European Committee
of the Regions

[Y] FACTOR

Connecting You[th] EU

Perspectives of EU's rural youth regarding (digital) connectivity

European Committee of the Regions trainees 2021-2022

Mind the gap
Urban/Rural Divide

#YFactor

INTRODUCTION

[Y]FACTOR 2021 - II: CONNECTING YOU[TH] EU

In September 2021, the CoR welcomed an intake of 24 trainees from across 11 EU Member States. The trainees, who work across the CoR's various units and political groups, came together at the end of October to kickstart the new version of the Y-Factor project. Having debated and discussed several topics, the trainees came to the conclusion that it would be best to carry out a project to investigate the issue of the digital divide between rural and urban areas, particularly focusing on a rural youth perspective, given the importance of the digital transition on the European agenda and the glaring disparities between rural and urban areas in terms of connectivity.

This subject matter was found to be relevant to the political priorities of the CoR 2020-25, namely to bring Europe closer to people, manage societal transformations and encourage the implementation of place-based policies. Additionally, in its Long Term Vision for Rural Areas, the European Commission, in line with its strong commitment to democracy and equality, and mindful of the impact of demographic change, is "committed to leave no one and no place behind and to bring the EU closer to its citizens" and aims to "create a new momentum for rural areas by changing the way they are perceived and by building new opportunities, with a stronger voice for rural communities, which are an integral part of building the future of Europe" (Commission)[1]. This commitment will require huge efforts, and it is vital that rural areas are not left behind while at the same time well-developed areas adopt new technologies and become increasingly interconnected.

Given that 2022 marks the European Year of Youth, the trainees decided that it would be worthwhile for this investigation to be focused solely on the issue of connectivity among rural youth. According to the Commision, the Year of Youth aims to acknowledge that "young people have endured much hardship during the pandemic" and to "honour their efforts to overcome the set-backs they have experienced and which the COVID-19 crisis has caused"[2]. The trainees agreed that the Commision is right to acknowledge the setbacks young people have faced, as the pandemic highlighted the way in which digital connectivity can influence a young person's education and job opportunities. This is particularly the case for young people living in the countryside, who often need to migrate to urban regions.

The approach to this project was twofold. Firstly, a series of interviews were planned with young people, aged between (18-33) across a range of countries, in order to collect their views on a number of issues relating to digitization. These interviews were recorded by trainees, and carried out in a semi structured format with each interviewer given a list of questions to guide, but not limit, the conversation. These interviews gave the trainees valuable insights into the situation of the rural youth, and the importance of digital equality in the EU. Secondly, once the interviews were completed, a social media campaign was launched which aimed to generate awareness among the urban youth of the situation in the countryside. This was launched across a range of social media platforms, such as Instagram, Twitter and Facebook, showcasing highlights from the interviews. Finally, a report was drafted compiling an account of the project and outlining its key findings.

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[1] Communication report on the long-term vision for the EU's rural areas (COM(2021) 345 final)

[2] EU to designate 2022 as the European Year of Youth - Consilium (europa.eu)

SPOTLIGHT ON THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Data to keep in mind:

➔ **Almost 87%** of rural homes in the EU have a fixed broadband subscription[3];

➔ **40%** of Europeans living in rural areas still do not have access to a fast broadband connection[4];

➔ **Significant gap** between rural and national penetration rates of the fixed broadband, even though it decreased from 11% in 2010 to 7% in 2018[5];

➔ **The crucial role** local and regional actors have to play.

The choice of theme for this Y-Factor project came from the observation that all countries of the EU still have a significant urban-rural digital divide. This is due to the higher costs and risks implied by network development in less densely populated areas. This divide contributes to various inequalities between rural and urban areas. For example, as we can see from the graph presented in figure 1 below, the amount of rural inhabitants having basic digital skills is on average 14% lower than those living in urban areas[6].
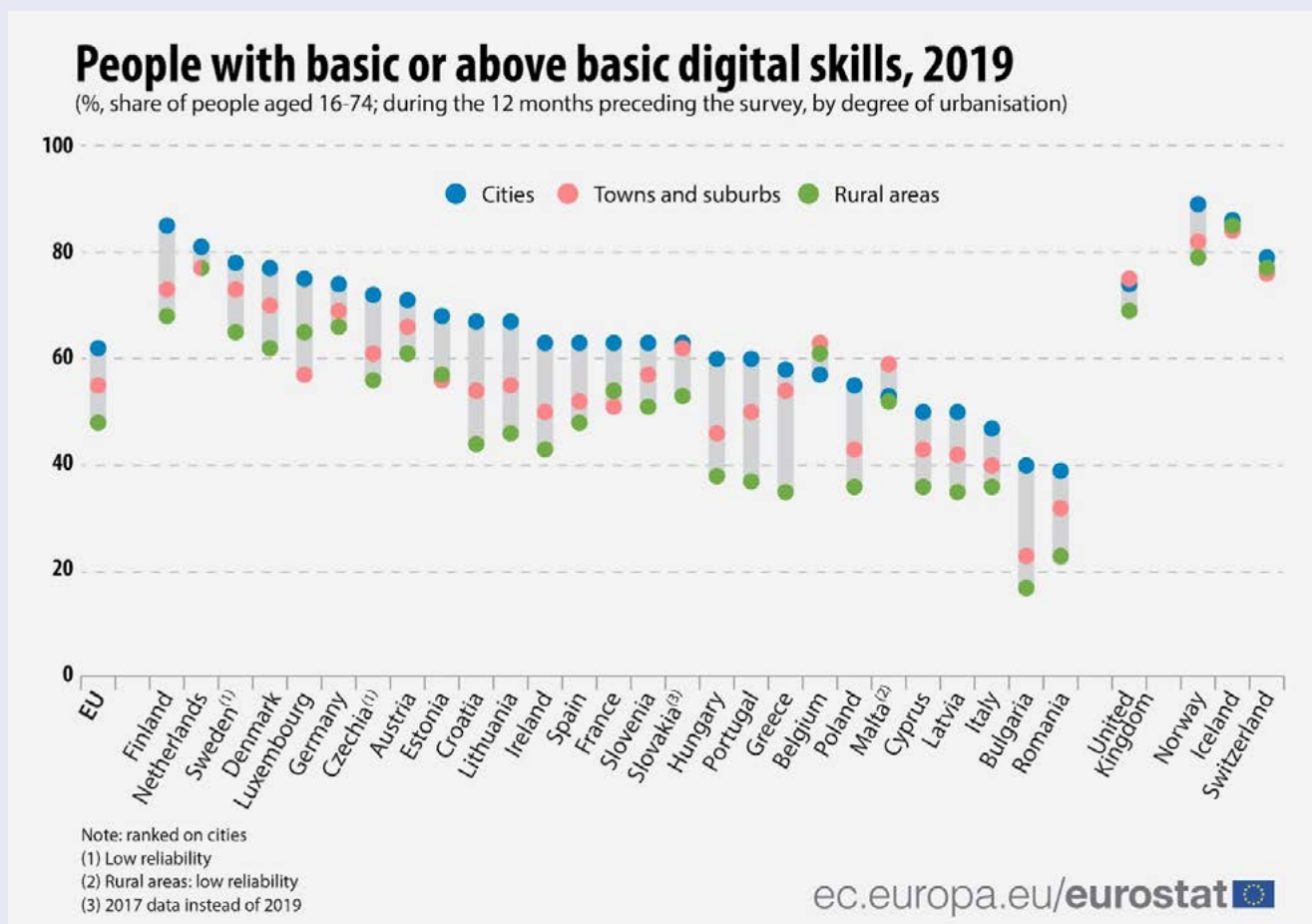

Figure 1.

³ File:Internet access in households by degree of urbanisation, 2021 (% of all households).png - Statistics Explained (europa.eu)

⁴ (n.d.). 2020, https://www.digitaleurope.org/resources/bridging-the-urban-rural-digital-divide/ . Retrieved February 13, 2022,

⁵ Caradaica, M. (2020). Digital Divide in the European Union. *Proceedings of the 7th ACADEMOS Conference 2020*, 102.

⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/long-term-vision-rural-areas/eu-rural-areas-numbers_en

This explains why, alongside the Green Deal, the Digital transition is a priority of the EU and European Commission. DigitalEurope, in its Digital Investment Plan for Europe expects 70% of EU households to have a broadband connection of a minimum of 100 Mbps by 2025 and an additional 20% of SMEs to implement cybersecurity strategies by the same year.

It is also a concern of the European Committee of the Regions as local and regional authorities have a key role to play in bridging the gap. Cities and regions offer essential services to citizens, and in order to do so, access to internet is often needed. Moreover, when it comes to the digitisation of SMEs in rural areas, they are the actors best placed to offer support and funding.

Finally, the Covid-19 Pandemic, by forcing people to work from home, only reinforced the need to tackle the digital divide and ensure better Internet access for all Europeans.

SPOTLIGHT ON RURAL AREAS

Data to keep in mind:

➜ **30,6%** of EU's population live in rural areas[7];

➜ **83%** of the total EU area were rural areas in 2018[8];

➜ Those areas have the **lowest share** of EU's population in age groups below 50 years old[9].

Definition

As a first step, it was important to have a clear definition of urban and rural areas in Europe. For the purposes of this study, an urban-rural typology of regions in Europe was applied using a three-step approach to classify the NUTS level 3 regions, based on the population density of each region. In other words, the NUTS urban-rural typology was used to determine if a region is rural, intermediate or urban.

NUTS 3 regions are classified as follows, on the basis of the share of their population in rural areas:

• 'Predominantly rural' if the share of the population living in rural areas is higher than 50

For our project, we chose to adopt a broad definition of a 'rural area' by including all areas outside urban clusters. For reference, 'urban clusters' are clusters of contiguous grid cells of 1 km² with a density of at least 300 inhabitants per km² and a minimum population of 5 000[10].

• 'Intermediate' if the share of the population living in rural areas is between 20 and 50

• 'Predominantly urban' if the share of the population living in rural areas is below 20

fined according to the size of the urban centres in the region. Thus, a predominantly rural region which contains an urban centre of less than 200 000 inhabitants making up at least 25% of the regional population becomes predominantly rural.[11] Then, as we will see later, the example of Tournai falls under this case.

Since our project goal was to touch upon the realities of the urban-rural (digital) divide, we decided that it could be interesting to also approach young people in a small city, which belongs to an area categorised under the NUTS level 3. This was allowed because under the NUTS3 typology definition, a rural area is also de-

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[7] https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/long-term-vision-rural-areas/eu-rural-areas-numbers_en.
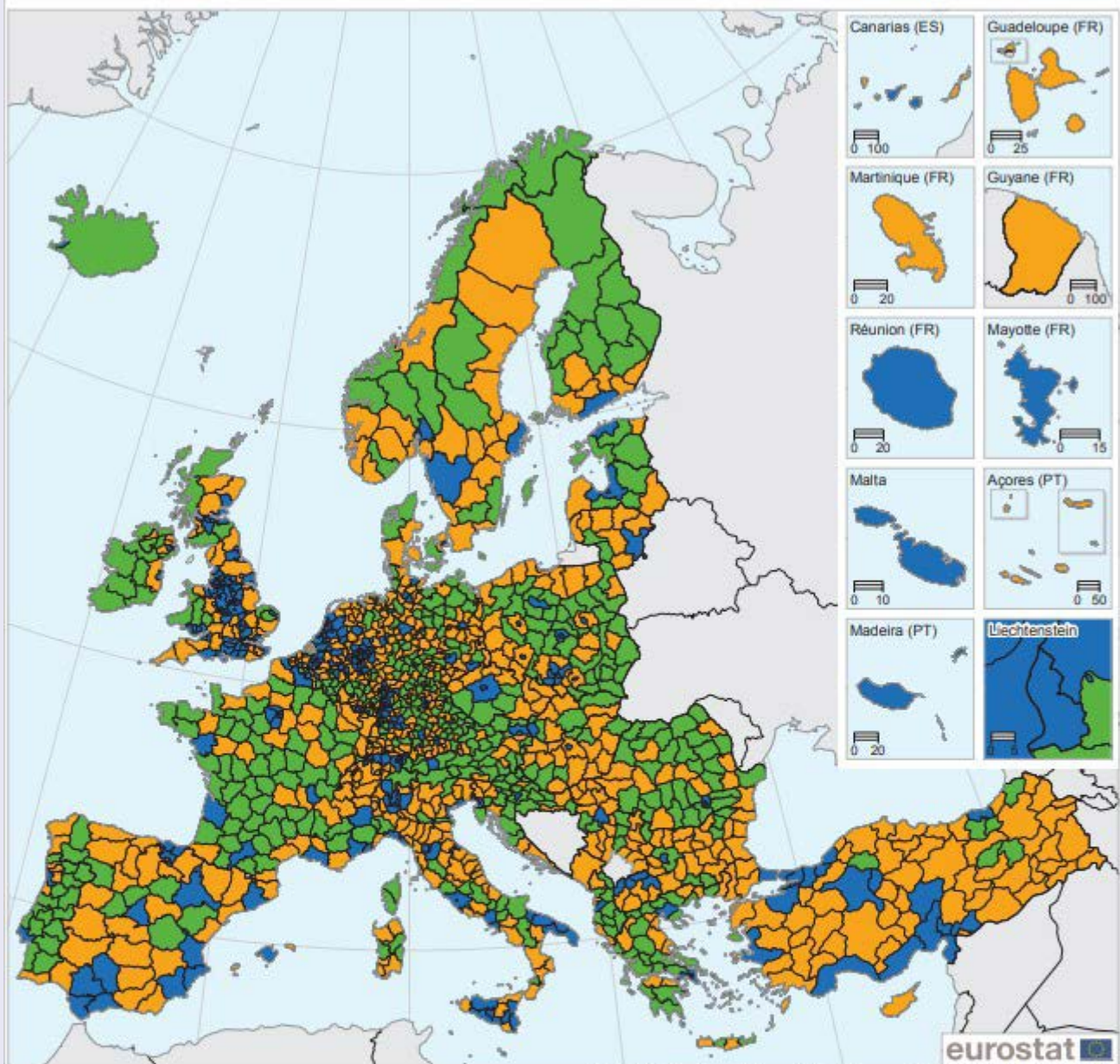
[8] *Ibid.*

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/rural-development/methodology .

[11] *Ibid.*

Figure 2.
Division of the European regions into urban, intermediate and rural regions.

Examples of challenges faced by rural areas

Lack of Connectivity

Lack of connectivity between rural and urban areas is one of the biggest challenges rural populations need to face. Due to this, rural areas are affected by numerous challenges, such as depopulation, ageing of the population and limited access to some basic services. Some of the immediate consequences are: fewer job opportunities (especially for intermediate and highly-skilled employees) and higher unemployment rates, increased levels of poverty and social exclusion, and

in many cases, increasing levels of euroscepticism[12]. To demonstrate the effect that lack of connectivity and the ensuing challenges have on youth, we note that according to the Eurostat Regional Yearbook for 2021, it was observed that students tend to leave school earlier in rural regions compared to their peers living in urban areas. Among other reasons, this pattern may be a reflection of lower life chances and weak local labour markets in rural areas.

Higher risk of poverty and social exclusion

Rural populations seem to face higher risk of poverty and social exclusion. Indeed, the figures regarding the share of population at risk compared to the total amount of population in 2019 are higher in rural areas (22.4%), compared to cities (21.3%) and towns and suburbs (19.2%)[13]. This can be easily understood since according to official EU statistics Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita in rural regions appears to be consistently lower than the EU average. In addition,

rural and sparsely-populated regions record some of the lowest regional employment rates in the EU. Even though since 2012, the employment rate in rural areas for people aged 20-64 has increased across the EU from 68% to 73%, the total number of employed persons has not increased, suggesting that the increase in the employment rate is due to the decrease of the rural active population[14].

Rural areas = Diverse areas full of opportunities

Europe's rural areas are very diverse. Variations in natural and climatic conditions, geographic features, historic and cultural developments, demographic and social changes, national and regional specificities and economic prosperity mean that no two rural areas are alike. This diversity calls for locally designed responses and solutions corresponding to each territory's specific needs and possibilities. It also means that territorial development strategies should address rural areas according to their individual characteristics and in relation to their environment.

These aspirations were also underlined in the CoR's 2021 opinion, adopted on the 26th January 2022, on the subject of "A long-term vision for the EU's rural areas" (rapporteur Juan Manuel Moreno Bonilla, ES/EPP). The recent opinion is one of a series of many documents, following the Commission's communication on

the long-term vision for the EU's rural areas up to 2040. In this long-term vision the rural areas are set to play an essential role in economic recovery, sustainable development and - following the prevalence of new technologies, contribute to making Europe's Digital Decade a reality.

The CoR immediately welcomed the vision in the relevant opinion adopted on the 10th December 2020 on the subject of an "EU strategy for rural revival" (rapporteur Enda Stenson, IE/EA), emphasising the importance of increasing the role of local and regional authorities in the development and governance of rural policies, due to their capacity to represent rural areas and to identify their very own specific needs.

Of course, these needs have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has once more highlighted many of the rural vulnerabilities, notably in terms

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[12] Dijkstra, L., Poelman, H., Rodriguez-Pose, A.. The geography of EU discontent. Working Papers DG for Regional and Urban Policies, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2018. https://doi.org/10.2776/61870 .
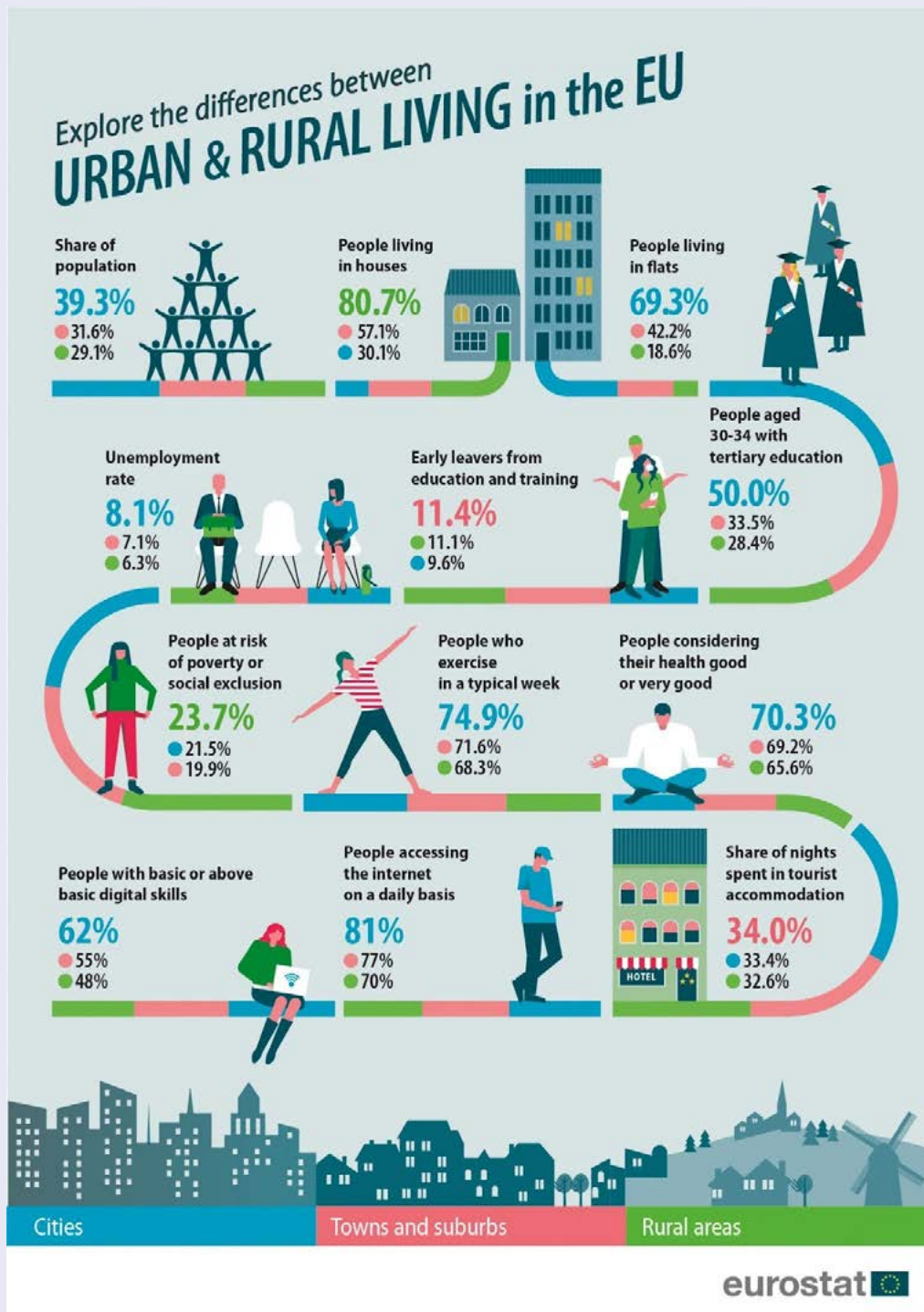
[13] File:Share of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion, by degree of urbanisation, 2015 (%) RYB17.png - Statistics Explained (europa.eu).

[14] Communication report on the long-term vision for the EU's rural areas (COM(2021) 345 final).

of quality and delivery of health services, education, digital capacity, resilience of distribution chains, and innovation skills. Mobile and remote education and training, working during the current pandemic shows the potential of what could be achieved in rural areas if the services were available.

To effectively address the issues, it is indispensable to invest in the opportunities of the EU's digital transition to improve rural quality of life, achieve balanced ter- ritorial development and stimulate economic growth in rural areas. Teleworking and digitalisation, digital education and training should be encouraged. A better digital connectivity could indeed help rural areas not feel excluded until transport infrastructures are further developed. Finally, the development of digital capacities in rural areas will be crucial to improve their attractiveness to younger generations, and stem the increasing levels of urban migration which pose an existential threat to rural communities.

Explore the differences between
URBAN & RURAL LIVING in the EU

Share of population
39.3%
● 31.6%
● 29.1%

People living in houses
80.7%
● 57.1%
● 30.1%

People living in flats
69.3%
● 42.2%
● 18.6%

People aged 30-34 with tertiary education
50.0%
● 33.5%
● 28.4%

Unemployment rate
8.1%
● 7.1%
● 6.3%

Early leavers from education and training
11.4%
● 11.1%
● 9.6%

People at risk of poverty or social exclusion
23.7%
● 21.5%
● 19.9%

People who exercise in a typical week
74.9%
● 71.6%
● 68.3%

People considering their health good or very good
70.3%
● 69.2%
● 65.6%

People with basic or above basic digital skills
62%
● 55%
● 48%

People accessing the internet on a daily basis
81%
● 77%
● 70%

Share of nights spent in tourist accommodation
34.0%
● 33.4%
● 32.6%

Cities | Towns and suburbs | Rural areas

eurostat

SPOTLIGHT ON THE YOUTH

Data to keep in mind:

➜ "The **Youth**" is the category of people aged between **15 and 29 years old**;

Between 2014 and 2019, young people in the EU28:

➜ Approximately **18%** (**15 to 16 million**) lived in rural areas;

➜ About **36%** (**30 to 32 million**) lived in intermediate regions;

➜ **45% to 46%** (**about 40 million**) lived in urban settings;

➜ The population **increased by 1.1% in urban areas** and **decreased by 0.7% in rural areas**.[15]

This edition of the Y-Factor Project has focused specifically on Youth, as the year 2022 was designated as the European Year of Youth. This is integrated within the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027, which considers that young people have a great potential and should actively contribute to EU policy-making through dialogue and participation. By the end of 2020, the CoR also adopted a relevant opinion, highlighting the needs of the youth, as they should be encouraged to keep inhabiting the rural areas. In general, the Croatian presidency of the European Council during the first semester of 2020 drew the attention specifically on rural youth.

Young people living in rural areas long for improved quality of education, access to infrastructure and transport, as well as access to quality employment. Such improvements would make rural areas more attractive to current and new young habitants, as more opportunities would be available. It is undeniable that young people in rural areas suffer the consequences of lack of infrastructure and opportunities. As far as employment is concerned, the problem of the lack of access to quality jobs is frequently raised.

It is true that due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the existing challenges were exacerbated for the younger generations. Hence, the need to access digital resources became even more vital for youngsters of the rural areas, who constantly miss educational and job opportunities due to lack of accessibility.

Therefore, education and training should be offered locally, so that the necessity for migration in the urban areas for studying would be reduced. The same would also apply to working opportunities. A few ideas which would be helpful to that cause are the enhancement of (digital) connectivity, the improvement of the accessibility to information on employment, as well as the promotion of various EU programmes, such as European Solidarity Corps and Erasmus +.

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[15] Barta, O. (2020). *Rural Youth Indicators: Open Source Indicators for Evaluating Youth Goals Implementation.*
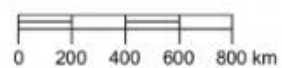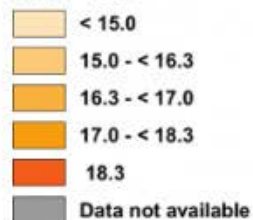
Young people aged 15-29 years in the population, by NUTS 2 regions, 2019
(% share of total population)
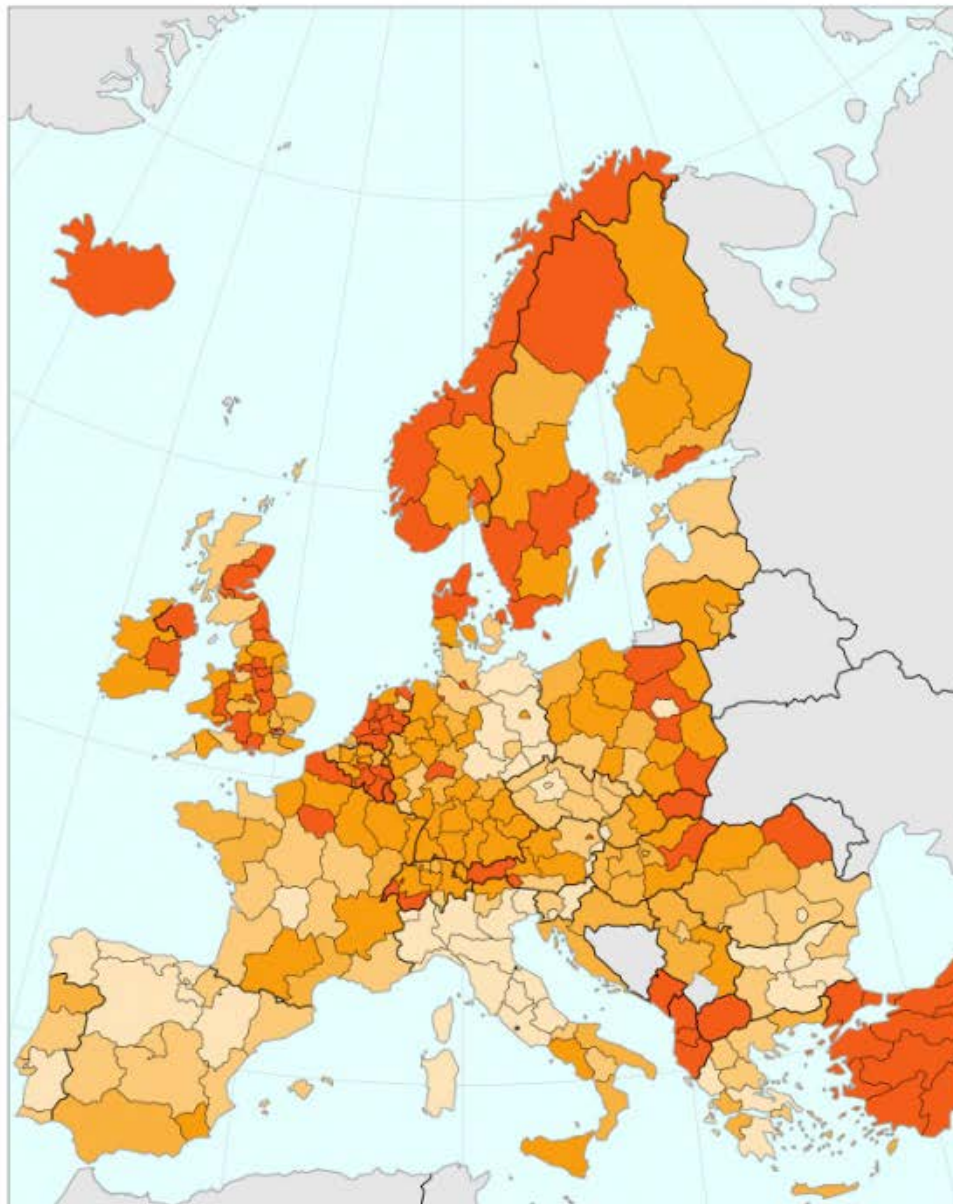
(% share of total population)

Administrative boundaries: © EuroG
Cartography: Eurostat – IMAGE, 09

EU-27 = 16.6

- < 15.0
- 15.0 - < 16.3
- 16.3 - < 17.0
- 17.0 - < 18.3
- 18.3
- Data not available

0 200 400 600 800 km

Note: as of 1 January. EU-27 and France: provisional. Ireland: estimates. Northern Ireland (UKN0): 2018.
Source: Eurostat (online data code: demo_r_pjangroup)

All the previous observations influenced the approach we chose for our project.

OUR PROJECT

Our project aims to give a voice to young people living in rural areas across Europe, considering the difficulties caused by COVID-19 and the recurrent measures of lockdown. Given that the current state of evolution of the pandemic was a factor for making decisions for us, it was decided that in order to limit travel to as little as possible, that we would conduct interviews in our home country during the Christmas holidays. This way, we were able to collect testimonies in different places in a more sustainable way. We decided that we would use public transportation whenever possible, particularly trains as a reference to 2021 European Year of the Rail. However, as some rural areas are still lacking in public transport infrastructure, it was still necessary to travel by car at times.

A pool of questions was created for interviewers, in order to guide the semi structured interview while allowing them to be able to adapt the discussion to the situation. A few personal questions were asked at the beginning to establish a profile and then several items were discussed: digital divide and connectivity; education and digital skills; employment; information on health; public administrations services; culture, leisure and sports; living in a rural area, the EU, its youth policies and finally the work of the CoR.

In the following part you can find the essence of what was captured during those interviews.

THE INTERVIEWS

In order to raise awareness on the digital divide, we, the 2021-2022 trainees of the CoR, decided to capture and share testimonies of young people living in rural areas about their daily experience with connectivity.

We had the opportunity to interview people in rural areas as well as small urban areas.

RURAL AREAS

FRANCE

The area's ID:	
Name	**Eyjeaux**
Country	**FRANCE**
Region	**Nouvelle-Aquitaine**
NUTS3	**FRI22**
Size	**24 km²**
Inhabitants	**1.319**

Adrian, 24 years old, young professional looking for a job in biology An overview of additional practices

"I believe that the European Union needs to ensure that funding for connectivity reaches rural areas and is not just monopolised by urban areas."

Eyjeaux can be defined as a rural area, it is also part of an intercommunal structure of around 210.000 inhabitants, called Limoges Metropol. In Eyjeaux, all households have access to a broadband connection and most of them have an optic fibre connection. The interviewee, though, does not have access to the latter. During the interview, he pointed out the difficulty of using the 4G network with most phone operators in his area . Despite all that, he does not feel like he missed out on any opportunities during his studies or during his job search. For him, his rural area does not suffer from a lack of digital connectivity but more from a lack of physical connectivity - public transports - which is surprising as his village is part of an urban structure.

Due to the absence of job opportunities in his field (biology) he would need to work in an urban centre but he is ready to commute in order to live in a rural area where he considers the quality of life to be better (tranquillity, air quality, easy access to nature for outdoor activities such as hiking and cycling).

GREECE

The area's ID:	
Name	**Platamonas**
Country	**GREECE**
Region	**Central Macedonia**
NUTS3	**EL525**
Size	**8,42 km²**
Inhabitants	**2.013**

Marialena, 24 years old, student of a postgraduate degree on Governance of Sustainability

"I was personally lucky enough to be able to participate in European Union programs such as Erasmus+, youth exchanges and many more so I was already very informed about these programs. Unfortunately, I know that my peers in my area do not feel as close to the EU as I do. They don't really know what the EU does and they don't share its mentality as it seems to them like something foreign and faraway that only influences financial and economic aspects of our society."

The interview took place in Platamonas which is a coastal village of 2.013 inhabitants located at the foot of mount Olympus. It is 48 km away from the city of Larisa, where the interviewee is originally from.

Even though Larisa is a city and is located at the centre of mainland Greece, it is the hub of agriculture of Greece due to the plain of Thessaly. Even though the city itself is very well linked transport-wise with the rest of Greece, the many villages around the region, such as Platamonas, do not have good transport connections to the main city or to other villages.

According to the interviewee, **the connectivity problem in Larisa and Platamonas was not due to digital or transport-related issues, but due to lack of opportunities for young people**.

POLAND

The area's ID:	
Name	**Niezdów**
Country	**POLAND**
Region	**Krakowski**
NUTS3	**PL214**
Size	**1.44 km²**
Inhabitants	**200**

Maciej, 19 years old, first-year student in Physical Education in Cracow and part-time tennis instructor

"As far as my ambitions and goals are concerned, I think it is possible to achieve them without moving

to a bigger city, but it is much more difficult. In a larger city, there's a lot more people who might be interested in, for example, the services you offer, so it's easier to find new customers and set up your business, for instance, than here locally. And of course, there are also more job offers, more opportunities to earn money and for personal development."

Niezdów is a village of about 200 inhabitants in the Lesser Poland Voivodeship. Being home to an indus-trial zone of 14 factories and about 1700 employees has brought significant improvements to Niezdów's digital infrastructure in the recent decade. Most of its households are now covered by mobile networks and have access to fibre-optic internet connections, which quality-wise do not differ from ones in urban areas.

Still, as highlighted by the interviewee, **metropolitan centres offer more opportunities for young people's personal and career development**; therefore, relocation to larger cities is often a natural choice for them.

PORTUGAL

The area's ID:	
Name	**Santo Isidoro e Livração**
Country	**PORTUGAL**
Region	**Tamega e Sousa**
NUTS3	**PT11C**
Size	**4,67 km²**
Inhabitants	**2.083**

Renato, 33 years old, working at a tourism company

"I have believed in the European Union project since forever. Yet, I don't believe that the European Union is very close to us. So... I think there's a lot of work to be done, especially in complement with our national and regional services in Portugal, in order to create the opportunities and also provide information to reach everyone, something that hasn't happened yet."

Santo Isidoro e Livração is a civil parish in the municipality of Marco de Canaveses (Portugal), with an area of 4.67 km2, and 2083 inhabitants.

There, fibre optic internet is not yet as widely available. And, although most of the households have access to a broadband connection, its performance is limited and the speed is slow.

This issue, alongside the lack of job opportunities and the lack of culture services and venues, was highlighted during the discussion. For the interviewee, the **long-standing persistence of these major issues commonly push young people living in Livração to seek better employment, social and cultural opportunities (and the benefits these bring) elsewhere**.

SPAIN

The area's ID:	
Name	**Barcones**
Country	**SPAIN**
Region	**Castilla y León**
NUTS3	**ES417**
Size	**55 km²**
Inhabitants	**42**

Source: Inicio - Vive Tu pueblo

María, 22 years old, student at university

"When you do not have an internet connection, you are disconnected from the world, like the social networks, Internet, and so on. There is no pollution either, and it is a much calmer environment than in the city."

Barcones is a municipality located in the province of Soria, Castile and León, Spain. It currently has a population of no more than 20 inhabitants.

As María, the interviewee pointed out, they only have Wi-Fi in the bar of the village, and as for the coverage, it can only be found in a specific point of the village, so it can be said that they are completely disconnected.

Young people need to go to study in other cities in Spain and, of course, **teleworking is not an option in Barcones, that is facing a youth depopulation**.

SMALL URBAN AREA

BELGIUM

The area's ID:	
Name	**Tournai**
Country	**BELGIUM**
Region	**Hainaut**
NUTS3	**BE327**
Size	**213,8 km²**
Inhabitants	**69 554**

Anh, 20 years old, student at a university in another town

"For those who live in the countryside and who have a bad network the school makes sure to provide them with the necessary equipment and a good network, so they can come to campus to work instead of staying at home."

Tournai is one of the oldest cities in Belgium and has played an important role throughout the history of the region. Its strategic location, close to the French border, makes it interesting for the solicitation of a number of EU funds for cross border cooperation, regional development and cultural heritage conservation due to its mediaeval architecture and its cathedral, which is the only cathedral in Belgium to be listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Three short interviews were conducted in the streets of Tournai. Since 2019, Tournai has been actively investing in its internet infrastructure resources, as it was the city that was selected in the 2nd position at the WIFI4EU call for projects, receiving €15,000. This money has allowed the city to increase the number of Wi-Fi access points in its public spaces. The WiFi4EU initiative comes from the European Commission and aims to promote free access to Wi-Fi connectivity for citizens in public spaces in municipalities across Europe.[16]

All of the interviewees admitted that either them, or other young people they know, are facing issues connecting online, but their approach to the problem was different. For example, **for one of the interviewees, students from rural areas can cover their needs for studying and accessing online material by using the internet connection provided by their university**. On the other hand, even though this seems to be the case of the other interviewee, it appears that this approach is not enough due to the fact that the university Wi-Fi was down at the moment of the interview and that her lifestyle demands that she has a connection outside the campus. During the interview, this interviewee shared that **she only uses 4G and she divides the MB available to her between two devices, as she cannot afford to have a broadband connection through Wi-Fi**. For the third interviewee, **Wi-Fi connection should be provided for all citizens**, as it is absolutely necessary for everyone today and despite that, **there are poor people that cannot really afford the cost of neither the broadband connection at home nor the 4G**. He points out that the need to be connected at school and even at public places is common among young people, and for him, **good Wi-Fi connection is necessary even in public places since he likes to shoot and share outdoor videos of his sport and passion, freestyle scootering**.

Despite the issues mentioned, all three of the interviewees feel like they can manage to continue their activities and develop personally and professionally without leaving the area they live in now.

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[16] Tournai lauréat de WIFI4EU - Actualités - TOURNAI.be .

COMMUNICATION

The initial goal was to raise awareness regarding the issues faced by young people living in rural areas. Our purpose was to enhance their voice so that their daily difficulties might be heard by and shared with others.

The various interviews which were taken for the current project were utilised for a communication campaign published on several social media platforms.

THE STRATEGY

First, a visual identity was established with the help of the communications unit of the CoR.

To reach a maximum number of people, we decided to be active on four different social media platforms:

• Instagram was chosen as it is used by younger generations and contains mostly photos and very short videos;

• Twitter, was chosen as it is used by a broad number of young people, while it is also used by EU-enthusiasts which could contribute to making our voice heard, as well as politicians and organisations for various reasons, such as social issues;

• Facebook was considered to be a useful platform as it targets different age categories at once and combines different forms of communication (photos, videos, texts etc.);

A communication plan was established in order to publish informative and innovative content of different kinds (e.g. images, infographics, videos), and on different topics:

➜ Informative content on the different priorities of the CoR linked to our project: European Year of Youth, the Digital Divide, The Long-term Vision for rural areas etc.;

➜ Informative content about our project and introduction of our teams;

➜ Innovative content stemming from the interviews.

Our first posts on Facebook and Instagram, as well as our first "tweet" were published to announce the launch of the project on the 7th of January 2022. The videos from the interviews started to be published on the 10th of February and are scheduled to be completed on the 28th of February 2022.

THE RESULT

Instagram has been our main platform. We were able to publish several posts in one month and a half. Among those, there were informational posts about the urban-rural divide, the European Commission long-term vision on Rural Areas, the CoR's opinion on EU's rural areas adopted in the plenary session on 26-27 January, as well as Rural Areas in the EU, the European Youth Year and the impact of Covid on Rural Areas. We have also published on Facebook and Twitter, we used the latter for following the Plenary Session in January tweet about the contribution of our representative.

Ο χρήστης **YFactor presents** βρίσκεται στην τοποθεσία **European Committee of the Regions.**

25 Ιανουαρίου στις 4:16 μ.μ. · Περιοχή των Βρυξελλών, Βέλγιο · 🌐

The long-term vision for rural areas is an #European #Commission initiative for 2040. The latter, through the Rural Pact, which is a framework for #cooperation among authorities and stakeholders at the European, #national, #regional and #local level, aims to contribute to achieving the shared #goals: stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas.

Rural areas should be #home to #empowered and vibrant local communities. #Public #transport and connections should be ... Δείτε περισσότερα

What you should know about the

EUROPEAN COMMISSION LONG-TERM VISION FOR RURAL AREAS

The Long-term Vision is to develop a common European vision for 2040.

It aims to contribute to achieving shared goals:

Stronger, Connected, Resilient and Prosperous Rural Areas

👍 Afroditi Deilogkou και 2 ακόμη

YFactor @YFactor · 27/01/22

"This edition of the #YFactor #project, led by the trainees of the @EU_CoR, explores the #urban-rural #divide and takes the occasion of the #EUYearOfYouth to focus on #young #people's #perspectives on the issue." #CoRplenary

Connecting You th EU

YFactor and European Committee of the

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What about Rural Areas in the EU?
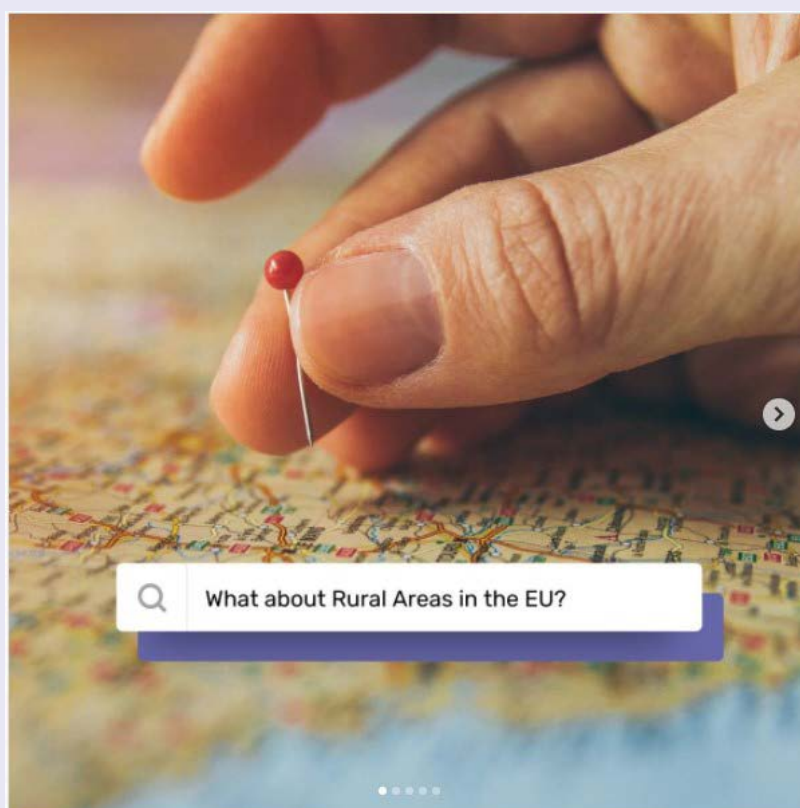
yfactorproject · Ακολουθήστε
European Committee of the Regions

yfactorproject Europe can be divided in #urban, #intermediate and #rural #regions (see the map, respectively in blue, orange and green). Specifically, 30.6% of the EU population lives in #RuralAreas, which account for 83% of the total EU area.

As it can be seen from the map, countries such as France, Portugal, Romania, Poland, Greece and Finland show a predominance of rural regions on their territories. And in terms of population, Ireland, Croatia, Austria, Poland, Romania, Slovenia and Slovakia have the highest shares of population living in rural areas, with percentages well above the EU average.
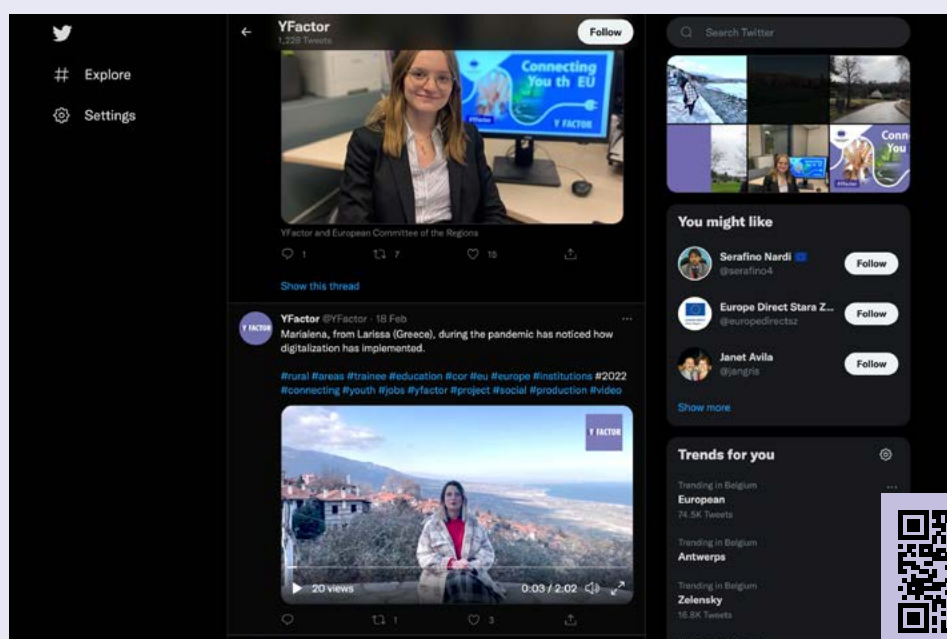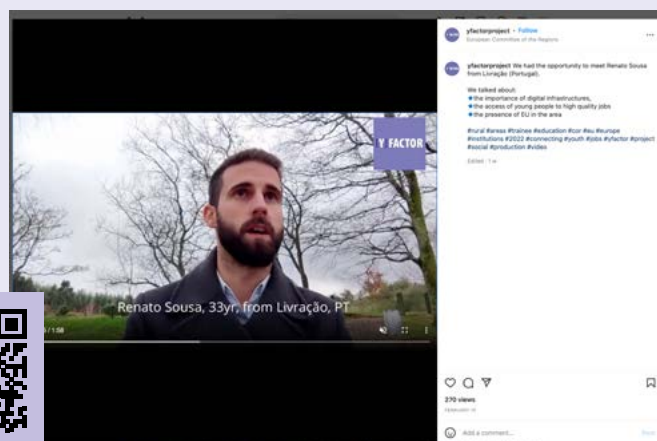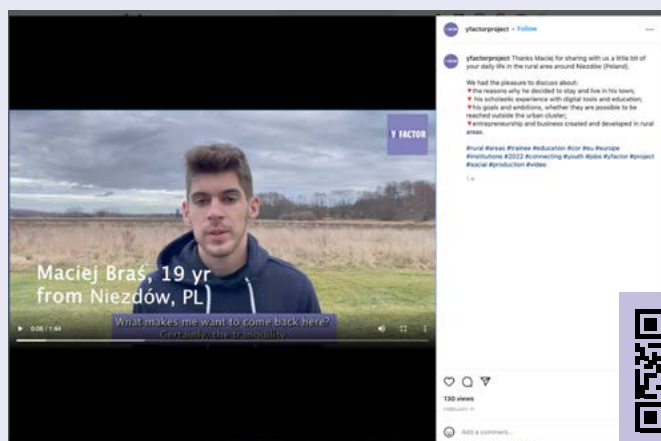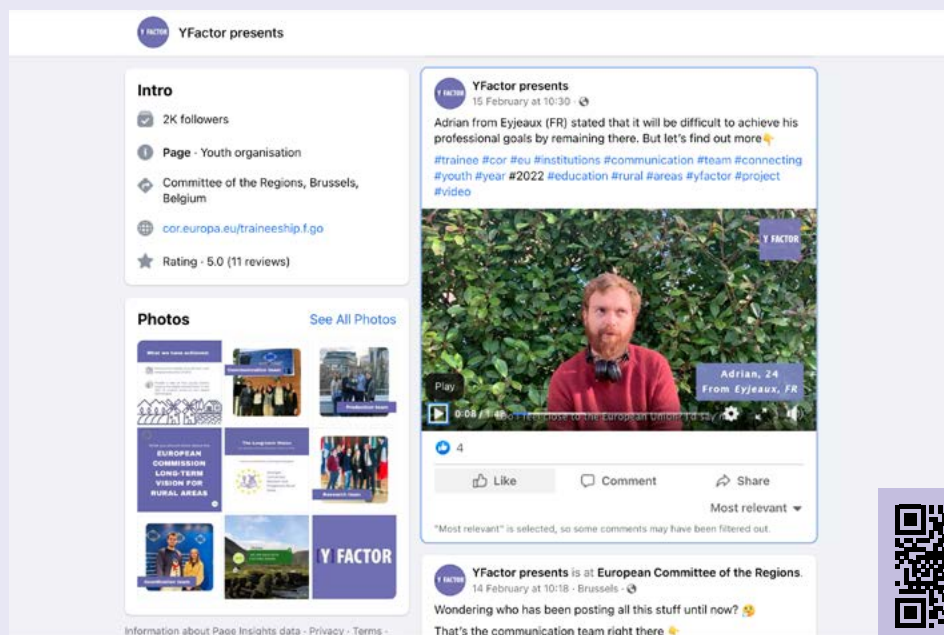
♡ ♡ ➤   🔖

Αρέσει σε 16

1 ΦΕΒΡΟΥΑΡΙΟΥ

☺ Προσθέστε ένα σχόλιο...   Δημοσίευση

At the moment we have started creating posts and sharing snapshots of the video interviews we conducted on all the above social media. You can check all the relevant information through the links provided in the table below.

Y-FACTOR CONNECTING YOU[TH] EU SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

PROJECT RESULTS

KEY FINDINGS

Our project was inspired not only by the European Year of Youth but also by the CoR's vision on the Rural Agenda as it was expressed in the relevant opinion adopted on the 18th of September 2020. As stated in the opinion "the Rural Agenda should ensure that mutually beneficial rural-urban linkages are integrated into all EU policies". We supported this idea by expressing our genuine concern about our peers, other young people living in rural areas, and their accessibility to digital services and Internet connection. We wanted to provide a space for rural youth to communicate their messages about their environment and their conditions to reach other young people living in urban areas and why not, policy makers.

Doing interviews with young people living in rural areas during our winter break, we discovered that young people from rural areas in many European countries are directly impacted by the digital divide. It is true that in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, issues of digital connectivity and digitalisation rapidly emerged, affecting citizens in general and youth in particular. The transition towards teleworking and online or hybrid education methods has been difficult for employers as well as employees, teachers as well as students. And of course it is evident that digital transition is not at the same level everywhere. As the world is evolving to become more and more digital, young people from rural areas sometimes feel excluded. Therefore, it is important to note here that for young people, development is not only about construction and infrastructure projects or plans for better accessibility, but also providing to them the tools to manage the digital transition in the easiest and most sustainable way.

Pursuing strategies to improve digital connectivity for the rural areas is crucial for the development of a job market that will offer opportunities to youth in a more equitable way. But before that, it is important to first recognise that connectivity is absolutely needed for young people to be able to live and build a future in rural areas. In our interviews, some of the young people said that they are hopeful about their future in rural areas, provided that they have access to the necessary technological equipment, specialised training and affordable high speed internet connection that will allow them to remain relevant to the rapidly changing labour market or even to create their own entrepreneurial projects.

From our research and interviews we can confirm that the digital gap is a multi-factor issue that can be addressed with strategies and policies that emphasise equity. First of all, we think that we have arrived in a historical period that justifies the recognition of internet access as a public right at EU level and the request for a gradual transition towards a time where a broadband connection will be available for every citizen. To reach this goal, the EU should make sure that rural areas are in a favourable position to attract relevant investments to accelerate the development of high-speed Internet while also protecting the advantages those areas have.

For young people with no access to Wi-Fi at home, we noticed a tendency to rely exclusively from the Internet connection provided by their educational institutions yet, as we saw, these Wi-Fi services often fail them. From that we can assume that it would be relevant at this point to design policies to ensure that all educational institutions have quality Wi-Fi. With our project, we gave light to the realities of young people with lower socio-economic backgrounds that still struggle to connect online, the same way as their peers. Thus, making sure that connecting to the Internet, be it through Wi-Fi or 4G, is affordable or free for

these young people could contribute to a future for them facing less poverty and social exclusion.

Finally, we don't forget that our conclusions are not relevant for the entire EU rural youth population, but they did show the realities of a diverse group of young people from different EU countries. Overall, we believe that fair and balanced development of 4G and 5G networks across Europe can be not only beneficial for the depopulation but also allow marginalised groups and minorities to have better life and opportunities. Communities can benefit from better social cohesion and they won't feel left behind by society and policy-makers.

THE Y-FACTOR AS EXPERIENCE

The Y-Factor is a project conducted twice per year by the trainees of the European Committee of the Regions (CoR). The objective of the project is for the trainees to take charge of an investigation into an issue young people face within the European Union (EU). For the trainees, this involves choosing a topic, conducting research and finally compiling the results and delivering them across a range of media. The project is unique in its kind across the EU institutions and gives the trainees the opportunity to develop their professional skills. Once completed, the outcomes of the Y-Factor project are usually presented during a CoR plenary session. Previous Y-Factor project editions have covered a diverse range of topics such as the European Year of Rail and Waste Management. The current project was presented during the 148th Plenary Session on the 27th January 2022.

As the Y-factor is a trainee-led project it was our responsibility to manage the project from beginning to end, with the support of the existing CoR project infrastructure. To achieve an efficient project management and an optimal task division, we decided to create five teams: one for the overall coordination of the project and budget matters, one for background research, one for production and editing of the video content from the interviews, one for communications and outreach and last but not least one for drafting the final report. Some of us also took up the role of interviewers and collected testimonies from young people in rural areas.

Challenges and resilience

All along the project we encountered several challenges starting with the late launch of the Y-Factor forcing us to build a project in a shorter period than 5 months. Therefore, we planned accordingly, also taking into account the obstacles caused by the pandemic. For example, to make the experience of working together remotely easier, we chose to organise hybrid meetings and work in smaller groups with regular updates in plenary sessions. Finally, this project was also an opportunity to discover the internal processes of a complex organisational environment but we successfully managed to navigate through all the challenges that created delays but also forced us to be resourceful and more creative for the cases where our initial approach could not bring in the expected results in the end. To give an example, we, unfortunately, put some of our efforts on creating the name and logos for the project, as we witnessed the previous trainees creating these for their respective project editions. In our case though, we were informed that due to an internal CoR policy, it is forbidden to create new logos, so CoR's graphic designers kindly offered to create a visual identity for the current edition of the project.

Finally, as challenging as it might have been each one of us kept their learning points from investing our energy and efforts putting the Y-Factor project in motion and together with our impressions.

THE [Y] FACTOR

seen by the Trainees

COORDINATION TEAM

"Having always lived in large cities, this project allowed me to realize the extent of the divide between urban and rural European regions. Also, as a member of the coordination team, I was able to realize the actual work and skills required to coordinate different teams."
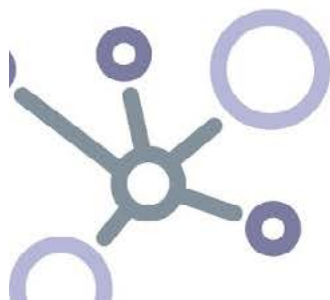
ANNABELLE DURAMÉ

FRANCE

FILIP FULA

POLAND

"I have convinced myself that agility and a dedicated team are essential for a project to succeed within a highly complex and often challenging environment such as the CoR. Luckily, we had both, and the experience was invaluable."

THE [Y] FACTOR

seen by the Trainees

RESEARCH TEAM

"The ideal opportunity to gain more hands-on insight into a current European issue that affects young people"

MAURITS PAAUWE

NETHERLANDS

"The Y factor was a unique experience of self-management and skills development that served the purpose of raising awareness on such an important issue. "

LEANDRO MONTEIRO

PORTUGAL

"An amazing opportunity to share stories, raise awareness and help the rural youth to make their voices heard. "

RICCARDO GAROFALO

ITALY

THE [Y] FACTOR

seen by the Trainees

RESEARCH TEAM

"The project was an enriching and rewarding experience that has furthered my passion for eroding the pervasive barriers faced by rural communities in undertaking the digital transformation."

KIRSTEN MCNAMEE

IRELAND

"Very interesting to see the various steps needed to realise such a project."

JANA STRIEN

GERMANY

"Superb!"

DUJE HRGA

CROATIA

THE [Y] FACTOR

seen by the Trainees

PRODUCTION TEAM

"I loved watching the interviews and using creativity to edit them, in a way that speaks to people."

ANNA VAN WUIJCKHUIJSE

NETHERLANDS

"This project presented us, the trainees, with the opportunity to bring our ideas to the forefront of the CoR's work and show how new personnel can bring a fresh perspective."

JACK WALSH

IRELAND

"This Y-Factor represents an interesting and very stimulating project, through which we expect to contribute to make the voices and concerns of European youth heard".

FATIMA AZEVEDO LEITAO

PORTUGAL
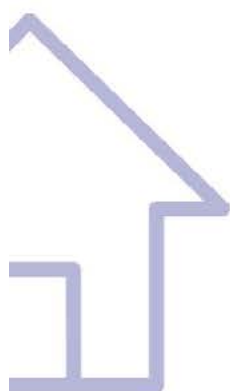
THE [Y] FACTOR

seen by the Trainees

PRODUCTION TEAM

"Growing up in very badly connected area myself, I am very happy that we can share stories about the rural-urban divide to policymakers who might not be aware of these difficulties. Teamwork with all the trainees made this possible!"

DESPOINA TSIMPRIKIDOU

GREECE

"A very interesting and necessary project that deals with an issue that is very important to address and that needs a solution so that all youth can have the opportunity of having a good and bright future".

ANA ZORRILLA

SPAIN

"A perfect opportunity to get an insight into the creative minds of my colleagues and the versatile approaches to different tasks."

ELLA HUBER

AUSTRIA
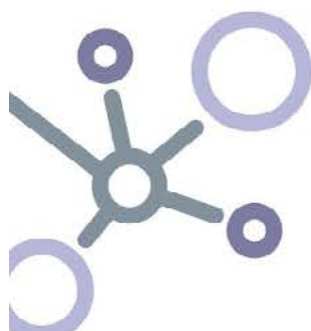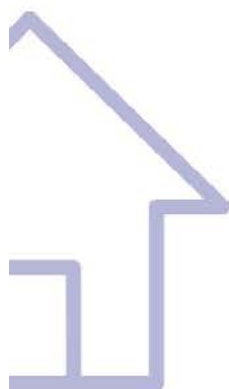
THE [Y] FACTOR

seen by the Trainees

COMMUNICATION TEAM

"Striving for progress while moving beyond my comfort zone. Undoubtedly an enriching opportunity."

LUDOVICA LO SORDO

ITALY

"A nice opportunity to bond with colleagues who have a different background from yours."

EUGENIA LANTERI

ITALY

"A chance to step outside your comfort zone and think outside the box!"

CHANEL MARTINEZ FERNANDEZ

ITALY

THE [Y] FACTOR

seen by the Trainees

COMMUNICATION TEAM

"Since I was born and raised in a city I never realised how many difficulties citizens, students and workers living in rural areas face every day. Since the EU does not want to leave anyone behind, it is vital to address this divide as it can have a positive impact socially, economically, culturally and environmetally."
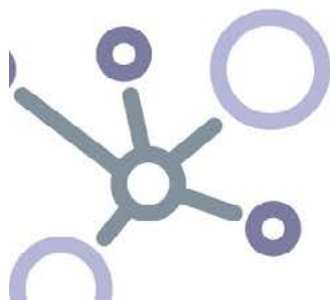
DAVIDE VEARDO
ITALY

"A great project, a challenging environment, and a unique opportunity for trainees to meaningfully impact EU policies on such an important issue."

ANTOINE BLOT
FRANCE

THE [Y] FACTOR

seen by the Trainees

REPORT TEAM

"As my parents live in a rural area, it took hours to upload the videos after conducting the interview. It was another way of experiencing the digital divide. Overall, I think we have learnt a lot from this project."

ANNE-LAURE LIARDOU

FRANCE

DARRAGH DUNCAN

IRELAND

""Working on the Y-factor has been a great learning experience. Coming from a rural background, I know only too well the vital importance of high quality digital connections, for work and study. This project has allowed my to apply the knowledge gained through my work with the European Alliance group to a subject matter with importance for young people across Europe""

"A great project that dovetails perfectly my interest in research and my roots"

JASMINE FAUDONE

ITALY

THE [Y] FACTOR

seen by the Trainees

REPORT TEAM

MARIA AFRODITI DEILOGKOU

GREECE

"The Y-factor inspired me to go meet young people in Wallonia and conduct interviews -in a language that is not my mother tongue, to showcase their realities. This journey allowed me to feel a bit closed to young people living far from me that are facing quite different but also similar conditions to mine. Also, I am happy I managed to handle the administration part of our budget and to write, together with my team, an inspiring report for our project and our experience putting it in motion."

BEATRIZ REYES AGUIRRE

SPAIN

"The Y Factor presents a vision and a new strategy for rural Europe. "

Created in 1994, after the entry into force of the Maastricht Treaty, the European Committee of the Regions is the EU's assembly of 329 regional and local representatives from all 27 Member States, representing over 447million Europeans. Its main objectives are to involve regional and local authorities and the communities they represent in the European Union's decision-making process and to inform them about EU policies. The European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council have to consult the Committee in policy areas affecting regions and cities. It can appeal to the Court of Justice of the European Union as a means of upholding EU law where there are breaches to the subsidiarity principle or failures to respect regional or local authorities.

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