



Overcoming the geography of discontent: New perspectives and innovative solutions

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The EU is a continental project forged from the ashes of war, and it has long sought to transcend its historical divisions and foster a sense of shared identity. However, persistent regional disparities remain a significant challenge to this endeavour. These disparities, often manifested in economic inequalities, social tensions and political polarisation, could undermine the very fabric of the Union.

This ‘geography of discontent’ is rooted in a complex interplay of factors, including economic inequality, social isolation and a perceived disregard for the concerns of marginalised communities. Despite the EU’s significant strides in creating a single market and promoting economic convergence, the legacy of its past, coupled with contemporary global challenges and rapid technological development, continues to shape its regional dynamics.

Over the past 25 years our societies have undergone profound changes. One of the most pressing concerns is the persistent economic divide between the core and the periphery of the EU. While a significant number of people have experienced increased prosperity, an equally significant or perhaps even larger number have faced declining standards of living. This economic insecurity has led to widespread anxiety and fear for the future.

The advent of the Internet and social media has further exacerbated these societal and socio-economic changes. While these platforms provide unprecedented access to information, they can also amplify feelings of inequality and discontent. For individuals facing economic hardship or personal challenges, social media can become a powerful instrument for expressing anger and frustration.

In particular, people in rural areas often feel disconnected from the political mainstream, believing that their concerns are overlooked or dismissed. This feeling of being

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overlooked or abandoned has driven many towards extremist parties that promise to address their grievances. Meanwhile, cities, while benefiting from economic opportunities and educational resources, are grappling with overcrowding and a lack of affordable housing. These challenges have contributed to the political alienation of young people and exacerbated social tensions.

To address these challenges, a multifaceted approach and an especially ambitious plan are required.

First, we need to invest in infrastructure and public services in peripheral regions and rural areas. This includes improving transportation, health care, education and broadband Internet access. The EU's cohesion and regional funds can play a crucial role in supporting these initiatives.

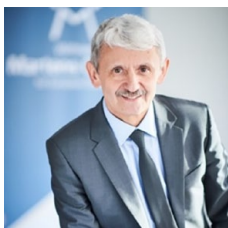
Second, the EU must tailor its policies to the specific needs of rural areas. This involves finding a balance between affordable food, high environmental standards and decent incomes for farmers. Promoting sustainable agricultural practices and supporting innovation can help achieve these goals.

Third, it is essential to rethink policies that have alienated rural communities, such as the ban on combustion engines and the Nature Restoration Law. These measures must be implemented in a way that addresses the practical concerns of rural residents.

Fourth, changing perceptions is as important as implementing policies. It is possible to build a more positive narrative by portraying farmers not as the problem but as key actors in the green transition and in fighting climate change. Additionally, understanding the unique challenges faced by rural communities, such as limited access to transportation, is essential for developing effective policies.

Fifth, the very concept of 'work' must be redefined to reflect the changing nature of our societies. Remote working, for example, can help revitalise peripheral regions. By promoting flexible working arrangements and supporting entrepreneurship, we can create new opportunities for people living outside urban centres.

Addressing the geography of discontent requires a comprehensive and innovative approach. By investing in infrastructure, supporting rural communities and rethinking our approach to work and policymaking, we can create a more equitable and inclusive Europe for all.



Author biography

Mikuláš Dzurinda is President of the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies and a former Prime Minister of Slovakia (1998–2006). He has also held the positions of Minister of Transport and Minister for Foreign Affairs.