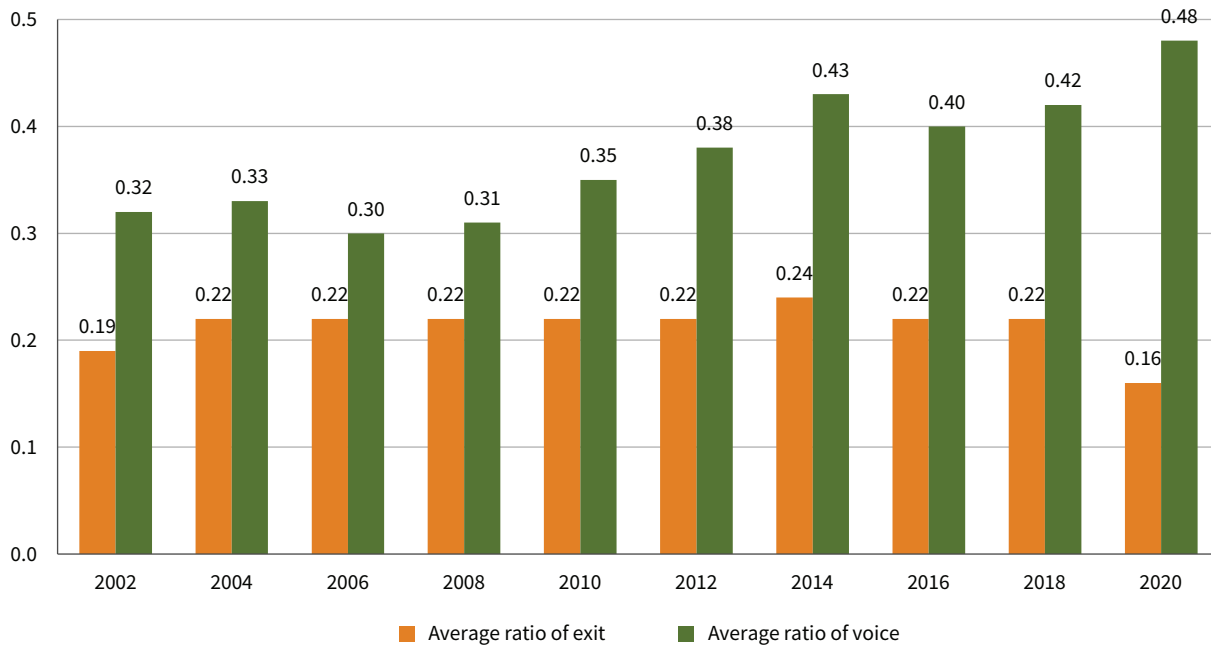
When using the framework of voice, exit and loyalty developed by Hirschman (1970) to capture the political dimensions of social cohesion, there was no evidence of a decline in social cohesion in the past 20 years in Europe (Figure 1). Our measures of regional voice and exit, derived from ESS data collected between 2002 and 2020, show that for the 25 EU Member States participating in the survey the average exit ratio decreased slightly over time. It reached a dip in 2020, when more people voted than in other years. The voice ratio increased each year from 2006 to 2014. It peaked at nearly 50% in 2020, at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the issue of existing disaffection

among citizens, they have been stably voting and participating in the democratic process for more than 20 years. It is apparent that they do so to a greater extent during times of crisis, such as during the financial crisis in 2007 and 2008, the European debt crisis of 2010–2012 and the COVID-19 crisis.

Country-specific perspectives

However, these trends are not observed in every country. As can be seen from Figure 2, there is a wide variance in the levels of exit and voice among countries, with some countries, such as Denmark, Finland and Sweden, having consistently high levels of voice and low levels of exit, and others, such as Czechia, Hungary and Poland, having higher levels of exit than voice or equal levels of exit and voice.

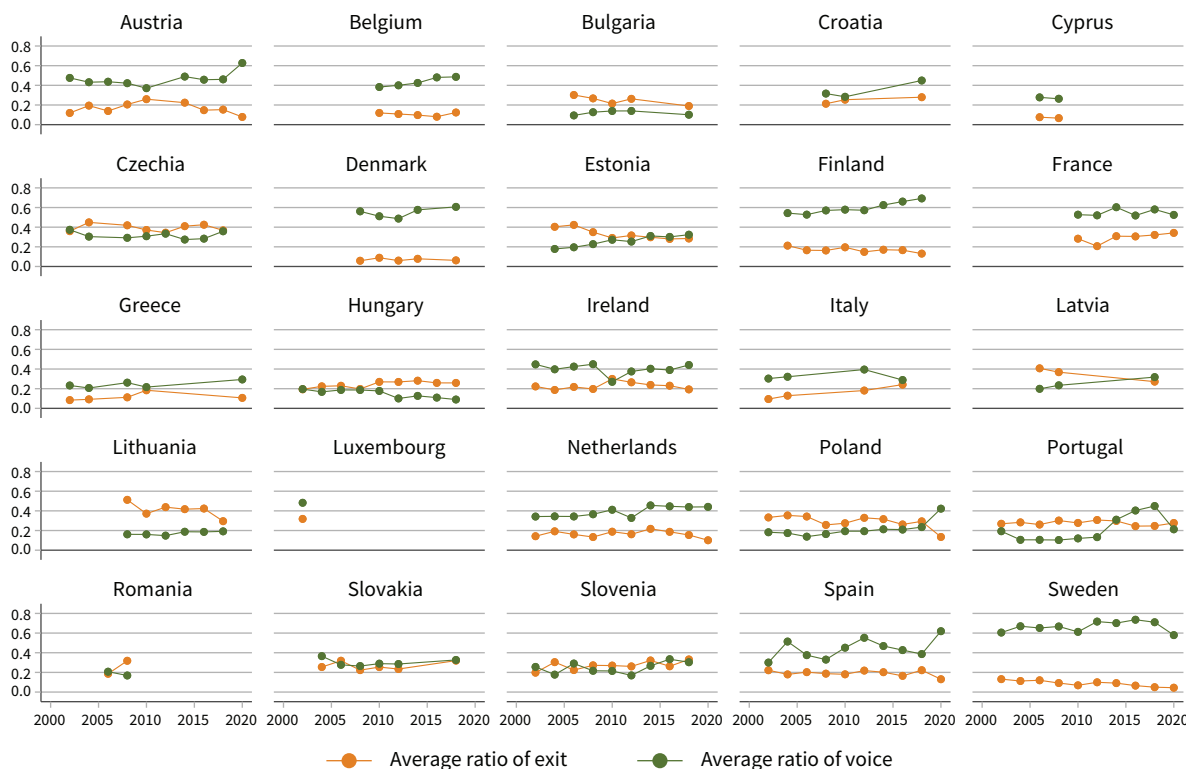
Figure 1: Trends in voice (protest) and exit (not voting) ratios, by ESS round, 2002–2020



Notes: Average ratio, by ESS round, of individuals that exit and voice across the NUTS 2 regions for the 25 EU Member States in the ESS. Ratios were calculated by NUTS 2 region for each ESS round and then averaged to obtain one level per round. Regions with fewer than 30 observations per round were dropped.

Source: Authors' own calculations, based on the ESS

Figure 2: Trends in voice (protest) and exit (not voting), by country, 2002–2020



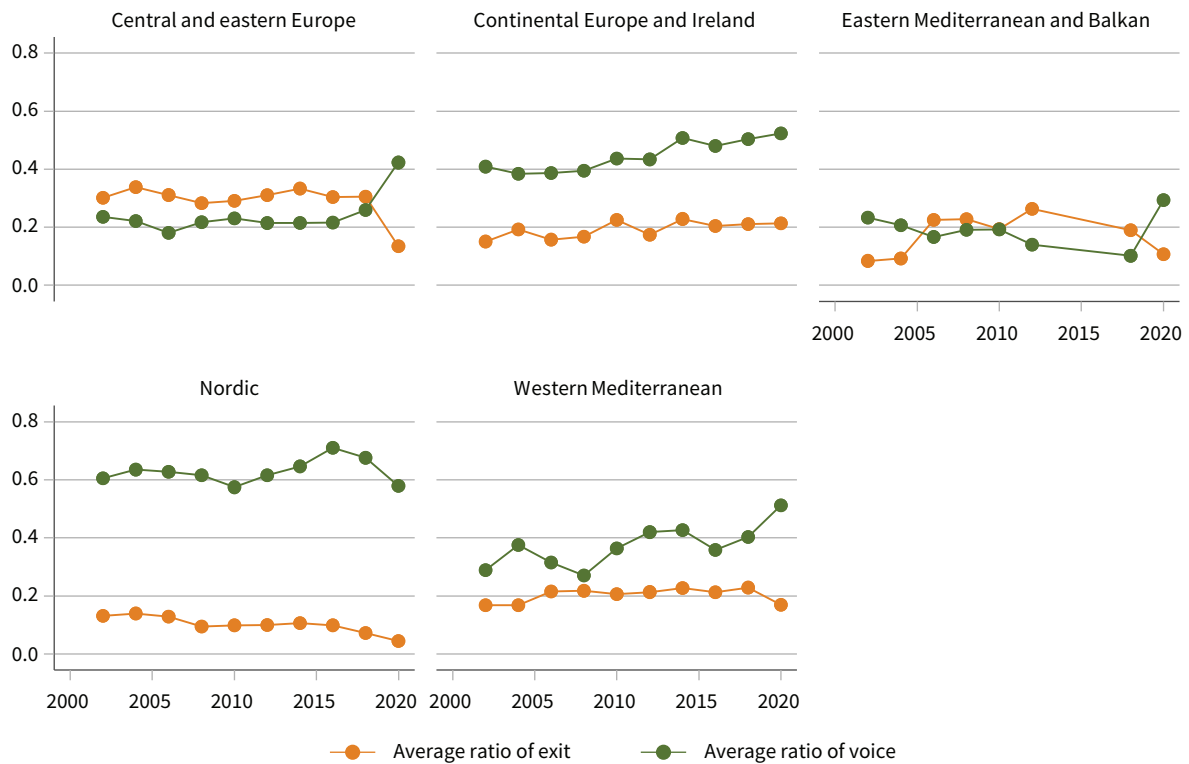
Notes: Average ratio, by ESS round, of individuals that exit and voice in the 25 EU Member States participating in the ESS. This analysis considers every ESS round available for every EU27 country. Ratios were calculated by NUTS 2 region for each country and then averaged to obtain one level per country and round. Regions with fewer than 30 observations per round were dropped.
Source: Authors' own calculations, based on the ESS

These regional differences are more noticeable when we group the European countries into geographical clusters, as shown in Figure 3. In particular, the Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland and Sweden) show low and decreasing levels of exit and high and stable levels of voice. During the 20 years analysed, more than 50% of the Nordic population participated in at least one type of voicing activity, with a slight decline from 2016. The high level of voice in these countries is a result that can also be found in other studies that value political participation as an essential characteristic of social cohesion (Dickes et al, 2010; Janmaat, 2011; Dragolov et al, 2016; Eurofound, 2018). We see a similar, but more moderate, trend in the countries of continental Europe (Austria, Belgium, France, Luxembourg and the Netherlands) and Ireland, with, in comparison to the

Nordic countries, high and stable levels of exit and lower, but still high, and increasing levels of voice. As depicted in Figure 2, Austria stands out as having the highest level of voice in this group. Countries in central and eastern Europe (Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia) have the highest levels of exit and lower levels of voice. These levels remained stable throughout the period of analysis, except for in the most recent year, in which the trends indicate an abrupt increase.⁷ Countries in the eastern Mediterranean and Balkan region (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece and Romania) show similar results, but have higher initial levels of voice. Finally, in the western Mediterranean region (including Italy, Portugal and Spain), we see an increase in voice, particularly during the debt crisis of 2010–2012.

⁷ Eurofound (2018) found that Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Latvia, Poland and Romania were among the countries where political participation was lower in 2016. Dragolov et al (2016) found similar results while capturing the levels of civic participation.

Figure 3: Trends in voice (protest) and exit (not voting), by country cluster, 2002–2020



Notes: Average ratio, by ESS round, of individuals that exit and voice for the five country clusters included in the ESS. Ratios were calculated by NUTS 2 regions for each country cluster and then averaged to obtain one level per country cluster and round. Regions with fewer than 30 observations per round were dropped. The clusters are central and eastern Europe (Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia), continental Europe and Ireland (Austria, Belgium, France, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands), eastern Mediterranean and Balkan (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Romania), Nordic (Denmark, Finland, Sweden) and western Mediterranean (Italy, Portugal, Spain).

Source: Authors' own calculations, based on the ESS

We gain three important insights from these cluster trends. First, there is a tendency for regions with higher levels of voice to also have higher rates of voting. This relationship is clear for Nordic countries but is also true for other regions, especially after 2018. When there is a dip (at least a slight one) in non-voting, we see an increase in voicing. For example, in central and eastern Europe in 2020 the decrease in non-voting was directly tied to a rise in voice, surpassing it for the first time since 2002. Second, crises affect voicing more than exiting. The rapid increase in voicing in the Mediterranean countries as a result of the 2010–2012 debt crisis and in the rest of the regions (except for the Nordic countries) after the COVID-19 crisis are examples of this. Nevertheless, although we consider our two variables, voice and exit, to be comparable forms of political participation, it must be said that both are not necessarily based on the same time frame. The survey question about exit asks about voter turnout in the most recent election, while the question about voice

asks about participation in protests in the 12 months before the survey. It may be that both activities did not occur at the same time. Third, we see signs of a more cohesive society regarding participation and voting. For all clusters except the Nordic countries, voicing was at its highest in 2020, following an increase. In addition, in all clusters except the western Mediterranean countries, there was a slight decrease in exit in the 10 years before 2020.

Regional-level perspectives

Benefiting from the fact that the ESS enables us to observe trends in political and electoral participation at regional level, this report examines if there are considerable differences, or any convergence across time, in the levels of exit and voice within countries. Figures 4 and 5 compare levels of exit and voice, respectively, in quintiles at NUTS 2 level in 2002 and 2020,⁸ and Figures 6 and 7 show the changes in the regional variance within countries. For exit, our

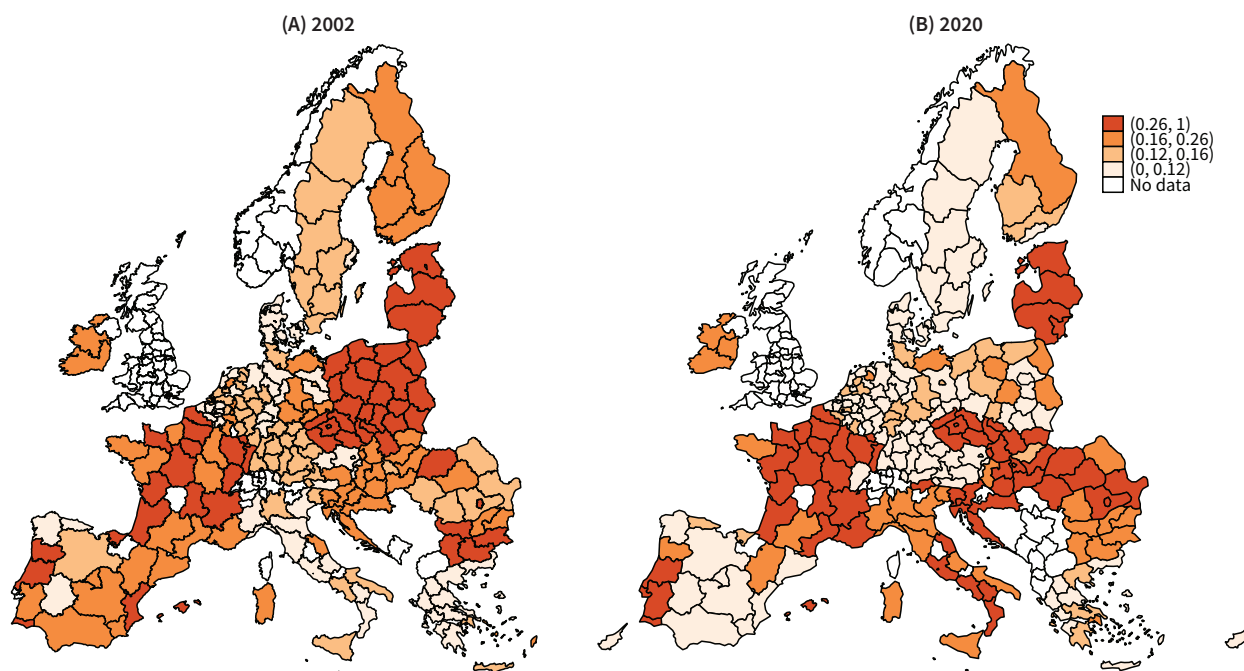
⁸ For countries not surveyed in 2002 and 2020, the first and last rounds of the ESS for which data were available were used.

attention is drawn to three results. First, countries that are dissimilar in terms of political systems or development levels, such as the Nordic countries, and continental European countries (Austria, Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands) exhibited low levels of exit in 2002, decreasing two decades later. As shown in Figure 6, in these countries – except for Finland and the Netherlands, whose regional variance substantially increased during this period – the difference between regions with high and low exit levels decreased. A second group, formed by western Mediterranean countries, shows mixed results. In 2002, Spain had high and varied levels of exit, with regions such as Euskadi having a meagre voter turnout compared with others, such as Galicia. It has since seen its exit levels decrease substantially, becoming a much more homogeneous country (see Figure 6, which shows a decrease in variance). In contrast, in France and Italy the situation has worsened. Italy, once a country with high electoral participation throughout its territory, shows poor results 20 years later, especially in the south. In addition, former countries of the Eastern Bloc also display mixed results. Poland, a country with all regions

in the highest exit quintile in Europe in 2002, shows a significant increase in participation. On the contrary, exit is an increasing problem in Romania, Hungary, Czechia and Slovakia, with high levels and high variance between regions (see Figure 6).

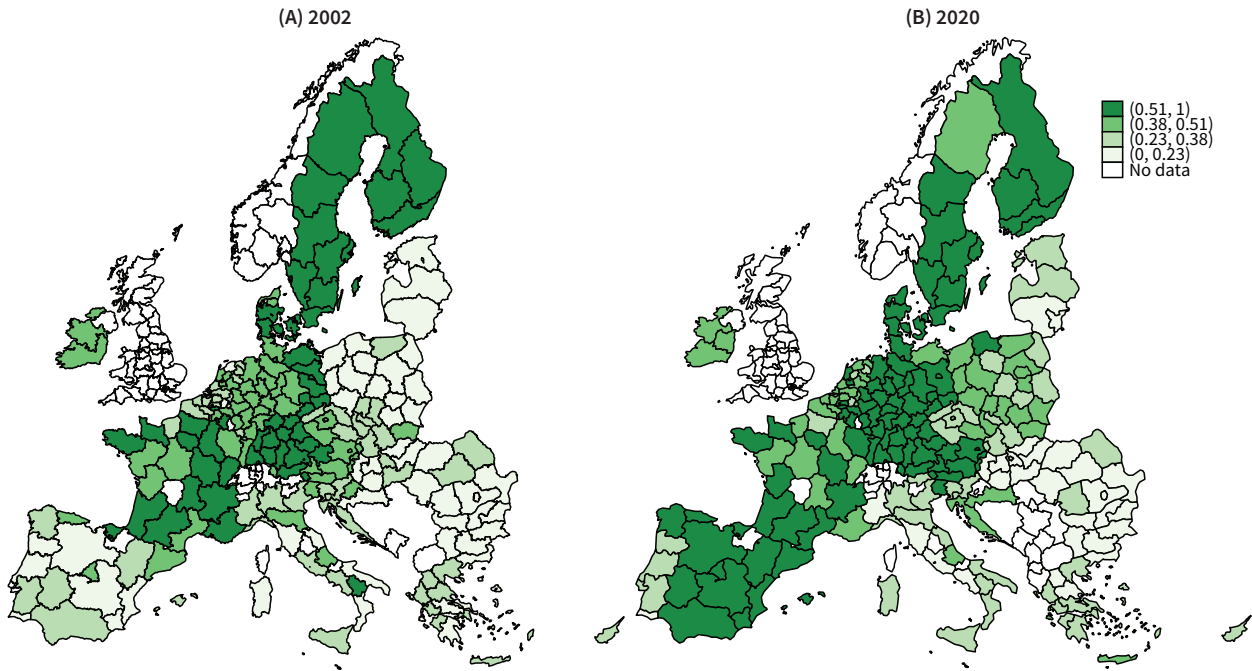
Voice shows opposing trends to exit (see Figure 5), reinforcing our finding that exit and voice are negatively correlated. First, there are meaningful increases in political voice in Austria, Germany and Spain, towards the high levels of the Nordic countries. Second, eastern Mediterranean and Balkan countries continue to exhibit low levels of voice, while there are minor improvements in Poland and the Baltic countries. Third, it can be observed that voice used to be much higher in some regions where there is a history of conflict. In 2002, those in Catalonia and Euskadi in Spain voiced much more than other regions, and those in eastern Germany voiced more than western Germany. In 2020, that difference is less evident, as those in both countries voiced more and reduced their regional variances substantially (see Figure 7). Nevertheless, voicing is still noticeably higher in the Walloon Region of Belgium than in the Flemish Region.

Figure 4: Change in exit (not voting) quintiles, 2002–2020



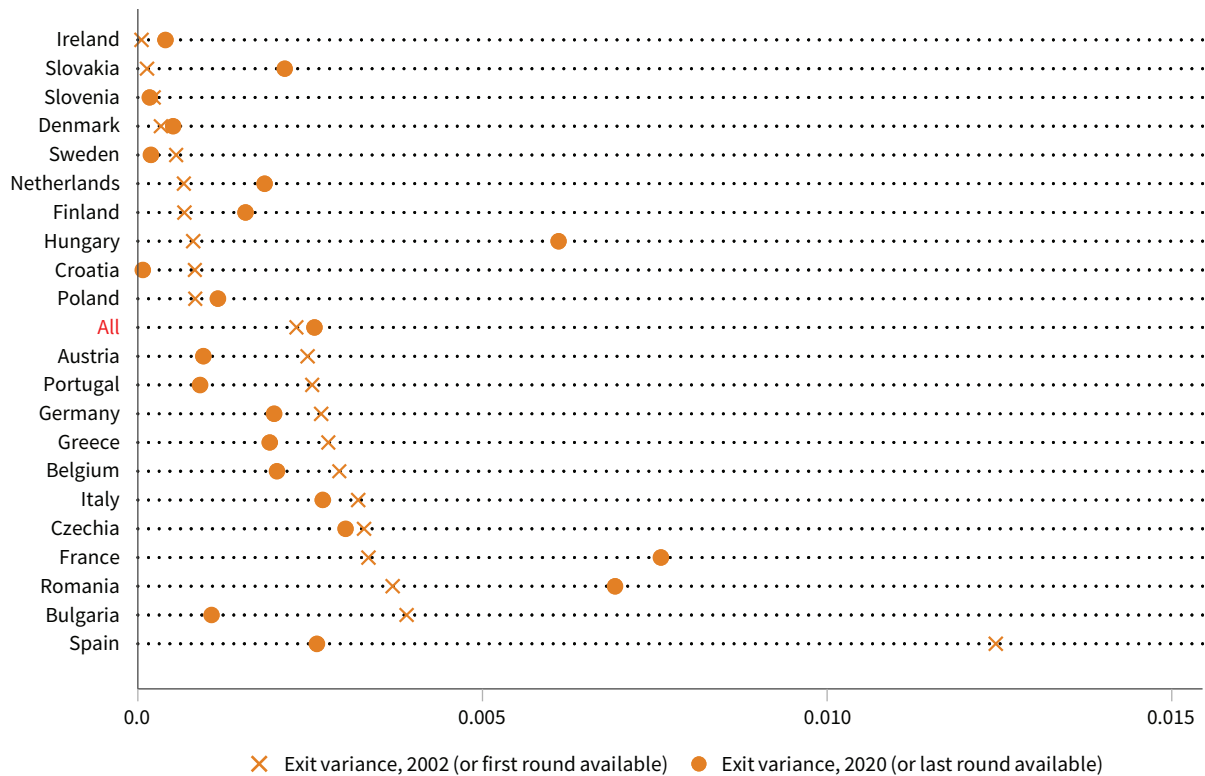
Notes: Ratio of individuals that exit at NUTS 2 regional level, by quintile, for 2002 (or earliest year for which data are available) and 2020 (or latest year for which data are available). Information for Germany in the ESS is available only at NUTS 1 level. For data based on the first round of the ESS, the figure reflects the 2006 NUTS classification, while for the data based on the last round in the period analysed the figure reflects the 2021 NUTS classification. Quintile thresholds are fixed at 2002 levels. Regions with fewer than 30 observations per round were dropped.
Source: Authors' own calculations, based on the ESS

Figure 5: Change in voice (protest) quintiles, 2002–2020



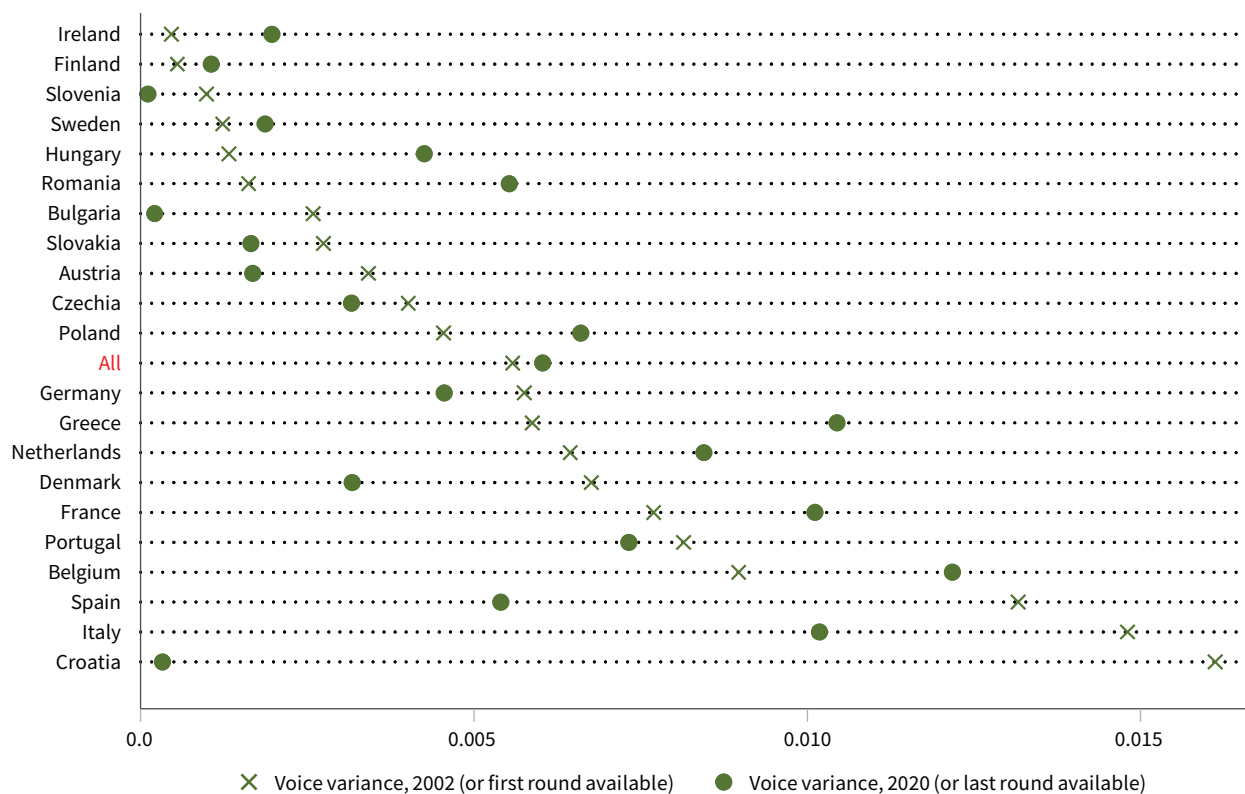
Notes: Proportion of individuals that voice at NUTS 2 regional level by quintiles, for 2002 (or earliest available) and 2020 (or latest available). Information on regional levels for Germany in the ESS is available only at NUTS 1 level. For the first round, the graph follows the 2006 NUTS classification, while for the last it follows the 2021 NUTS classification. Quintile thresholds are fixed at 2002 levels. Regions with fewer than 30 observations per round were dropped.
Source: Authors' own calculations, based on the ESS

Figure 6: Change in variance of exit (not voting) levels, by country, 2002–2020



Notes: The figure shows the variance of exit levels among NUTS 2 regions, by country, between 2002 and 2020. When no data were available for 2002 or 2020, we used data for the closest year for which data were available. The variance for Germany is based on NUTS 1 regions. Croatia has been excluded, as observations are from a single round. Cyprus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Luxembourg are composed of a single NUTS 2 region; therefore, the variance is zero. Regions with fewer than 30 observations per round were dropped.
Source: Authors' own calculations, based on the ESS

Figure 7: Change in the variance of voice (protest) levels, by country, 2002–2020

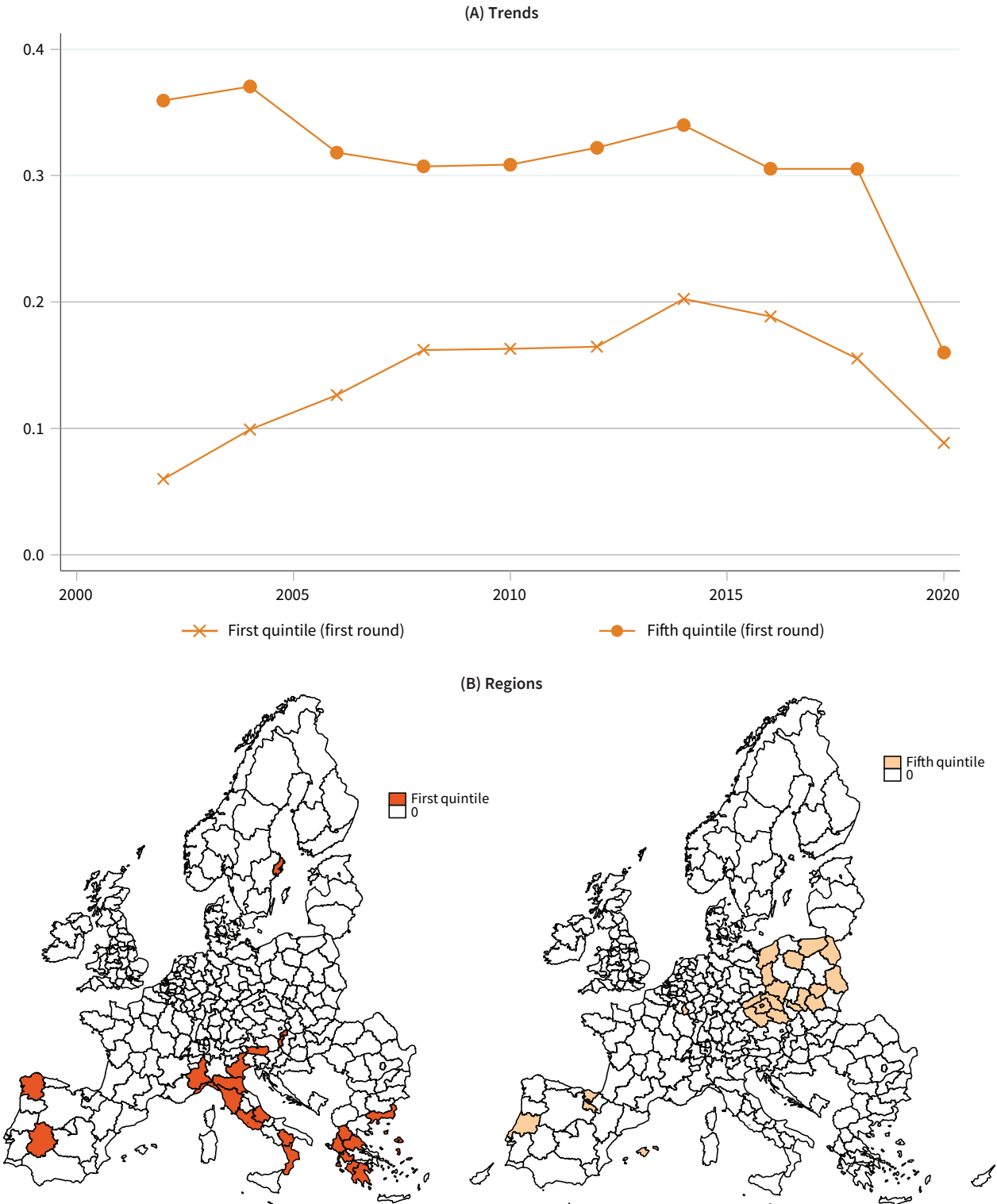


Notes: The figure shows the variance of voice levels among NUTS 2 regions, by country, between 2002 and 2020. When no data were available for 2002 or 2020, we used data for the closest year for which data were available. The variance for Germany is based on NUTS 1 regions. Croatia has been excluded, as observations are from a single round. Cyprus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Luxembourg are composed of a single NUTS 2 region; therefore, the variance is zero. Regions with fewer than 30 observations per round were dropped.
Source: Authors' own calculations, based on the ESS

With regard to convergence in voice and exit among the European NUTS 2 regions in recent years, Figures 8 and 9 show us the average trends for regions in the highest and lowest quintiles in 2002. These quintiles include the regions with the most extreme (high and low) values of exit and voice. These regions are depicted on the maps in Figures 8b and 9b. The same groups' averages are then represented for the following rounds, until 2020. For exit, we observe a convergence between the regions in the first and fifth quintiles of exit values in 2002. Between 2002 and 2010, the convergence is

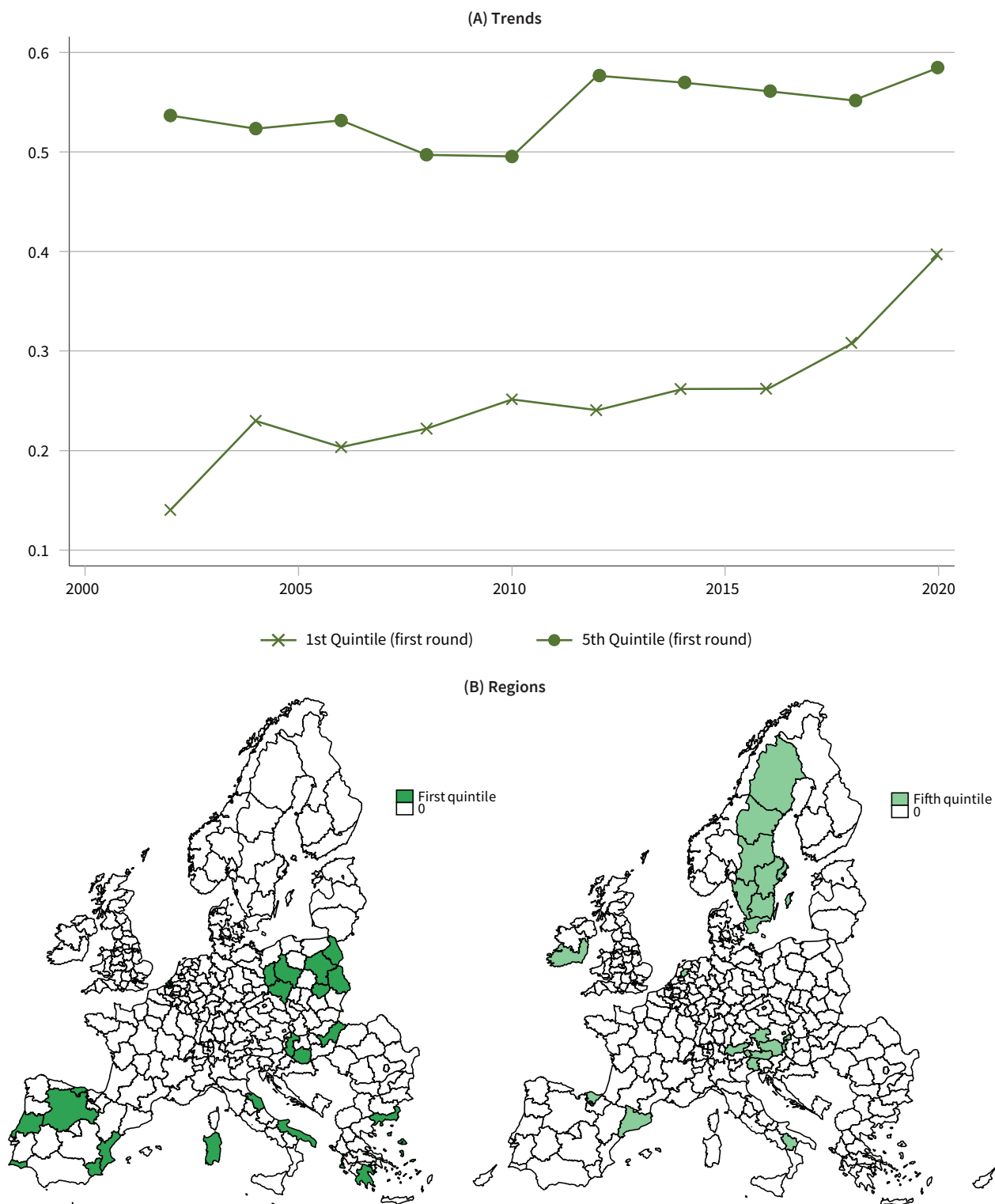
mainly due to exit levels increasing among the NUTS regions with low exit levels. The gap remained stable from 2010 until 2015. Since then, exit decreased in both groups, but to a greater extent for the regions in the highest quintile. For voice, we see a slight convergence throughout the entire period, driven by an improvement in voice in the low-performing regions (Figure 9). The highest jump occurred in 2020, when increases in voice in the regions in the lowest quintile reduced the gap by a third.

Figure 8: Trends in exit levels for regions with low and high levels of exit (not voting) (in the lowest and highest quintiles) in 2002



Notes: The figure shows trends in the average proportion of people exiting over time for NUTS 2 regions in the first and fifth quintiles in 2002. The first-quintile regions are AT11, AT21, ES11, ES43, GR11, GR12, GR13, GR14, GR21, GR22, GR23, GR25, GR41, ITC1, ITC3, ITF1, ITF5, ITF6, ITH3, ITH5, ITI1, ITI4 and SE11. The fifth-quintile regions are CZ01, CZ02, CZ03, CZ04, CZ05, CZ06, CZ08, ES21, ES53, ES70, PL21, PL22, PL31, PL33, PL34, PL42, PL43, PL51, PL61, PL62 and PT16. For the NUTS 2 classification, see Eurostat (undated). Regions with fewer than 30 observations per round were dropped.
Source: Authors' own calculations, based on the ESS

Figure 9: Trends in voice levels for regions with low and high levels of voice (protest) (in the lowest and highest quintiles) in 2002



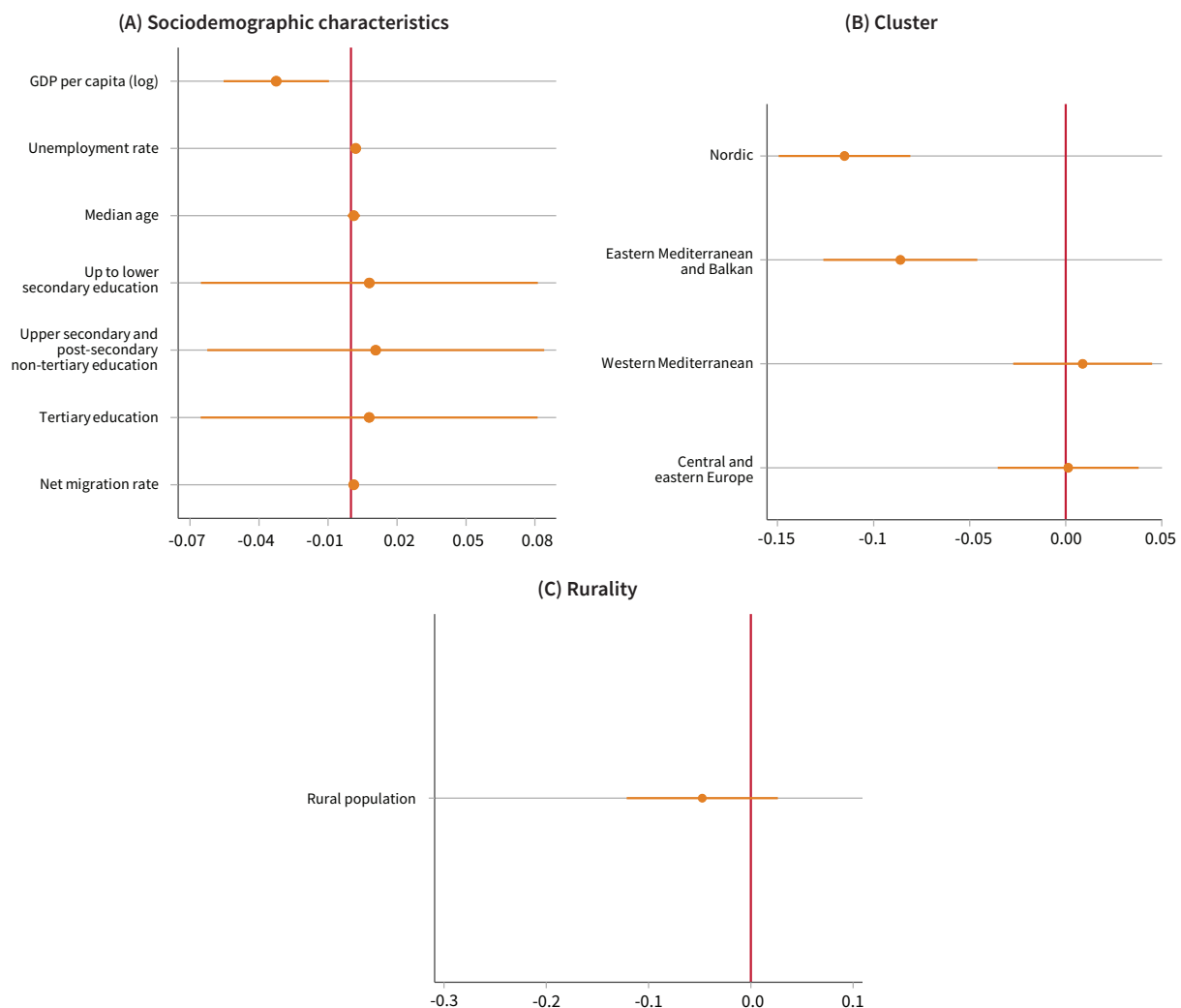
Notes: The figure shows the trends in the average proportion of people voicing over time for NUTS 2 regions in the first and fifth quintiles in 2002. The first-quintile regions are ES41, ES52, ES62, GR11, GR22, GR25, GR41, HU22, HU23, HU32, ITF4, ITG2, ITI3, NL34, PL51, PL43, PL41, PL34, PL33, PL31, PL12, PT16 and PT15. The fifth-quintile regions are AT11, AT13, AT21, AT22, AT31, AT33, CZ01, ES21, ES51, IE06, ITF5, ITH4, NL23, SE11, SE12, SE21, SE22, SE23, SE31, SE32 and SE33. For the NUTS 2 classification, see Eurostat (undated). Regions with fewer than 30 observations per round were dropped.
Source: Authors' own calculations, based on the ESS

Driving forces of voice and exit over the past 20 years

In this section, we consider the main determinants of political participation. Figures 10 and 11 show the results for exit. For the geographical variables, the coefficients measure effects with respect to a reference category of countries belonging to the continental Europe and Ireland cluster. Our attention is drawn to four results. First, the regional economic conditions substantially and significantly affect exit levels. Regions with higher gross domestic product (GDP) per capita have lower proportions of people not voting, while regions with higher unemployment have higher portions (although the effect is small⁹). Second, compositional factors, such

as the rural population and net migration, do not produce significant effects. Third, factors such as the age structure at regional level and education do not seem to affect the level of exit in a region. Nevertheless, the confidence intervals for education are broad, suggesting a considerable variance in its effect across regions. Finally, regional clusters are important in determining exiting and voicing, which could be explained by different cultural traits and path dependencies. In Figure 10, Nordic and eastern Mediterranean and Balkan countries show lower exit levels than continental Europe and Ireland, while there is no difference between central and eastern Europe and western Mediterranean countries, on the one hand, and continental Europe and Ireland, on the other.

Figure 10: Coefficients of exit (not voting) based on the ESS dataset, by regional characteristics (regression analysis)

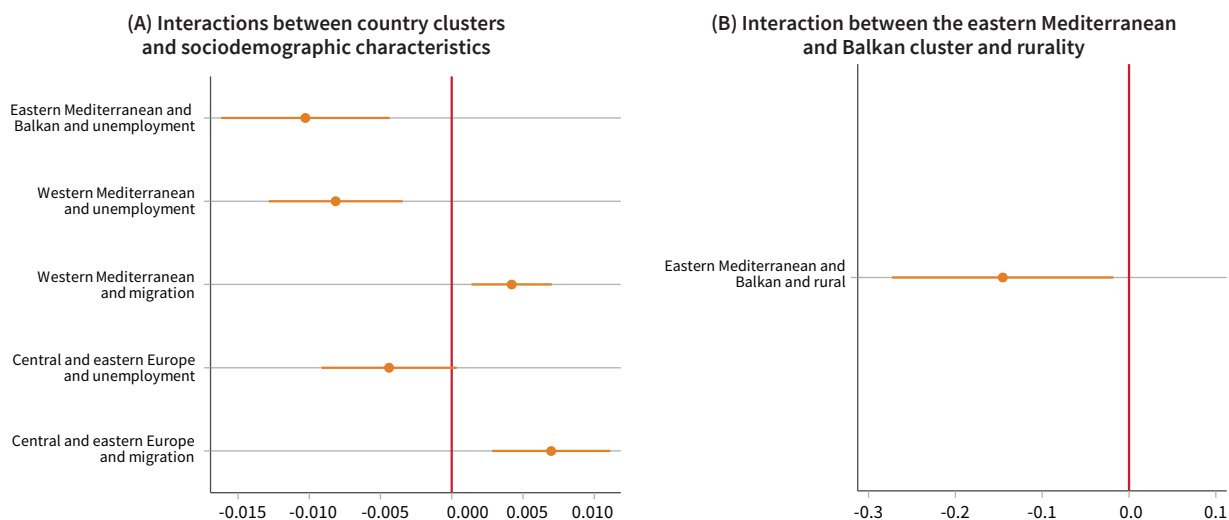


Notes: The figure shows the estimated coefficients when exit is the ratio of individuals in a NUTS region who did not vote in the most recent election (all regression results are available in Annex 1). The bars indicate the 95% confidence intervals for the estimations. Regions with fewer than 30 observations per round were dropped. The reference cluster for comparison is continental Europe and Ireland. The clusters are central and eastern Europe (Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia), continental Europe and Ireland (Austria, Belgium, France, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands), eastern Mediterranean and Balkan (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Romania), Nordic (Denmark, Finland, Sweden) and western Mediterranean (Italy, Portugal, Spain).

Source: Authors' own calculations, based on the ESS

9 See full details of the regression analysis in Annex 1.

Figure 11: Coefficients of exit (not voting) based on the ESS dataset, by regional characteristics and interactions (regression analysis)



Notes: The figure shows the estimated coefficients when exit is the ratio of individuals in a NUTS region who did not vote in the most recent election (all regression results are available in Annex 1). The bars indicate the 95% confidence intervals for the estimations. Regions with fewer than 30 observations per round were dropped. The figure shows only the significant interactions in the model. The reference cluster for comparison is continental Europe and Ireland. The clusters are central and eastern Europe (Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia), continental Europe and Ireland (Austria, Belgium, France, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands), eastern Mediterranean and Balkan (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Romania), Nordic (Denmark, Finland, Sweden) and western Mediterranean (Italy, Portugal, Spain).

Source: Authors' own calculations, based on the ESS

By including interactions (see model 2 in Annex 1 for the results for all interactions) in our analysis, as shown in Figure 11, we see that the regional unemployment rate is significant for eastern Mediterranean and Balkan and western Mediterranean countries, increasing their chances of voting. In addition, a higher migration rate increases the likelihood of exit in some geographical regions of Europe, particularly central Europe and the western Mediterranean region. Finally, the proportion of the population living in rural areas is a clear determinant of turnout, as shown for the eastern Mediterranean and Balkan countries.

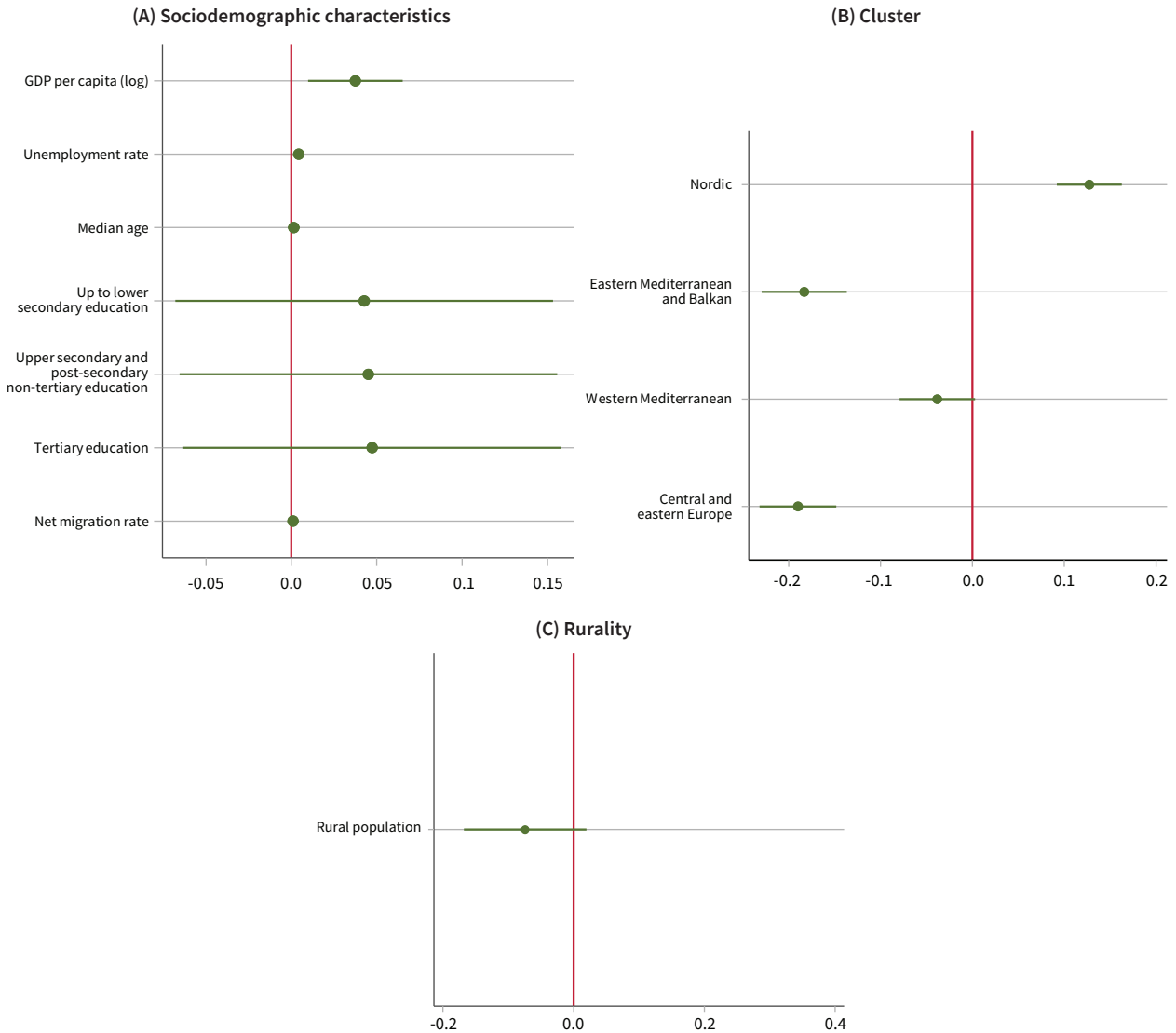
In the case of voice, the same determinants are relevant (Figures 12 and 13). GDP per capita is positively correlated with voice, and the effect of unemployment is positive but small. The higher the regional unemployment rate, the higher the proportion of people voicing across the NUTS 2 regions. Education, age and migration rate have no effect on voice levels. In addition, as was observed for exit, regions with a high proportion of people living in rural areas exhibit lower levels of voice. However, the effect is not significant.

Finally, for the clusters, the results follow the same trends as the descriptive results in Figure 3: voice is most prevalent in the Nordic cluster, followed by the continental Europe and Ireland cluster (the reference category) and the western Mediterranean cluster. Central and eastern European and eastern Mediterranean and Balkan countries exhibit much lower levels of voice.

Finally, our attention is drawn to three results when including interactions in the regression analysis for voice, as shown in Figure 13.¹⁰ First, although an increase in unemployment rates generally results in an increase in voice across Europe, this is untrue for the Nordic, western Mediterranean and central and eastern European regions, compared with continental Europe and Ireland. In Figure 13, the reference category of continental Europe and Ireland shows higher levels of voice at higher unemployment rates than the other country clusters. Second, among the Nordic countries, regions with higher migration rates have a higher voice index. Finally, even though the rural population tends to voice less across Europe, the proportion of the rural population is crucial in determining voice levels in the eastern Mediterranean and Balkan countries.

¹⁰ The figure includes only the significant interactions in the model (see Annex 1 for the regression table).

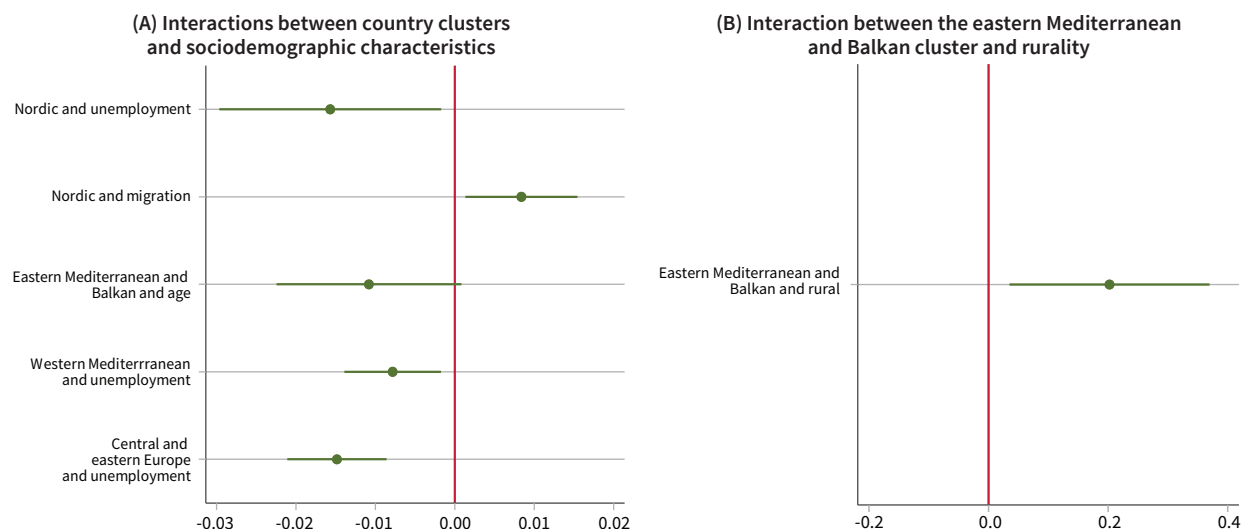
Figure 12: Coefficients of voice (protest) based on the ESS dataset, by regional characteristics (regression analysis)



Notes: The figure shows the estimated coefficients when voice is the proportion of individuals in a NUTS region who participated in at least one of the five voicing activities in the 12 months before the survey (all regression results are available in Annex 1). The bars indicate the 95% confidence intervals for the estimations. Regions with fewer than 30 observations per round were dropped. The reference cluster for comparison is continental Europe and Ireland. The clusters are central and eastern Europe (Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia), continental Europe and Ireland (Austria, Belgium, France, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands), eastern Mediterranean and Balkan (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Romania), Nordic (Denmark, Finland, Sweden) and western Mediterranean (Italy, Portugal, Spain).

Source: Authors' own calculations, based on the ESS

Figure 13: Coefficients of voice (protest) based on the ESS dataset, by regional characteristics and interactions (regression analysis)



Notes: The figure shows the estimated coefficients when voice is the proportion of individuals in a NUTS region who participated in at least one of the five voicing activities in the 12 months before the survey (all regression results are available in Annex 1). The bars indicate the 95% confidence intervals for the estimations. Regions with fewer than 30 observations per round were dropped. The figure shows only the significant interactions in the model. The reference cluster for comparison is continental Europe and Ireland. Clusters are central and eastern Europe (Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia), continental Europe and Ireland (Austria, Belgium, France, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands), eastern Mediterranean and Balkan (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Romania), Nordic (Denmark, Finland, Sweden) and western Mediterranean (Italy, Portugal, Spain).

Source: Authors' own calculations, based on the ESS

Voice and exit during the COVID-19 pandemic

Using data from the fourth round of the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey, we are able to see how voice and exit levels changed during the COVID-19 pandemic among the individuals sampled. Considering the same five country clusters as in the previous section,¹¹ Figure 14 shows that political participation was very similar for these country clusters in October–November 2021. In particular, the Nordic countries have the highest level of voice, and the central and eastern European countries have the lowest. We do not find significant differences in the exit index either. Consistent with the trends derived from the ESS, the Nordic countries have the lowest portion of citizens exiting, while individuals living in the

eastern Mediterranean and Balkan region have the highest exit levels. Similar to the regional results for the ESS, there is an inverse relationship between voice and exit levels.

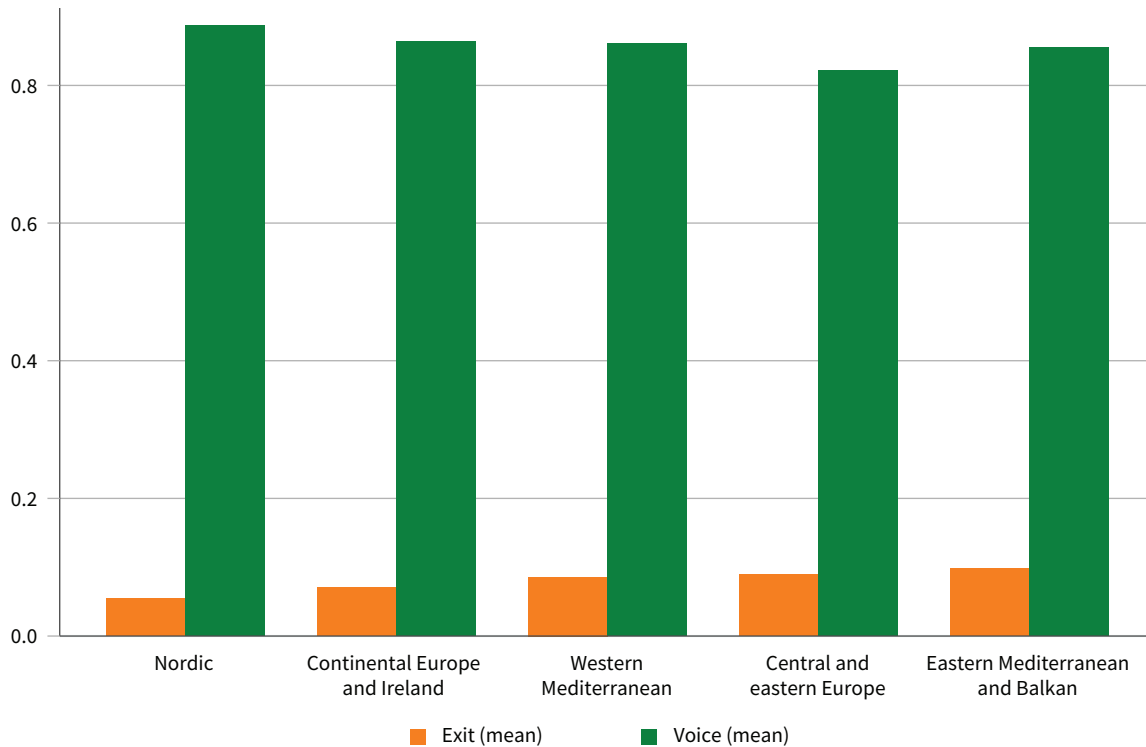
Determinants of voice and exit during the pandemic

We again use data from the fourth round of Eurofound's LWC-19 e-survey to construct a linear probability model, where the variables exit and voice are regressed on a set of control variables at individual level. We include information about participants based on gender, residence, age, employment status, country cluster, education and whether they are living alone.¹² The results may differ owing to a variety of factors, among them the COVID-19 pandemic and the sampling methods used to conduct the surveys.

11 The Nordic cluster (Denmark, Finland and Sweden), the continental Europe and Ireland cluster (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg and the Netherlands), the western Mediterranean cluster (Italy, Malta, Portugal and Spain), the central and eastern European cluster (Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia) and the eastern Mediterranean and Balkan cluster (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece and Romania).

12 Specifically, we include the variable 'living alone' (a binary variable equal to one for people living alone) to capture the effect of not having a family. Gender is a binary variable taking the value one for women and zero otherwise, and we include it to capture gender differences for voice and exit. We created five dummy variables, for the 18–29, 30–39, 40–49, 50–59 and 60 and over (reference category) age groups. We include a binary variable for residence that takes the value of one if people live in a city or a big town, instead of a small town or rural area. Unlike our ESS calculation, for the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey we consider three groups of higher educational attainment: secondary or lower (reference category), bachelor's degree level, and master's degree or PhD level. Because the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey is an online survey carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic through social media, older people and highly educated people were more likely to participate in it than in the ESS. Finally, we created five dummy variables for the country clusters, covering the main areas of Europe: the Nordic cluster (Denmark, Finland and Sweden), the continental Europe and Ireland cluster (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg and the Netherlands), the western Mediterranean cluster (Italy, Malta, Portugal and Spain), the central and eastern European cluster (Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia) and the eastern Mediterranean and Balkan cluster (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece and Romania).

Figure 14: Voice (protest) and exit (not voting) levels based on the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey, by country cluster

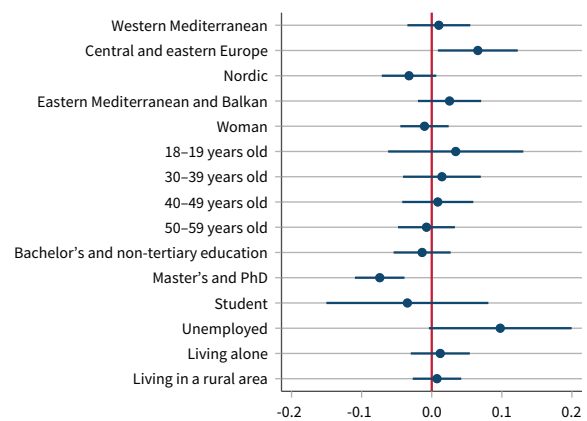


Notes: The figure shows the average voice and exit levels by country cluster. The clusters are central and eastern Europe (Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia), continental Europe and Ireland (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands), eastern Mediterranean and Balkan (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Romania), Nordic (Denmark, Finland, Sweden) and western Mediterranean (Italy, Malta, Portugal, Spain).

Source: Authors' own calculations, based on the fourth round of the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey (October–November 2021)

The results for these regressions are shown in Figures 15 and 16. Complete regression tables showing all results can be found in Annex 2. For exit, only a few sociodemographic characteristics are significant in explaining its variation. Unlike in the regional analysis, the Nordic countries do not have lower levels of exit than continental Europe and Ireland. The only country cluster with significant differences compared with the reference cluster is the central and eastern European region, showing higher levels of exit. Education, which seemed irrelevant in our regional aggregated models, is relevant at the individual level. People with a master's or a higher-level degree are less prone (7%) to exiting than those with a high school diploma (the reference category). Finally, unemployed people are most likely to exit the political system.

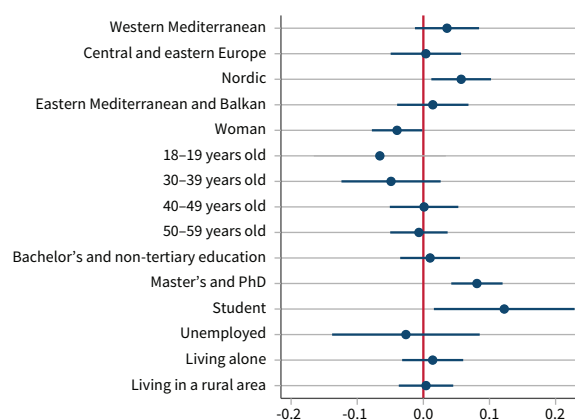
Figure 15: Coefficients of exit (not voting) based on the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey, by sociodemographic characteristics (regression analysis)



Notes: The figure shows the estimated coefficients when exit is a binary variable equal to one if the individual did not vote in the most recent election (all regression results are available in Annex 2). The bars indicate the 95% confidence intervals for the estimations. Robust standard errors. Reference categories for comparison are 'continental Europe and Ireland' for clusters, '60 years old or over' for age and 'secondary or less' for education. Country clusters are central and eastern Europe (Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia), continental Europe and Ireland (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands), eastern Mediterranean and Balkan (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Romania), Nordic (Denmark, Finland, Sweden) and western Mediterranean (Italy, Malta, Portugal, Spain). **Source:** Authors' own calculations, based on the fourth round of the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey (October–November 2021)

For voice, other sociodemographic characteristics are relevant. Figure 16 shows the same trends as those previously described for the descriptive results in Figure 14: the analyses show that coming from a Nordic country increases citizens' likelihood (compared with continental Europe and Ireland) of voicing (protesting). Despite our expectations, women protest significantly less, even after the rise of women's rights movements in countries such as Spain and despite the increasing concerns around gendered problems, despite the increasing concerns around gender inequality. As with exit, more-educated people tend to voice more. This effect was particularly relevant if the respondent was a student. Finally, socioeconomic factors, such as unemployment, do not have an effect.

Figure 16: Coefficients of voice (protest) based on the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey, by sociodemographic characteristics (regression analysis)



Notes: The figure shows the estimated coefficients when voice is a binary variable equal to one if the individual participated in at least one of the six voicing activities in the 12 months before the survey (all regression results are available in Annex 2). The bars indicate the 95% confidence intervals for the estimations. Robust standard errors.

Reference categories for comparison are 'continental Europe and Ireland' for clusters, '60 years old or over' for age and 'secondary or less' for education. Country clusters are central and eastern Europe (Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia), continental Europe and Ireland (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands), eastern Mediterranean and Balkan (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Romania), Nordic (Denmark, Finland, Sweden) and western Mediterranean (Italy, Malta, Portugal, Spain).

Source: Authors' own calculations, based on the fourth round of the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey (October–November 2021)

Key takeaways on voice (protesting) and exit (not voting)

- There was no evidence of a decline in political social cohesion in the past 20 years in Europe. Despite the existing disaffection, citizens have consistently participated in the democratic process, including voting, over the past two decades. Their engagement appears to increase during times of crisis, such as during the financial crisis in 2007 and 2008, the European debt crisis of 2010–2012 and the COVID-19 crisis.
- Crises tend to affect voicing more than exiting. The rapid increase in voicing in the western Mediterranean countries as a result of the 2007–2009 Great Recession and the subsequent 2010–2012 debt crisis and in the rest of the regions (except for the Nordic countries) after the COVID-19 crisis are examples of this. This indicates that citizens tend to be actively involved in the democratic processes, which is a sign of engaged citizenship.
- However, there is a wide variance in the levels of exit and voice among countries, with some countries, such as Denmark, Finland and Sweden, having consistently high levels of voice and low levels of exit, and others, such as Czechia, Hungary and Poland, having higher levels of exit than voice or equal levels of exit and voice.
- There is a tendency for regions with higher levels of voice to also have higher voter turnout, indicating a correlation between active engagement and voting behaviour. When there is a dip (at least a slight one) in non-voting, we see an increase in voicing.
- Economic development, net migration and age structure do not seem to play a significant role in electoral absenteeism.
- The regional economic conditions substantially and significantly affect exit levels. Regions with higher unemployment have higher portions of electoral absenteeism. In addition, the prevalence of disengagement in terms of voting is much higher in rural areas.
- Unemployment is important for voice: the higher the unemployment rate, the higher the levels of voice.
- Levels of voice are higher when the average level of education is high, and when the population is older. Interestingly, the rate of migration does not increase voice.

- During the COVID-19 pandemic, political participation was very similar for the various country clusters. The Nordic countries had the highest level of voice, and the central and eastern European countries have the lowest.
- In terms of exiting during COVID-19, education is relevant; people with a master's or a higher-level degree were less prone (7%) to exit than those with a high school diploma (the reference category). Unemployed people were most likely to exit the political system.

3 | Distrust and dissatisfaction

Measuring distrust and dissatisfaction

The ESS was used to measure distrust and dissatisfaction as an indicator of the institutional legitimacy dimension of social cohesion (observed from the perspective of a lack of trust or satisfaction in public institutions). This survey asks various questions concerning trust in and satisfaction with institutions in Europe (see Chapter 2 for more details of the survey). For distrust, data were compiled from the questions where individuals are asked to rate their level of trust in (i) the legal system, (ii) the police, (iii) politicians, (iv) the European Parliament, (v) the United Nations and (vi) their national parliament. All variables are measured on a scale from 0 (no trust) to 10 (complete trust) and are used to intuitively describe the trends in and levels of distrust in the past 20 years. To analyse the relationship between the two political components of social cohesion (legitimacy and political participation), we used these highly correlated variables¹³ to construct a distrust index using principal component analysis (PCA).¹⁴ The first component is used as the dependent variable in our analyses. Starting with individual distrust indexes, we aggregated the values by region, obtaining one regional mean value per survey round. In this way, the observations, being for each NUTS 2 region, feature one mean level of distrust every two years from 2002 to 2020.

Institutional legitimacy can also be indicated by citizens' lack of satisfaction with institutions, the government or political leadership. In the ESS, several questions aim to measure this attitudinal aspect for European residents. In particular, to construct an index for dissatisfaction we used the variables indicating individuals' level of satisfaction with (i) the present state of the economy, (ii) the way the national government is doing its job, (iii) the way democracy works, (iv) the state of education, and (v) the state of the health service in their country. The responses range from 0 (extremely dissatisfied) to 10 (extremely satisfied) for the first three variables, while for the last two, they range from 0 (extremely bad) to 10 (extremely good). As for the trust index, we used PCA to build a dissatisfaction index and used the first component in our regressions.

As a second approach to evaluating levels of distrust and dissatisfaction with institutions, based on individual and more recent data, we used the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey (see Chapter 2 for more details of the survey). For this analysis, the distrust variable is a unique index obtained by aggregating three variables: citizens' levels of distrust in (i) the police, (ii) their country's government and (iii) the EU. These variables take values from 0 (complete trust) to 10 (no trust) and are highly correlated,¹⁵ legitimising the use of PCA to obtain a unique index. We constructed an index by selecting the first component from the PCA, as it indicates the maximum total variance. The greater the value of this index, the higher the individual's distrust in institutions.

To measure dissatisfaction with institutions during COVID-19 times, we aggregated five variables capturing satisfaction with the government's response. Participants in the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey were asked how satisfied they were with (i) the handling of the roll-out of the COVID-19 vaccines, (ii) the measures taken to prevent or reduce the spread of COVID-19, (iii) the involvement of citizens in the decision-making process, (iv) the provision of financial support to people and (v) ensuring children could continue to receive education. These variables take values from 0 (very satisfied) to 10 (very dissatisfied). As for distrust, these variables are highly correlated. This makes it possible to build a PCA and therefore to construct an index, considering the first component of the analysis.

Trends in distrust and dissatisfaction over the past 20 years

The lack of institutional legitimacy, and therefore of a fundamental cornerstone of social cohesion, can be observed from the perspective of a lack of trust or satisfaction in public institutions. In reality, the concepts are correlated, as shown in Figure 17. For NUTS 2 regions, distrust in institutions and dissatisfaction are positively correlated,¹⁶ as shown in Figures 17 and 18. In Figure 17, both measures of legitimacy (or a lack of it) are positively correlated for almost every ESS round between 2002 and 2020, except for 2002. In other words, when dissatisfaction goes up, so does distrust, and vice versa.

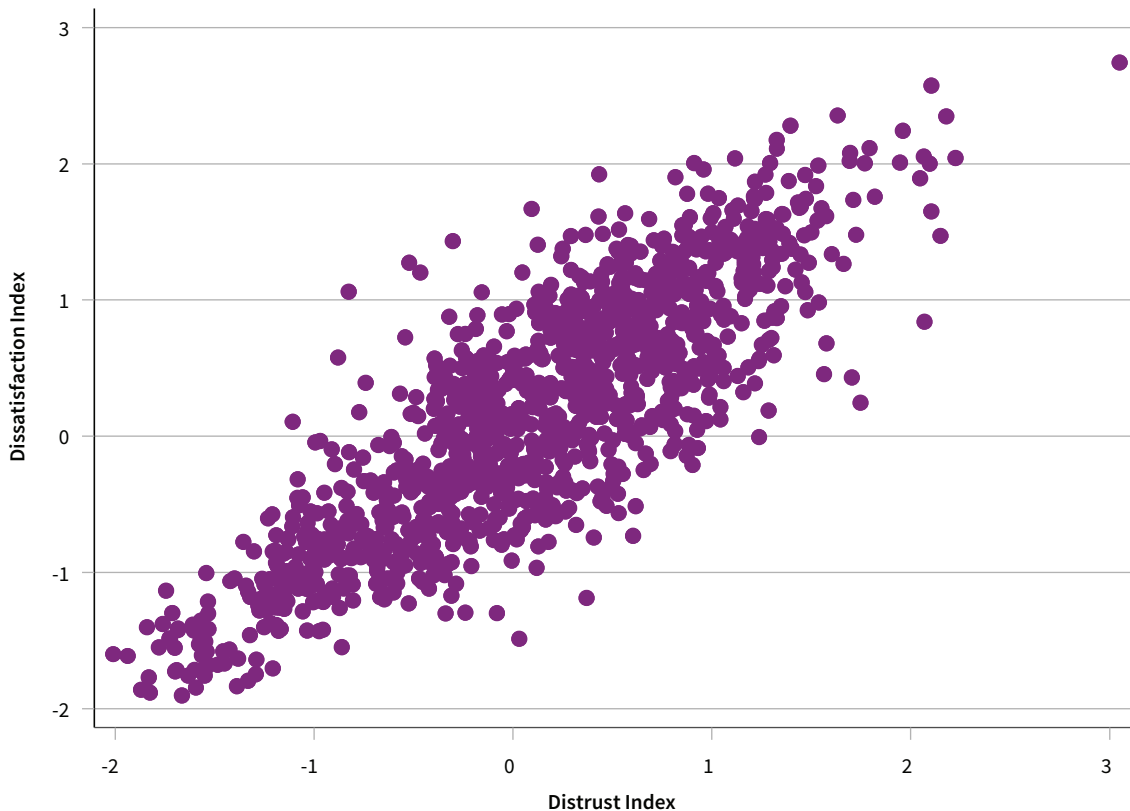
13 See the correlation table (Table A3) in Annex 3.

14 PCA is a method used to reduce a given number of variables into one or more variables that contain most of the information provided by the original variables, whose correlation must be high to provide a significant result.

15 See the correlation table (Table A4) in Annex 3.

16 The two variables are highly correlated, as shown in Table A7 in Annex 4. With a correlation of 0.84 and a Cronbach's alpha of 0.91, both measures have a high internal consistency in describing the same concept.

Figure 17: Association between dissatisfaction and distrust indexes based on the ESS, 2002–2020



Notes: The figure shows means at NUTS 2 regional level for 2002–2020. For the correlation table, see Annex 4. The distrust index considers ESS questions where individuals are asked to rate their level of trust in (i) the legal system, (ii) the police, (iii) politicians, (iv) the European Parliament, (v) the United Nations and (vi) their national parliament. All variables are measured on a scale from 0 (no trust) to 10 (complete trust) and are used to construct a distrust index using principal component analysis (PCA). The dissatisfaction index uses the variables indicating individuals' level of satisfaction with (i) the present state of the economy, (ii) the way the national government is doing its job, (iii) the way democracy works, (iv) the state of education, and (v) the state of the health service in their country. The responses range from 0 (extremely dissatisfied) to 10 (extremely satisfied) for the first three variables, while for the last two, they range from 0 (extremely bad) to 10 (extremely good). As for the trust index, we used PCA to build a dissatisfaction index and used the first component for this figure.

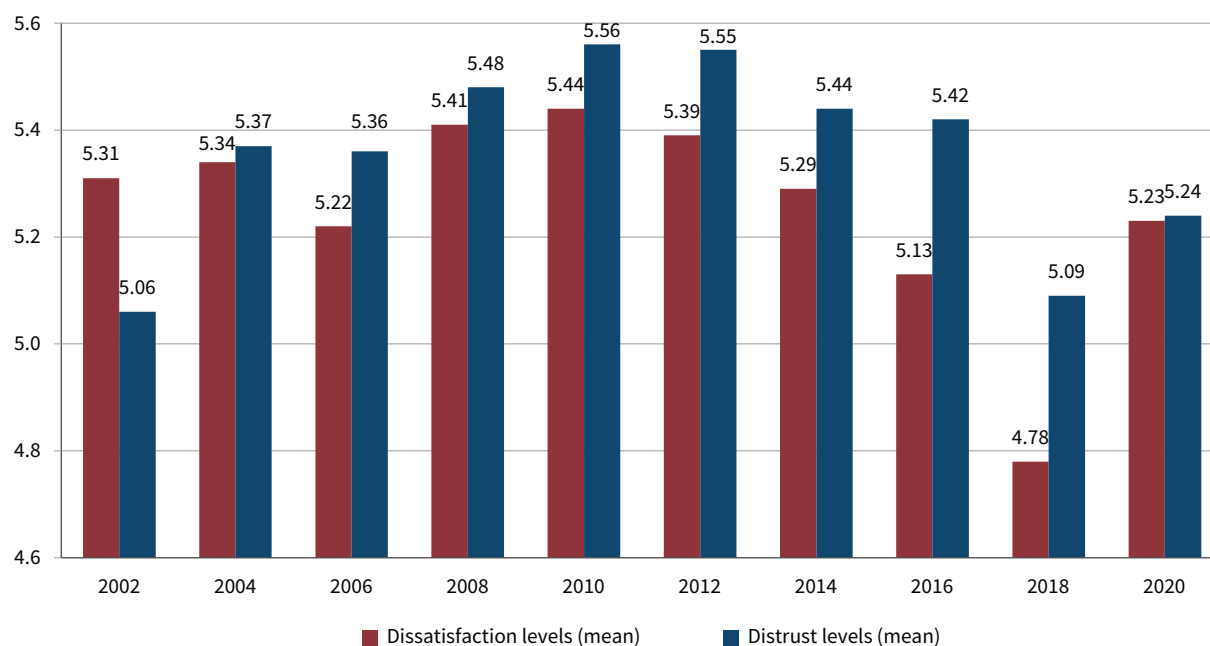
Source: Authors' own calculations, based on the ESS

In particular, distrust in institutions and dissatisfaction appear to increase during hardship, such as during the the 2007–2008 financial crisis and following the restrictions imposed by governments during the COVID-19 pandemic. Both reached their highest level in the years after the 2008 economic crisis, during the European debt crisis that followed. During the COVID-19

crisis, distrust and dissatisfaction were above the average level recorded over the preceding 20 years.¹⁷ Nevertheless, although there are changes and differences in distrust and dissatisfaction over the years, they are not of great magnitude: they oscillate between around 4.8 and roughly 5.6, respectively, on a scale of 0 to 10 (Figure 18).

¹⁷ The fieldwork for round 10 of the ESS was carried out over a longer period than the other rounds. The first country started its fieldwork in September 2020, and the final countries finished their fieldwork in August 2022. The pandemic may have resulted in some attitudinal and behavioural changes; therefore, the timing of fieldwork was crucial in this round (ESS ERIC, undated).

Figure 18: Trends in distrust and dissatisfaction, by ESS round, 2002–2020



Notes: The figure shows the means by year (with a range of 0–10) at NUTS 2 regional level, considering all variables of distrust and dissatisfaction detailed in the first section of Chapter 3. Levels of distrust and dissatisfaction were calculated by NUTS 2 region for each ESS round and then averaged to obtain one level per round. Regions with fewer than 30 observations per round were dropped.

Source: Authors’ own calculations, based on the ESS

However, when focusing on the country level, we notice that not all countries experience the same trend. As shown in Figure 19, some countries’ levels of trust and satisfaction were not affected by the 2008 economic crisis; in some countries, it even improved. That is the case in Czechia, Hungary and Portugal. In these countries, levels of distrust have been high since 2002, but decreased following the crisis. However, countries such as Greece, Italy and Spain seemed to reach their peak levels of distrust after the crisis.

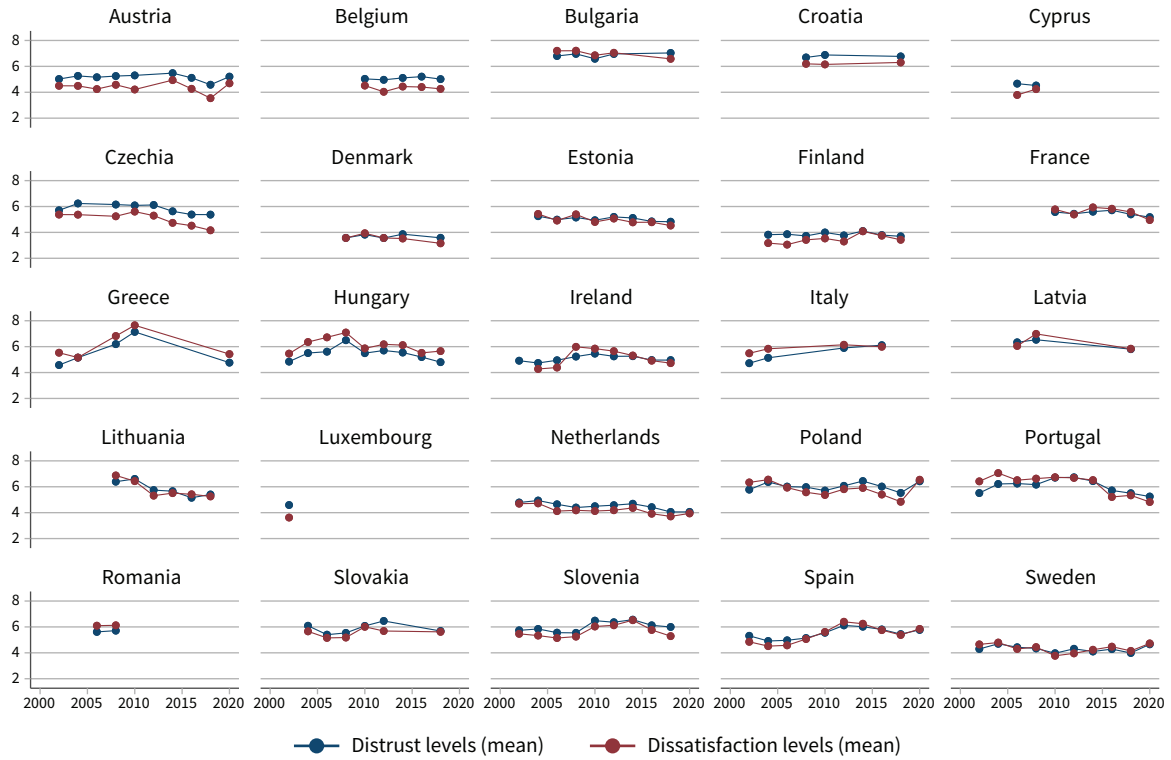
To better explain these country and regional differences, we analysed the levels and trends by country cluster. Figure 20 shows the changes in the distrust and dissatisfaction indexes over time for five different European country clusters.¹⁸ First, it seems that the rise in distrust and dissatisfaction in the last year of the ESS data were almost exclusively due to the increase in the countries of central and eastern Europe,

and, to a lesser extent, the Nordic countries. In the Nordic countries, which exhibited very low levels of distrust – consistent with the findings for this dimension of social cohesion in other works, such as Dragolov et al (2016)¹⁹ – distrust abruptly increased in 2020. Second, the high levels of distrust after the 2008 economic crisis can mainly be explained by the high levels of distrust in the eastern Mediterranean and Balkan and western Mediterranean countries, which were hit the hardest by the crisis and the subsequent debt crisis. After 2016–2018, this group of countries saw their levels of distrust decrease to those observed at the beginning of the century. Lastly, countries in the Nordic and continental Europe and Ireland clusters have high and constant levels of trust for the entire period, with a slight rise from 2010 to 2012. In these countries, economic and social crises do not appear to reduce citizens’ levels of institutional trust.

18 The Nordic cluster (Denmark, Finland and Sweden), the continental Europe and Ireland cluster (Austria, Belgium, France, Ireland, Luxembourg and the Netherlands), the western Mediterranean cluster (Italy, Portugal and Spain), the central and eastern European cluster (Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia) and the eastern Mediterranean and Balkan cluster (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece and Romania).

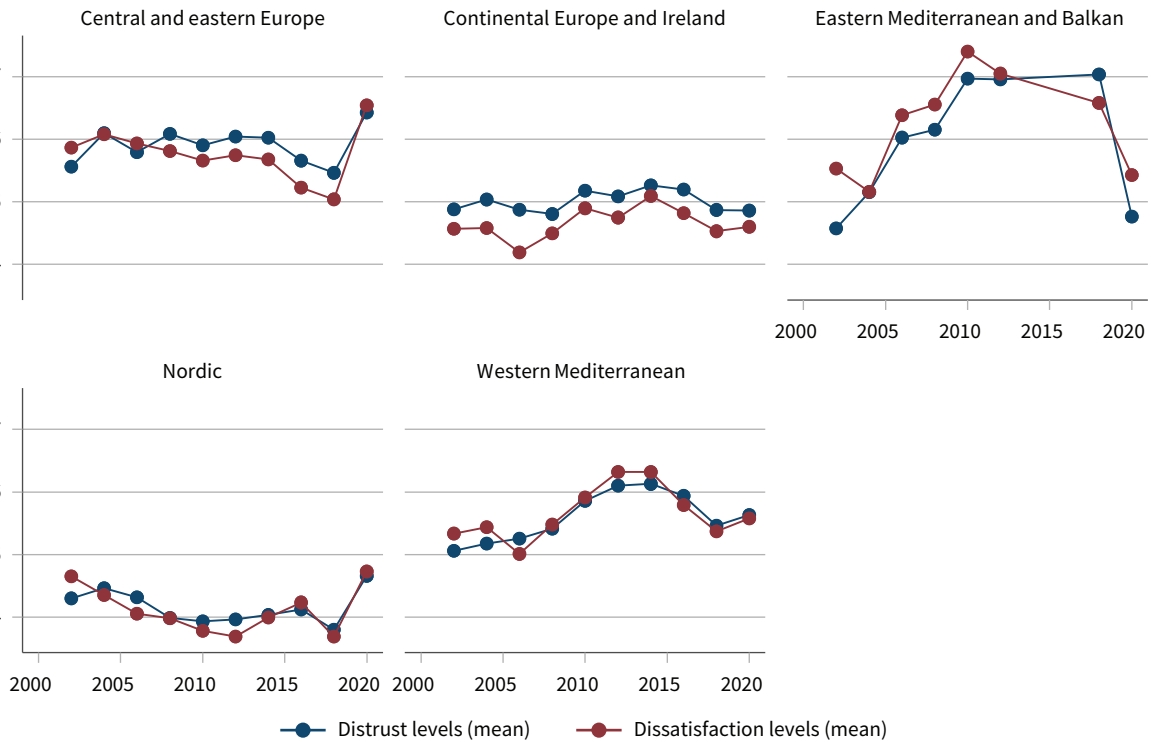
19 Dragolov et al (2016) measured the levels of trust in institutions as a dimension of social cohesion for four periods between 1989 and 2012. For the last two periods, 2004–2008 and 2009–2012, those from Denmark, Finland and Sweden had the highest trust in institutions among citizens of the EU27 countries. The authors also showed that the levels of distrust increased between the two periods in the western and eastern Mediterranean countries.

Figure 19: Trends in distrust and dissatisfaction based on the ESS, by country, 2002–2020



Notes: The figure shows the average levels of distrust and dissatisfaction, by ESS round and country. It considers every ESS round with available data for every EU27 country, and all variables of distrust and dissatisfaction detailed in the first section of Chapter 3. Levels of distrust and dissatisfaction were calculated by NUTS 2 region for each ESS round and then averaged to obtain one level per round. Regions with fewer than 30 observations per round were dropped.
Source: Authors' own calculations, based on the ESS

Figure 20: Trends in distrust and dissatisfaction based on the ESS, by country cluster, 2002–2020

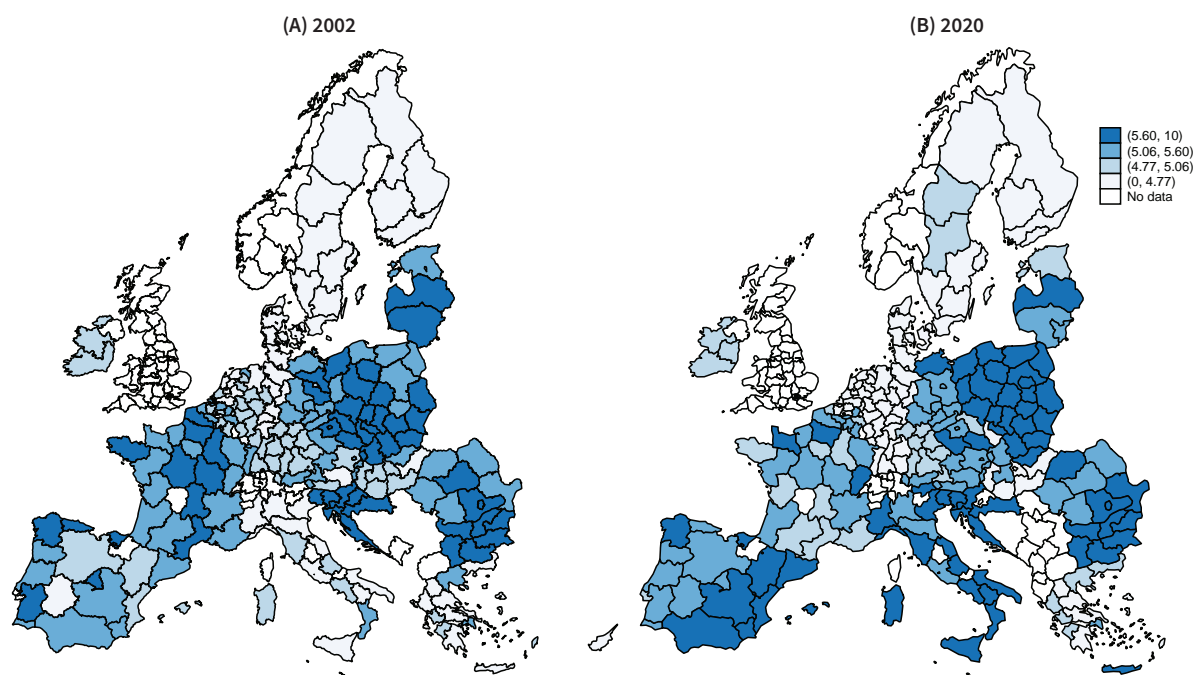


Notes: The figure shows the average levels of distrust and dissatisfaction, by ESS round and country cluster. It considers every ESS round with available data for every EU27 country, and all variables of distrust and dissatisfaction detailed in the first section of Chapter 3. Levels of distrust and dissatisfaction were calculated by NUTS 2 region for each ESS round and then averaged to obtain one level per round. Regions with fewer than 30 observations per round were dropped. The clusters are central and eastern Europe (Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia), continental Europe and Ireland (Austria, Belgium, France, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands), eastern Mediterranean and Balkan (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Romania), Nordic (Denmark, Finland, Sweden) and western Mediterranean (Italy, Portugal, Spain).
Source: Authors' own calculations, based on the ESS

Figures 21 and 22 show the changes in the levels of dissatisfaction and distrust at subregional (NUTS 2) level from 2002 to 2020,²⁰ by quintile. For distrust in institutions, our attention is drawn to three results. First, there is a noteworthy rise in distrust levels in western Mediterranean countries such as Italy and Spain. From being among the highly trusting countries in 2002, these countries increased their distrust to the highest quintiles, similar to those of central and eastern Europe. Second, we see an increase in gaps in trust in some countries with historical territorial, cultural or language divisions, such as the Walloon Region and the Flanders Region in Belgium and eastern Germany and western Germany. Finally, we see that some regions of Europe have made little progress in decreasing their levels of distrust, especially eastern Europe. The only exception is Hungary.

Dissatisfaction with aspects of public life and the government follow similar trends as institutional distrust, as shown by the increase in this index in Mediterranean countries (such as Italy and Spain) and the stable low level of dissatisfaction in the Nordic countries. Our attention is drawn to three particular results in Figure 22. First, countries with different economic and political paths during these 20 years and from various regions decreased their dissatisfaction levels, including Czechia, France, Germany and Portugal and the Baltic countries. Second, regional differences are still very important in some countries: eastern Germany, Catalonia and southern Italy have markedly higher levels of dissatisfaction than their neighbouring regions. In Italy and Germany, this difference is also reflected in the rising regional variance of the dissatisfaction index (see Figure 24). Third, as with institutional distrust, the eastern countries are lagging behind, except for Czechia and Hungary.

Figure 21: Change in distrust, by quintile, 2002–2020

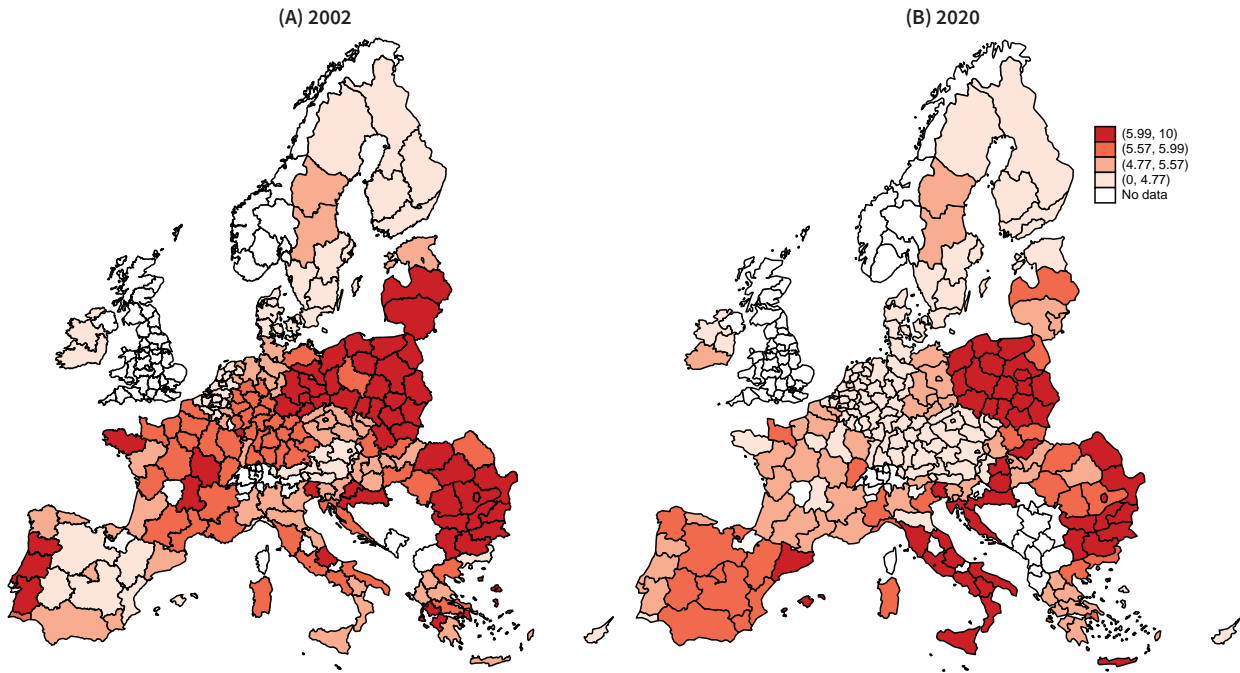


Notes: The figure shows the average levels of distrust at NUTS 2 regional level, by quintile, in 2002 (or earliest year with available data) and 2020 (or latest year with available data). Information for Germany in the ESS is available only at NUTS 1 level. For the first round, the graph follows the 2006 NUTS classification, while for the last it follows the 2021 NUTS classification. Quintile thresholds are fixed at 2002 levels. Regions with fewer than 30 observations per round were dropped.

Source: Authors' own calculations, based on the ESS

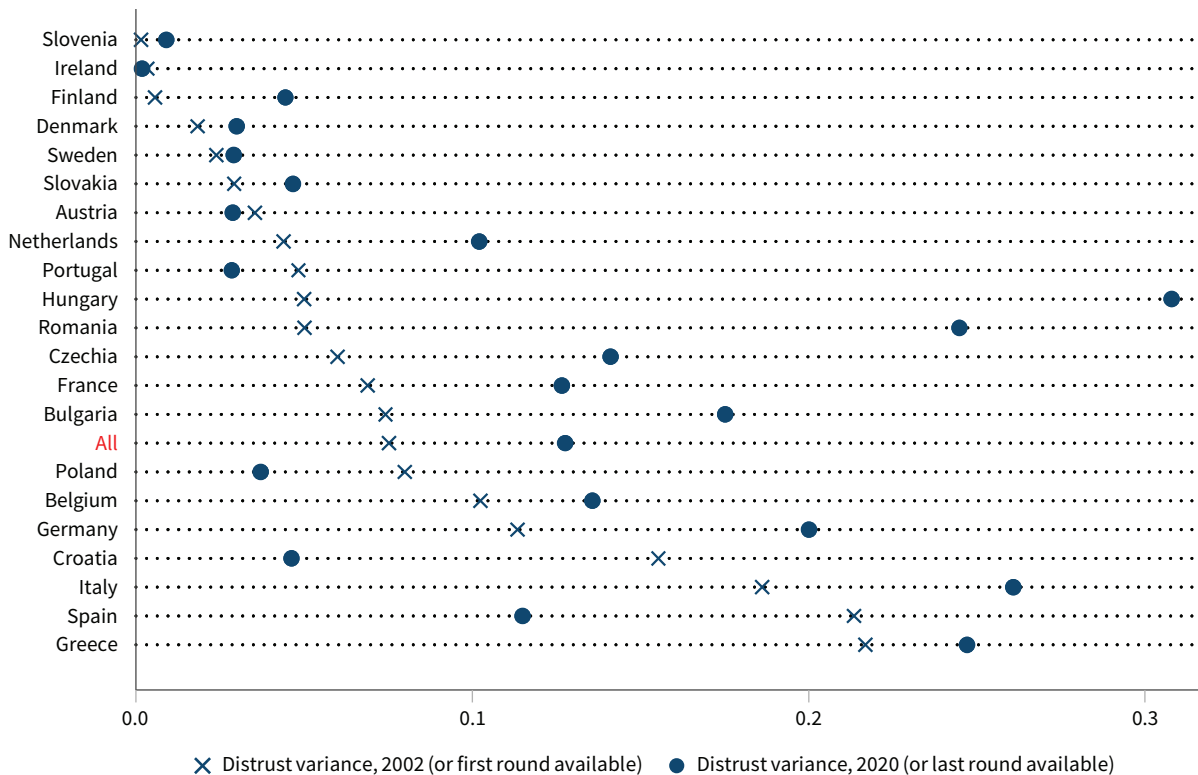
20 For countries not surveyed in 2002 and 2020, the first and last rounds of the ESS for which data were available were used.

Figure 22: Change in dissatisfaction, by quintile, 2002–2020



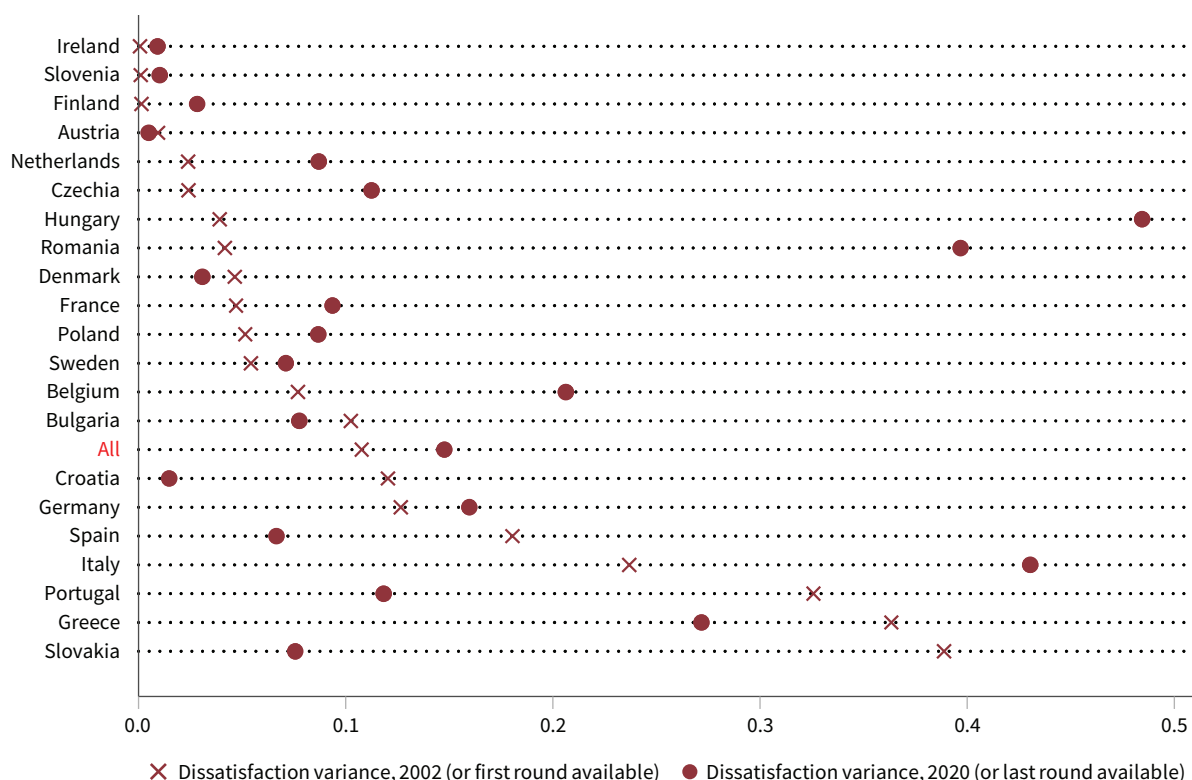
Notes: The figure shows the average dissatisfaction levels at NUTS 2 regional level, by quintile, in 2002 (or earliest year with available data) and 2020 (or latest year with available data). Information for Germany in the ESS is available only at NUTS 1 level. For the first round, the graph follows the 2006 NUTS classification, while for the last it follows the 2021 NUTS classification. Quintiles thresholds are fixed at 2002 levels. Regions with fewer than 30 observations per round were dropped.
Source: Authors' own calculations, based on the ESS

Figure 23: Change in the variance of distrust levels, by country, 2002–2020



Notes: The figure shows the variance among NUTS 2 regions in levels of distrust, by country, between 2002 and 2020. When no data were available for 2002 or 2020, we used the closest year for which data were available. The variance for Germany is at NUTS 1 level. Croatia has been excluded, as observations were from a single round. Cyprus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Luxembourg are composed of a single NUTS 2 region; therefore, the variance is zero. Regions with fewer than 30 observations per round were dropped.
Source: Authors' own calculations, based on the ESS

Figure 24: Change in the variance of dissatisfaction levels, by country, 2002–2020



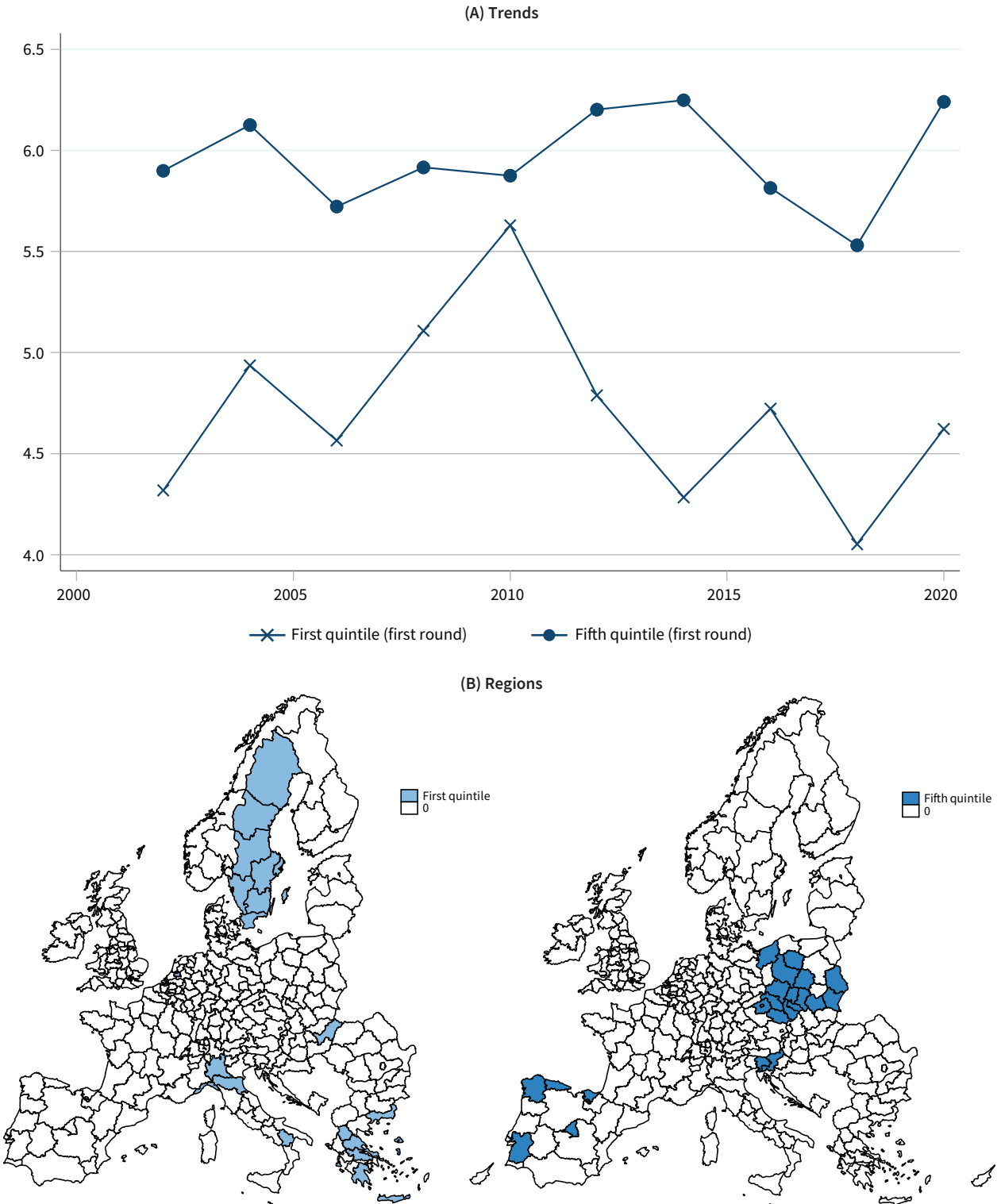
Notes: The figure shows the variance among NUTS 2 regions in the levels of dissatisfaction, by country, between 2002 and 2020. When no data were available for 2002 or 2020, we used data for the closest year for which data were available. The variance for Germany is at NUTS 1 level. Croatia has been excluded, as observations are from a single round. Cyprus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Luxembourg are composed of a single NUTS 2 region; therefore, the variance is zero. Regions with fewer than 30 observations per round were dropped.
Source: Authors' own calculations, based on the ESS

To get a sense of whether there has been convergence in the distrust and dissatisfaction indexes among European regions in recent years, Figures 25 and 26 compare the trends in the regions that in 2002 had the highest and lowest levels of distrust and dissatisfaction in Europe, by showing the average distrust and dissatisfaction levels.²¹ Although we know that in some regions levels of trust or satisfaction have increased or worsened, these figures show that, on average, there

has not been much convergence in the levels of distrust or dissatisfaction among the regions that were best and worst off in 2002. As shown in Figure 25, there was some convergence in distrust levels during a brief period before the financial crisis in 2008, but the effect was lost after that. As shown in Figure 26, there was slight convergence in dissatisfaction levels from 2014 to 2018, but during the COVID-19 pandemic the difference between regions in both quintiles was as big as in 2014.

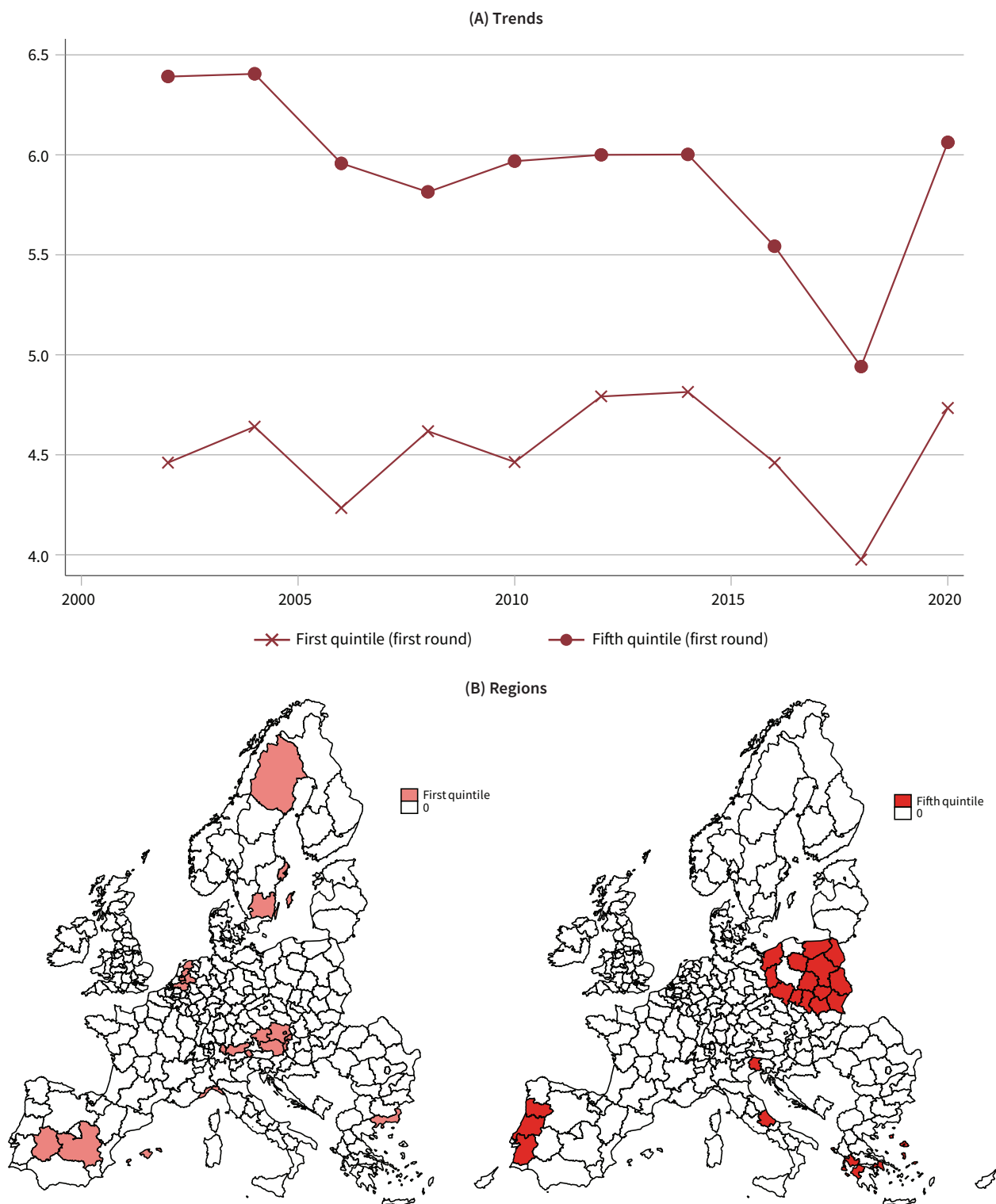
21 The groups of regions analysed in each figure are those in the lowest and highest quintiles for distrust and dissatisfaction in 2002, based on information from the first round of the ESS. The same groups' averages are presented for the following rounds until 2020.

Figure 25: Trends in distrust levels for regions with low and high levels (in the lowest and highest quintiles) in 2002



Notes: The figure shows the trends in the average distrust levels, by NUTS 2 region, in the first and fifth quintiles in 2002. The first-quintile regions are GR11, GR13, GR14, GR22, GR24, GR25, GR41, GR43, HU32, ITC3, ITC4, ITF5, ITH5, NL31, SE11, SE12, SE21, SE22, SE23, SE31, SE32 and SE33. The fifth-quintile regions are CZ02, CZ05, CZ06, CZ07, CZ08, ES11, ES12, ES21, ES22, ES30, PL11, PL21, PL22, PL31, PL32, PL41, PL42, PL51, PL52, PL61, PT18, SI01 and SI02. For the NUTS 2 classification, see Eurostat (undated). Regions with fewer than 30 observations per round were dropped.
Source: Authors' own calculations, based on the ESS

Figure 26: Trends in dissatisfaction levels for regions with low and high levels (in the lowest and highest quintiles) in 2002



Notes: The figure shows trends in average dissatisfaction levels, by NUTS 2 region, in the first and fifth quintiles in 2002. The first-quintile regions are AT11, AT12, AT13, AT22, AT31, AT33, AT32, AT34, ES42, ES43, ES53, GR11, ITC3, NL12, NL22, NL23, NL31, NL41, SE11, SE21 and SE33. The fifth-quintile regions are GR22, GR23, GR30, GR41, ITF1, ITH4, PL11, PL12, PL21, PL22, PL31, PL32, PL33, PL34, PL42, PL43, PL51, PL52, PL61, PL62, PT11, PT16 and PT18. For the NUTS 2 classification, see Eurostat (undated). Regions with fewer than 30 observations per round were dropped.

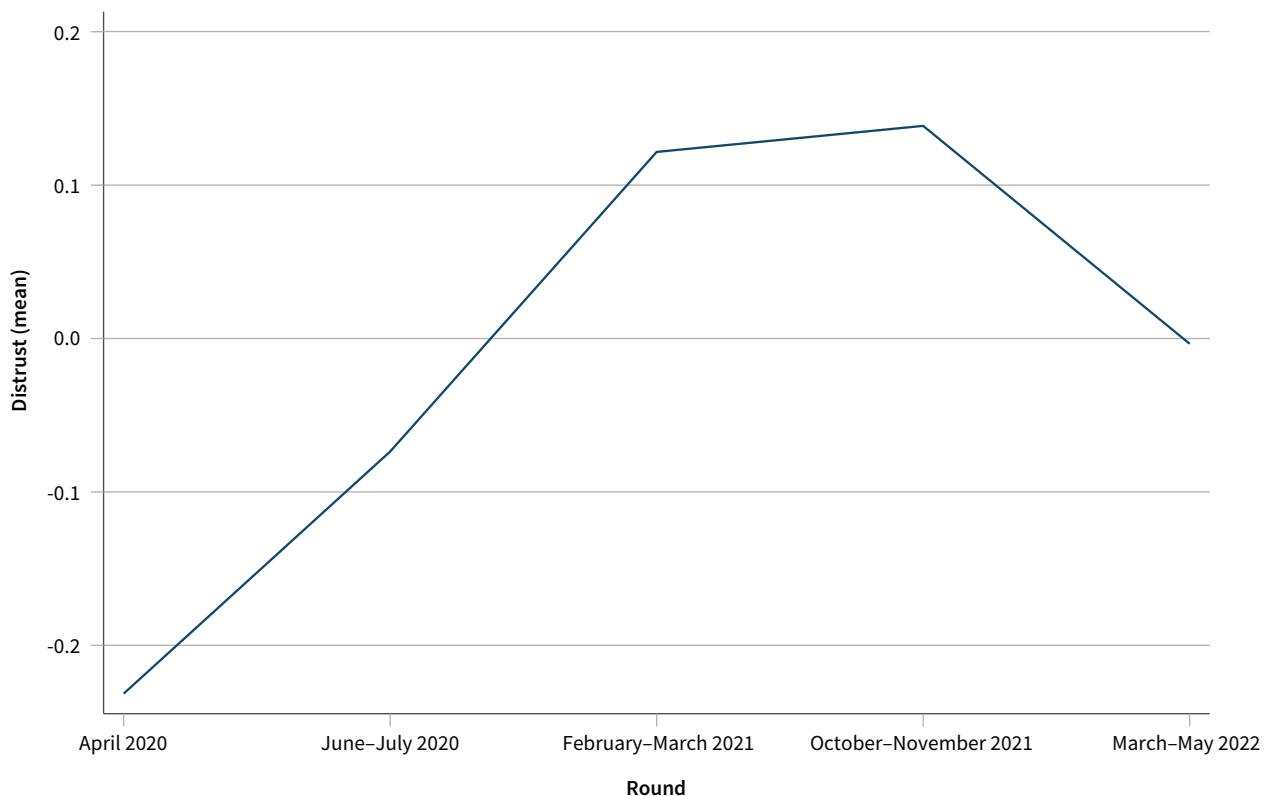
Source: Authors' own calculations, based on the ESS

Distrust and dissatisfaction during the COVID-19 pandemic

We evaluate distrust and dissatisfaction during the COVID-19 pandemic using the fourth *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey. The survey was fielded by Eurofound from October to November 2021, a period when the pandemic slowed down after vaccines were rolled out in most European countries.²² However, the five rounds of the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey provide a picture of how distrust fluctuated throughout the pandemic.²³ Using an index of distrust, shown in Figure 27, it can be seen that distrust increased rapidly from the first lockdown in April 2020 until February–March

2021. Distrust then stabilised for around eight months and then decreased in 2022 once the pandemic had receded. The initial low level of distrust could reflect individuals’ positive attitudes towards the introduction of the first lockdown and exceptional restrictions carried out by European governments, a feature also known as the rally-around-the-flag effect (Eurofound, 2022). Yet, inferred from Figure 27, this effect did not last long. Once the exceptional nature of the phenomenon had passed, distrust increased rapidly until February–March 2021 and then steadily until November 2021. The extension of lockdowns or the end of financial aid in many countries could be behind this jump. Finally, distrust declined again once the pandemic had receded, up to the spring of 2022.

Figure 27: Trends in distrust based on *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey rounds, 2020–2022



Notes: The figure shows the average levels of distrust for the five rounds of the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey (April 2020; June–July 2020; February–March 2021; October–November 2021; March–May 2022). Distrust levels were determined using PCA for each round, taking the first component as the distrust index.

Source: Authors’ own calculations, based on the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey (2020–2022)

22 As for the regional variables, they are highly correlated, as shown in Table A8 in Annex 4. With a correlation of 0.73 and a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.84, both measures have a high internal consistency in describing the same concept.

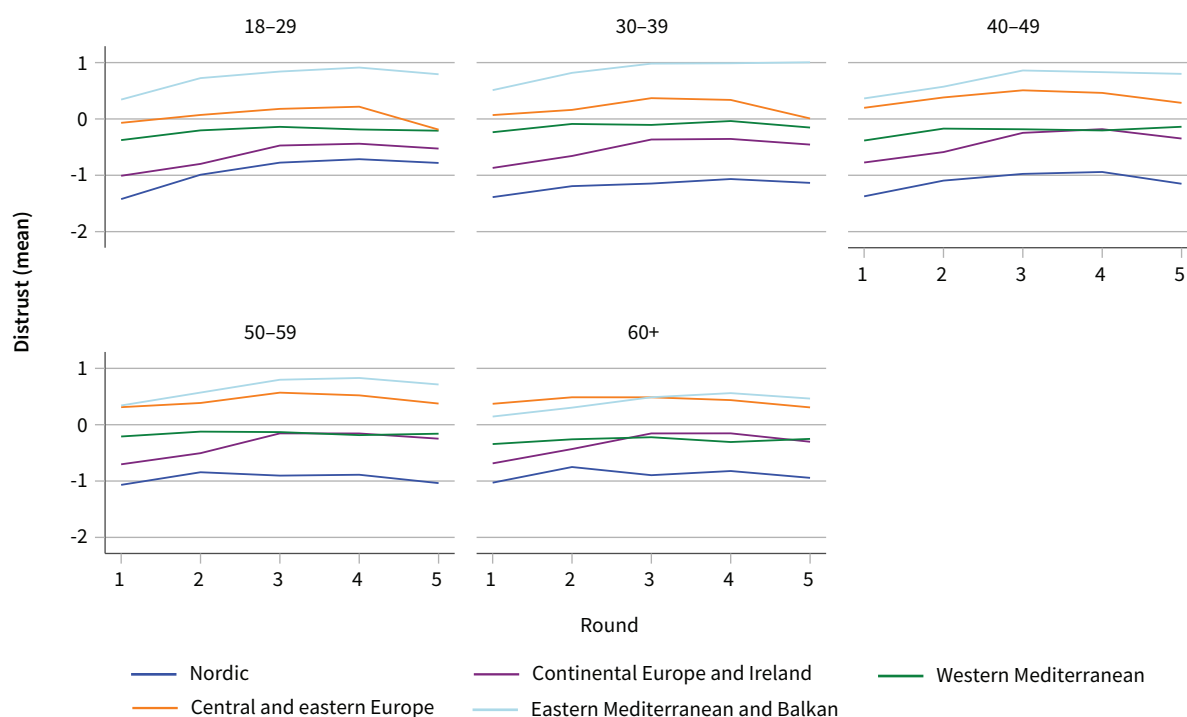
23 We cannot observe the trends in dissatisfaction because the questions related to that variable were only asked in the fourth round of the survey.

As the data come from individuals, it can be observed how distrust and dissatisfaction changed considering personal characteristics. When analysing distrust by age and country cluster, as shown in Figure 28, we notice much bigger differences by country cluster than by age. Nordic countries have the lowest level of distrust for each age group, followed by continental Europe and Ireland and the western Mediterranean. Eastern Mediterranean and Balkan countries have the highest levels of distrust, except during the onset of the pandemic from April–June 2020 among those aged 60 or older. When focusing on age groups, we note that for all people over 50 distrust levels remained stable throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, with the exception of those in continental Europe and Ireland (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands). After March 2021, distrust never returned to its initial levels in these countries. For the group of young people under 30, in almost all regions (except central and eastern Europe) there was a significant increase in distrust levels from April 2020 onwards. For the middle-aged respondents (those aged between 30 and 49 years), the initial trust levels were recovered once the vaccines were rolled out.

The general trends observed seem to be determined by risk awareness among the population and the harshness of the COVID-19 policy measures implemented by the countries. The backlash resulting from the lockdowns further undermined trust among the young population, who perceived the risk of COVID-19 as lower and may have been more directly affected by the restrictions. For instance, restrictions were placed on schools, and sports and leisure facilities, which are all important for socialisation among the young population. In contrast, for the older population the measures may have been more closely aligned with their expectations.

For dissatisfaction, we can only examine the results from the fourth round of the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey, shown in Figure 29. We find similar trends to distrust: the Nordic countries exhibit the lowest level of dissatisfaction, followed by the western Mediterranean countries. On the contrary, eastern Mediterranean and Balkan citizens were the most dissatisfied with the government’s performance during the COVID-19 pandemic, mirroring the trend in distrust. Generally, the younger generations have higher institutional distrust and are more dissatisfied than those who are 60 years old or over.

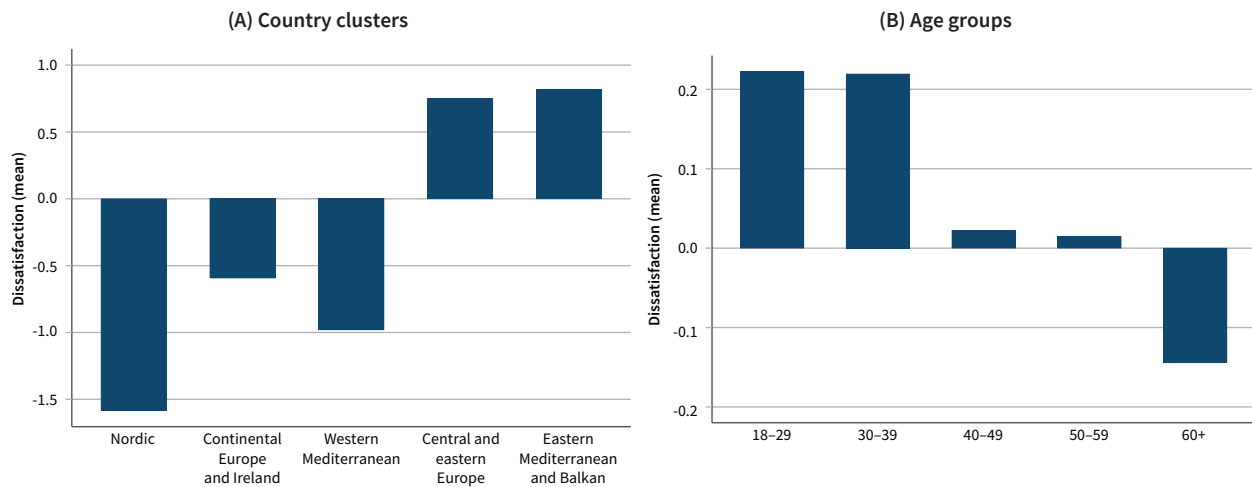
Figure 28: Levels of distrust, by country cluster, age group and *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey round, 2020–2022



Notes: The figure shows the average levels of distrust for the five rounds of the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey (April 2020, June–July 2020, February–March 2021, October–November 2021 and March–May 2022). Distrust levels were determined using PCA for each round, age group and country cluster, taking the first component as the distrust index. The country clusters are central and eastern Europe (Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia), continental Europe and Ireland (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands), eastern Mediterranean and Balkan (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Romania), Nordic (Denmark, Finland, Sweden) and western Mediterranean (Italy, Malta, Portugal, Spain).

Source: Authors’ own calculations, based on the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey (2020–2022)

Figure 29: Dissatisfaction levels based on the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey, by country cluster and age group, 2021



Notes: The figure shows the average level of dissatisfaction for the fourth round of the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey (October–November 2021). Dissatisfaction levels were determined using PCA, taking the first component as the dissatisfaction index. The index was then averaged by age group and country cluster. The country clusters are central and eastern Europe (Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia), continental Europe and Ireland (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands), eastern Mediterranean and Balkan (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Romania), Nordic (Denmark, Finland, Sweden) and western Mediterranean (Italy, Malta, Portugal, Spain).

Source: Authors' own calculations, based on the fourth round of the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey (October–November 2021)

Box 1: Does social media use reflect voice and discontent?

An intriguing question arises: is there a connection between the rise of social media and exit, voice and discontent? The digital realm of social media has not only lowered the barriers to accessing information but also empowered citizens, particularly among marginalised groups, to make their voices heard. Online platforms such as blogs and social media enable individuals to share their thoughts and messages inexpensively, potentially reaching a wide audience. In essence, there is a significant distinction between traditional media outlets and social media: the latter enables direct citizen engagement.

When it comes to the trust that citizens place in different media sources, their preferences play a pivotal role. Findings from the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey reveal that citizens tend to trust traditional media if it is their preferred media outlet. The same principle applies to social media.

It is also worth noting that respondents in the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey who favour social media as their primary news source tend to have lower levels of institutional trust. This lower trust can increase discontent with democracy, because some citizens may feel unheard or excluded from public decisions when their priorities and perspectives are not reflected in government policies. Distrustful citizens may perceive their government's public agenda as conflicting with the mainstream public, leading to a sense of non-representation in the democratic process. This, in turn, fosters distrust and discontent with the democratic system.

In contrast, when assessing the effect of using social media on exit and voice (measured by voter absenteeism and protesting, respectively), we find no strong relationships. The *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey contains a six-category variable capturing the frequency of social media use: (i) every day, for three hours or more, (ii) every day, for more than one hour, (iii) every day, for less than one hour, (iv) every other day, (v) less often and (vi) never. We define intense use of social media as the respondent using social media as a source of information at least every other day or more frequently. The correlation with voice is 0.03 and the correlation with exit is 0.025; neither is significant. This does not necessarily mean that there is no relationship. The key issue is that it is not possible to distinguish what kind of social media the respondent uses. Moreover, as traditional news outlets are moving to online platforms, the difference between traditional and social media outlets is becoming more blurred.

Key takeaways on distrust and dissatisfaction

- When dissatisfaction in public institutions goes up, so does distrust, and vice versa. In particular, distrust and dissatisfaction in institutions appear to increase during hardship, such as during the 2008 economic crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic.
- However, levels of trust and satisfaction differ between countries. For instance, in some countries' levels of trust and satisfaction were not affected by the 2008 economic crisis; in some countries, it even improved (Czechia, Hungary and Portugal).
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, distrust increased rapidly from the first lockdown in April 2020 until February–March 2021. Distrust then stabilised for around eight months and then decreased in 2022 once the pandemic had receded.
- Nordic countries have the lowest level of distrust for each age group, followed by continental Europe and Ireland and the western Mediterranean. Eastern Mediterranean and Balkan countries have the highest levels of distrust, except during the onset of the pandemic from April–June 2020 among those aged 60 or older.
- For young people under 30, in almost all regions (except central and eastern Europe) there was a significant increase in distrust levels from March 2020 onwards, most likely because of the COVID-19 restrictions that were placed on schools, and sports and leisure facilities.
- The Nordic countries exhibit the lowest level of dissatisfaction, followed by the western Mediterranean countries. Eastern Mediterranean and Balkan citizens were the most dissatisfied with the government's performance during the COVID-19 pandemic, mirroring the trend in distrust.
- Generally, the younger generations have higher institutional distrust and are more dissatisfied than those who are 60 years old or over.
- When it comes to the trust that citizens place in different media sources, citizens tend to trust traditional media if it is their preferred media outlet. The same principle applies to social media.
- Respondents who favour social media as their primary news source tend to have lower levels of institutional trust. This lower trust can increase discontent with democracy, because some citizens may feel unheard or excluded from public decisions when their priorities and perspectives are not reflected in government policies. This can result in distrust and discontent with the democratic system.

4 Institutional legitimacy, voice and exit: A new approach

Do individuals who opt out of political participation harbour more distrust in institutions? Are particular clusters of countries more prone to expressing discontent through increasing their voice? Is there a direct positive link between political engagement and institutional legitimacy across European nations?

To answer these questions, we follow a similar approach to one taken previously, utilising the ESS panel data at NUTS 2 regional level. Key explanatory variables include the proportion of individuals in the region engaging in at least one political voicing activity in the 12 months before the survey and the percentage of individuals in the region who chose not to vote in the most recent election. To account for other factors that may impact the levels of institutional legitimacy, we introduce dummy clusters and regional characteristics such as GDP per capita, educational attainment, median age, unemployment rate, net migration rate and rural/urban residency. As before, these clusters

represent distinct European regions, including central and eastern Europe, continental Europe and Ireland, the eastern Mediterranean and Balkan region, the Nordic region and the western Mediterranean region. The NUTS 2 regional characteristics were sourced from Eurostat and the ESS.

We apply a similar approach, utilising Eurofound's *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey, to answer these questions in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our analysis focused on respondents in the fourth round of this survey (October to November 2021), as it was the only round that enquired about distrust in institutions during the pandemic and dissatisfaction with the government's handling of the crisis. In these models, we incorporated additional micro socioeconomic variables, including employment status and whether the individual lives alone. We employed the weights provided by Eurofound to ensure that the sample was representative at country level.

Box 2: Legitimacy, political participation and social trust

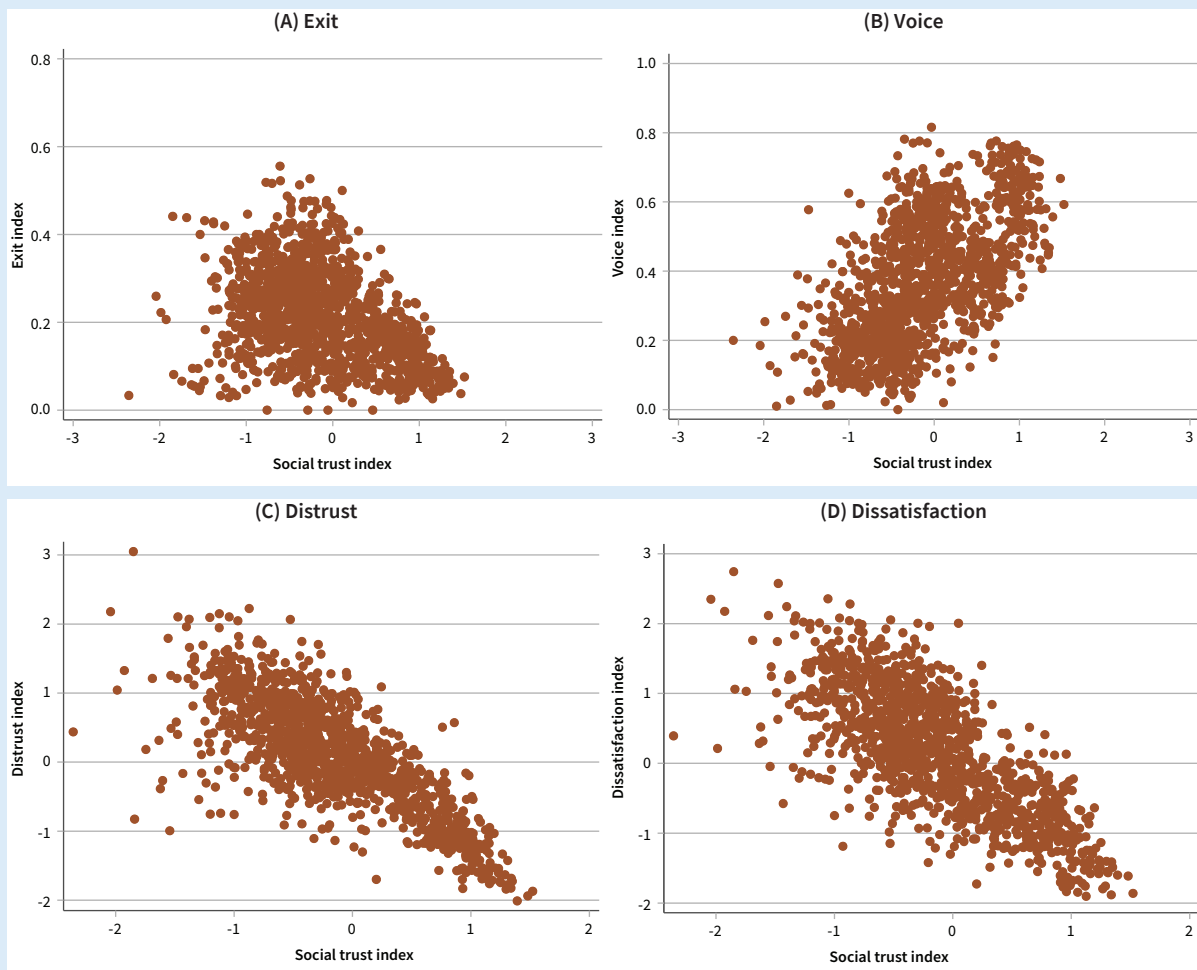
Multiple dimensions of social cohesion have been extensively studied and analysed, as seen in the first chapter of this report. Among them, one of the most studied is social trust. As Eurofound (2018) highlighted in a report, 'a cohesive society is a "mutually supportive community" in which its members pursue common goals', and 'trust in fellow citizens is a building block for mutual support and civic orientation' (p. 29). For Sztompka (1999), trust is the expectation that others act reasonably and are honest and benevolent.

A characteristic of social trust is that it is rather stable, or 'sticky', over time. This implies that there are no simple or quick ways to increase a country's level of social trust. Larsen (2014) used the European Values Survey and World Value Survey waves from the 1980s to the 2010s in different European countries (along with other non-European countries) to measure levels of social trust throughout these decades. The overall finding is a strong correlation over time, with a tendency for trust to be higher among countries that already, in the early 1990s, had high trust levels. Thus, countries such as Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden are caught in a virtuous cycle of trust. These results suggest that social trust is 'sticky' due to the development of a common understanding of how societies and their citizens behave. Uslaner (2002) argues that basic impressions of socialisation among young people are hard to change throughout the individual's lifetime, and social trust is part of that. For example, when studying attitudes in the United States, Uslaner (2008) found that trust levels of the country of origin persist across many generations.

To see how the political components of social cohesion are directly related to other dimensions, such as social trust, we analyse the correlation between the four main variables of this report (exit, voice, distrust and dissatisfaction) and a measure of social trust based on the panel of respondents in the ESS survey. The first step was to build a social trust indicator using PCA and three ESS variables that capture social trust. Data were used from the respondents' opinions about the following statements: (i) most people can be trusted, or you can't be too careful; (ii) most people try to take advantage of you, or try to be fair; and (iii) most of the time people try to be helpful or they are mostly looking out for themselves. All variables are measured on a scale from 0 (no trust) to 10 (complete trust). The first component of the PCA was used as the social trust index. For this methodology to be valid, there must be a strong correlation between the three variables that form the index. See Annex 4 for further information on the strong correlation and Cronbach's alpha between the variables.

Figure 30 shows how social trust relates to the four determinants of social cohesion we analyse in this report. Except in the case of exit (Figure 30a), we see a robust linear relationship between these variables and social trust. In the case of voice, the greater the social trust, the higher the levels of voice. Although it can be perceived as counterintuitive, it is easy to see that the voicing activities this report analyses include collaborative activities that require trust in others to be carried out, such as signing petitions or legally protesting. There is a negative relationship between distrust and dissatisfaction and social trust. The higher the social trust, the higher the institutional trust and satisfaction with the government. Finally, for exit, the negative relationship is less evident. This may be because the questions on social trust and electoral participation have different time horizons. In addition, the respondents' levels of social trust at the time of being interviewed may have changed since the most recent election. In any case, in regions with higher social trust, levels of exit are slightly lower.

Figure 30: Association between social trust and determinants of social cohesion in the ESS, 2002–2020



Note: The data points are the means at NUTS 2 regional level for 2002–2020.
Source: Authors' own calculations, based on the ESS

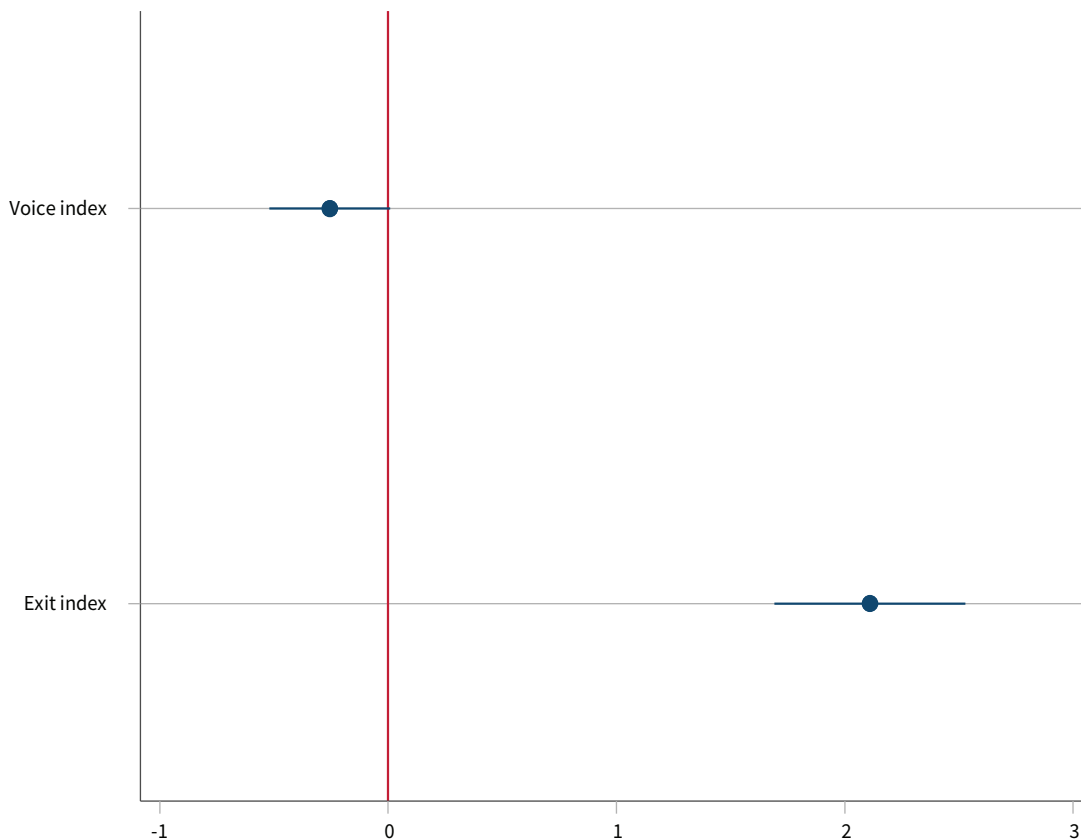
Determinants of distrust over the last 20 years

Our analysis shows that a variety of factors influence distrust in institutions. Using Hirschman’s framework of voice and exit as a measure of the political participation dimension of social cohesion, we find a positive relationship between distrust and decisions to exit, while distrust has a negative, slightly significant effect on voice. As seen in Figure 31, in our simplest model, in regions with higher electoral absenteeism the levels of distrust in institutions are higher, while in regions where the levels of voice are higher the levels of distrust are lower. On the one hand, the former result is expected: to vote, people need to trust the institutions managing the democratic process, and those deciding to exit may perceive less institutional legitimacy. On the other hand, for voice, this result may seem counterintuitive, but it is not when one considers voice as an institutional way to express discontent. People who voice do so because there is a system that will listen to them.

As we saw in Chapter 3, voice includes activities such as signing petitions and contacting local politicians, which means the citizens trust the system. Nevertheless, the effect of voice on distrust is small and slightly significant, at 10%.

However, when geographical and socioeconomic control variables are considered, the negative effect of voicing disappears (Figure 32). The Nordic countries have significantly less institutional distrust than countries in continental Europe and Ireland (the reference category), and central and eastern European and Mediterranean countries have significantly more distrust. Economic factors such as higher economic development (log GDP per capita) decrease distrust, while higher unemployment rates in the regions increase it, albeit by a small amount. Surprisingly, we do not find any effect of educational attainment level or the proportion of the population living in a rural area. Finally, regions with higher net migration have a slightly significantly lower level of distrust.

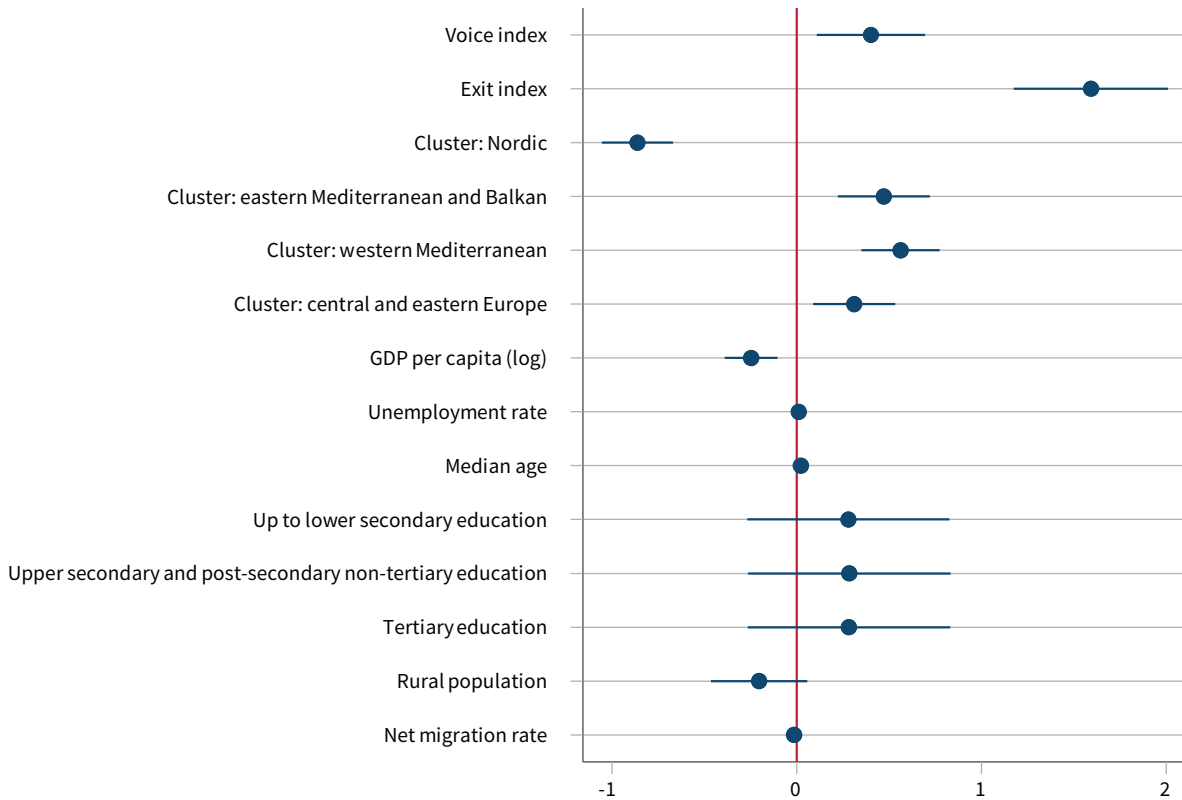
Figure 31: Coefficients of distrust based on the ESS dataset, by political participation (regression analysis)



Notes: The figure shows the estimated coefficients when distrust is the average distrust index by NUTS 2 region. The individual distrust index is determined using the first component of the PCA for the six variables of distrust in the ESS (all regression results are available in Annex 5). The bars indicate the 95% confidence intervals for the estimations. Regions with fewer than 30 observations per round were dropped. Exit and voice are the proportion of individuals in a NUTS region who did not vote in the most recent election or the proportion of individuals in a NUTS region who participated in political activities in the 12 months before the survey, respectively.

Source: Authors’ own calculations, based on the ESS

Figure 32: Coefficients of distrust based on the ESS dataset, by political participation and regional characteristics (regression analysis)



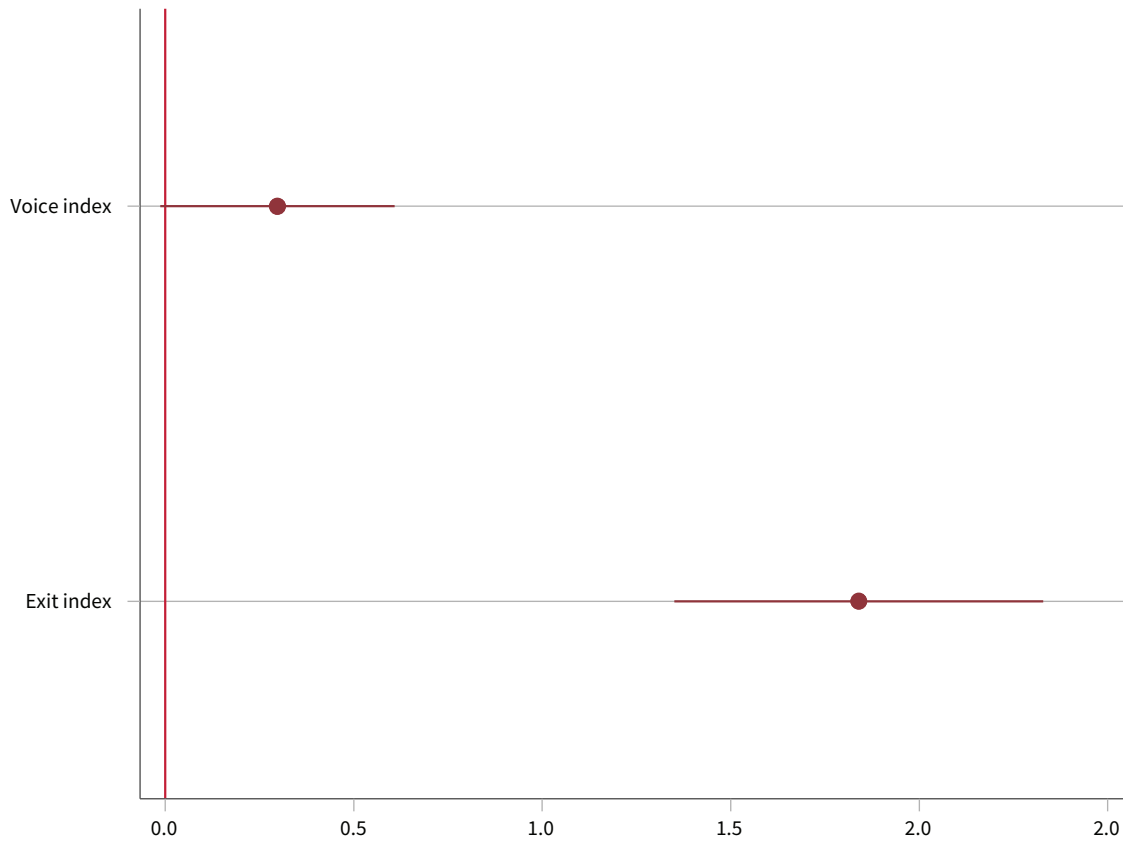
Notes: The figure shows the estimated coefficients when distrust is the average distrust index by NUTS 2 region. The distrust index is determined using the first component of the PCA for the six variables of distrust in the ESS (all regression results are available in Annex 5). The bars indicate the 95% confidence intervals for the estimations. Regions with fewer than 30 observations per round were dropped. Exit and voice are the proportions of individuals in a NUTS region who did not vote in the most recent election and proportions of individuals in a NUTS region who participated in political activities in the 12 months before the survey, respectively. The reference cluster for comparison is continental Europe and Ireland. The clusters are central and eastern Europe (Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia), continental Europe and Ireland (Austria, Belgium, France, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands), eastern Mediterranean and Balkan (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Romania), Nordic (Denmark, Finland, Sweden) and western Mediterranean (Italy, Portugal, Spain).

Source: Authors' own calculations, based on the ESS

For dissatisfaction in aspects of public life and the government, we employ the same models and sets of determinants as for distrust in institutions. Figure 33 shows that the regions with higher exit and voice have higher levels of dissatisfaction. However, a lack of satisfaction with important aspects of public life, such as democracy and government, is expressed much more through exit than through voice, with the effect of exit

being sixfold higher. People who decide to exit show more dissatisfaction than those who decide to voice, which is consistent with the research of Hirschman, who argues that people are more likely to exit when they are dissatisfied because they are much more likely to abandon their political participation than fight for change.

Figure 33: Coefficients of dissatisfaction based on the ESS dataset, by political participation (regression analysis)



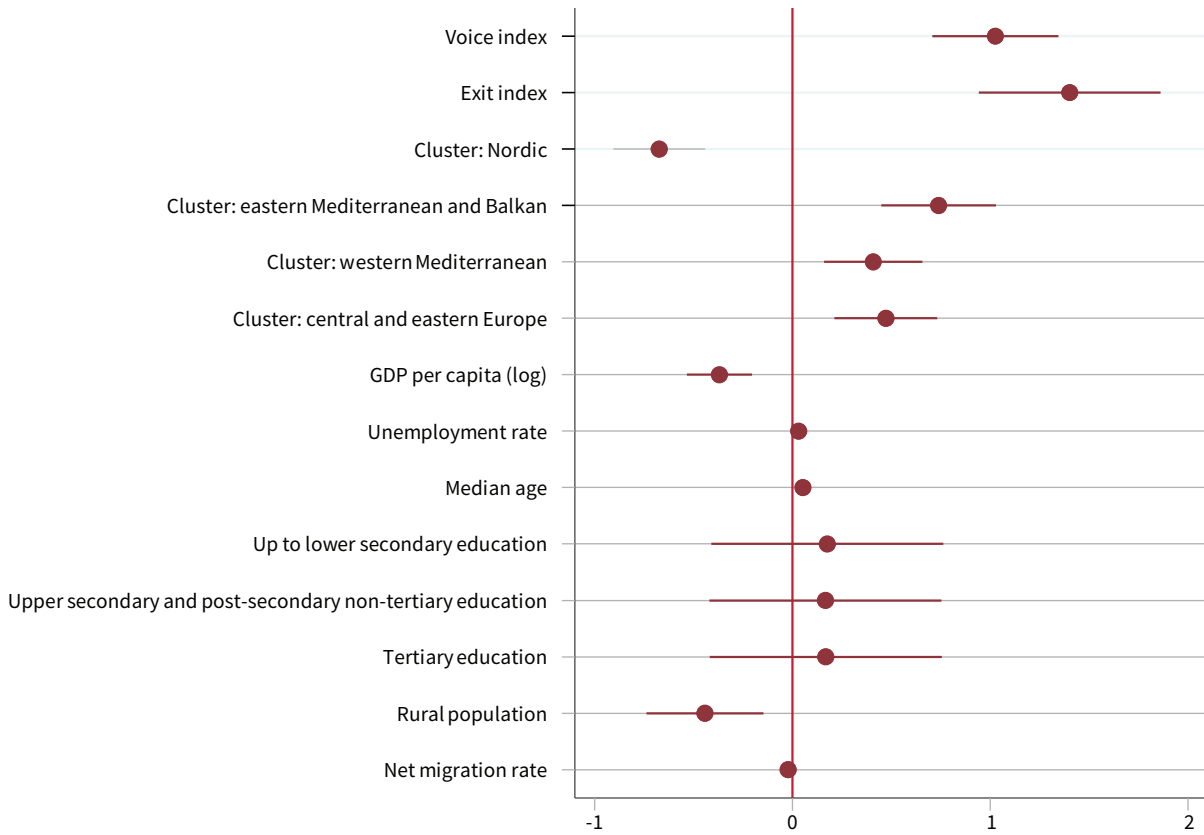
Notes: The figure shows the estimated coefficients when dissatisfaction is the average dissatisfaction index by NUTS 2 region. The dissatisfaction index is determined using the first component of the PCA for the five variables of dissatisfaction in the ESS (all regression results are available in Annex 5). The bars indicate the 95% confidence intervals for the estimations. Regions with fewer than 30 observations per round were dropped. Exit and voice are the proportion of individuals in a NUTS region who did not vote in the most recent election and the proportion of individuals in a NUTS region who participated in political activities in the 12 months before the survey, respectively.

Source: Authors' own calculations, based on the ESS

Nevertheless, when geographical and socioeconomic control variables are considered, the difference between voice and exit narrows, as seen in Figure 34. Regarding the control variables, we found similar results to those for distrust. A big part of the variance in dissatisfaction levels is due to regional differences. The Nordic countries show significantly less dissatisfaction than countries in continental Europe and Ireland (the reference category) and central and eastern

European and Mediterranean countries. Economic factors such as higher economic development (log GDP per capita) decrease the dissatisfaction levels in the population, while higher unemployment rates increases them very slightly. Regions with older populations have significantly lower satisfaction levels than those with younger populations. Finally, in regions where higher shares of the population live in rural areas or are migrants dissatisfaction is significantly lower.

Figure 34: Coefficients of dissatisfaction based on the ESS dataset, by political participation and regional characteristics (regression analysis)



Notes: The figure shows the estimated coefficients when dissatisfaction is the average dissatisfaction index by NUTS 2 region. The dissatisfaction index is determined using the first component of the PCA for the five variables of dissatisfaction in the ESS (all regression results are available in Annex 5). The bars indicate the 95% confidence intervals for the estimations. Regions with fewer than 30 observations per round were dropped. Exit and voice are the proportion of individuals in a NUTS region who did not vote in the most recent election and the proportion of individuals in a NUTS region who participated in political activities in the 12 months before the survey, respectively. The reference cluster for comparison is continental Europe and Ireland. The clusters are central and eastern Europe (Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia), continental Europe and Ireland (Austria, Belgium, France, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands), eastern Mediterranean and Balkan (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Romania), Nordic (Denmark, Finland, Sweden) and western Mediterranean (Italy, Portugal, Spain).
Source: Authors' own calculations, based on the ESS

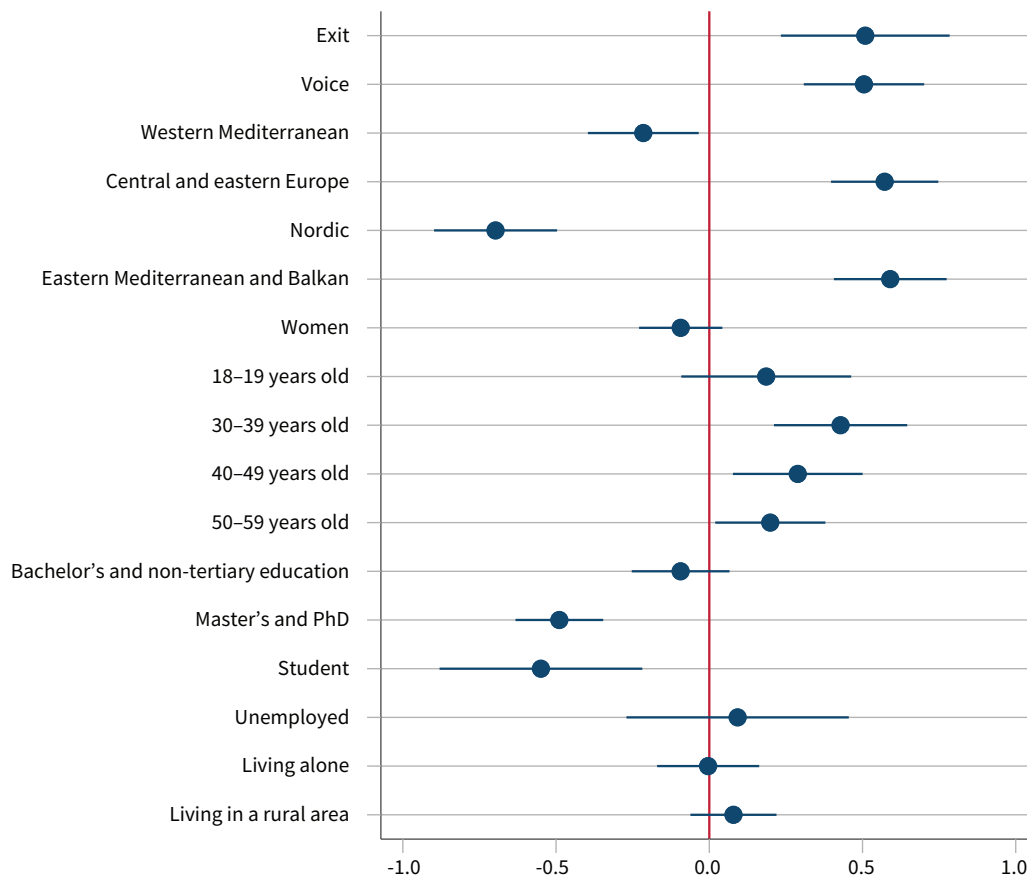
Distrust and dissatisfaction during the pandemic

Figures 35 to 38 show how individuals' behaviour in terms of exit and voice affected institutional legitimacy during the COVID-19 pandemic. The regression analysis starts with a primary model considering only the effects of exit and voice. From there, we added the sociodemographic characteristics (living alone, gender, residence, age, employment status and education) one by one until the model included the interactions between the control variables and the regressors of interest, exit and voice. The regression results are provided in Annex 6.

When considering institutional distrust as a measure of institutional legitimacy, we found that people's choice to exit and voice increases institutional distrust. According to Figure 35, citizens who have chosen to exit from electoral processes show significantly more institutional distrust than those who vote. To a lesser extent, the same happens with those who express their discontent by voicing or protesting. As with our region-level panel analysis, the Nordic countries have lower distrust levels than continental European countries and Ireland (the reference category²⁴), regardless of citizens' voicing or exiting behaviours. The western Mediterranean countries are also in this group.

²⁴ The reference categories are, for the country clusters, the continental Europe and Ireland cluster; for the age groups, 60 and over; for education, lower than secondary level; and, for residence, living in a city or a big town.

Figure 35: Coefficients of distrust based on the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey dataset, by political participation and sociodemographic characteristics (regression analysis)



Notes: The figure shows the coefficients estimated using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression, where distrust is regressed on exit and voice, sociodemographic characteristics (country cluster, age group, education, employment status, living alone, living in a rural area and gender), and interactions between exit, voice and the control variables. The distrust index is determined using the first component of the PCA for the three variables of distrust in the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey (all regression results are available in Annex 6). The bars indicate the 95% confidence intervals for the estimations. Robust standard errors and weights. The reference categories for comparison are 'continental Europe and Ireland' for clusters, '60 years old or over' for age and 'secondary or less' for education. The country clusters are central and eastern Europe (Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia), continental Europe and Ireland (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands), eastern Mediterranean and Balkan (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Romania), Nordic (Denmark, Finland, Sweden) and western Mediterranean (Italy, Malta, Portugal, Spain). Only certain categories of country clusters, sex and age groups are included as this is a regression analysis.

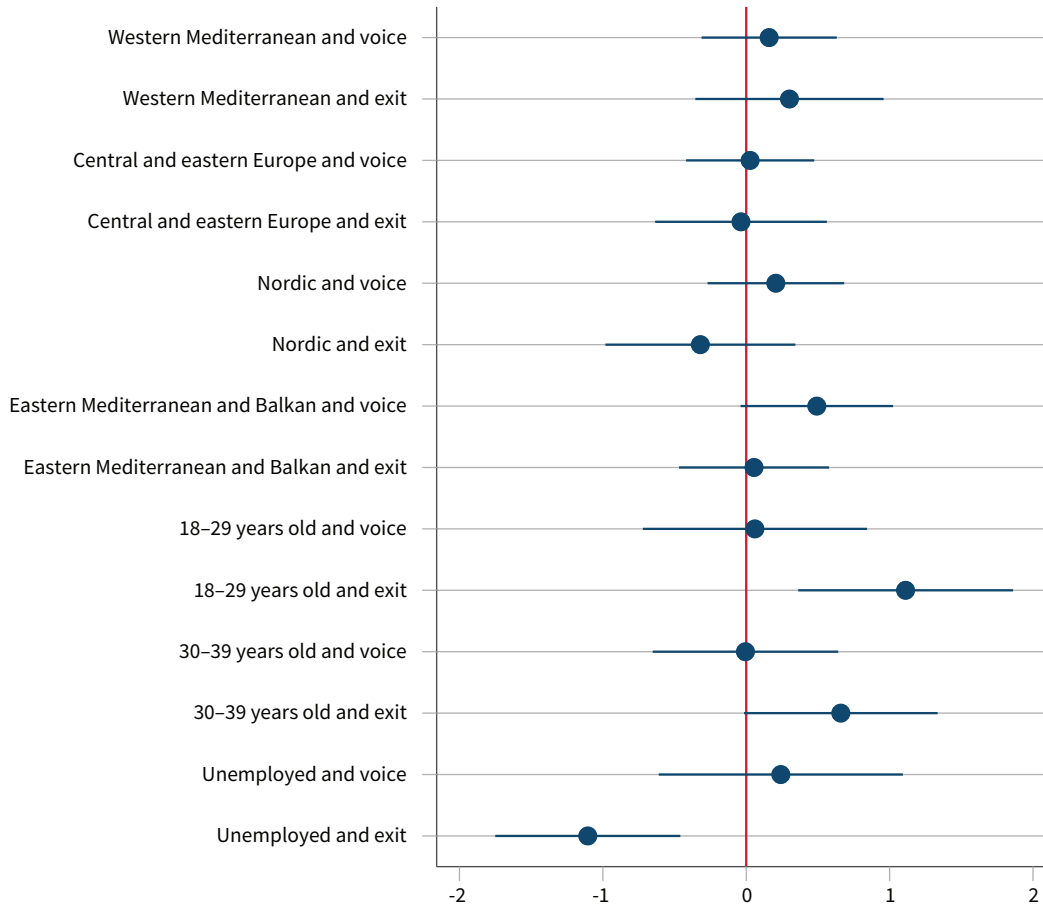
Source: Authors' own calculations, based on the fourth round of the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey (October–November 2021)

In contrast, central and eastern European and eastern Mediterranean and Balkan countries have much higher levels of distrust. Regarding age groups, the population between 30 and 59 years old has more distrust than the younger and older populations. For the other control variables, having a higher educational level or being a student results in lower distrust. However, unemployment, living in a rural area or living alone does not significantly affect distrust levels.

We also analyse some interactions between the socioeconomic characteristics of individuals and their voice and exit decisions, as shown in Figure 36. When combining our country clusters with voice and exit, we find that people from eastern Mediterranean and

Balkan countries participating in political life through voicing have much higher distrust in institutions. No other combination seems to be significant. When considering interactions with age groups, people under 40 choosing to exit (not vote) distrust more. Yet voicing does not have a significant effect on their distrust. Finally, unemployed people who decided not to vote in the most recent election have significantly more trust in the government, parliament and EU institutions. One explanation for this phenomenon is that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, unemployed people received increased financial support in many of the surveyed countries, boosting their trust in the government. Nevertheless, it is unclear why the effect is particularly acute among non-voters.

Figure 36: Coefficients of distrust based on the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey dataset, by interactions (regression analysis)



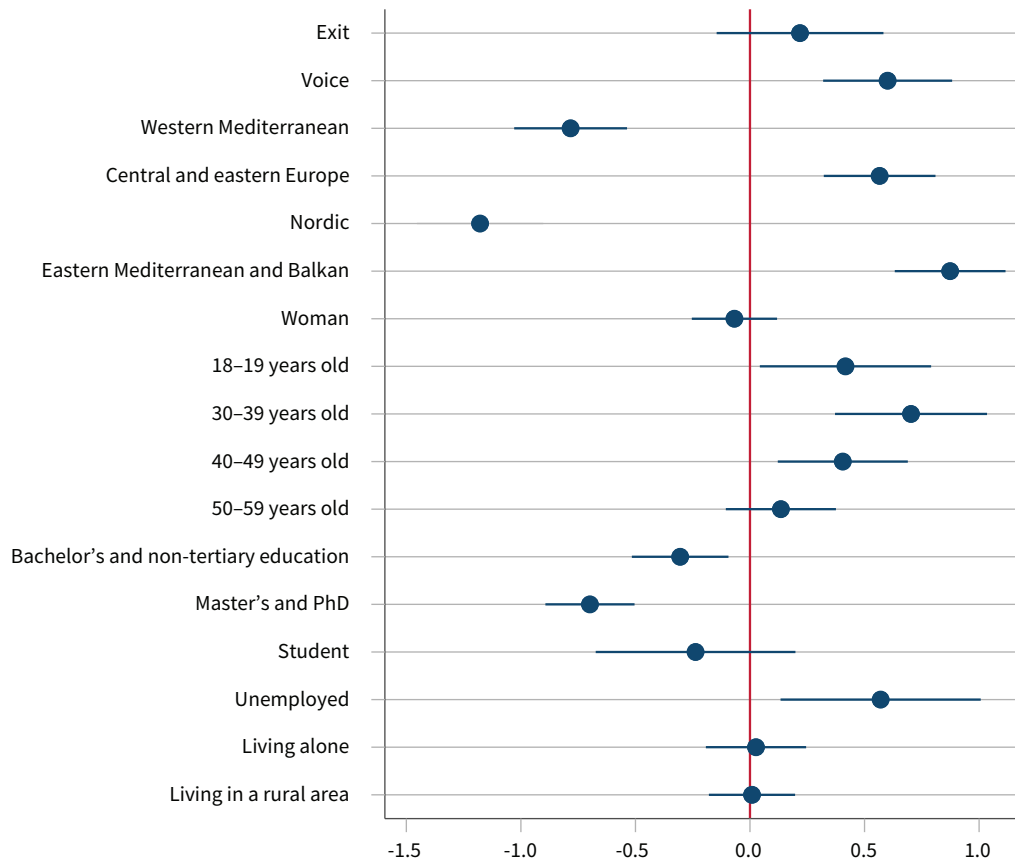
Notes: The figure shows the coefficients estimated using OLS regression, where distrust is regressed on exit and voice, sociodemographic characteristics (country cluster, age group, education, employment status, living alone, living in a rural area and gender), and interactions between exit, voice and the control variables. The distrust index is determined using the first component of the PCA for the three variables of distrust in the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey (all regression results are available in Annex 6). The bars indicate the 95% confidence intervals for the estimations. Robust standard errors and weights. The reference categories for comparison are ‘continental Europe and Ireland’ for clusters, ‘60 years old or over’ for age and ‘secondary or less’ for education. The country clusters are central and eastern Europe (Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia), continental Europe and Ireland (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands), eastern Mediterranean and Balkan (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Romania), Nordic (Denmark, Finland, Sweden) and western Mediterranean (Italy, Malta, Portugal, Spain). Not all interactions are shown. For the full model, see Annex 6.

Source: Authors’ own calculations, based on the fourth round of the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey (October–November 2021)

When the focus of our analysis is changed to dissatisfaction, the effects of the variables of interest are very similar. In Figure 37, voice and exit have a positive effect on dissatisfaction with the government’s actions. However, unlike for distrust, the effect of voice appears to be more substantial than that of exit. For the covariates, except education, age and employment status, the effects follow the same trend as distrust.

Unlike on distrust, the effects of education on dissatisfaction are more prominent: the greater an individual’s educational level, the lower their level of dissatisfaction. Regarding the age brackets, all ages below 60 appear to be more dissatisfied than those aged 60 and over (the reference category). Finally, being unemployed significantly increases people’s dissatisfaction.

Figure 37: Coefficients of dissatisfaction based on the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey dataset, by political participation and sociodemographic characteristics (regression analysis)



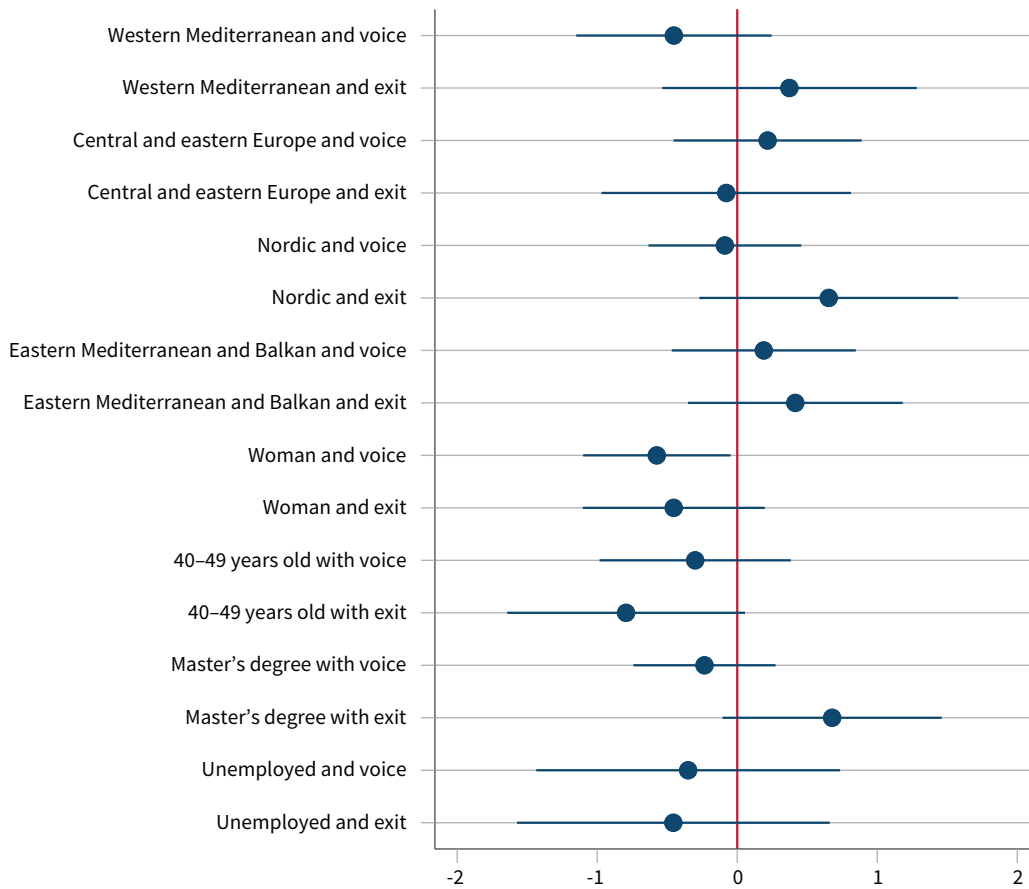
Notes: The figure shows the coefficients estimated using OLS regression, where dissatisfaction is regressed on exit and voice, sociodemographic characteristics (country cluster, age group, education, employment status, living alone, living in a rural area and gender), and interactions between exit, voice and the control variables. The dissatisfaction index is determined using the first component of the PCA for the five variables of dissatisfaction in the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey (all regression results are available in Annex 6). The bars indicate the 95% confidence intervals for the estimations. Robust standard errors and weights. The reference categories for comparison are ‘continental Europe and Ireland’ for clusters, ‘60 years old or over’ for age and ‘secondary or less’ for education. The country clusters are central and eastern Europe (Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia), continental Europe and Ireland (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands), eastern Mediterranean and Balkan (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Romania), Nordic (Denmark, Finland, Sweden) and western Mediterranean (Italy, Malta, Portugal, Spain).

Source: Authors’ own calculations, based on the fourth round of the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey (October–November 2021)

Like we did with distrust, we include interactions in this model. Figure 38 shows women who participate politically through voice (e.g. protesting) are less dissatisfied than men or women who do not voice. Adults aged between 40 and 49 who decided to exit

were also less dissatisfied. Third, master’s degree holders who do not vote are less satisfied with the government’s COVID-19 response. The last two findings are only slightly significant, and therefore do not enable us to draw solid empirical conclusions.

Figure 38: Coefficients of dissatisfaction based on the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey dataset, by interactions (regression analysis)



Notes: The figure shows the coefficients estimated using OLS regression, where dissatisfaction is regressed on exit and voice, sociodemographic characteristics (country cluster, age group, education, employment status, living alone, living in a rural area and gender), and interactions between exit, voice and the control variables. The dissatisfaction index is determined using the first component of the PCA for the five variables of dissatisfaction in the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey (all regression results are available in Annex 6). The bars indicate the 95% confidence intervals for the estimations. Robust standard errors and weights. The reference categories for comparison are ‘continental Europe and Ireland’ for clusters, ‘60 years old or over’ for age and ‘secondary or less’ for education. The country clusters are central and eastern Europe (Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia), continental Europe and Ireland (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands), eastern Mediterranean and Balkan (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Romania), Nordic (Denmark, Finland, Sweden) and western Mediterranean (Italy, Malta, Portugal, Spain). Not all interactions are shown. For the full model, see Annex 6.

Source: Authors’ own calculations, based on the fourth round of the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey (October–November 2021)

Key takeaways on institutional legitimacy, voice and exit

- A positive relationship between distrust and decisions to exit was found, while distrust has a negative, slightly significant effect on voice.
- In regions with higher electoral absenteeism the levels of distrust in institutions are higher, while in regions where the levels of voice are higher the levels of distrust are lower.
- The Nordic countries have significantly less institutional distrust than countries in continental Europe and Ireland (the reference category), and central and eastern European and Mediterranean countries have significantly more distrust.
- Economic factors such as higher economic development (log GDP per capita) decrease distrust, while higher unemployment rates in the regions increase it, albeit by a small amount.
- Surprisingly, distrust is not affected by educational attainment level or the proportion of the population living in a rural area. Regions with higher net migration have a slightly significantly lower level of distrust.
- For dissatisfaction in aspects of public life and the government, regions with higher exit and voice have higher levels of dissatisfaction. However, a lack of satisfaction with important aspects of public life, such as democracy and government, is expressed much more through exit than through voice. People who decide to exit show more dissatisfaction than those who decide to voice.
- Variance in dissatisfaction levels is due to regional differences. The Nordic countries show significantly less dissatisfaction than countries in continental Europe and Ireland (the reference category) and central and eastern European and Mediterranean countries.
- Regions with older populations have significantly lower satisfaction levels than those with younger populations. In regions where higher shares of the population live in rural areas or are migrants dissatisfaction is significantly lower.
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, the analysis found that people's choice to exit and voice increased institutional distrust. Citizens who have chosen to exit from electoral processes show significantly more institutional distrust than those who vote.
- The Nordic countries have lower distrust levels than continental European countries and Ireland, regardless of citizens' voicing or exiting behaviours. In contrast, central and eastern European and eastern Mediterranean and Balkan countries have much higher levels of distrust.
- Regarding age groups, the population between 30 and 59 years old has more distrust than the younger and older populations. For the other control variables, having a higher educational level or being a student results in lower distrust. However, unemployment, living in a rural area or living alone does not significantly affect distrust levels.

5 | Conclusions

This report provides a comprehensive overview of the political dimensions of social cohesion in Europe, focusing on citizens' actual behaviours. Specifically, it examines the extent to which people participate in political life through activities such as voting and protesting. An essential aspect of this analysis is understanding how social cohesion, as measured by voice (active participation) and exit (disengagement in terms of voting), relates to discontent, which serves as a measure of legitimacy.

While some commentators have expressed concerns about a widespread decline in social cohesion, followed by increased discontent, the evidence from surveys on the political dimensions of social cohesion does not support such a sweeping view. This report reveals significant variations between European countries and even within individual countries, although these trends are not universal.

This report's findings indicate that European citizens have consistently participated in the democratic process, including voting, over the past two decades. Interestingly, their engagement appears to increase, particularly after crises. Notably, voice is consistently more affected than exit. This pattern suggests that European citizens tend to be actively involved in democratic processes, which is a sign of engaged citizenship.

When examining all countries together, there was no clear decline in social cohesion in Europe from 2002 to 2020 when using Hirschman's framework of voice and exit. However, it is important to note that there are variations in the levels of non-voting and voicing across European regions, and these regions may experience upward or downward trends in social cohesion. Interestingly, regions with higher levels of voicing also tend to have higher voter turnout, indicating a correlation between active engagement and voting behaviour.

Unsurprisingly, Nordic countries consistently have low levels of non-voting (exit) and strong political engagement (voice). This positive trend was already noticeable in 2002, and over the period considered the Nordic countries further improved in this regard.

In contrast, western Mediterranean countries show mixed results in terms of electoral participation and political engagement. Italy experienced a decrease in voter turnout and protest levels from 2002 to 2020, while Spain saw an increase in these metrics. This indicates that Italy and Spain have distinct political trajectories, despite having some similarities.

Among the former Soviet Union countries, there are variations in participation levels. Poland provides a noteworthy example of significant gains in political engagement.

Despite these mixed trends, it appears that there has been a convergence between regions with higher and lower political participation in Europe. In particular, regions with lower levels of participation are moving closer to the levels observed in high-performing regions.

The report also establishes the drivers of voice and exit by integrating the differences between subnational regions. Indeed, subnational clusters differ within countries. Economic development, net migration and age structure play no significant role in electoral absenteeism. In contrast, unemployment does. Moreover, the prevalence of exit (disengagement in terms of voting) is much higher in rural areas. Unemployment is also important for voice: the higher the unemployment rate, the higher the levels of voice. Levels of voice are also higher when the average level of education is high, and when the population is older. Interestingly, economic prosperity (GDP per capita) and the rate of migration do not increase voice. Voice is not much different in rural areas compared with other areas, except in eastern Mediterranean countries. In these countries, voice is higher in rural areas than other areas.

Many of these trends are also prevalent when we analyse the individual survey data obtained during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nordic countries have much lower rates of non-voters, and individuals' participation through voice is higher in Nordic countries than in all other countries, especially the central and eastern European countries. Unemployed people and citizens residing in rural and disadvantaged areas are much more likely to exit through not voting.

Discontent is expressed in terms of institutional trust and reported satisfaction with public institutions. The two measures are strongly correlated and change in parallel from 2002 to 2020. Discontent increases during times of hardship, such as the economic crisis of 2008 and the 2020 COVID-19 crisis. And there are important regional differences. The increase in discontent in the last year of the survey was almost exclusively due to an increase in discontent in the countries of central and eastern Europe, and, to a lesser extent, the Nordic countries. Discontent in Nordic and continental European countries and Ireland remained low and constant throughout the period, with a slight rise from 2010. Italy and Spain, in contrast, experienced increasing discontent from 2002 onwards.

The study also shows how levels of discontent changed at subnational regional level from 2002 to 2020, drawing attention to countries with historical territorial, cultural or language divisions, such as Belgium, Germany and Italy. Increased gaps were detected along cultural lines. Thus, subnational differences remain important. The trends do not show convergence or divergence, or at least not in the same ways or periods. Nevertheless, when comparing the high- and low-performing regions, we see some evidence of convergence. We identify some clear winners, for example the Algarve and Alentejo in southern Portugal. The eastern countries are lagging behind in both institutional trust and satisfaction, except for Czechia and Hungary.

Regarding the pandemic, we found that discontent was actually low during the first lockdown, an effect mostly attributable to the rally-around-the-flag effect. Indeed, during this period, institutional trust was high. The rally-around-the-flag effect is rarely long lasting, and, indeed, discontent rose and remained high until the vaccines were rolled out. It seems clear that government action, to which citizens responded, played an important role in this. Still, these broad trends hide important country differences. Discontent was low among Nordic countries and in continental Europe and Ireland, whereas there was much higher discontent among the eastern Mediterranean and Balkan and western Mediterranean countries. Discontent was stronger among the younger population.

When examining the effects of voice and exit on discontent, we find a positive relationship between discontent and exit. Thus, discontent is expressed through lower rates of voting, whereas higher levels of voice are found when discontent is low. However, this relationship becomes weaker when geographical and socioeconomic control variables are considered.

Policy pointers

- Among the diverse factors explored in this report, unemployment emerges as a predominant catalyst for diminished political engagement, fostering discontent with institutions. While providing immediate income support during economic crises remains vital, it is equally imperative to prioritise initiatives geared towards job creation.
- Crises tend to have a more pronounced impact on young individuals than older people, affecting not only their political involvement but also their disenchantment with political establishments. Youth unemployment rates tend to surge more dramatically during crises, necessitating attention from policymakers. Young people are at a pivotal stage of development, and the absence of employment opportunities can yield enduring negative consequences, potentially compromising their long-term political participation.
- Considering the pivotal role of employment, it becomes crucial to steer policy efforts towards expanding educational access. This is particularly pertinent given the evolving skills requirements driven by rapid labour market transformations owing to digitalisation and technological advancement. Ensuring access to education for young individuals is necessary in providing them with the resilience and preparedness required to navigate an increasingly uncertain future. Concurrently, we must give due attention to the development of job guarantee schemes, prioritising their prominence in policy agendas.
- Establishing a positive feedback loop between social cohesion and political participation remains imperative. These two aspects are intrinsically linked, with stronger social cohesion increasing political engagement and vice versa. It is noteworthy that there is no uniform trend of escalating political discontent across all of Europe, with growing regional disparities in political participation and institutional discontent observed over the past two decades. Hence, a one-size-fits-all policy approach is not applicable. This reinforces the need for tailored, context-specific policy solutions.

References

All Eurofound publications are available at www.eurofound.europa.eu

- Beauvais, C. and Jenson, J. (2002), *Social cohesion: Updating the state of the research*, Discussion Paper No. F|22, Canadian Policy Research Networks, Ottawa.
- Bernard, P. (1999), 'La cohésion sociale: Critique d'un quasi-concept', *Lien social et Politiques*, Vol. 41, pp. 47–59.
- Bertelsmann Stiftung (2013), *Social cohesion radar: Measuring common ground – An international comparison of social cohesion*, Gütersloh, Germany.
- Boxell, L., Gentzkow, M. and Shapiro, J. (2017), 'Greater internet use is not associated with faster growth in political polarisation among US demographic groups', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, Vol. 114, No. 40, pp. 10612–10617.
- Broadhead, J. (2021), *Social cohesion in Europe: Literature review*, British Council, London.
- Chan, J., To, H. and Chan, E. (2006), 'Reconsidering social cohesion: Developing a definition and analytical framework for empirical research', *Social Indicators Research*, Vol. 75, pp. 273–302.
- Cheong, P. H., Edwards, R., Goulbourne, H. and Solomos, J. (2007), 'Immigration, social cohesion and social capital: A critical review', *Critical Social Policy*, Vol. 27, No. 1, pp. 24–49.
- Council of Europe (2010), *New Strategy and Council of Europe Action Plan for Social Cohesion*, Adopted by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on 7 July 2010, Strasbourg, France.
- Dennison, J. and Dražanová, L. (2018), *Public attitudes on migration: Rethinking how people perceive migration*, Migration Policy Centre, European University Institute, Florence, Italy.
- Dickes, P., Valentova, M. and Borsenberger, M. (2010), 'Construct validation and application of a common measure of social cohesion in 33 European countries', *Social Indicators Research*, Vol. 98, No. 3, pp. 451–473.
- Dinesen, P. T., Sønderskov, K. M., Sohlberg, J. and Esaiasson, P. (2022), 'Close (causally connected) cousins? Evidence on the causal relationship between political trust and social trust', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 86, No. 3, pp. 708–721.
- Dornschneider, S. (2021), 'Exit, voice, loyalty ... or deliberate obstruction? Non-collective everyday resistance under oppression', *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 21, No. 1, pp. 126–141.
- Dragolov, G., Ignác, Z. S., Lorenz, J., Delhey, J., Boehnke, K. and Unzicker, K. (2016), *Social cohesion in the western world: What holds societies together – Insights from the social cohesion radar*, Springer, Cham, Switzerland.
- ESS ERIC (European Social Survey European Research Infrastructure Consortium) (undated), *ESS round 10 – 2020. Democracy, digital social contacts*, web page, available at <https://ess.sikt.no/en/study/172ac431-2a06-41df-9dab-c1fd8f3877e7>, accessed 27 November 2023.
- Eurofound (2014a), *Developing a country typology for analysing quality of life in Europe*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.
- Eurofound (2014b), *Social cohesion and well-being in the EU*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.
- Eurofound (2018), *Social cohesion and well-being in Europe*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.
- Eurofound (2020), *Living, working and COVID-19*, COVID-19 series, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.
- Eurofound (2022), *Maintaining trust during the COVID-19 pandemic*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.
- Eurostat (undated), *NUTS – Nomenclature of territorial units for statistics*, web page, available at <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/nuts/background>, accessed 12 December 2023.
- Fonseca, X., Lukosch, S. and Brazier, F. (2018), 'Social cohesion revisited: A new definition and how to characterize it', *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research*, Vol. 32, No. 2, pp. 231–253.
- Funke, M., Schularick, M. and Trebesch, C. (2020), *Populist leaders and the economy*, CEPR Discussion Paper No. 15405, Centre for Economic Policy Research, London.
- Hirschman, A. O. (1970), *Exit, voice, and loyalty: Responses to decline in firms, organizations, and states*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, and London.
- Hooghe, M. and Marien, S. (2013), 'A comparative analysis of the relation between political trust and forms of political participation in Europe', *European Societies*, Vol. 15, No. 1, pp. 131–152.

- Hulse, K. and Stone, W. (2007), 'Social cohesion, social capital and social exclusion: A cross cultural comparison', *Policy Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 2, pp. 109–128.
- Janmaat, J. G. (2011), 'Social cohesion as a real-life phenomenon: Assessing the explanatory power of the universalist and particularist perspectives', *Social Indicators Research*, Vol. 100, No. 1, pp. 61–83.
- Jeannotte, M. S. (2000), *Social cohesion around the world: An international comparison of definitions and issues*, Strategic Research and Analysis, Ottawa.
- Jenson, J. (1998), *Mapping social cohesion: The state of Canadian research*, CPRN Study No. F|03, Renouf Publishing Co. Ltd., Ottawa.
- Jewett R. L., Mah S. M., Howell, N. and Larsen, M. M. (2021), 'Social cohesion and community resilience during COVID-19 and pandemics: A rapid scoping review to inform the United Nations Research Roadmap for COVID-19 Recovery', *International Journal of Health Services*, Vol. 51, No. 3, pp. 325–336.
- Jordahl, H. (2007), *Inequality and trust*, IFN Working Paper No. 715, Research Institute of Industrial Economics, Stockholm.
- Kawachi, I., Kennedy, B. P., Lochner, K. and Prothrow-Stith, D. (1997), 'Social capital, income inequality, and mortality', *American Journal of Public Health*, Vol. 87, No. 9, pp. 1491–1498.
- Larsen, C. A. (2014), *Social cohesion: Definition, measurement and developments*, Institut for Statskundskab, Aalborg University.
- Lockwood, D. (1999), 'Civic integration and social cohesion', in Gough, I. and Olofsson, G. (eds.), *Capitalism and social cohesion*, Palgrave Macmillan, London.
- Mishler, W. and Rose, R. (2001), 'What are the origins of political trust? Testing institutional and cultural theories in post-communist societies', *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 1, pp. 30–62.
- Newton, K., Stolle, D. and Zmerli, S. (2018), 'Social and political trust', in Uslaner, E. M. (ed.), *The Oxford handbook of social and political trust*, Oxford University Press, New York, pp. 37–56.
- OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) (2017), *Understanding the socio-economic divide in Europe*.
- OECD (2021), *Perspectives on global development 2021: From protest to progress?* OECD Publishing, Paris.
- Schiefer, D. and Noll, J. (2017), 'The essentials of social cohesion: A literature review', *Social Indicators Research*, Vol. 132, No. 2, pp. 579–603.
- Sztompka, P. (1999), *Trust: A sociological theory*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.
- Tucker, J., Guess, A., Barbera, P., Vaccari, C., Siegel, A., Sanovich, S. et al (2018), 'Social media, political polarisation, and political disinformation: A review of the scientific literature', *Social Science Research Network*.
- Uslaner, E. (2002), 'The moral foundation of trust', *Social Science Research Network*.
- Uslaner, E. (2008), *Corruption, inequality, and the rule of law: The bulging pocket makes the easy life*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.
- Uslaner, E. and Brown, M. (2005), 'Inequality, trust, and civic engagement', *American Politics Research*, Vol. 33, No. 6.
- van der Veen, R. and Kooijman, E. (2019), *Identification of EU funding sources for the regional heating and cooling sector*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.
- Zmerli, S. and Newton, K. (2008), 'Social trust and attitudes toward democracy', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 72, No. 4, pp. 706–724.

Annexes

Annex 1: Determinants of voice and exit in the ESS

We obtained our estimates for voice (active participation) and exit (disengagement in terms of voting) by constructing random effects regression models using panel data from 185 NUTS 2 regions in European countries. The variables in the models are country cluster dummies, log GDP per capita, educational attainment, migration rate, unemployment, rurality and age structure. Two of the regression models provide the voice estimates, while the two other models provide the results for exit (Table A1).

Table A1: Regression analysis results for voice and exit for the ESS, by regional characteristics and interactions

Variable	Voice		Exit	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
GDP per capita (log)	0.0375*** (0.0141)	-0.0651* (0.0385)	-0.0325*** (0.0117)	-0.0435 (0.0305)
Unemployment rate	0.00430*** (0.000841)	0.0127*** (0.00267)	0.00204*** (0.000607)	0.00923*** (0.00209)
Median age	0.00144 (0.00173)	0.00247 (0.00298)	0.00120 (0.00140)	0.00206 (0.00242)
Educational attainment: lower primary, primary or lower secondary	0.0427 (0.0564)	0.0384 (0.0993)	0.00795 (0.0374)	0.0254 (0.0667)
Educational attainment: upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education	0.0451 (0.0564)	0.0450 (0.0993)	0.0107 (0.0374)	0.0309 (0.0666)
Educational attainment: tertiary education (levels 5–8)	0.0473 (0.0564)	0.0465 (0.0993)	0.00790 (0.0374)	0.0280 (0.0666)
Proportion of population living in rural areas (mean)	-0.0120 (0.0259)	-0.0742 (0.0478)	-0.0693*** (0.0202)	-0.0475 (0.0377)
Net migration rate	0.000988 (0.000780)	0.00151 (0.00156)	0.00119** (0.000546)	-0.00300*** (0.00113)
Cluster: Nordic	0.127*** (0.0180)	-2.269 (20.49)	-0.115*** (0.0175)	-2.001 (13.75)
Cluster: eastern Mediterranean and Balkan	-0.183*** (0.0237)	11.52 (20.24)	-0.0860*** (0.0204)	-16.88 (13.73)
Cluster: western Mediterranean	-0.0382* (0.0210)	2.715 (15.68)	0.00882 (0.0184)	6.172 (10.47)
Cluster: central and eastern Europe	-0.190*** (0.0213)	-5.813 (14.54)	0.00131 (0.0187)	9.673 (9.758)
Nordic and GDP per capita (log)		0.152 (0.114)		-0.0664 (0.0921)
Nordic and unemployment rate		-0.0157** (0.00713)		-0.00483 (0.00498)
Nordic and median age		0.000689 (0.00888)		-0.00488 (0.00711)
Nordic and lower primary, primary or lower secondary		0.00631 (0.205)		0.0307 (0.137)
Nordic and upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education		0.0107 (0.205)		0.0271 (0.137)
Nordic and tertiary education		0.00446 (0.205)		0.0279 (0.137)
Nordic and proportion of population living in rural areas (mean)		0.0903 (0.102)		0.00132 (0.0765)
Nordic and net migration rate		0.00838** (0.00360)		0.00406 (0.00254)

Variable	Voice		Exit	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Eastern Mediterranean and Balkan and GDP per capita (log)		0.114** (0.0498)		0.0579 (0.0394)
Eastern Mediterranean and Balkan and unemployment rate		-0.00626 (0.00406)		-0.0103*** (0.00302)
Eastern Mediterranean and Balkan and median age		-0.0108* (0.00594)		0.00121 (0.00464)
Eastern Mediterranean and Balkan and lower primary, primary or lower secondary		-0.121 (0.203)		0.165 (0.138)
Eastern Mediterranean and Balkan and upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education		-0.127 (0.203)		0.165 (0.137)
Eastern Mediterranean and Balkan and tertiary education		-0.127 (0.203)		0.159 (0.138)
Eastern Mediterranean and Balkan and proportion of population living in rural areas (mean)		0.202** (0.0854)		-0.145** (0.0651)
Eastern Mediterranean and Balkan and net migration rate		-0.00169 (0.00420)		0.00195 (0.00302)
Western Mediterranean and GDP per capita (log)		0.0242 (0.0706)		0.00125 (0.0542)
Western Mediterranean and unemployment rate		-0.00783** (0.00310)		-0.00815*** (0.00240)
Western Mediterranean and median age		-0.00678 (0.00445)		-0.000584 (0.00356)
Western Mediterranean and lower primary, primary or lower secondary		-0.0259 (0.157)		-0.0584 (0.105)
Western Mediterranean and upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education		-0.0276 (0.157)		-0.0636 (0.104)
Western Mediterranean and tertiary education		-0.0254 (0.157)		-0.0604 (0.104)
Western Mediterranean and net migration rate		0.0434 (0.0695)		-0.00241 (0.0539)
Western Mediterranean and proportion of population living in rural areas (mean)		-0.000692 (0.00199)		0.00421*** (0.00144)
Central and eastern Europe and GDP per capita (log)		0.0751 (0.0535)		0.0136 (0.0418)
Central and eastern Europe and unemployment rate		-0.0149*** (0.00319)		-0.00440* (0.00242)
Central and eastern Europe and median age		-0.00485 (0.00544)		0.00608 (0.00435)
Central and eastern Europe and lower primary, primary or lower secondary		0.0526 (0.146)		-0.101 (0.0976)
Central and eastern Europe and upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education		0.0506 (0.146)		-0.1000 (0.0977)
Central and eastern Europe and tertiary education		0.0493 (0.146)		-0.102 (0.0976)
Central and eastern Europe and proportion of population living in rural areas (mean)		0.00694 (0.0749)		-0.0115 (0.0592)
Central and eastern Europe and net migration rate		-0.00130 (0.00293)		0.00698*** (0.00211)
Constant	-4.526 (5.640)	-3.384 (9.919)	-0.392 (3.739)	-2.320 (6.664)
Observations	1,148	1,148	1,148	1,148
NUTS 2 ID	174	174	174	174

Notes: The table shows the estimated coefficients when exit is the ratio of individuals in a NUTS region who did not vote in the most recent election and voice is the ratio of people who participated in at least one of the five voice-related activities in the 12 months before the survey. Standard errors are shown in parentheses. Regions with fewer than 30 observations per round were dropped. The reference cluster for comparison is 'continental Europe and Ireland'. The clusters are central and eastern Europe (Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia), continental Europe and Ireland (Austria, Belgium, France, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands), eastern Mediterranean and Balkan (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Romania), Nordic (Denmark, Finland, Sweden) and western Mediterranean (Italy, Portugal and Spain). * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.
Source: Authors' own calculations, based on the ESS

Annex 2: Determinants of voice and exit in the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey

We obtained our estimates for voice and exit using linear probability models with frequency weights. The variables in the linear probability models are country cluster dummies, age group dummies and gender, education, employment status, living alone and living in a rural area. The first regression model provides the exit estimates, while the second provides the results for voice (Table A2).

Table A2: Regression analysis results for exit and voice for the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey, by sociodemographic characteristics and interactions

Variable	Model 1 (Exit)	Model 2 (Voice)
Western Mediterranean	0.0102 (0.0229)	0.0358 (0.0247)
Central and eastern Europe	0.0658** (0.0291)	0.00379 (0.0272)
Nordic	-0.0324 (0.0198)	0.0572** (0.0230)
Eastern Mediterranean and Balkan	0.0254 (0.0230)	0.0143 (0.0275)
Woman	-0.0103 (0.0176)	-0.0398** (0.0194)
18–29 years old	0.0342 (0.0492)	-0.0658 (0.0509)
30–39 years old	0.0145 (0.0283)	-0.0488 (0.0383)
40–49 years old	0.00862 (0.0259)	0.00109 (0.0264)
50–59 years old	-0.00750 (0.0207)	-0.00671 (0.0221)
Bachelor's degree	-0.0137 (0.0208)	0.0102 (0.0231)
Master's degree	-0.0742*** (0.0180)	0.0810*** (0.0198)
Employment status: student	-0.0347 (0.0589)	0.122** (0.0543)
Employment status: unemployed	0.0978* (0.0519)	-0.0264 (0.0569)
Living alone	0.0122 (0.0215)	0.0141 (0.0236)
Living in a rural area	0.00749 (0.0176)	0.00404 (0.0210)
Constant	0.0982*** (0.0311)	0.840*** (0.0304)
Observations	10,978	11,394
R-squared	0.024	0.017

Notes: The figures are estimated coefficients when exit is a binary variable equal to one if the individual did not vote in the most recent election and when voice is a binary variable equal to one if the individual participated in a political activity in the 12 months before the survey. Robust standard errors and weights. Robust standard errors are shown in parentheses. Reference categories for comparison are 'continental Europe and Ireland' for clusters, '60 years old or over' for age and 'secondary or less' for education. The country clusters are Nordic (Denmark, Finland, Sweden), continental Europe and Ireland (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands), western Mediterranean (Italy, Malta, Portugal, Spain), central and eastern Europe (Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia) and eastern Mediterranean and Balkan (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Romania). * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Source: Authors' own calculations, based on the fourth round of the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey (October–November 2021)

Annex 3: Correlation of the components of distrust and dissatisfaction

In order to conduct our PCA, there needed to be a strong correlation between variables. In this annex, we present the correlations between the variables we used to conduct the PCA for distrust and dissatisfaction. Tables A3 and A4 show the correlations and Cronbach's alphas for distrust.

Table A3: Correlation and Cronbach's alpha between the six variables constituting the distrust index in the ESS dataset

Variable	Legal system	Police	Politicians	EU Parliament	UN	Parliament
Legal system	1.0000					
Police	0.8271	1.0000				
Politicians	0.8185	0.6178	1.0000			
EU Parliament	0.3736	0.2319	0.4886	1.0000		
UN	0.4944	0.4294	0.6032	0.6502	1.0000	
Parliament	0.8720	0.7403	0.9029	0.4903	0.5870	1.0000

Cronbach's alpha for all components	0.9070
-------------------------------------	--------

Note: The variables are trust in the parliament (*parliament*), trust in the legal system (*legalsystem*), trust in the police (*police*), trust in politicians (*politicians*), trust in the European Parliament (*EUparlament*) and trust in the United Nations (*UN*).

Source: Authors' own calculations, based on the ESS

Table A4: Correlation and Cronbach's alpha between the three variables constituting the distrust index in the Living, working and COVID-19 dataset

Variable	Distrust in police	Distrust in government	Distrust in EU
Distrust in police	1.0000		
Distrust in government	0.5731	1.0000	
Distrust in EU	0.3879	0.5348	1.0000

Cronbach's alpha for all components	0.7495
-------------------------------------	--------

Note: The variables are distrust in the police (*distrust police*), distrust in the government (*distrust gov*) and distrust in EU institutions (*distrust eu*).

Source: Authors' own calculations, based on the fourth round of the Living, working and COVID-19 e-survey (October–November 2021)

Tables A5 and A6 show the correlations and Cronbach's alphas for dissatisfaction.

Table A5: Correlation and Cronbach's alpha between the five variables constituting the dissatisfaction index in the ESS dataset

Variable	Economy	Government	Democracy	Education	Health
Economy	1.0000	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.
Government	0.8497	1.0000	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.
Democracy	0.8012	0.8472	1.0000	n.d.	n.d.
Education	0.6788	0.6274	0.6578	1.0000	n.d.
Health	0.5302	0.5150	0.6093	0.5764	1.0000

Cronbach's alpha for all components	0.9026
-------------------------------------	--------

Note: The variables are satisfaction with state of the economy (*economy*), satisfaction with the way the national government is doing its job (*government*), satisfaction with the way democracy works in their country (*democracy*), what the respondent thinks about the state of education in their country nowadays (*education*) and what the respondent thinks about the state of health services in their country nowadays (*health*).
n.d., no data.

Source: Authors' own calculations, based on the ESS

Table A6: Correlation and Cronbach's alpha between the five variables constituting the dissatisfaction index in the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey dataset

Variable	Roll-out vaccines	Reduce Spread	Citizen Involvement	Financial Support	Ensure Education
Roll-out vaccines	1.0000	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.
Reduce Spread	0.7871	1.0000	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.
Citizen Involvement	0.6127	0.6967	1.0000	n.d.	n.d.
Financial Support	0.6399	0.7143	0.7238	1.0000	n.d.
Ensure Education	0.6526	0.7652	0.6976	0.6924	1.0000
Cronbach's alpha for all components	0.9183				

Note: The variables are dissatisfaction with the handling of the roll-out of the COVID-19 vaccines, dissatisfaction with measures taken to prevent or reduce the spread of COVID-19, dissatisfaction with the involvement of citizens in the decision-making process, dissatisfaction with the provision of financial support to people; dissatisfaction with ensuring children could continue to receive education. n.d., no data.

Source: Authors' own calculations, based on the fourth round of the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey (October–November 2021)

Annex 4: Correlations between and internal consistency of distrust and dissatisfaction

Tables A7 and A8 show the correlations and Cronbach's alphas for distrust and dissatisfaction for the ESS and the *Living, working and COVID-19 e-survey* datasets.

Table A7: Correlation and Cronbach's alpha between the distrust and dissatisfaction indexes in the ESS dataset

Correlation	0.8444
Cronbach's alpha	0.9132

Note: Correlation and Cronbach's alpha for dissatisfaction- and distrust-dependent variables.

Source: Authors' own calculations, based on the ESS

Table A8: Correlation and Cronbach's alpha between the distrust and dissatisfaction indexes in the *Living, working and COVID-19 e-survey* dataset

Correlation	0.7312
Cronbach's alpha	0.8351

Note: Correlation and Cronbach's alpha for dissatisfaction- and distrust-dependent variables.

Source: Authors' own calculations, based on the fourth round of the *Living, working and COVID-19 e-survey* (October–November 2021)

To see how the political components of social cohesion are directly related to other dimensions, such as social trust, we analyse the correlation between the four main variables of this report (exit, voice, distrust and dissatisfaction) and a measure of social trust based on the panel of respondents in the ESS survey. The first step was to build a social trust indicator using PCA and three ESS variables that capture social trust. Data were used from the respondents' opinions about the following statements: (i) most people can be trusted, or you can't be too careful; (ii) most people try to take advantage of you, or try to be fair; and (iii) most of the time people try to be helpful or they are mostly looking out for themselves. All variables are measured on a scale from 0 (no trust) to 10 (complete trust). The first component of the PCA was used as the social trust index. For this methodology to be valid, there must be a strong correlation between the three variables that form the index. Table A9 shows the strong correlation and Cronbach's alpha between the variables.

Table A9: Correlation and Cronbach's alpha between the three variables constituting the social index in the ESS dataset

Variable	pplfair	pplhlp	ppltrst
pplfair	1.0000		
pplhlp	0.8752	1.0000	
ppltrst	0.8643	0.8767	1.0000

Cronbach's alpha for all components	0.9531
-------------------------------------	--------

Note: The variables are *ppltrst* (most people can be trusted or you can't be too careful (0–10)), *pplfair* (most people try to take advantage of you, or try to be fair (0–10)) and *pplhlp* (most of the time, people try to be helpful or they are mostly looking out for themselves (0–10)).

Source: Authors' own calculations, based on the ESS

Annex 5: Determinants of distrust and dissatisfaction in the ESS

We obtained our estimates for distrust and dissatisfaction using random effects regression models including panel data from 185 NUTS 2 regions in European countries (see Tables A10 and A11). The models include the effects of exit and voice and covariates. These are country cluster dummies, log GDP per capita, educational attainment, migration rate, unemployment, rurality and age structure. Model 1 is a simple model just with voice and exit, model 2 includes country clusters and model 3 includes all covariates.

Table A10: Regression analysis results for distrust for the ESS, by political participation, regional characteristics and interactions

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Voice index	-0.255* (0.135)	0.594*** (0.139)	0.401*** (0.150)
Exit index (non-voters)	2.110*** (0.214)	1.860*** (0.201)	1.592*** (0.213)
Cluster: Nordic		-0.950*** (0.101)	-0.863*** (0.0980)
Cluster: eastern Mediterranean and Balkan		0.889*** (0.0969)	0.470*** (0.127)
Cluster: western Mediterranean		0.614*** (0.0787)	0.562*** (0.108)
Cluster: central and eastern Europe		0.735*** (0.0796)	0.310*** (0.113)
GDP per capita (log)			-0.247*** (0.0728)
Unemployment rate			0.00983** (0.00429)
Median age			0.0213** (0.00881)
Educational attainment: lower primary, primary or lower secondary			0.279 (0.280)
Educational attainment: Upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education			0.284 (0.280)
Educational attainment: tertiary education (levels 5–8)			0.281 (0.280)
Proportion of population living in rural areas (mean)			-0.205 (0.133)
Net migration rate			-0.0148*** (0.00391)
Constant	-0.243*** (0.0839)	-0.829*** (0.0951)	-27.04 (27.95)
Observations	1,244	1,244	1,244
NUTS 2 ID	185	185	174

Note: The table shows the estimated coefficients when distrust is the average distrust index by NUTS 2 region. The distrust index is built using the first component of the PCA for the six variables of distrust in the ESS. Standard errors are shown in parentheses. Regions with fewer than 30 observations per round were dropped. Exit and voice are the proportion of individuals in a NUTS region who did not vote in the most recent election and the proportion of individuals in a NUTS region who participated in political activities in the 12 months before the survey, respectively. The reference cluster for comparison is 'continental Europe and Ireland'. The clusters are central and eastern Europe (Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia), continental Europe and Ireland (Austria, Belgium, France, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands), eastern Mediterranean and Balkan (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Romania), Nordic (Denmark, Finland, Sweden) and western Mediterranean (Italy, Portugal, Spain). * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Source: Authors' own calculations, based on the ESS

Table A11: Regression analysis results for dissatisfaction for the ESS, by political participation, regional characteristics and interactions

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Voice index	0.297* (0.159)	1.206*** (0.160)	1.026*** (0.163)
Exit index (non-voters)	1.840*** (0.250)	1.790*** (0.234)	1.402*** (0.234)
Cluster: Nordic		-0.853*** (0.125)	-0.674*** (0.119)
Cluster: eastern Mediterranean and Balkan		1.493*** (0.119)	0.739*** (0.148)
Cluster: western Mediterranean		0.981*** (0.0986)	0.408*** (0.127)
Cluster: central and eastern Europe		0.859*** (0.0986)	0.472*** (0.133)
GDP per capita (log)			-0.370*** (0.0840)
Unemployment rate			0.0305*** (0.00473)
Median age			0.0524*** (0.0101)
Educational attainment: lower primary, primary or lower secondary			0.176 (0.299)
Educational attainment: Upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education			0.167 (0.299)
Educational attainment: tertiary education (levels 5–8)			0.168 (0.299)
Proportion of population living in rural areas (mean)			-0.443*** (0.151)
Net migration rate			-0.0220*** (0.00427)
Constant	-0.300*** (0.0996)	-1.147*** (0.113)	-16.05 (29.92)
Observations	1,241	1,241	1,148
NUTS 2 ID	185	185	174

Notes: The table shows the estimated coefficients when dissatisfaction is the average dissatisfaction index by NUTS 2 region. The dissatisfaction index is built using the first component of the PCA for the five variables of dissatisfaction in the ESS. Standard errors are shown in parentheses. Regions with fewer than 30 observations per round were dropped. Exit and voice are the proportion of individuals in a NUTS region who did not vote in the most recent election and the proportion of individuals in a NUTS region who participated in political activities in the 12 months before the survey. The reference cluster for comparison is 'continental Europe and Ireland'. The clusters are central and eastern Europe (Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia), continental Europe and Ireland (Austria, Belgium, France, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands), eastern Mediterranean and Balkan (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Romania), Nordic (Denmark, Finland, Sweden) and western Mediterranean (Italy, Portugal, Spain). * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Source: Authors' own calculations, based on the ESS

Annex 6: Determinants of distrust and dissatisfaction in the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey

The observations from the fourth round of the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey were used to produce ordinary least squares regression estimates according to four different models, including frequency weights (see Tables A12 and A13). Model 1 includes only the effects of exit and voice. In model 2, sociodemographic characteristics are combined with country clusters to check how estimates change when controlling for more than one variable. Model 2 includes exit, voice, country cluster dummies, age group dummies and gender. Model 3 includes, in addition to control variables, education, employment status, living alone and living in a rural area. Model 4 includes all the variables in model 3 plus interactions between the sociodemographic variables and exit and voice. The first regression model displays the distrust estimates, while the second provides the results for dissatisfaction.

Table A12: Regression analysis results for distrust for the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey, by political participation, sociodemographic characteristics and interactions

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Exit	0.659*** (0.140)	0.589*** (0.139)	0.509*** (0.140)	0.417 (0.347)
Voice	0.422*** (0.103)	0.452*** (0.0995)	0.505*** (0.100)	0.542* (0.294)
Western Mediterranean		-0.183** (0.0930)	-0.215** (0.0922)	-0.379* (0.223)
Central and eastern Europe		0.580*** (0.0909)	0.572*** (0.0893)	0.603*** (0.214)
Nordic		-0.720*** (0.105)	-0.697*** (0.102)	-0.857*** (0.217)
Eastern Mediterranean and Balkan		0.606*** (0.0942)	0.591*** (0.0939)	0.187 (0.258)
Woman		-0.123* (0.0720)	-0.0932 (0.0693)	-0.0150 (0.191)
18–29 years old		-0.0665 (0.115)	0.186 (0.141)	-0.00142 (0.388)
30–39 years old		0.321*** (0.111)	0.428*** (0.111)	0.361 (0.317)
40–49 years old		0.269** (0.107)	0.289*** (0.108)	0.541** (0.220)
50–59 years old		0.232** (0.0975)	0.199** (0.0917)	0.0772 (0.235)
Bachelor's degree			-0.0936 (0.0814)	0.0801 (0.207)
Master's degree			-0.489*** (0.0730)	-0.328 (0.200)
Employment status: student			-0.549*** (0.169)	-0.323 (0.523)
Employment status: unemployed			0.0924 (0.185)	0.110 (0.415)
Living alone			-0.00380 (0.0850)	0.113 (0.199)
Living in a rural area			0.0789 (0.0716)	0.0766 (0.176)
Western Mediterranean and voice				0.160 (0.240)
Western Mediterranean and exit				0.302 (0.335)
Central and eastern Europe and voice				0.0273 (0.228)
Central and eastern Europe and exit				-0.0364 (0.306)
Nordic and voice				0.207 (0.243)
Nordic and exit				-0.320 (0.338)

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Eastern Mediterranean and Balkan and voice				0.492* (0.271)
Eastern Mediterranean and Balkan and exit				0.0545 (0.267)
Woman and voice				-0.0890 (0.202)
Woman and exit				-0.201 (0.246)
18–29 years old and voice				0.0606 (0.399)
18–29 years old and exit				1.111*** (0.382)
30–39 years old and voice				-0.00551 (0.330)
30–39 years old and exit				0.660* (0.344)
40–49 years old and voice				-0.247 (0.245)
40–49 years old and exit				0.00379 (0.396)
50–59 years old and voice				0.116 (0.253)
50–59 years old and exit				0.311 (0.370)
Bachelor's degree and voice				-0.229 (0.221)
Bachelor's degree and exit				0.156 (0.236)
Master's degree and voice				-0.178 (0.212)
Master's degree and exit				0.116 (0.268)
Student and voice				-0.141 (0.543)
Student and exit				-0.654 (0.432)
Unemployed and voice				0.241 (0.434)
Unemployed and exit				-1.105*** (0.329)
Living alone and voice				-0.0819 (0.215)
Living alone and exit				-0.388 (0.262)
Living in a rural area and voice				0.0259 (0.189)
Living in a rural area and exit				-0.0477 (0.238)
Constant	-0.450*** (0.0968)	-0.568*** (0.127)	-0.571*** (0.137)	-0.615*** (0.271)
Observations	11,099	11,071	10,858	10,858
R-squared	0.029	0.102	0.122	0.138

Notes: The table shows coefficients estimated using OLS regression, where distrust is regressed on exit and voice, sociodemographic characteristics (country cluster, age group, education, employment status, living alone, living in a rural area and gender), and interactions between exit, voice and the control variables. Exit and voice are the dummies for the proportion of individuals who did not vote in the most recent election and the proportion of individuals who participated in political activities in the 12 months before the survey, respectively. Robust standard errors and weights. Robust standard errors are shown in parentheses. Reference categories for comparison are 'continental Europe and Ireland' for clusters, '60 years old or over' for age and 'secondary or less' for education. Countries clusters are central and eastern Europe (Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia), continental Europe and Ireland (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands), eastern Mediterranean and Balkan (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Romania), Nordic (Denmark, Finland, Sweden) and western Mediterranean (Italy, Malta, Portugal, Spain). * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Source: Authors' own calculations, based on the fourth round of the Living, working and COVID-19 e-survey (October–November 2021)

Table A13: Regression analysis results for dissatisfaction for the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey, by political participation, sociodemographic characteristics and interactions

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Exit	0.4503** (0.1876)	0.360** (0.178)	0.218 (0.186)	0.453 (0.498)
Voice	0.4422*** (0.1557)	0.523*** (0.150)	0.601*** (0.144)	1.088*** (0.382)
Western Mediterranean		-0.673*** (0.128)	-0.783*** (0.126)	-0.420 (0.336)
Central and eastern Europe		0.610*** (0.126)	0.566*** (0.124)	0.446 (0.325)
Nordic		-1.169*** (0.142)	-1.178*** (0.141)	-1.130*** (0.232)
Eastern Mediterranean and Balkan		0.949*** (0.122)	0.874*** (0.123)	0.686** (0.315)
Woman		-0.0892 (0.0975)	-0.0679 (0.0950)	0.445* (0.255)
18–29 years old		0.319** (0.156)	0.417** (0.191)	0.365 (0.431)
30–39 years old		0.642*** (0.176)	0.703*** (0.169)	0.943* (0.560)
40–49 years old		0.412*** (0.144)	0.405*** (0.145)	0.789** (0.319)
50–59 years old		0.169 (0.123)	0.135 (0.123)	-0.0977 (0.289)
Bachelor's degree			-0.305*** (0.108)	-0.253 (0.278)
Master's degree			-0.699*** (0.0993)	-0.520** (0.241)
Employment status: student			-0.238 (0.222)	0.192 (0.693)
Employment status: unemployed			0.570** (0.223)	1.012** (0.515)
Living alone			0.0261 (0.112)	-0.0738 (0.301)
Living in a rural area			0.00874 (0.0960)	0.0468 (0.253)
Western Mediterranean and voice				-0.452 (0.356)
Western Mediterranean and exit				0.372 (0.464)
Central and eastern Europe and voice				0.217 (0.343)
Central and eastern Europe and exit				-0.0780 (0.454)
Nordic and voice				-0.0885 (0.278)
Nordic and exit				0.654 (0.472)
Eastern Mediterranean and Balkan and voice				0.190 (0.335)
Eastern Mediterranean and Balkan and exit				0.415 (0.391)
Woman and voice				-0.574** (0.268)
Woman and exit				-0.453 (0.331)
18–29 years old and voice				0.111 (0.464)

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
18–29 years old and exit				-0.431 (0.762)
30–39 years old and voice				-0.265 (0.573)
30–39 years old and exit				-0.000594 (0.620)
40–49 years old and voice				-0.300 (0.348)
40–49 years old and exit				-0.794* (0.433)
50–59 years old and voice				0.326 (0.314)
50–59 years old and exit				-0.452 (0.504)
Bachelor's degree and voice				-0.0918 (0.294)
Bachelor's degree and exit				0.210 (0.371)
Master's degree and voice				-0.234 (0.259)
Master's degree and exit				0.678* (0.399)
Student and voice				-0.483 (0.731)
Student and exit				0.207 (0.752)
Unemployed and voice				-0.351 (0.554)
Unemployed and exit				-0.456 (0.570)
Living alone and voice				0.196 (0.318)
Living alone and exit				-0.514 (0.407)
Living in a rural area and voice				-0.0461 (0.269)
Living in a rural area and exit				0.259 (0.322)
Constant	-0.488*** (0.148)	-0.603*** (0.179)	-0.455** (0.186)	-0.931*** (0.354)
Observations	9,024	9,005	8,849	8,849
R-squared	0.012	0.130	0.155	0.170

Notes: The table shows the coefficients estimated using OLS regression, where dissatisfaction is regressed on exit and voice, sociodemographic characteristics (country cluster, age group, education, employment status, living alone, living in a rural area and gender), and interactions between exit, voice and the control variables. Exit and voice are the dummies for the proportion of individuals who did not vote in the most recent election and the proportion of individuals who participated in political activities in the 12 months before the survey, respectively. Robust standard errors and weights. Robust standard errors are shown in parentheses. Reference categories for comparison are 'continental Europe and Ireland' for clusters, '60 years old or over' for age and 'secondary or less' for education. Country clusters are central and eastern Europe (Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia), continental Europe and Ireland (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands), eastern Mediterranean and Balkan (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Romania), Nordic (Denmark, Finland, Sweden) and western Mediterranean (Italy, Malta, Portugal, Spain). * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Source: Authors' own calculations, based on the fourth round of the Living, working and COVID-19 e-survey (October–November 2021)

Getting in touch with the EU

In person

All over the European Union there are hundreds of Europe Direct information centres. You can find the address of the centre nearest you at: https://european-union.europa.eu/contact-eu_en

On the phone or by email

Europe Direct is a service that answers your questions about the European Union. You can contact this service:

- by freephone: 00 800 6 7 8 9 10 11 (certain operators may charge for these calls)
- at the following standard number: +32 22999696
- by email via: https://european-union.europa.eu/contact-eu_en

Finding information about the EU

Online

Information about the European Union in all the official languages of the EU is available on the Europa website at: <https://europa.eu>

EU publications

You can download or order free and priced EU publications at: <https://op.europa.eu/publications>

Multiple copies of free publications may be obtained by contacting Europe Direct or your local information centre (see https://european-union.europa.eu/contact-eu_en).

EU law and related documents

For access to legal information from the EU, including all EU law since 1952 in all the official language versions, go to EUR-Lex at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu>

Open data from the EU

The EU Open Data Portal (<https://data.europa.eu>) provides access to datasets from the EU. Data can be downloaded and reused for free, both for commercial and non-commercial purposes.

This report investigates the political dimensions of social cohesion in Europe, offering a 20-year perspective derived from 10 rounds of the European Social Survey. It scrutinises trends and regional variations in political participation, examining correlations with levels of institutional distrust and discontent. In addition, the report explores political engagement amid the COVID-19 pandemic, utilising insights from the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey.

Unemployment emerges as the primary driver of political disengagement, a pivotal finding of the analysis. Furthermore, the report uncovers significant disparities in political engagement across European regions. Regions with well-educated populations tend to exhibit higher levels of political activity, and economic prosperity and migration rates have only a modest influence on political activity.

The report also highlights the variation in institutional distrust across regions. Nordic countries display markedly lower levels of distrust in their institutions than continental countries, whereas in eastern European and Mediterranean countries levels are markedly higher.

The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound) is a tripartite European Union Agency established in 1975. Its role is to provide knowledge in the area of social, employment and work-related policies according to Regulation (EU) 2019/127.

