WOODS, M. (2024). ***Rural Discontent and Disruptive Politics in Europe: An Inital Analysis.*** The Overarching Issues of the European Area- How to efficiently combine sustainability, resilience and territorial management?, Porto, Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto. pp. 26-41
DOI: https://doi.org/10.21747/978-989-9193-48-2/coma1

RURAL DISCONTENT AND DISRUPTIVE POLITICS IN EUROPE: AN INITIAL ANALYSIS

DESCONTENTAMENTO COM OS ESPAÇOS RURAIS E POLÍTICAS DISRUPTIVAS NA EUROPA: UMA ANÁLISE INICIAL

Michael WOODS
Department of Geography and Earth Sciences, Aberystwyth University
m.woods@aber.ac.uk

Resumo

A ascensão de partidos políticos disruptivos na Europa, incluindo partidos populistas e de extrema-direita, tem sido frequentemente associada, nos meios de comunicação social e na academia, ao descontentamento do mundo rural, especialmente nas regiões periféricas "esquecidas". Este texto apresenta novas análises que mostram que a geografia eleitoral é mais complicada. Centrando-se nas recentes eleições nos Países Baixos, em França e em Portugal, demonstra que existem dinâmicas diferentes em cada país, com relações diferentes com o descontentamento rural. Nos Países Baixos, o descontentamento rural canalizado através de um partido populista agrário é um elemento numa geografia multifacetada de políticas disruptivas; em França, as áreas rurais são um campo de batalha fundamental; e em Portugal, o descontentamento rural foi captado em alguns territórios numa geografia ainda emergente. Estas evidências preparam o terreno para uma investigação mais aprofundada para compreender a importância do descontentamento rural na política disruptiva.

Palavras-chave: Descontentamento rural, eleições, populismo, justiça espacial.

Abstract

The rise of disruptive political parties in Europe, including far-right and populist parties, has been frequently associated in media and academic sectors with rural discontent, especially in peripheral 'left-behind' regions. This paper presents new analysis that shows that the electoral geography is more complicated. Focusing on recent elections in the Netherlands, France and Portugal it demonstrates that there are different dynamics in each country with different relations to rural discontent. In the Netherlands, rural discontent channelled through an agrarian populist party is one element in a multi-layered geography of disruptive politics; in France, rural areas are a key battleground; and in Portugal, rural discontent has been captured in some localities in a still emerging geography. These findings set the scene for further investigation to understand the significance of rural discontent in disruptive politics.

keywords: Rural discontent, elections, populism, spatial justice.

1- Introduction

On the first day of February 2024 over a thousand tractors filled the streets around the European Parliament in Brussels as farmers converged to demonstrate against trade deals and other policies that they feared posed an existential threat to their industry. It was the culmination of a wave of farmers protests that had spread across Europe that winter. Starting in Germany in November 2023, by February farmers

protests had been reported in 21 EU member states, as well as in Albania, Moldova, Serbia and the UK (Finger et al, 2024). The catalysts for action varied between countries. German farmers had mobilized against reductions in subsidies for agricultural fuel. In France, farm protests objected to policies in the green transition. In Poland, farmers protested against tariff-free imports from Ukraine; while the main target of the Brussels rally was proposals for an EU trade deal with Mercosur, the South American common market. Underlying all these protests, however, was a sense of agriculture in crisis, with farmers coping with economic precarity and feeling beleaguered by the green turn in rural policy.

The farmers' protests captured news headlines, but they are just one expression of a wider rural malaise that has settled over the European countryside in recent decades. Many rural regions have faced persistent out-migration and depopulation, accompanied by a loss of services, school closures, and the demographic ageing of communities (Gómez Valenzuela and Holl, 2024; Newsham and Rowe, 2023; Rickardsson, 2021). Deindustrialization and globalization have been linked to economic decline or stagnation (McDonagh et al., 2015; Rickardsson, 2021).

Rural economies are too often characterized by low wages, limited job opportunities, and poor infrastructure. Transitions in some rural areas from primary industries to the consumption economy has frequently brought its own challenges of over-tourism and demand for holiday and second homes that has contributed to increasing problems with access to affordable housing. In other localities, the conversion of farmland to renewable energy production or carbon forestry, or designation for re-wilding, has prompted claims of neo-extractivism or new forms of 'green colonialism' (Bresnihan and Brodie, 2021; Canelas and Carvalho, 2023; del Mármol and Vaccaro, 2020).

Although the European Commission has made a serious and substantial effort to recognize and address these trends through the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas, launched in 2021, it is also not difficult to understand why rural residents may feel alienated from urban-centred governments and consider themselves as victims of spatial injustice (Lago, 2022; Woods, 2023a, 2023b). Neither is it surprising that such rural discontent has been exploited by populist, nationalist and other disruptive parties, especially on the political right. The populist rhetoric of 'us' versus 'them' is all too easily mapped on to perceptions of a rural-urban divide.

As disruptive parties have advanced in many European countries over the last decade it has become commonplace in both academic analysis and political commentary to identify their rise with peripheral and 'left-behind' regions, including rural areas. Yet, not all experiences fit this narrative. There are many rural regions in Europe, including economically lagging rural districts, that have not swung behind disruptive parties; and the majority of people voting for disruptive parties live in cities and suburbs, not the countryside (see for example, Albertazzi and Zulianello, 2021; De Lange et al., 2023; Manley et al., 2017). There is, therefore, a need to more carefully interrogate the nature and extent of rural support for disruptive politics and its variegated geographies. This is the focus of the 'Rural Discontent, Spatial Justice, and Disruptive Politics' (Rural-Spatial-Justice) project, which is employing mixed qualitative and quantitative methods to examine the drivers, dynamics and consequences of rural support for disruptive politics at macro- and micro-

scales in Europe and North America. This article sets the scene for the research by discussing the background and presenting some initial findings from recent elections in France, Portugal and the Netherlands. It draws on quantitative geographical analysis of election results by rural-urban categorization and secondary data, including previously published commentaries in academic papers and media articles. The next section of the chapter introduces our approach to the study of disruptive politics and their association with rural discontent, with the remainder of the chapter focusing in turn on the cases of the Netherlands, France and Portugal, before summarising some conclusions.

2 – Approaching Disruptive Politics

A decade ago, Strijker et al. (2015) published an edited volume on *Rural Protest Groups and Populist Political Parties*. The contributors surveyed a landscape at the start of the century in which rural protests had developed in several countries, including Austria, Britain, France and the Netherlands, and populist parties had emerged in several more, including Austria, Finland, France, Hungary, the Netherlands and Poland, but the two did not necessarily connect. There were a few cases where rural protests did bleed into populist parties, notably in Poland (Stanley, 2015), and the odd populist party with clear rural origins, for example in Finland (Jungar, 2015). More generally, however, Strijker et al. (2015, p. 15) observed that "there are far more examples of modern populist parties that do not have a rural origin, and of rural protest groups that did not develop into populist parties".

This conclusion has been tested by subsequent events, as populist parties have become more widespread and achieved greater success in European countries, and as they have become more overt in seeking to tap into rural discontent. A multitude of academic studies have examined this nexus, both within individual countries and comparatively (see for instance, Mamonova and Franquesa, 2019). At the same time, economic geographers and regional scientists have drawn connections between populist voting and economically 'left-behind' regions, implicitly, if not explicitly, identifying populism with peripheral rural districts (along with de-industrializing towns) (Essletzbichler et al., 2018; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Together with American ethnographic studies that recorded the growth of populist sentiments in rural and small-town communities (most notably Cramer, 2016, and Hochschild, 2016), these accounts have shaped much of popular understanding of recent politics. However, there are a number of critiques that can be directed at this literature.

First, the emphasis on populism is problematic. In spite of its current widespread use, populism is a vague and malleable term that has been applied in different ways by different writers and researchers (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). It has been used to refer to an ideology, to a style of politics, to a discourse, to specific language and rhetoric, to a cause, and to a condition of contemporary politics. Political scientists tend to adopt an ideational approach, understanding populism either as an ideology or as a discourse; whereas many geographers, sociologists and agrarian scholars have focused on 'authoritarian populism', which is more concerned with a style of politics. Accordingly, there are disagreements over whether specific

individual parties are populist or not, some of which extend to significant parties in Europe such as Fratelli d'Italia in Italy. Neither is it any more straightforward to define the parties that we're interested in as 'far right' or 'radical right'. Not all populists are right-wing; some populist parties combine conventionally left- and right-wing policies; some parties have moved on the political spectrum over time; and fine categorizations such as between 'far right' and 'radical right' are hotly contested. Moreover, it is also evident that rural discontent can also be expressed through support for parties that are neither populist nor right-wing, but which nonetheless present a challenge to settled structures, such as separatist parties in Catalonia and the Basque Country.

We, therefore, use 'disruptive politics' as a more inclusive term that can accommodate parties and movements with a variety of ideological positions, but which share an outsider status in relation to the political mainstream. More precisely, we define disruptive politics as political movements and events that disrupt settled political cultures and parties and challenge established leaders and sites of authority, and which contribute to societal polarization. In order to be included in our analysis, a party must meet three criteria: advocacy of policies that sit outside the conventional window of acceptability; attributes relating to ideology, language, style or leadership that are expressly disruptive or polarizing (e.g., populist or nationalist rhetoric; racism or homophobia; religious fundamentalism; promotion of conspiracy theories; or neophyte leaders); and demonstrating either a surge in public support or a sustained high level of support since 2000.

Second, there is little correspondence or interaction between work on rural discontent and disruptive politics produced from different directions, for example, between quantitative analysis of election results and regional statistics and qualitative ethnographic studies of individual communities. While the former can reveal geographical patterns, it often tends towards emphasizing economic factors that are most easily quantifiable and, in some cases, plays down the significance of rural identity or culture, in part because of the difficulty of expressing these in statistical terms. The latter, in contrast, often foreground rural identity and culture as important, but can only do so in the context of specific places.

Third, the literature puts forward a wide range of explanations for the differences in support for disruptive parties, including specifically support from rural areas. Support for disruptive parties is variously attributed to economic marginalization, including impacts of deindustrialization, globalization and agricultural restructuring (Essletzbichler et al., 2018; Hobolt, 2016; McCann, 2020; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018); anti-immigration and anti-minority sentiment (Carreras et al., 2019; Locco et al., 2020; Kalmar, 2020); religious voting (Ignazi & Wellhofer, 2013; Kalmar, 2020); the demographic and class profile of rural areas (Manley et al., 2018; Oesch, 2008); a rural-urban cultural divide (Lee et al., 2018; Nilsson and Lundgren, 2019); nostalgia (Elgenius and Rydgren, 2019; Mamonova, 2019); libertarian and anti-statist beliefs (Cortes-Vazquez, 2020; Fortner et al., 2021); and perceived political marginalization and declining trust in political leaders (Ejrnæs et al., 2024; Kasabov, 2020; Mitsch et al., 2021; Schraff, 2019).

Fourth, some elements in the literature reproduce essentialist notions of rural places and people that fail to acknowledge their social, economic, cultural and political diversity. These include quantitative analyses that treat 'rural' as a homogenous category, or which include rural areas within similarly broad

categories such as lagging regions, but also qualitative and ethnographic studies that generalize conclusions about rural people and their politics from place-specific individual case studies. As such, these studies tend to overlook or neglect differences in rural-urban dynamics between countries as well as variations between different rural localities within countries, which may have contrasting economic fortunes or divergent cultural or political histories, leading to differing contemporary political behaviors (see for example, Strijker et al. 2015; Woods, 2015).

3 – Examining Disruptive Politics in Context: Three Case Studies

This paper presents analysis from the first stage of the Rural-Spatial-Justice project at Aberystwyth University, which has involved a global survey of elections since 2000 to assess the significance of rural areas in providing support for disruptive political parties and to identify emerging patterns and differences. We focus here on the analysis of recent elections in three European countries, France, the Netherlands, and Portugal, selected as examples that reveal differing dynamics in rural voting patterns for disruptive parties. The analysis has been conduced at the scales both of departments or provinces and of municipalities, communes or *freguesias* (parishes). Election results were sourced from official or media sites (Expresso in Portugal, NOS in the Netherlands). For rural-urban categorization, we used Eurostat's rural-urban classification at the regional scale (including for departments in France). At the local scale, in France, we used commune population size as a proxy for rurality/urbanity, in the Netherlands we applied a rural-urban classification of municipalities based on that used by Gao et al. (2018), and in Portugal we have followed the 2014 TIPAU Typology of Urban Areas produced by the Instituto Nacional de Estatística (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2014).

3.1- The Netherlands

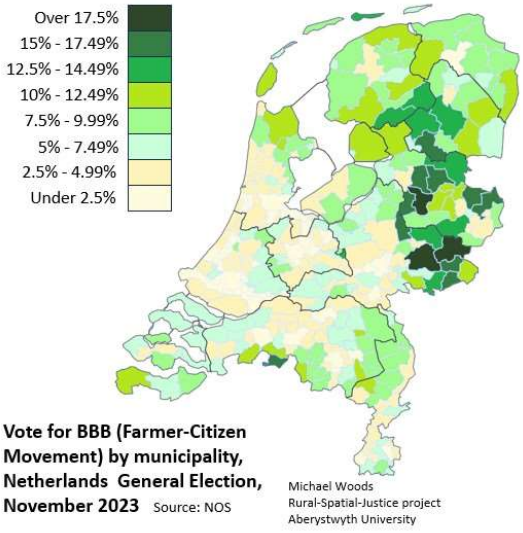
The Netherlands is one of the few European countries where a clear line can be drawn between farmers' protests and a disruptive political party. In 2019, Dutch farmers had mounted a series of road blocks and rallies, primarily in protest at government proposals aimed at reducing nitrogen emissions from agriculture, but also encompassing a wider, less well defined, sense of discontent (Van der Ploeg, 2020). The protests spawned a new political party, the BoerBurgerBeweging (BBB) (Farmer-Citizen Alliance), although its emergence wasn't organic. The party was set up, and initially funded, by a marketing agency that had been working with farmer activists (Engelen, 2023). Its framing as an alliance between farmers and citizens reflected a recognition that to have an electoral impact the movement needed to enol urban supporters and paralleled the publicity campaign that the agency had been running.

The BBB won its first seat in the Dutch parliament in 2021, but became a significant national political force in the provincial elections in March 2023, in which it was the first placed party with over 19% of the vote. It achieved over 30% of the vote in some rural parts of the eastern Netherlands, but also came first in many small towns and periurban areas (Otjes, 2023). It is not unusual for provincial elections to be used by

the Dutch electoral as an opportunity to cast protest votes and the far-right Forum voor Democratie (FvD) had taken first place in 2019. The BBB's victory in the 2023 provincial elections in part reflected the broadening of its platform to include populist positions on multiculturalism and law and order as well as the representation of itself as a party of 'common sense' against the excesses of the political establishment (van der Plas, 2023).

At the same time, the BBB's agrarianism enabled it to build up a more solid core vote of farmers who had previously supported the Christian Democrats (CDA), and who remained as its wider protest vote faded (Boom, 2024). In the November 2023 parliamentary elections, the BBB took 4.65% of the vote nationally and increased its number of MPs from one to seven. The BBB's vote came predominantly from rural areas, but not evenly, instead being concentrated in a band of rural municipalities running through the provinces of Drenthe, Overijssel, and Gelderland (Figure 1). Most of these districts had been sites of farmers protests, but they are not necessarily the areas of highest agricultural production or places with the greatest issues around nitrate use and pollution. Rather, they tended to be more marginal rural areas by Dutch standards, but economically and in terms of access to services.

.



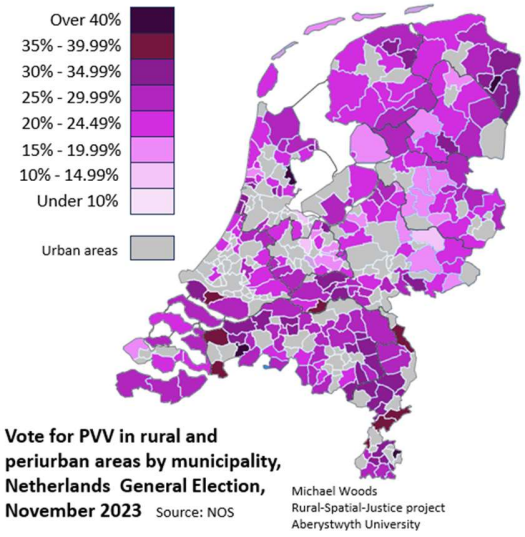


Figure 1: Vote share for the BBB by municipality in the Netherlands parliamentary election, 2023 (left);
Figure 2: Vote share for the PVV in rural municipalities in the Netherlands parliamentary election, 2023.
Source: Prepared by the author. Election data: NOS.

The main winner of the November 2023 election was the far-right populist Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV) (Freedom Party), which polled 23.5% nationally. In contrast to the BBB, the PVV comes from a lineage of urban-based populism in the Netherlands, extending back to Leefbaar Nederland and Lijst Pim Fortuyn in the early 2000s, with its electoral base in Rotterdam (Harteveld et al., 2022; Van Gent et al., 2014). However, its victory in 2023 rested on extending its appeal to rural areas and small towns (Figure 2). Eight of the ten

municipalities with the highest PVV vote share were in rural, small town or periurban areas, as were seven of its ten largest increases in vote

The third key beneficiary of the 2023 election was a new party, Nieuw Sociaal Contract (NSC) (New Social Contract), founded by former Christian Democrat politician Peter Omtzigt. The NSC doesn't qualify as a disruptive party in our definition, with a moderate centre-right platform and an emphasis on upholding the constitution. Yet it's message of change also appealed to voters disillusioned with established parties and it subsequently joined the BBB and liberal-conservative VVD in a controversial PVV-led coalition that has enacted disruptive policies. That BBB, NSC and PVV were fishing in the same pool of rural voters is indicated by the electoral geography, which shows the PVV winning relatively fewer votes in municipalities where the BBB or NSC performed strongly, as well as by survey data. Around 40 percent of voters supporting the BBB at the start of November, three weeks before the election, and a quarter of those backing the NSC eventually voted PVV (Boom, 2024).

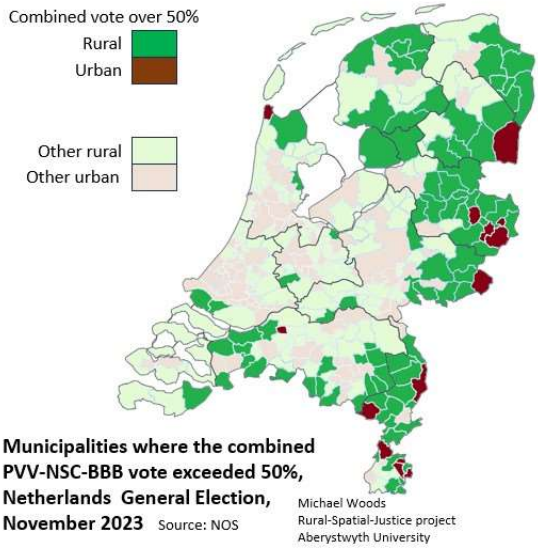


Figure 3: Municipalities where the combined PVV, BBB and NSC vote exceeded 50% in the Netherlands parliamentary election 2023.
Source: Prepared by the author. Data: NOS.

De Lange et al. (2023) have argued that populism in the Netherlands is driven by *regional* resentment rather than *rural* resentment, reflecting a perception of spatial injustice that is strongest in peripheral districts. To a degree, the 2023 parliamentary election results support this conclusion. As Figure 3 shows, municipalities where the combined PVV, BBB and NSC vote exceeded 50% are largely found in peripheral and border regions. They include some medium-sized towns such as Almelo, Emmen, Enschede, and Venlo, but are mainly rural. However, the rise of the BBB has added rural identity more prominently into the mix of Dutch disruptive politics. It has contributed to a layering of electoral dynamics in which a core-periphery pattern of perceived spatial injustice creating a volatile electorate moving behind different vehicles

WOODS, M. (2024). ***Rural Discontent and Disruptive Politics in Europe: An Inital Analysis.*** The Overarching Issues of the European Area- How to efficiently combine sustainability, resilience and territorial management?, Porto, Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto. pp. 26-41
DOI: https://doi.org/10.21747/978-989-9193-48-2/coma1

for disruptive politics (PVV, BBB, FvD), is reinforced both by disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods with long-term populist tendencies backing the PVVV, and by rural discontent around public services and the net-zero transition harnessed by the BBB.

3.2- France

France also has long histories of both disruptive right-wing politics and farmers' protests, but the connections between the two are less direct than in the Netherlands (Ivaldi and Gombin, 2015; Woods, 2015). During farmers' protests in January 2024 both Jordan Bardella of the Rassemblement National (RN) and Marion Maréchal – then heading the European parliamentary election list for the rival right-wing Reconquête party – attempted to position themselves as spokespersons for the farmers and tap into their discontent. When the RN subsequently topped the vote in the June 2024 European election and June-July 2024 parliamentary election, some media reports referred to the party's 'rural heartland'. However, closer analysis suggests that the electoral geography map is more complicated.

.

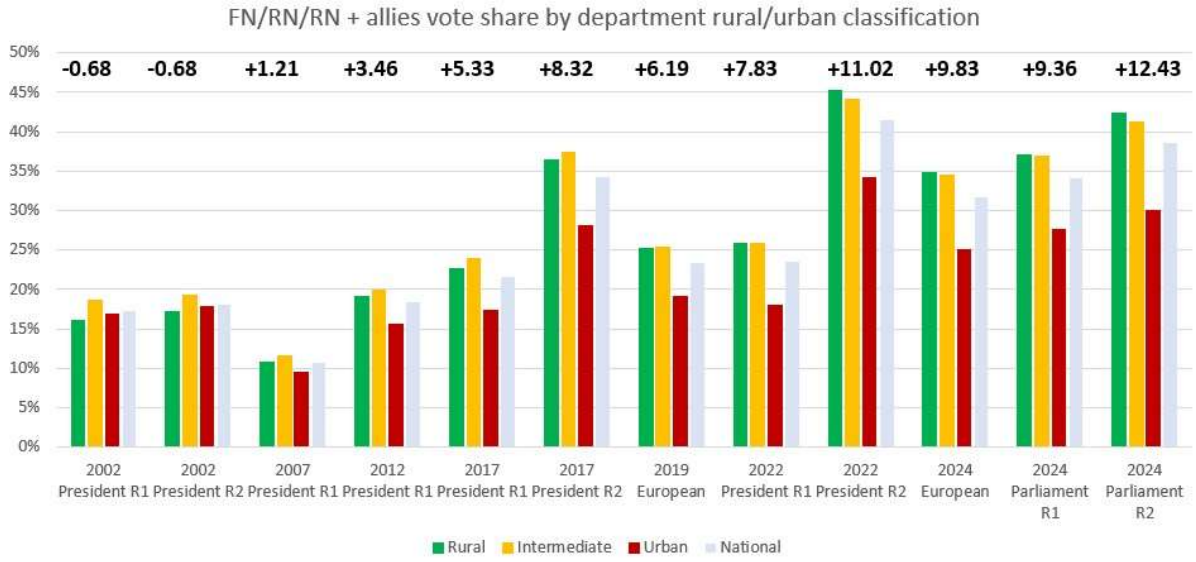


Figure 4: Vote share for Front National / Rassemblement National by rural-urban typology.
Source: Prepared by the author. Election data from French Interior Ministry.

Like the PVV in the Netherlands, the initial voter base of the RN, or the Front National (FN) as it was named until 2018, was in cities. When FN leader Jean-Marie Le Pen first broke through to the second round of the presidential election in 2002, his vote share was higher in urban departments than in rural departments (Figure 4). Over the next two decades, however, the FN/RN vote has undergone a distinct rural tilt. By the second round of the 2024 parliamentary elections, the RN's vote share was 12.43 percentage points higher in rural departments than in urban departments. In total, the RN and allies took 42.4% of the vote in rural

departments, 30.0% in urban departments, and 41.1% in 'intermediate' departments, where between 20% and 50% of the population live in rural areas

If voting patterns are analysed by commune rather than department, with commune population size taken as proxy for rurality, the rural skew is equally pronounced. The RN polled 41.3% of the vote in communes with 2,500 or fewer electors in the first round of the 2024 parliamentary elections, compared with 33.2% of the vote overall nationally. In contrast, as Figure 5 shows, its vote in large cities was generally under 20%, with the notable exceptions of Marseille and Nice; and the RN and allies did not achieve more than 50% of the vote in any commune with an electorate of more than 50,000, and not more than 60% in any commune with an electorate of more than 25,000.

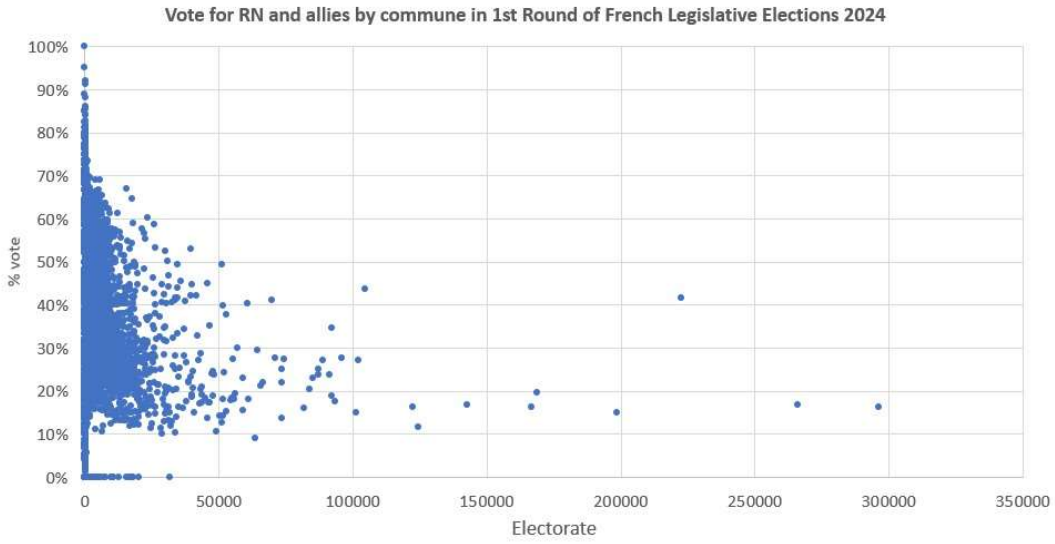


Figure 5: Vote share for RN and allies in the first round of the French legislative elections 2024, by size of commune (35.079 communes) (Excludes Paris (11% of vote) and Marseille (33%)).
Source: Prepared by the author. Election data from the French Interior Ministry.

Ivaldi and Gombin (2015) note that a number of explanations have been advanced for the rural tilt in the FN/RN vote, including migration and the socio-economic reconfiguration of the rural population as lower income groups have moved in (see also Pierru and Vignon, 2023). They also observe that the FN explicitly reached out to "voters in the so-called 'invisible constituency' in urban peripheries and rural areas", resulting in "the politicization of new issues concerning in-migrations, models of rural development and the transformation of the rural-urban divide" (p. 259). Farmers have also played a part. Ivaldi and Gombin report that around 22% of farmers are estimated to have voted for Jean-Marie Le Pen in the first round in 2002 and that in parts of Brittany, Normandy and around Paris, between a third and a half of voters are modelled to have voted for Marine Le Pen in the 2012 election. Fourquet (2023), meanwhile, demonstrates high levels of RN support in rural communes that have experienced a sharp loss of public and private services.

WOODS, M. (2024). ***Rural Discontent and Disruptive Politics in Europe: An Inital Analysis.*** The Overarching Issues of the European Area- How to efficiently combine sustainability, resilience and territorial management?, Porto, Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto. pp. 26-41
DOI: https://doi.org/10.21747/978-989-9193-48-2/coma1

.

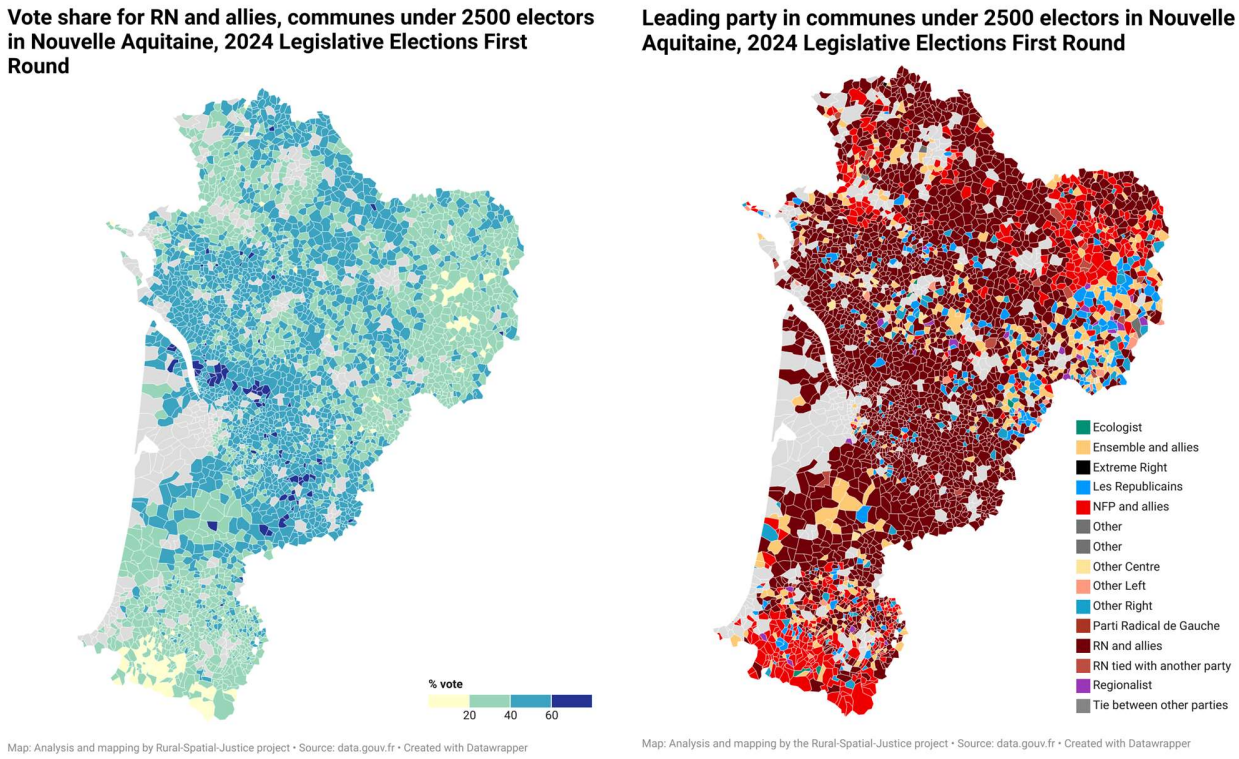


Figure 6: Vote share for the RN and allies in the first round of the French legislative elections 2024 in communes with under 2500 electors in the Nouvelle Aquitaine region (left); Figure 7: Leading party in the first round of the French legislative elections 2024 in communes with under 2500 electors in the Nouvelle Aquitaine region (right). Source: Prepared by the author. Election data from the French Interior Ministry.

Yet, Figure 5 also shows a clear tail of very small communes in which the RN performed poorly. Indeed, there are 802 communes with an electorate of under 2,500 where the RN achieved less than 20% of the vote, including 18 where it got no votes at all. Therefore, while rural areas as a whole are more inclined to vote for the disruptive far right in France, *not all rural communes are far right strongholds*. Figures 6 and 7 reveal something of this fragmented geography for communes with under 2,500 electors in the Nouvelle Aquitaine region of south west France, both in variations in the RN vote share (Figure 6) and in the plethora of parties leading the vote in individual communes (Figure 7). Notably, the strongest areas for the RN are not peripheral, potentially 'left-behind' districts, but more accessible and affluent communes in the lower Dordogne and Garonne valleys close to Bordeaux. As such, rather than describing rural France as the heartland for the Rassemblement National, it would be more accurate to describe the French countryside as the key battleground for and against right-wing disruptive politics

3.3 - Portugal

Until recently, Portugal, along with Spain, were considered to be exceptions in Europe with no active right-wing populist parties (Heyne and Manucci, 2021). There was a school of thought among some, that memories of twentieth century dictatorships provided a form of immunity. That spell was broken in Portugal with the rise of the right-wing populist party Chega! Founded in April 2019, the party achieved just 1.3% of the vote in the October 2019 legislative elections, surged to 11.9% in the 2021 presidential election, fell back to 7.2% in the 2022 legislative election, but achieved a new record high of 18.1% in the 2024 legislative elections (Mendes 2022; Ministério da Administração Interna, 2024).

The party's founder, André Ventura, had been a councillor in Loures, in the urban fringe of Lisbon and he won Chega's first parliamentary seat in the Lisbon constituency. However, the party's highest vote share in that first 2019 election was in the largely rural constituency of Portalegre in Alentejo, where it achieved 2.73%. Heyne and Manucci (2021) similarly found through analysis of online survey data from 2019 that Chega supporters were more likely to live in rural areas than in urban areas. Although Chega has not explicitly positioned itself as a party representing rural interests and is active in larger towns and cities, it has tailored its platform to appeal to conservative sentiments among rural voters. Article 48 of the party's political platform refers to 'Defence of the Rural World', which it presents as "respecting good agricultural practices and good animal welfare customs, against all threats of animalist ideology" (Chega website). It proceeds to commit to representing and promoting agriculture, hunting, fishing, bullfighting and rural customs and traditions, stating that the party "will always preserve the Portuguese identity of rural areas, such as ethnography, handicrafts, gastronomy, rational use of natural resources as a consecration of national biodiversity" (ibid.). Strikingly, this appeal to rural voters is made in cultural terms not economic terms, which is consistent with Heyne and Manucci's (2021) finding that support for Chega does not come from economic 'losers' from globalization.

The increase in Chega's vote in 2024 was similarly especially pronounced in rural areas. Almeida and Rodríguez-Pose (2024) calculate that its vote share in rural districts rose from 10.92% in 2022 to 36.53%, substantially more than the 10.9 percentage point increase in its vote nationally. Almeida and Rodríguez-Pose interpret this as confirmation of the pattern identified by Heyne and Manucci (2021), observing that "the party's strongholds are rural areas and some medium-sized cities, where feelings of marginalization and neglect run deep. Despite overall growth in all municipalities, *Chega* struggled to make inroads in urban centres, drawing attention to a growing gulf between Portugal's metropolitan hubs and its peripheries".

However, the pattern of *freguesias* (parishes) where Chega was in first place by votes cast in the 2024 election does not fully match this conclusion, as Figure 8 shows. They include a cluster of both rural and urban *freguesias* in Portalegre district, a peripheral and deprived region against the Spanish border, which has frequently voted for disruptive left-wing parties, including the Communists in the past; as well as a scattering of small rural *freguesias* in the north. They also include, though, urbanized coastal communities

in the Algarve and more urbanized *freguesias* close to the Lisbon metropolitan area, which do not fit ideas of 'left-behind' regions in the conventional sense, but may still perceive spatial injustice. Indeed, Almeida and Rodríguez-Pose (2024) note that support for Chega in Algarve is connected to internal social divides, low wages in a tourism economy, and a perception of being forgotten by Portugal's major parties.

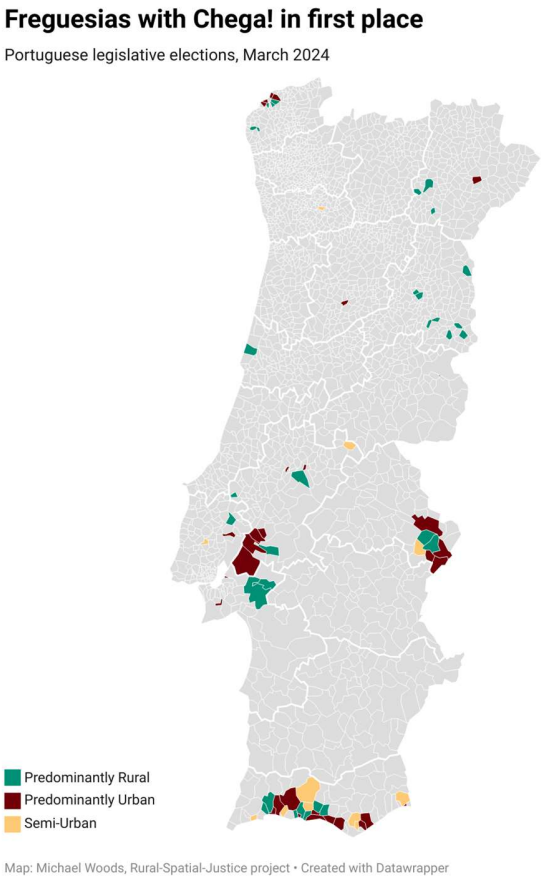


Figure 8: Freguesias where Chega came first in votes cast in the Portuguese parliamentary election 2024. Source: Prepared by the author. Election data from Expresso.

As such, the rise of the disruptive right in Portugal can be connected to perceptions of political disenfranchisement and spatial injustice, which includes appealing to rural communities by asserting support for traditional rural cultures, but which is not yet substantially aligned with rural-urban disparities or dynamics of rural discontent.

4 – Conclusions

The examples discussed in this paper indicate that the geography of disruptive politics is complicated and that generalizations cannot be made about the significance of rural support to disruptive political parties across Europe. Disruptive parties do feed on sentiments of spatial injustice, but these are about more than

economic marginalization – they are also about rural-urban cultural differences and perceptions of political neglect. In this way, rural discontent can be a breeding ground for disruptive politics, but disruptive parties also draw votes from urban areas and, crucially, support for disruptive parties in rural areas is uneven. We need to better understand the geographies of rural discontent and why and how discontent is converted into support for disruptive parties in some rural localities but not in others. This is one of the central aims of our research in the Rural-Spatial-Justice project.

Many of the drivers of rural support for disruptive politics are long-term trends. It is not a passing phenomenon and could have significant implications for the social, economic and political coherence of Europe, as well as for the capacity of the European Union to tackle major challenges such as climate change. Rural discontent is exploited by parties that aim to dismantle aspects of democracy and civil rights giving them credibility and contributing to widening social polarization. At the local scale, rising rural support for parties using populist, xenophobic or exclusionary rhetoric compromises the 'right to the country' of immigrants and other minorities. More broadly, opposition to net zero and green transition policies by disruptive parties in rural areas – as well as by protesting farmers - may block necessary action on the climate and biodiversity crises. However, forcing through green actions against rural opposition risks being perceived as a further sign that rural opinion doesn't matter to urban elites, further fuelling support for disruptive parties that claim to represent rural interests.

Seeking to understand the specific drivers and dynamics of rural discontent and its connections to disruptive politics, taking the genuine grievances and feelings of neglect of rural people seriously, and trying to find alternative, less disruptive and less polarizing ways of articulating and addressing these grievances are all vital steps for tackling the over-arching issues confronting Europe.

Bibliography

ALBERTAZZI, D. and ZULIANELLO, M. (2021) Populist electoral competition in Italy: the impact of sub-national contextual factors, *Contemporary Italian Politics*, 13(1), 4-30.

ALMEIDA, J. & RODRÍGUEZ-POSE, A. (2024) The geography of discontent and the rise of far-right politics in Portugal, LSE EUROPP blog, 26 March. Available at: https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2024/03/26/the-geography-of-discontent-and-the-rise-of-far-right-politics-in-portugal/. Accessed 20 December 2024.

BOOM, W. (2024) *De ruk nar rechts*. Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Balans.

BRESNIHAN, P. and BRODIE, P. (2021) New extractive frontiers in Ireland and the Moebius strip of wind/data, *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, 4, 1645-1664.

CANELAS, J. and CARVALHO, A. (2023) The dark side of the energy transition: extractivist violence, energy (in)justice, and lithium mining in Portugal, *Energy Research and Social Science*, 100, 103096.

CARRERAS, M., IREPOGLU CARRERAS, Y., & BOWLER, S. (2019) Long-term economic distress, cultural backlash, and support for Brexit. *Comparative Political Studies*, 52, 1396-1424.

CORTES-VAZQUEZ, J. A. (2020) In the name of the people: The populist redefinition of nature conservation in post-crisis Spain. *Geoforum*, 108, 110-118.

CRAMER, K. J. (2016) *The politics of resentment: Rural consciousness in Wisconsin and the rise of Scott Walker*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

DE LANGE, S., VAN DER BRUG, W., & HARTEVELD, E. (2023) Regional resentment in the Netherlands: a rural or peripheral phenomenon? *Regional Studies*, 57, 403-415.

DEL MÁRMOL, C. and VACCARO, I. (2020) New extractivism in European rural areas: how twentieth first century mining returned to disturb the rural transition, *Geoforum*, 116, 42-49.

ELGENIUS, G. & RYDGREN, J. (2019) Frames of nostalgia and belonging: the resurgence of ethno-nationalism in Sweden. *European Societies*, 21, 583-602.

ENGELEN, E. (2023) Boze burgers en boeren. Leiden: Bot uitgevers.

ERJÆNAES, A., JENSEN, M.D, SCHRAFF, D. & VASILOPOULOU, S. (2024) Introduction: regional inequality and political discontent in Europe, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 31(6), 1465-1493.

ESSLETZBICHLER, J., DISSLBACHER, F. & MOSER, M. (2018) The victims of neoliberal globalisation and the rise of the populist vote: a comparative analysis of three electoral decisions. *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, 11, 73-94.

FINGER, R., FABRY, A., KAMMER, M., CANDEL, J., DALHAUS, T. & MEEMKEN, E. (2024) Farmer protests in Europe 2023-2024, EuroChoices, 23(3), 59-63.

FORTNER, M., BELINA, B. & NAUMANN, M. (2021) The revenge of the village? The geography of right-wing populist electoral success, anti-politics, and austerity in Germany, *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*, 39, 574-596.

FOURQUET, J. (2023) *La France d'après: Tableau politique*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.

GAO., J., KAMPHUIS, C.B.M., DIJST, M. & HELBICH, M. (2018) The role of natural and built environment in cycling duration in the Netherlands, *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*, 15, 82.

GÓMEZ VALENZUELA, V. & HOLL, A. (2024) Growth and decline in rural Spain: an exploratory analysis, *European Planning Studies*, 32(2), 430-453.

HARTEVELD, E., VAN DER BRUG, W., DE LANGE, S. & VAN DER MEER, T. (2022) Multiple roots of the populist radical right: support for the Dutch PVV in cities and the countryside, *European Journal of Political Research*, 61(2), 440-461.

HEYNE, L. & MANUCCHI, L. (2021) A new Iberian exceptionalism? Comparing the populist radical right electorate in Portugal and Spain. *Political Research Exchange*, 3, 1989985.

HOBOLT, S. B. (2016) The Brexit vote: a divided nation, a divided continent. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 23, 1259-1277.

HOCHSCHILD, A. R. (2016) *Strangers in their own land: Anger and mourning on the American right*. New York: The New Press.

IGNAZI, P. & WELLHOFER, E. S. (2013) Religion, rurality and voting: secularization, land ownership and Italian electoral behaviour, 1953-2008. *West European Politics*, 36, 919-945.

INSTITUTO NACIONAL DE ESTATÍSTICA (2014) Tipologia das áreas urbanas (2014), downloaded from https://dados.gov.pt/en/datasets/tipologia-das-areas-urbanas-2014/. Accessed 20 December 2024.

IOCCO, G., LO CASCIO, M., & PERROTTA, D. C. (2020) 'Close the ports to African migrants and Asian rice!', *Sociologia Ruralis*, 60, 732-753.

IVALDI, G. & GOMBIN, J. (2015) The Front National and the new politics of the rural in France. In D. Strijker et al. (Eds.) *Rural protest groups and populist political parties*. Wageningen Academic Press, pp 243-264.

JUNGAR, A.C. (2015) Agrarian populism in Finland: continuity and change. In D. Strijker et al. (Eds.) *Rural protest groups and populist political parties*. Wageningen Academic Press, pp 217-242.

KALMAR, I. (2020) The East is just like the West, only more so: Islamophobia and populism in Eastern Germany and the East of the European Union. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 28: 15-29.

KASABOV, E. (2020) Ignored, silenced, caricatured, ridiculed, patronised, and hijacked: what next for a post-populist, post-Gilded-Age countryside? *Journal of Rural Studies*, 75, 143-151.

LAGO, I. (2022) Rural decline and satisfaction with democracy, *Acta Politica*, 57(4), 753-771.

LEE, N., MORRIS, K. & KEMENY, T. (2018) Immobility and the Brexit vote. *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, 11, 143-164.

MAMONOVA, N. (2019) Understanding the silent majority in authoritarian populism: what can we learn from popular support for Putin in rural Russia? *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 46, 561-585.

MAMONOVA, N. & FRANQUESA, J. (2019) Populism, neoliberalism and agrarian movements in Europe: Understanding rural support for right-wing politics and looking for progressive solutions. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 60, 710-731.

MANLEY, D., JONES, K. & JOHNSTON, R. (2017) The geography of Brexit – What geography? Modelling and predicting the outcome across 380 local authorities. *Local Economy*, 32, 183-203.

McCANN, P. (2020) Perceptions of regional inequality and the geography of discontent: insights from the UK, *Regional Studies*, 54, 256-267.

McDONAGH, J., NIENABER, B. & WOODS, M. (Eds) (2015) *Globalization and Europe's Rural Regions*. Farnham: Ashgate.

MENDES, M. S. (2022) The rise of Chega and its impact on the Portuguese party system, Populism in Action Project blog, 17 March. Available at: https://more.bham.ac.uk/populism-in-action/2022/03/17/the-rise-of-chega-and-its-impact-on-the-portuguese-party-system/. Accessed 20 December 2024

MITSCH, F., LEE, N. & MORROW, E. (2021) Faith no more? The divergence of political trust between urban and rural Europe, *Political Geography*, 89, 102426.

MUDDE, C. and KALTWASSER, C.R. (2017) Populism: a very short introduction. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

NEWSHAM, N. and ROWE, F. (2023) Understanding trajectories of population decline across rural and urban Europe: a sequence analysis, *Population, Space and Place*, 29(3), e2630.

NILSSON, B. and LUNDGREN, A. S. (2019) Morality of discontent: the constitution of political establishment in the Swedish rural press. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 59, 314-328.

OESCH, D. (2008) Explaining workers' support for right-wing populist parties in Western Europe: evidence from Austria, Belgium, France, Norway and Switzerland. *International Political Science Review*, 29, 349-373.

OTJES, S. (2023) Provincial and Senate elections in the Netherlands, November, 2023, *Electoral Bulletins of the European Union*, https://geopolitique.eu/en/articles/provincial-and-senate-elections-in-the-netherlands/. Accessed 20 December 2024.

PIERRU, E. & VIGNON, S. (2023) Comprendre le votes frontistes dans les mondes ruraux. Une approche ethnographique des préférences électorales. In G. Mauger & W. Pelletier (Eds.) *Pourquoi tant de votes RN dans les classes populaires?* Éditions du Croquant, pp 127-148.

RICKARDSSON, J. (2021) The urban-rural divide in radical right populist support: the role of residents' characteristics, urbanization trends and public service supply, *Annals of Regional Science*, 67(1), 211-242.

RODRÍGUEZ-POSE, A. (2018) The revenge of the places that don't matter (and what to do about it). *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, 11, 189-209.

SCHRAFF, D. (2019) Regional redistribution and Eurosceptic voting. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 2, 83-105.

STANLEY, B. (2015). The Polish Self-Defence party: from agrarian protest to the politics of populism, 1991-2007. In D. Strijker et al. (Eds.) *Rural protest groups and populist political parties*. Wageningen Academic Press, pp 181-216.

STRIJKER, D., VOERMAN, G. & TERLUIN, I.J. (Eds.) (2015). *Rural protest groups and populist political parties*. Wageningen: Wageningen Academic Press.

VAN DER PLAS, C. (2023) Gewoon gezond verstand. Amsterdam: Prometheus.

VAN DER PLOEG. J.D. (2020) Farmers' upheaval, climate crisis and populism. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 47(3), 589-605.

VAN GENT, W. P. C., JANSEN, E. F., and SMITS, J. H. F. (2014) Right-wing radical populism in city and suburbs: an electoral geography of the Partij Voor de Vrijheid in the Netherlands. *Urban Studies*, 51, 1775-1794.

WOODS, M. (2015) Explaining rural protest: a comparative analysis. In D. Strijker et al. (Eds.) *Rural protest groups and populist political parties*. Wageningen Academic Press, pp 35-62.

WOODS, M. (2023a) Rural recovery of rural spatial justice? Responding to multiple crises for the British countryside. Geographical Journal [early view online]. Available at: https://rgs-ibg.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/geoj.12541. Accessed 20 December 2024.

WOODS, M. (2023b) Rural-urban inequalities and spatial justice in Europe. *Europa XXI*, 44, 37-56.

France election results: https://www.interieur.gouv.fr/actualites/actualites-du-ministere/elections-legislatives-2024-resultats-definitifs

Netherlands election results: https://app.nos.nl/nieuws/tk2023/

Portugal election results: https://expresso.pt/politica/eleicoes/legislativas-2024/resultados?location=NACIONAL

Chega political platform: https://partidochega.pt/index.php/programa_politico/

Acknowledgements

This article presents research from the project, 'Rural Discontent, Spatial Justice and Disruptive Politics' (Rural-Spatial-Justice), selected by the European Research Council as an Advanced Grant and funded by the UKRI Frontier Research Guarantee, grant EP/Y031148/1.