

Territorial Injustice, Discontent and Democratic Resilience across EU Regions

Stavroula Alexiou, George Petrakos and Alexandra Sotiriou

Department of Planning and Regional Development

University of Thessaly, Greece

Extended Abstract

Political discontent is hardly new. Historically, waves of populism and the translation of public dissatisfaction into electoral choices have often coincided with social polarisation and the strengthening of anti-establishment ideologies. Such dynamics typically intensify during periods of severe economic distress, especially where social capital is weak and welfare-state protections are limited. What appears paradoxical today is the scale and breadth of rising discontent within an EU widely associated with prosperity, high human capital, and comparatively strong living standards, alongside sustained investment in regional development and cohesion policies. Moreover, whereas political dissatisfaction in Europe has often been linked to downturns and structural weaknesses in the EU's periphery, recent years have also seen a marked rise of far-right populism within parts of the EU core.

This raises a challenging puzzle for regional science and political economy to solve. The EU is founded on commitments to solidarity, convergence, and cohesion, yet political dissatisfaction has intensified and become visible through electoral outcomes, referenda, and broader social mobilisation. A key premise of this paper is that discontent is shaped less by absolute levels of welfare and more by the geography of uneven opportunity and perceived fairness. The architecture of the common market and currency, uneven returns to deeper integration across regions and social groups, and structural transformations associated with globalisation, offshoring, and platform-driven 'jobless growth' have a strong spatial footprint in labour markets and public services, generating place-specific vulnerabilities and perceptions of territorial injustice that can translate to political dissatisfaction (Sotiriou et al. 2025).

Against this backdrop, we aim to examine how inequality, intensity of crisis exposure, and regional economic underperformance are spatially associated with political discontent across EU regions; how discontent aligns with persistent territorial disparities and the uneven distribution of the gains from EU integration; and whether these relationships differ between "left-behind" regions and relatively prosperous territories, pointing to distinct pathways through which dissatisfaction and disaffection emerge.

In recent years, the EU has experienced intensifying social polarisation and the rise of anti-establishment ideologies that increasingly challenge the cohesion and stability of the European project. As Rodríguez-Pose (2025, p.70) notes, discontent is “reshaping the European political landscape with alarming speed”. Alongside cultural and demographic influences, a growing body of research identifies economic stagnation and widening regional and social inequalities as central structural drivers of disaffection (Dijkstra et al. 2020; Rodríguez-Pose et al. 2023). Evidence from related literature shows that major economic shocks - including exposure to austerity programmes or trade-induced disruptions - can translate into anti-establishment and anti-integration voting (Autor et al. 2020; Fetzer 2019), with electoral outcomes and referenda reflecting broader dissatisfaction with prevailing political and economic arrangements (Los et al. 2017; McCann 2020). In this view, Euroscepticism is territorially embedded, shaped by regional characteristics and development trajectories rather than solely by national politics (Capello and Perucca 2018).

Building on this evidence, we advance a territorial political-economy framework linking objective (realized) and perceived inequalities to experiences of territorial injustice and, ultimately, to democratic resilience. Objective inequalities capture observable disparities in economic performance and life changes, while perceived inequalities reflect interpretations of unfairness and policy failure. Territorial injustice arises when regions or social groups are perceived to bear the costs of integration and structural change while receiving a smaller share of the benefits, which results in eroding trust of citizens in institutions and increasing receptiveness to anti-establishment narratives.

Discontent is expected to be especially pronounced in “development-trapped” regions experiencing prolonged stagnation relative to national or EU benchmarks, where limited employment prospects, institutional constraints, and deteriorating public services deepen grievances (Diemer et al. 2022; Rodríguez-Pose et al. 2023). At the same time, disaffection is not limited to “left-behind” places: trust in the EU may follow a U-shaped pattern, with relatively higher trust in both the most and least developed regions but lower trust in middle-income territories stuck in persistent stagnation (Vasilopoulou and Talving 2024).

The empirical analysis is conducted at the level of EU regions, using NUTS2 classification to capture territorial disparities in economic performance, inequality, and political behaviour. The dataset combines secondary regional indicators from official statistical sources with electoral information to link socio-economic conditions to political discontent across space.

Regional economic performance is captured through measures of development and dynamism, including GDP per capita levels and growth, labour-market performance, and related indicators of economic security. Objective inequality is captured through available distributional indicators (for example, income dispersion and/or poverty and deprivation metrics), while perceived inequality and dissatisfaction are proxied through

survey-based measures where regional coverage permits. Exposure to economic and social crises is represented through indicators reflecting the intensity of shocks and stressors in regional labour markets and living conditions.

Political discontent is operationalised using electoral outcomes, focusing on regional vote shares for populist and far-right parties and related measures of political fragmentation. To connect discontent with the uneven distribution of the benefits of EU integration, the dataset includes proxies for integration-related gains and policy-mediated redistribution, such as Cohesion Policy intensity and other regionally observable markers of integration exposure and opportunity. Results are presented for the full regional sample and for salient territorial groupings (for example, core/periphery, metropolitan/non-metropolitan, and development-level categories).

The empirical strategy is intentionally descriptive and pattern-oriented. We document the geography of discontent and its correlates through: (i) thematic maps that visualise spatial clustering and core-periphery contrasts; (ii) scatterplots that relate regional measures of discontent to indicators of economic performance, inequality, crisis exposure, and integration-related benefits; and (iii) simple correlation statistics summarising the strength and direction of bivariate associations. To capture potential non-linearities - consistent with “development-trap” narratives - we complement linear fits with non-parametric smoothing and present results by distributional segments (for example, quartiles or deciles of development, inequality, or crisis exposure).

To address heterogeneity, relationships are stratified by territorial typologies relevant to the conceptual framing, including “left-behind” versus relatively prosperous regions and urban-rural gradients (and, where feasible, institutional or governance categories). Robustness checks focus on the stability of patterns: we replicate key figures using alternative discontent measures (different election types or party-group definitions), alternative inequality proxies (objective vs perceived), and alternative normalisations (per capita vs shares; population-weighted vs unweighted). We also test sensitivity to outliers by winsorising extreme values and by re-estimating correlations after excluding very small regions or influential observations.

The descriptive evidence points to a distinctly territorial geography of political discontent in the EU. Dissatisfaction is not simply a reaction to low-income levels; it is more closely aligned with trajectories of stagnation, vulnerability, and perceived unfairness. In line with the development-trap perspective, discontent tends to concentrate in regions that have experienced prolonged underperformance relative to national or EU benchmarks, where limited prospects and weakening local services can amplify grievances. At the same time, disaffection is not confined to disadvantaged areas: in some relatively prosperous regions, discontent coexists with perceptions of policy failure, lack of voice, or a belief that the benefits and burdens of integration are unevenly distributed.

This dual geography supports an interpretation of discontent as both a material and a relational phenomenon - rooted in objective disparities, but mediated by perceived

inequalities and institutional legitimacy. While the analysis does not make causal claims, the consistency of spatial clustering and the repeated alignment between vulnerability, inequality indicators, and electoral outcomes is indicative of the mechanisms through which territorial injustice can translate into political dissatisfaction and pressures on democratic resilience.

The findings have direct relevance for cohesion and resilience policy in a transition era. Territorial cohesion cannot be treated solely as a growth and competitiveness agenda: where discontent aligns with persistent disparities, stagnation, and uneven integration gains, Cohesion Policy also becomes a legitimacy and democratic-resilience instrument. The observed spatial heterogeneity points to the limits of uniform prescriptions. Development-trapped regions require integrated, place-based packages combining productive investment with employment opportunities, accessible services, and capacity-building in local institutions. In relatively prosperous yet disaffected regions, priorities may shift toward addressing perceived unfairness and governance failures through transparency in allocation, participatory mechanisms, and policies that visibly broaden access to integration-related opportunities.

The results also motivate a stronger emphasis on monitoring and prevention. Early-warning systems tracking both objective disparities and subjective indicators (trust, perceived inequality, dissatisfaction) can help anticipate where political grievances are likely to intensify. Finally, policy assessment frameworks should incorporate democratic-resilience outcomes alongside economic indicators, recognising that sustained convergence depends not only on material performance but also on perceived fairness, voice, and institutional legitimacy.

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