

SMALL MUNICIPALITIES IN SEARCH OF UNDERSTANDING, CARE, AND COMMITMENT

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1. The characteristics of small and rural towns with high cultural values

The widespread urbanization of small municipalities is an incalculable value from the standpoint of the territorial heritage, and at the same time an essential component for sustainable regional planning. Small municipalities and rural areas are the other face of metropolitan concentrations.

Europe in particular bases its distinctiveness precisely upon the richness of the historic sediment built up throughout its territory. Small towns – villages in the term most widespread today – join large cities and art centres in taking full part in the territorial system's *geo-diversity*. The discipline of urban planning is responsible for the confident assertion of the unitarity nature of built settings in various historical periods, to be placed in a relationship with the rural and natural landscape – which is also to be protected and recognized for its contribution of social, productive, and cultural evolution. Affirming full respect for the morphology and typology of the entire urban structure, the scope of the interventions has been gradually expanded from monument restoration to the thoroughgoing requalification of the existing city through strategic plans and “complex” programmes. Moreover, the need has been discovered to affirm a vision of a regional programme that is no longer entrusted to large-scale works alone, but to careful action upon the city's spatial structure.

1.1. The European context and the specific nature of Italy

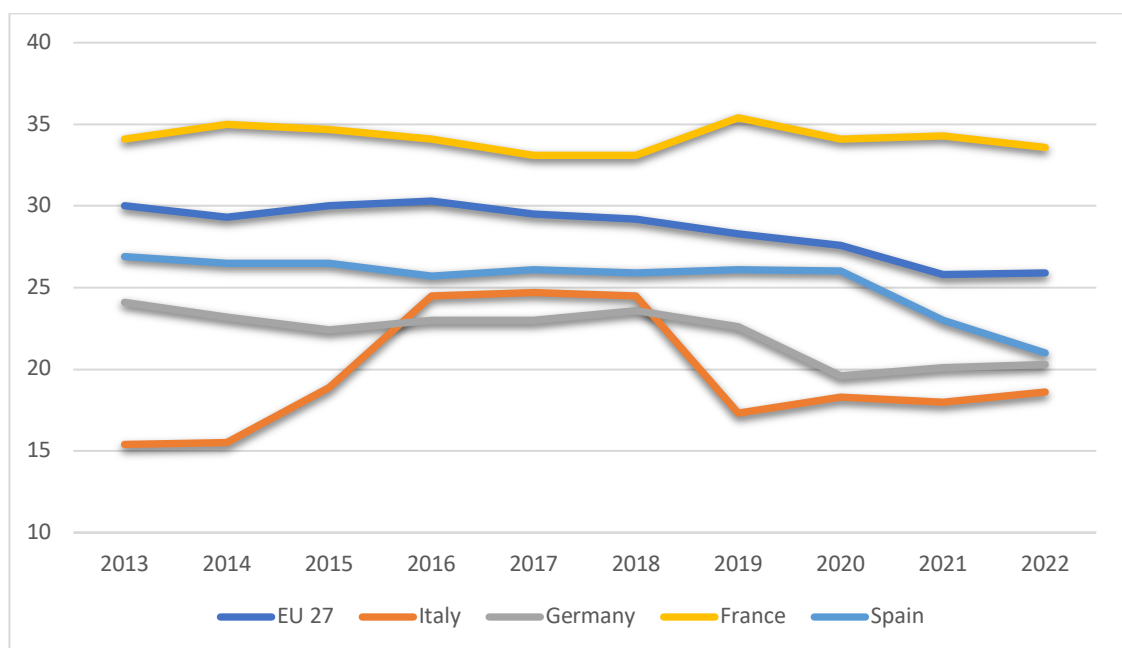
Looking to the horizon of 2040, the world's rural population will decline to 34.6% of the total, while it still represented a majority of 53.3% in the early 2000s. The European situation is headed in the same direction, albeit with significant diversities.

Over the past decade, residents of the European Union's small cities and rural areas declined from 30% in 2013 to 25.9% in 2022. In Germany, their share fell from

24.1% to 20.3% in 2022, while France is holding rather steady at 34% and Spain at about 26 % (given the low reliability of Eurostat data for 2021 and 2022, an estimate has been made) (fig. 1).

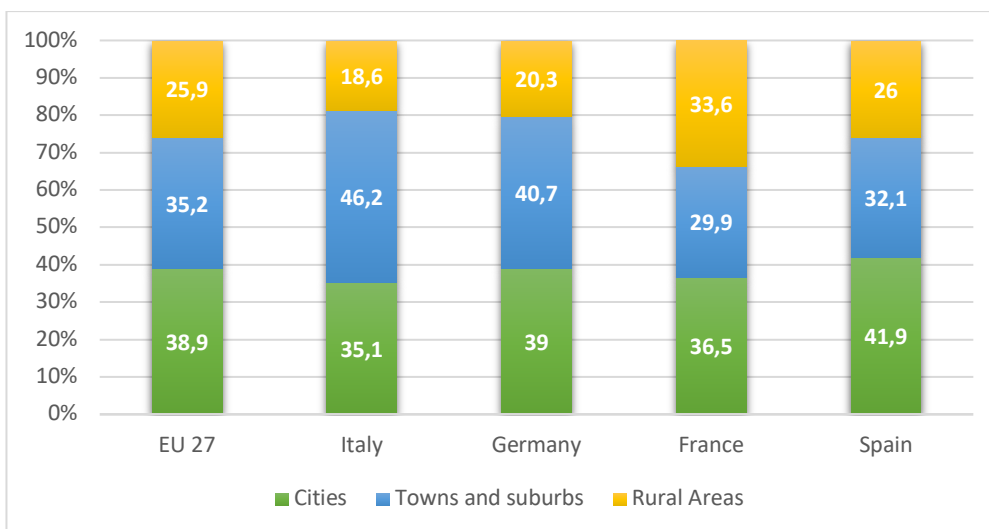
Breaking down the population by type of settlements, Spain concentrates more inhabitants in the large cities while medium-sized cities hold great prominence in Italy and Germany; France is quite polarized, with a high concentration in Paris and a considerable spread of rural towns (fig. 2).

Fig. 1 – Population trend in rural areas out of the total (%)



Source: RUR processing of Eurostat data

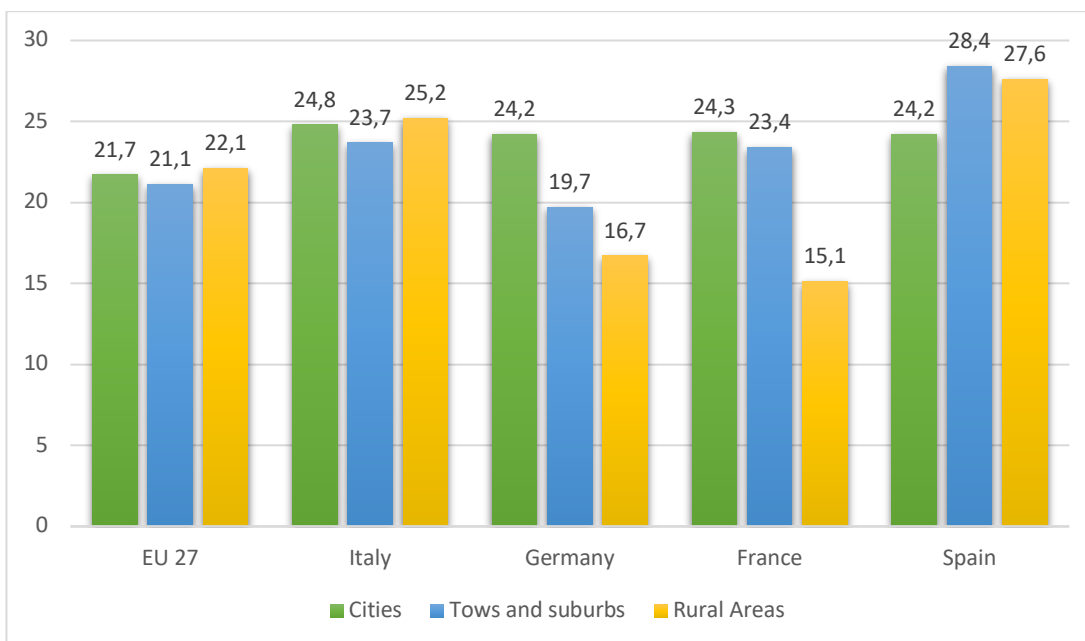
Fig. 2 – Population by degree of urbanization (%)



Source: RUR processing of Eurostat data

As to socioeconomic conditions, poverty risk in the European Union does not vary significantly among the various settlement types, as takes place in large countries: greater risk is recorded for metropolitan inhabitants in France and Germany, and for those of medium/small-sized cities in Spain. (fig. 3).

Fig. 3 - Population at risk of poverty by degree of urbanization (%)



Source: RUR processing of Eurostat data

A smaller economy and less employment have resulted in the abandonment of the territory: a consequence is a lack of care and maintenance especially of the forest and of the mountain and hilly areas, creating severe phenomena of hydrogeological instability that strike the cities downstream.

2. Digital technologies increase the attractiveness of small towns

Thanks to the spread of digital technologies, villages and rural areas have increased their attractiveness since they better correspond to the concept of beauty that James Hillman related not only to aesthetic values but to the nourishment of the soul: beauty as *anima mundi*.

The contribution of tourism takes on particular interest, also following the pandemic-related restrictions, but above all in relation to the slow but continuous change of models of living and using time. In fact, as Luciano Floridi predicts, “over the long term, technological unemployment will become leisure occupation” in a genuine democratic and liberal leisure society in which education helps people use their time. Then, Covid-19 accentuated the desire among travellers to conceive their holidays as a period of open-air activity in which to practise sports disciplines that could make it exciting to explore the environment (canoeing, paragliding, horseback riding, etc.), or even as a moment to “detox” from the pressure that metropolitan life entails. It is a tourism of discovery – above all of human relationships, which are discovered where a welcoming community lives. There are many examples of virtuous initiatives above all in the municipalities that belong to organized networks. Those in Italy include the association “Bandiere Arancioni del Touring Club Italiano,” to which 270 small Italian municipalities belong, as well as Cittaslow International, present in 31 countries around the world with 280 associated small cities, and headquartered in Orvieto, Umbria.

In addition to the structural factors discussed earlier, there is also a political implication to be reflected upon: institutions on a small scale can express a democratic vitality, an operative efficiency and a programmatic creativity that is hard to attribute to higher levels of government. In small municipalities, it is easier to find the most advanced traffic regulation, waste collection and recycling using the most cutting-edge technologies, innovative territorial welfare systems, and, often, cultural animation structures and initiatives that are attentive to citizen participation. The role of mayors in globalization processes was discussed in an interesting volume published several years ago – *If Mayors ruled the World: Dysfunctional Nations, Rising Cities* (2013) – at the height of the globalization crisis. The author states that cities are organizing increasingly in cultural and commercial communication networks, and that this growing cooperation may help formally

accomplish what they were already doing informally: governing through voluntary cooperation and shared consensus.

3. Strategies for developing relationships between urban and rural territories

It must now be wondered along what strategic lines the regeneration of villages and relations with urban agglomerations can be stimulated. First of all, the social and community dimension must be consolidated. Without people, small towns become inanimate realities, useful perhaps only for complicated real-estate speculations that are unlikely to succeed. Environment, traditions, and history are the basic resources for creating opportunities for employment that is as steady and enduring as possible. The essential elements for regeneration are *connections*, and digital ones above all. The pandemic saw the growth of working from home and the possibility to relocate where there is a better quality of life. These are small numbers – too small to change the large-scale trends taking place as described earlier. It is something new to be incentivized. *Neo-residentiality* brings with it the reactivation of the physiology of life in the village, starting from the physical connections with all the networks of “gentle” mobility and the reuse of secondary roads and regional railways, with a great propensity for electric mobility. Where trains no longer run, old stations can be used as hospitality and services facilities, becoming the *Villages’ Emporia and Inns*. Another element to emphasize is promoting local productions, first among which the agrifood productions that make rural territories places of excellence in nutrition, recognized worldwide as the Mediterranean diet. Moreover, set into extraordinary and often unspoilt natural settings, villages have everything it takes to themselves become full-blown *educating communities* capable of offering, beyond the experience of conviviality, formative moments for the knowledge of traditions and ecosystems. Lastly, to take advantage of these opportunities, powerful operating tools are needed. Cultural structures, local museums, and testimony of tangible and intangible culture will have to be recovered and managed, by applying the most up-to-date information technologies. There must also be hospitality capable of offering travellers above all an authentic atmosphere, regardless of the market segment it belongs to. All the above is to be done with an appropriate online promotion via an engaging platform and with adequate specific weight in order to become breakout players in the highly crowded space of the digital media.