

Poverty and Social Exclusion: Key Challenges for Sustainable Rural Development in the New European Union Member States between 2007 and 2022

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Abstract

Poverty has emerged as a significant global issue, impacting both urban and rural areas in developing countries. Its complex and multifaceted nature, encompassing profound economic, social, and psychological implications, has made addressing it even more challenging. Therefore, rural poverty is regarded as one of the most pressing challenges for achieving sustainable development within the European Union (EU). While the EU-15 countries (i.e., the “old” Member States) are relatively better positioned, rural poverty has remained a persistent issue in the “new” Member States, particularly in recent years. This study has examined the trends in rural poverty and social exclusion across the new EU Member States over the past 15 years. Using a data review methodology, it has analyzed rural poverty and exclusion trends from 2007 to 2022 in Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. The findings have revealed that Bulgaria, Croatia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Romania significantly lag behind the EU average in addressing rural poverty among the new member states.

Keywords: sustainable rural development, poverty, rural areas, European Union

JEL: I32, O18, Q01



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Introduction

Poverty has been a longstanding issue throughout history, and it has become a significant global concern due to economic, political, and social factors, particularly since the 18th century. The emergence of the welfare state as a result of economic development in developed countries has contributed to the reduction of poverty compared to developing nations. Through income support mechanisms designed for individuals in need, alongside access to essential services such as education and healthcare, as well as unemployment insurance, the welfare state has played a crucial role in mitigating the extent of poverty. These measures have helped to establish a more equitable socioeconomic structure, ensuring a higher level of social protection and economic stability within developed countries. Although numerous countries have achieved their growth targets in accordance with their socio-economic circumstances, it does not necessarily imply that the resulting revenue is distributed equitably among all members of society. Despite numerous attempts, poverty persists in rural areas, particularly in developing countries. The ramifications of poverty, which is a significant aspect of sustainable rural development, may manifest differently in rural settings. In addition to economic and socio-economic consequences, it can also give rise to social unrest and psychological effects. Consequently, the intricacy of poverty renders it an intractable challenge.

Sustainable rural development is a type of development that requires the integration of multiple aspects, including the economy, socio-economy, environment, society and governance, within rural areas. Given that agriculture is a fundamental aspect of rural life, the presentation of solutions in this area has become one of the basic stages of sustainable development. The European Union (EU) has adopted sustainable development by prioritizing people and accelerating development without disrupting socio-economic and environmental balances. The EU has been successful in reducing poverty in numerous countries through the implementation of targeted measures. However, challenges remain in many countries. Beyond economic and socio-economic difficulties, this situation represents a significant obstacle to sustainable rural development, particularly in rural areas of the “new” EU Member States (which joined after 2004) due to restricted access to education and health services.

The new Member States have continued to face challenges in addressing the rural disparities that have emerged. These challenges not only result in economic inequality but also impede individuals’ integration into society through social exclusion. Given the multifaceted nature of poverty, it is essential to consider and examine various methodological aspects alongside the proposed solutions to eradicate poverty and social exclusion.

It is therefore important to emphasize and analyze the differences in methodological approach and the situation of poverty and social exclusion in rural areas in the new EU Member States. The aim of this study is to examine the EU’s methodological approach to measuring poverty and social exclusion in sustainable rural development and to analyze the poverty and social exclusion situation of the new Member States with data from 2007 to 2022.

Clarification of terms and methodological framework

Poverty and social exclusion are two deeply intertwined phenomena that hinder individuals' progress and well-being. Poverty often leads to social marginalization due to limited resources and services, while social exclusion can also exist independently. Eradicating poverty requires a multifaceted approach that encompasses both social and economic policies, which makes measurement challenging due to its multifaceted nature (Kalinowski 2020). Poverty can be absolute (the lack of basic necessities) or relative (the lack of resources in comparison to society). Absolute poverty is more prevalent in developing countries and is measured by the number of people living below a fixed poverty line (Augère-Granier 2017). In order to address poverty and social exclusion, it is necessary to adopt a holistic approach that empowers individuals through economic empowerment, social inclusion, community engagement, and international cooperation.

One of the indices used to measure poverty is the Global Multidimensional Poverty Index-MPI (The United Nations 2023) which is calculated and analyzed by The United Nations and the University of Oxford. It is an international tool that assesses those living in severe deprivation in health, education, and living standard indicators, as well as multidimensional poverty. The MPI calculates a deprivation score for each individual based on the weighted number of deprivations children experience across ten indicators, such as developmental delay, school attendance, and access to basic amenities. Individuals with a deprivation score of 1/3 or above are considered to be multidimensionally poor. A country's overall MPI is calculated as its poverty rate (the proportion of multidimensionally poor individuals) multiplied by the average deprivation score among the poor. Lower MPI values indicate a reduction in the number of people in poverty or a reduction in the level of deprivation among the poor, reflecting progress in poverty reduction efforts.

The Multidimensional Poverty Measure-MPM (World Bank 2023) has been expanded to include a broader range of factors than traditional monetary poverty lines, such as access to education, basic infrastructure, and income below \$2.15 per day (the international poverty line). This broader definition captures more people experiencing poverty, as not everyone living below the income line is deprived in non-monetary ways. The MPM demonstrates that nearly 40% of multidimensionally poor people would not be identified by income alone. It is of the utmost importance to recognize the additional impact of non-monetary factors such as education and infrastructure access when attempting to comprehend the complexity of poverty and to design effective policies that have improved overall well-being and break cycles of inequality.

The EU's relative poverty measure defines an individual as poor if their disposable income falls below 60% of the average income in the relevant member state. This approach recognizes differences in living costs across the EU and aims to identify those facing the greatest economic challenges in their own countries. However, this relative poverty measure presents challenges in directly comparing poverty levels between EU member states, particularly given the varying dynamics between urban and rural areas in each country. This can also lead to difficulties in accurately measuring poverty. Even if an individual's income falls below the established poverty line, their daily life may be more financially comfortable than that of a person living in extreme poverty in a less developed EU country.

This inherent limitation of the EU measure of relative poverty emphasizes the need to include additional contextual factors when assessing poverty levels in different regions (Kalinowski 2020).

The data generated by the EU is employed to provide detailed and objective observations regarding poverty and social exclusion. To identify and quantify the multifaceted indicators of poverty and social exclusion, Eurostat employs an approach that draws data from comprehensive surveys such as the Household Budget Survey (HBS) and the EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC). These surveys target representative samples across EU member states and some candidate countries. The approach itself focuses on individuals who are experiencing at least one of the following situations:

- “At-risk-of-poverty” describes individuals with an equivalized disposable income (after social transfers) below 60% of the national median equivalized disposable income. Equivalized income is used to account for income differences between different household sizes and compositions.
- “Very low work intensity” is defined as individuals living in households where working-age adults (18–64 years old, excluding students aged 18–24 years and retirees) worked less than 20% of their total potential during the previous 12 months.
- “Severe material and social deprivation” describe individuals who cannot afford at least six of 13 items personally and seven of 13 items as a household (Table 1).

Table 1. Severe material and social deprivation items

List of items at the household level	List of items at the individual level
Capacity to face unexpected expenses	Having an internet connection
Capacity to afford to pay for a one-week annual holiday away from home	Replacing worn-out clothes with new ones
Capacity to be confronted with payment arrears (on mortgage or rental payments, utility bills, hire purchase installments or other loan payments)	Having two pairs of properly fitting shoes (including a pair of all-weather shoes)
Capacity to afford a meal with meat, chicken, fish or vegetarian equivalent every second day	Spending a small amount of money each week on themselves
Ability to keep home adequately warm	Having regular leisure activities
Have access to a car/van for personal use	Getting together with friends/family for a drink/meal at least once a month
Replacing worn-out furniture	

Source: Eurostat 2023.

This study undertakes a detailed examination and analysis of data on rural poverty and social exclusion created by the EU for the new EU Member States between 2007 and 2022. The countries included in the study are Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. The study addresses specific research questions:

- What is the extent of the disparity in rural poverty between the new EU Member States and the EU-15?

- What is the magnitude of rural poverty and social exclusion in the new EU Member States?
- How does rural poverty contrast with urban poverty in the new EU Member States?
- What measures and strategies can be implemented to mitigate rural poverty in the new EU Member States?

Poverty and social exclusion in the new EU Member States

Poverty and social exclusion are complex socio-economic problems that stem from various factors, each with multiple potential remedies. Within society, diverse groups are vulnerable to these issues, each for distinct reasons. Poverty extends beyond mere financial scarcity; it encompasses a deprivation of the opportunities, essential services, and social integration enjoyed by others. Consequently, individuals may struggle with unemployment, precarious employment, limited educational access, financial constraints, and inadequate healthcare. Moreover, they may also experience shame, discrimination, social ostracism, and humiliation. These challenges are pervasive in disadvantaged urban and rural settings. These areas not only lack adequate infrastructure, but also insufficient transportation, cultural and recreational amenities, and social support systems. Consequently, poverty erodes individuals' resilience over time, exacerbating their isolation and further entrenching their predicament (Duffy 2020). This situation poses a significant obstacle to improving societal welfare.

Within the EU, a significant share of the population faces challenges of poverty and social exclusion. In 2022, an estimated 22%, or 95.3 million people, were considered at risk. This number remained relatively stable compared with 2021 (95.4 million people, 22% of the population), which shows that poverty and social exclusion remain one of the EU's major problems. Figure 1 shows the percentage of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion in EU Rural Areas between 2007 and 2022, according to Eurostat. In 2007, the average poverty and social exclusion rate for the EU-15 was 22.3%, while the new Member States had an average rate of 35.3%. By 2022, the rate had decreased to an average of 19.6% for the EU-15 and 26.7% for the new EU Member States. While both country groups experienced a significant decline, the new Member States remain approximately 4.6 percent above the EU average. No significant change has been observed in EU-15 countries over the last four years or in the new Member States over the last three years.

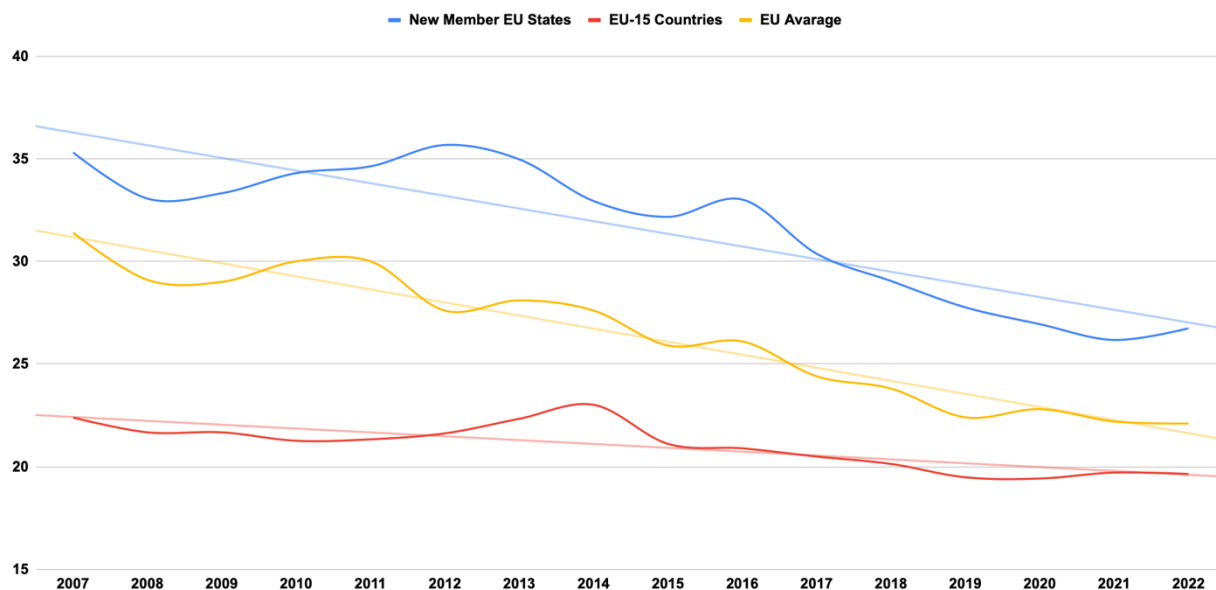


Figure 1. Persons at risk of poverty and social exclusion in European Union rural areas, 2007–2022 (%)

Source: author calculation based on Eurostat 2023.

The latest Eurostat figures from 2022 indicate that approximately 22% of both urban and rural populations experience poverty (Table 2). However, eastern EU countries are among the primary drivers of these averages. In 2022, Romania had the highest rate of rural poverty and social exclusion in the EU, with nearly half of the population at risk. Following Romania, the second most prominent country is Bulgaria, with a 40.5% poverty and social exclusion rate in rural areas. Croatia, Estonia, Hungary, Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania were all above the EU average in 2022. Poland had a poverty and social exclusion rate of 22.7% in rural areas, which almost matches the EU average. Conversely, the rates in Croatia, Slovakia, and Slovenia have poverty rates lower than the EU average. Notably, Slovakia and Croatia have poverty and social exclusion rates in both rural and urban areas below the EU average, although rates are higher in urban areas than in rural areas.

Table 2. Persons at risk of poverty and social exclusion in the new EU Member States, 2022 (%)

Country	Rural areas	Towns and suburbs	Cities
EU	22.1	21.3	22
Bulgaria	40.5	32.1	23.5
Croatia	27.0	21.1	16.9
Czechia	11.2	13.2	12.3
Estonia	25	27	25
Hungary	23.8	18.1	13.5
Latvia	34.6	22.9	20.8
Lithuania	29.7	26.5	20.2
Poland	22.7	14.5	10.9
Romania	45.6	28.0	17.2

Country	Rural areas	Towns and suburbs	Cities
Slovakia	20.8	16.7	11.1
Slovenia	13.2	13.8	16.7

Source: Eurostat 2023.

In 2021, the European Commission unveiled The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, designed to combat poverty through employment. The plan aims to lift 15 million people out of poverty and social exclusion, including at least 5 million children. Moreover, it prioritizes breaking the cycle of poverty by placing emphasis on children. It is centered on three primary domains: employment opportunities, access to the labor market, and ensuring fair working conditions. The report outlines three key objectives:

- The minimum employment rate target for individuals aged 20 to 64 is 78%.
- A reduction of at least 15 million individuals who are at risk of poverty and social exclusion.
- At least 60% of adults should participate in education annually by 2030.

The European Commission's Action Plan for the European Pillar of Social Rights aims to achieve a minimum employment rate of 78% for individuals aged 20 to 64 by 2030. One of the sub-goals is to reduce the gender employment gap by at least 50%. Additionally, it aims to increase the availability of early childhood education and care. The plan has included initiatives aimed at increasing employment participation among underrepresented groups, including the elderly, low-skilled individuals, persons with disabilities, and those in rural areas. Additionally, it targets basic digital skills for the 16–74 age group. It also sets goals for educational attainment: achieving at least a 40% completion rate of tertiary education for the 30–34 age group and encouraging at least 25% of adults to engage in lifelong learning.

A critical concern addressed by the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan is the NEET rate (Not in Education, Employment, or Training), a deeply concerning metric for young individuals across the EU. As per Eurostat (2022) figures, Romania has the highest NEET rate in the EU, at an average of 19.8%, followed closely by Bulgaria at 15.1%. Other countries with significant NEET rates include Croatia (13.3%) and Slovakia (12.3%). Meanwhile, Czechia (11.4%), Latvia (11.3%), Poland (10.9%), Hungary (10.8%), Lithuania (10.7%), and Estonia (10.6%) are below the EU average of 11.7% for 2022. Slovenia, at 8.4%, is the only country below 10%. Indeed, it is already below the EU's 2030 target of 9%.

A high NEET rate signifies disengagement and a lack of motivation regarding both employment and education. Failing to utilize the years between 15 and 29 productively heightens the risk of lifetime poverty. Factors that significantly contribute to the NEET rate include low educational attainment, disabilities, or immigrant backgrounds. Table 3 presents the NEET rates among individuals aged 15–29 in rural areas, towns and suburbs, and cities across the new EU Member States in 2022, as per Eurostat data. The average NEET ratio in rural areas averaged 12.6, whereas in cities, it is 10.9.

Romania has the highest NEET rate in rural areas at 27%, followed by Bulgaria (23.8%). In these two countries, approximately a quarter of young people are not in education, employment, or training, which is a concerning issue that requires attention. These countries also have the highest risk of poverty and social exclusion in rural areas. Conversely, Slovenia boasts the lowest NEET rate in rural areas among the new Member States, at 8%. Although the disparity between rural areas and cities is moderate on average across the EU, notable differences are observed in Bulgaria, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia.

Table 3. NEET rate for 15–29-year-olds in the new EU Member States, 2022 (%)

Country	Rural areas	Towns and suburbs	Cities
EU	12.6	12.2	10.9
Bulgaria	23.8	17	9.3
Croatia	14.8	12.6	11.8
Czechia	11.9	12.1	10.3
Estonia	12.8	10.5	9.2
Hungary	15.9	10.5	5.4
Latvia	12.9	11.1	9.5
Lithuania	14	14.7	6.4
Poland	12.5	11.1	8.3
Romania	27	22	7.9
Slovakia	13.1	13.7	8.3
Slovenia	8	9.1	8.1

Source: Eurostat 2023.

The poverty alleviation mechanisms among EU member states vary. It is believed that the EU can effectively tackle this issue by involving all social stakeholders collectively. A unified and coordinated approach is necessary to make a substantial impact in reducing the percentage of individuals at risk of poverty and social exclusion (Copeland 2023).

Bulgaria

Rural areas in Bulgaria face numerous challenges, including physical and infrastructure issues, low employment rates, high youth unemployment, an aging population, poverty, and exclusion (European Commission 2011). The country faces challenges in addressing issues within the EU, particularly due to the significant number of rural areas (Petrov 2021, pp. 208–209). The process of generating new job opportunities in rural areas is progressing slowly and faces considerable challenges, consequently heightening the risks of poverty and social exclusion. This is largely attributed to limited job availability in villages and towns, compounded by the absence of stable, long-term employment prospects (Petkova, Draganova, and Jeleva 2017).

Figure 2 shows the rate of poverty and social exclusion in rural and urban areas in Bulgaria and the EU between 2007 and 2022. Between 2012 and 2021 there is a significant decrease in rural areas in Bulgaria. However, from 2021 onwards, there is a slight upward trend. In 2022, the rate

in rural Bulgaria remained well above the EU average and was the second highest after Romania. In contrast, the urban rate is 23.5%, only 1.5% higher than the EU average in 2022. It has increased slightly since 2020 due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. In contrast to rural areas, the poverty and social exclusion rate in Bulgaria's urban regions decreased significantly after 2012, but less so in rural areas.

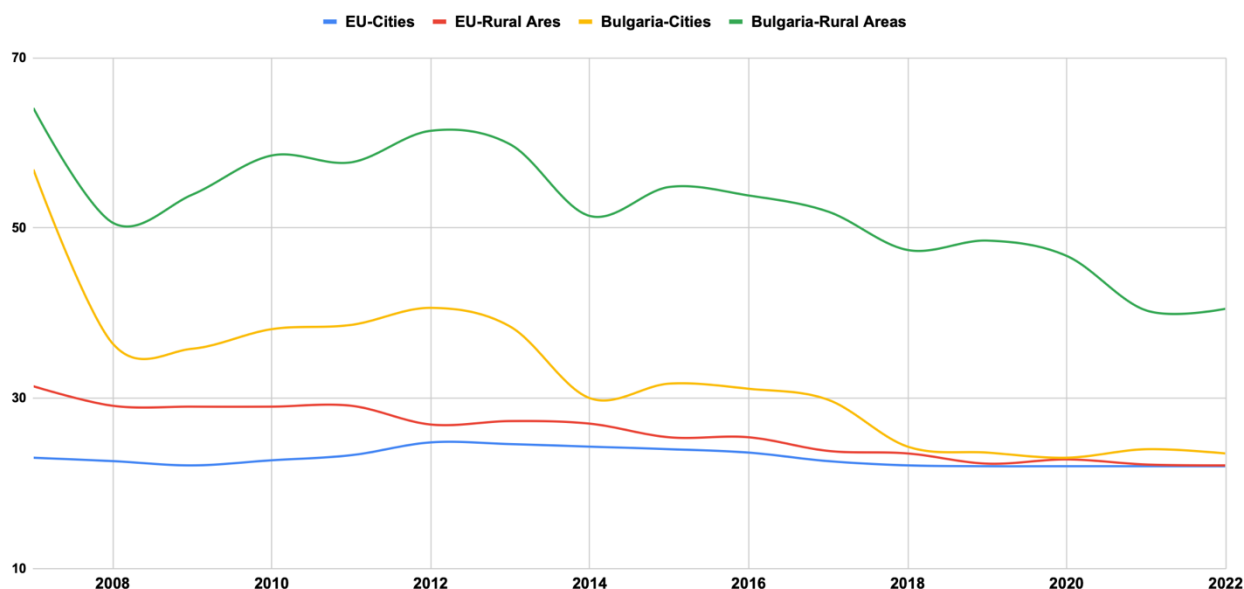


Figure 2. Persons at risk of poverty and social exclusion in Bulgaria, 2007–2022 (%)

Source: Eurostat 2023.

Croatia

Croatia is classified as a developed country for poverty, although it struggles with rural poverty and social exclusion in some areas. In particular, older people in rural areas in the eastern and southeastern regions of the country are vulnerable to poverty and social exclusion (Vučemić 2022). Subsequently, the National Action Plan (2021) for the period 2021–2027 was developed and adopted to ensure continuity in the implementation of policies to combat poverty and social exclusion. In the plan, a National Allowance Program was developed to provide basic social protection for the elderly and to help reduce poverty and social exclusion of the elderly who do not earn an income. The plan has noted that young people are also at risk compared to older people. According to Eurostat data, Croatia ranks slightly above the EU average in NEET rates in rural areas in 2022.

Figure 3 presents the rate of poverty and social exclusion in rural and urban areas in Croatia and the EU between 2010 and 2022. While the rate in Croatia's rural areas fell steadily between 2010 and 2022, it remained above the EU average at 22%. The rate in urban areas was below the EU average after 2012 and remained below average in 2022, at 16.9%.

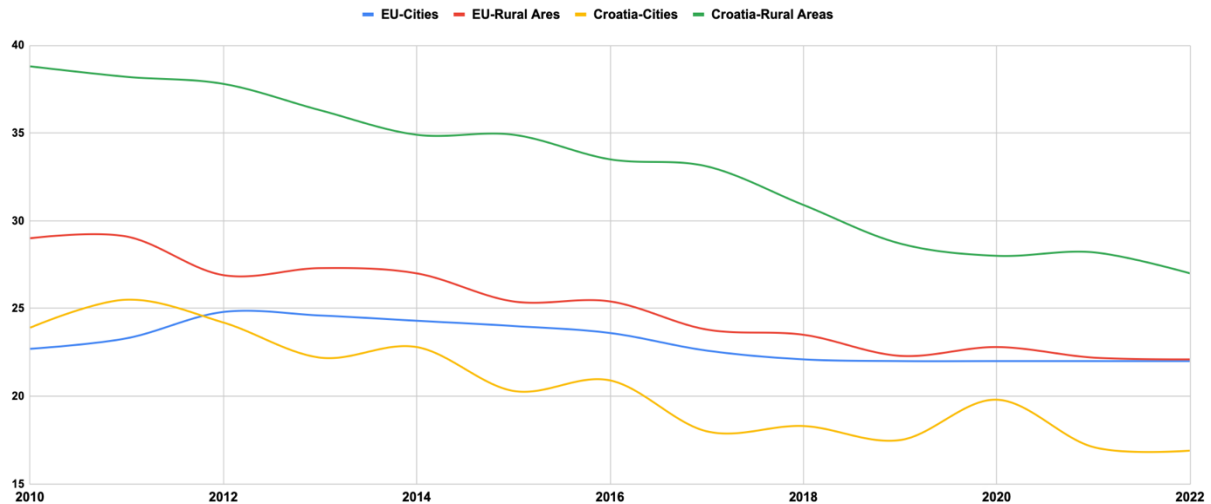


Figure 3. Persons at risk of poverty and social exclusion in Croatia, 2010*-2022 (%)

* The data in the Eurostat database start from 2010, unlike the other analyzed countries where they start in 2007.

Source: Eurostat 2023.

Czechia

Czechia is the best performer in terms of rural poverty among the new EU Member States, with an average rate of 11.8% of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2022. Janský, Kalíšková, and Münich (2016) noted that Czechia is a sustainable country in terms of household disposable income.

Figure 4 shows the rate of poverty and social exclusion in rural and urban areas in Czechia and the EU between 2007 and 2022. The urban rate did not decrease significantly until 2016. While the rate in rural areas decreased after 2014, no decrease was observed in urban areas until 2016. However, after 2021, due to the impact of COVID-19, the rate increased in both urban and rural areas.

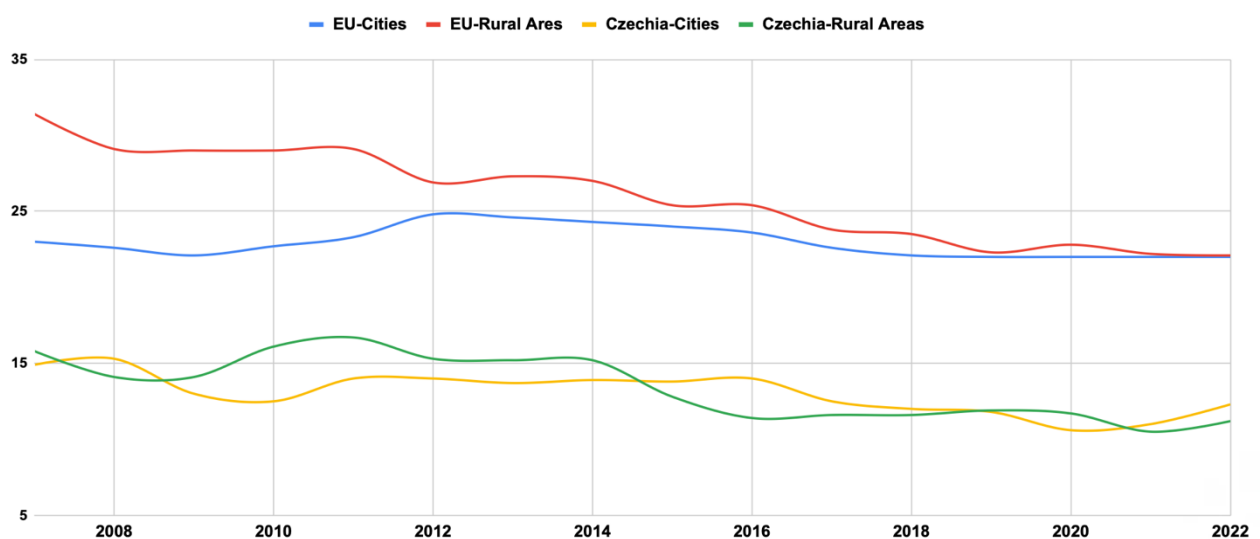


Figure 4. Persons at risk of poverty and social exclusion in Czechia, 2007-2022 (%)

Source: Eurostat 2023.

Estonia

The Eurostat data show that in Estonia, around a quarter of the population in rural areas was at risk of poverty and social exclusion in 2022. According to the Estonian Statistical Institute's 2022 data, the group most vulnerable to poverty are individuals over the age of 65 who live alone, with the highest rate of age poverty in the EU. Furthermore, poverty rates in southeastern and eastern Estonia are roughly double those in the capital, Tallinn.

Figure 5 gives the rate of poverty and social exclusion in rural areas and cities in Estonia and the EU between 2007 and 2022. In Estonia, the rural rate increased significantly after 2010, to 29.5%, before declining to 22.8% in 2021. However, the urban rate has been on an upward trend since 2008. Since 2021, there has been an increase in both rural areas and cities, exceeding the EU average; the COVID-19 pandemic likely also had an impact.

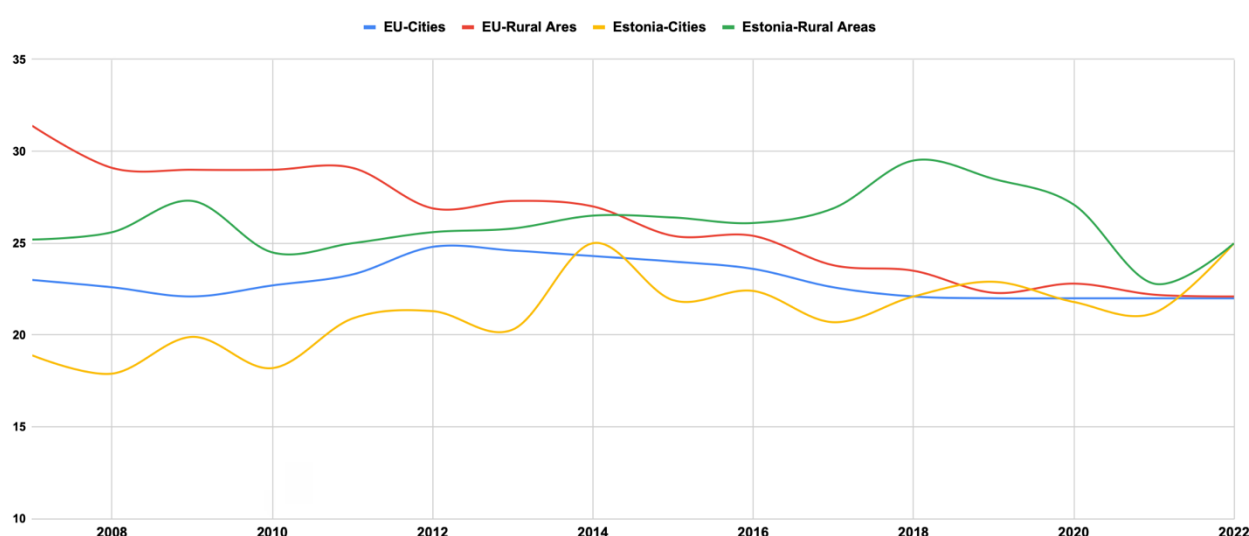


Figure 5. Persons at risk of poverty and social exclusion in Estonia, 2007–2022 (%)

Source: Eurostat 2023.

Hungary

According to Eurostat 2022 data, Hungary's poverty and social exclusion risk rate closely aligns with the EU average, standing at 23.8% in rural areas. While social assistance programs exist in rural regions, they predominantly target agricultural development, presenting a hurdle to enhancing the living conditions of rural inhabitants. Numerous households in rural areas find it challenging to cover their fundamental needs with their available financial resources, especially expenses beyond housing (Piwowar and Dzikuć 2021, p. 51).

Figure 6 illustrates the rate of poverty and social exclusion in rural areas and cities in Hungary and the EU between 2007 and 2022. In Hungary, the rate in both rural and urban areas increased until 2013, after which it decreased significantly. However, after 2020, the rate in rural areas increased slightly due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2022, the rate in rural areas was slightly above the EU average, although in cities, it was well below it.

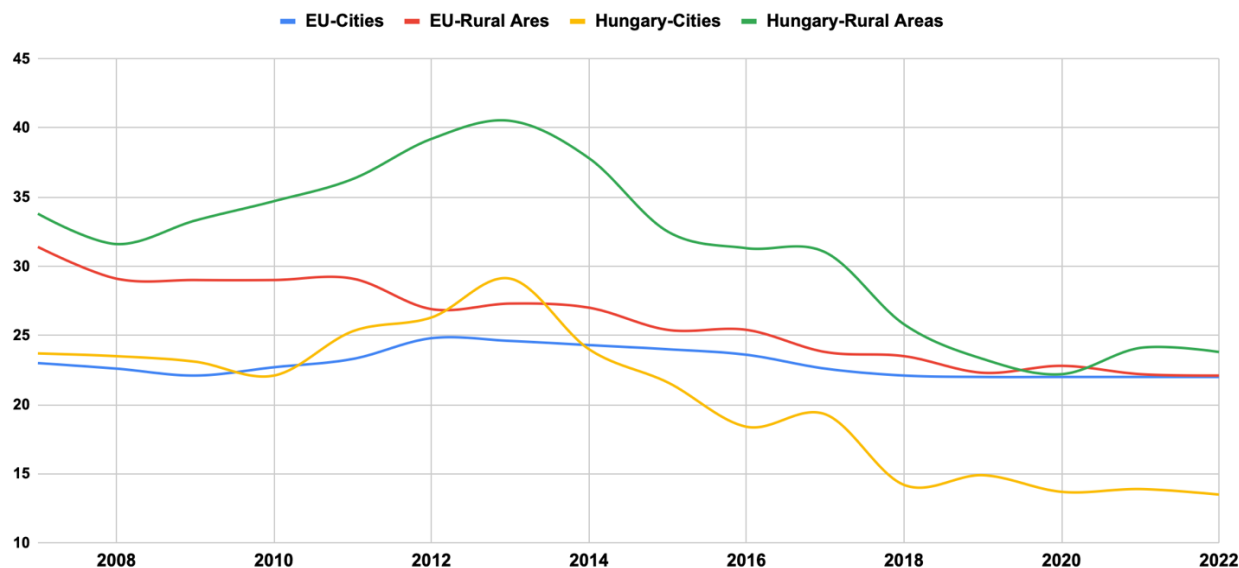


Figure 6. Persons at risk of poverty and social exclusion in Hungary, 2007–2022 (%)

Source: Eurostat 2023.

Latvia

According to 2022 Eurostat data, Latvia ranks third in terms of the risk of poverty and social exclusion in rural areas, following Bulgaria and Romania. In Latvia, social transfers are used in combination with pensions to address poverty. However, over the past fifteen years, there has been a convergence in the effectiveness of social transfers in reducing poverty between Scandinavia and the Baltic countries, except for Latvia, which has seen the lowest impact (Balvočiūtė and Šalkauskienė 2023, p. 26). This suggests potential inefficiencies in using social transfers to alleviate poverty there.

Figure 7 presents the rate of poverty and social exclusion in rural and urban areas in Latvia and the EU between 2007 and 2022. The rate in rural areas in Latvia started to decrease after 2013, but after 2020, it increased due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The urban rate began to decline after 2011 and fell below the EU urban average of 20.8% in 2022.

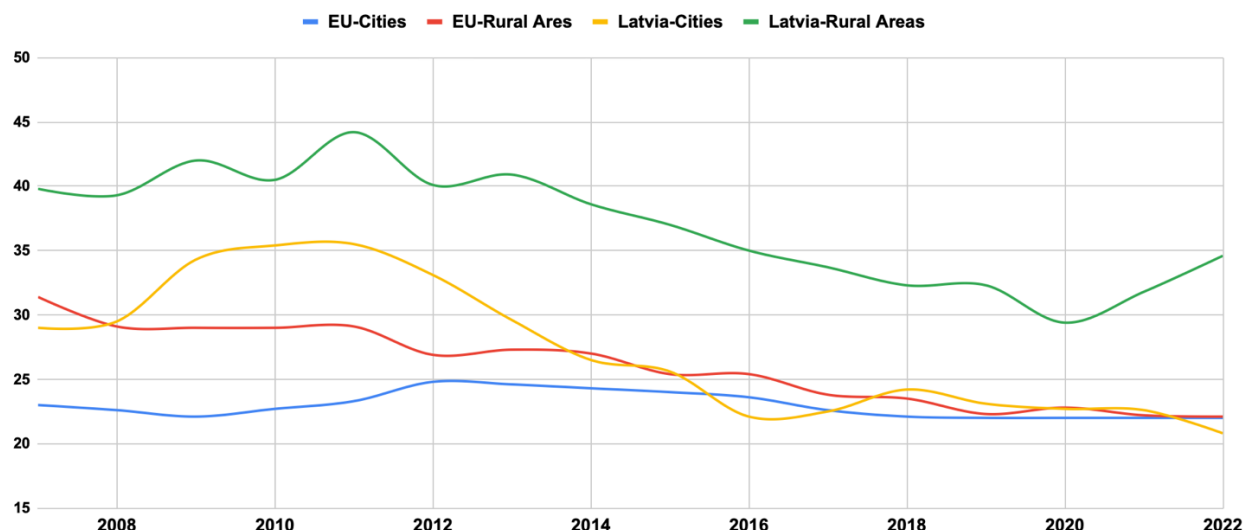


Figure 7. Persons at risk of poverty and social exclusion in Latvia, 2007–2022 (%)

Source: Eurostat 2023.

Lithuania

Although Lithuania's national economy has grown and innovated, with Vilnius at the forefront, smaller cities and towns have not seen the same level of development as central regions. This is due to a lack of investment in infrastructure, as well as issues such as aging and migration, which have led to poverty in rural areas (Terleckaite 2020).

Figure 8 presents the rate of poverty and social exclusion in rural and urban areas in Lithuania and the EU between 2007 and 2022. Poverty and social exclusion rates in rural areas of Lithuania varied until 2018 but started to decrease after 2018. Nevertheless, the rate of 29.7% in 2022 is well above the EU average. Conversely, the urban rate increased significantly between 2008 and 2010 but then declined until 2020, following which the impact of the coronavirus pandemic was relatively less pronounced.

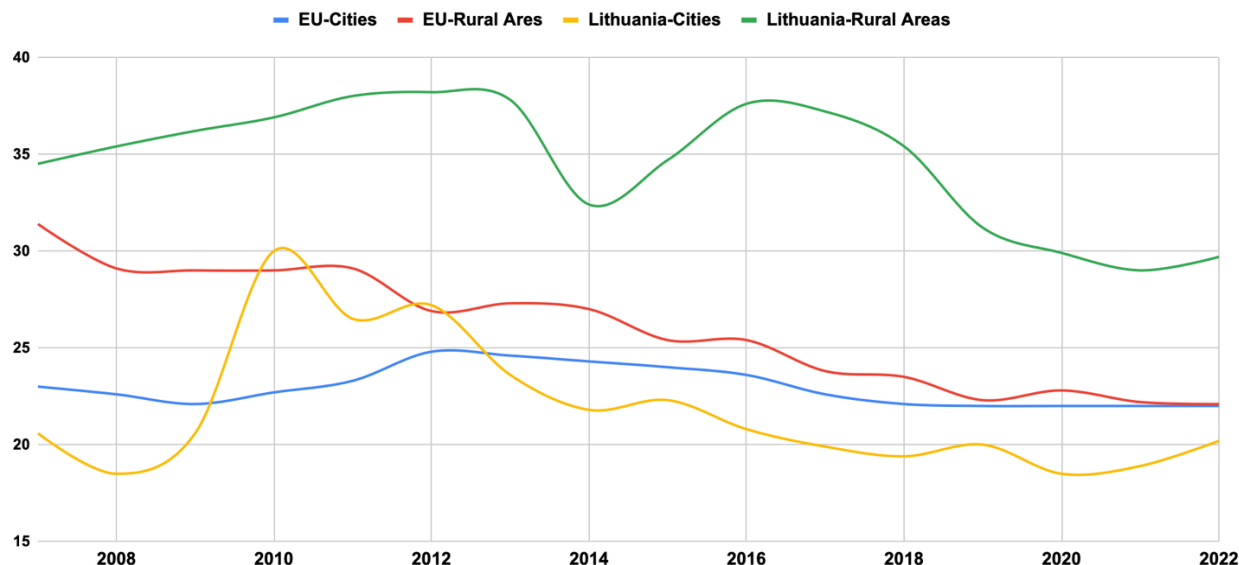


Figure 8. Persons at risk of poverty and social exclusion in Lithuania, 2007–2022 (%)

Source: Eurostat 2023.

Poland

Poland stands out among the new Member States for its low urban poverty and social exclusion rate, which stood at 10.9% in 2022, according to Eurostat. However, this positive picture is starkly contrasted by the situation in rural areas, where the rate surges to 22.7%, close to the EU average and similar to levels in Hungary and Slovakia. This disparity has highlighted the heightened risk of poverty and social exclusion faced by rural residents, particularly those living far from major cities and large towns. Additionally, rural poverty is more concentrated in northern and eastern regions (Kalinowski 2020).

Figure 9 presents the poverty and social exclusion rates in rural and urban areas in Poland and the EU between 2007 and 2022. Among the countries analyzed, Poland is notable as the only country that has continuously reduced its poverty and social exclusion rate in both its rural and urban regions. Between 2007 and 2020, there is a steady decline, with only sporadic small increases. In 2022, the urban poverty and social exclusion rate was 10.9%, almost half the EU average. In rural areas, it stands at 22.7%, which is close to the EU average.

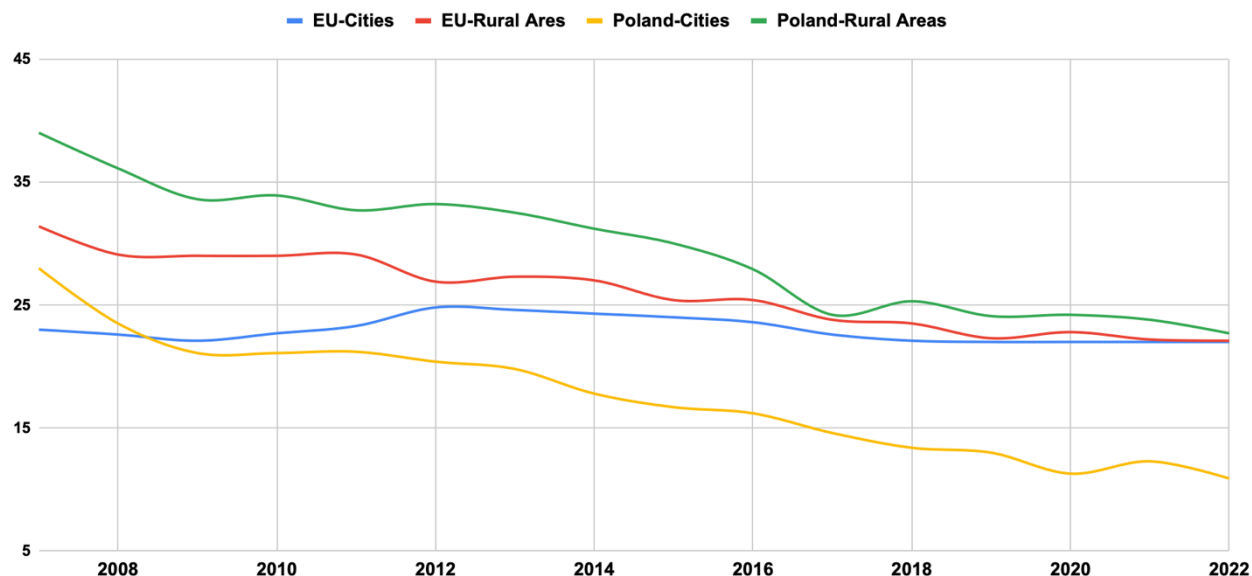


Figure 9. Persons at risk of poverty and social exclusion in Poland, 2007–2022 (%)

Source: Eurostat 2023.

Romania

Eurostat's 2022 data reveals that Romania has the highest rates of rural poverty, social exclusion, and NEETs among the new EU Member States, suggesting a persistent cycle of rural poverty. To break free, Romania requires a two-pronged approach: investing in high-quality education and ensuring equal access to primary education in rural areas. Simultaneously, fostering entrepreneurship awareness and attracting foreign investment to create job opportunities is necessary. Comprehensive plans focusing on education and job creation have represented significant steps toward breaking the cycle of rural poverty in Romania (Ulman and Dobay 2020).

Figure 10 shows the poverty and social exclusion rate in rural and urban areas in Romania and the EU between 2007 and 2022. In 2022, Romania had the highest rate in rural areas in the EU. It decreased between 2012 and 2018 when it started to rise again. As evident from the graph, there is a significant gap between rural and urban areas in Romania and compared to the EU average. Conversely, from 2013 until 2021, the rate in urban areas decreased, but it began to rise again due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, the urban poverty and social exclusion rate remains below the EU average.

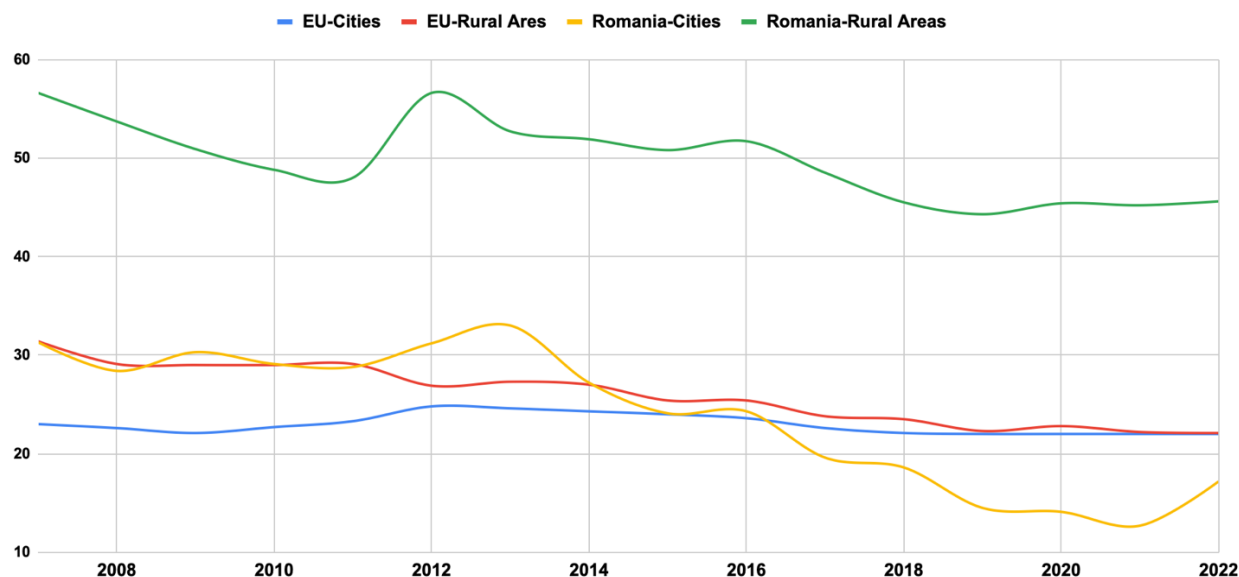


Figure 10. Persons at risk of poverty and social exclusion in Romania, 2007–2022 (%)

Source: Eurostat 2023.

Slovakia

Poverty remains a pressing issue in Slovakia, particularly in the eastern and southern regions. These areas are notably marked by a significant proportion of children and young individuals in the population, exacerbating the impact of poverty (Piwowar and Dzikuć 2021, pp. 46–47). Figure 11 presents the rate of poverty and social exclusion in rural and urban areas in Slovakia and the EU between 2007 and 2022. In rural Slovakia, the rate was above the EU average between 2007 and 2012 but fell between 2012 and 2020. After 2020, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the rate increased in both rural and urban areas, although it remains below the EU average.

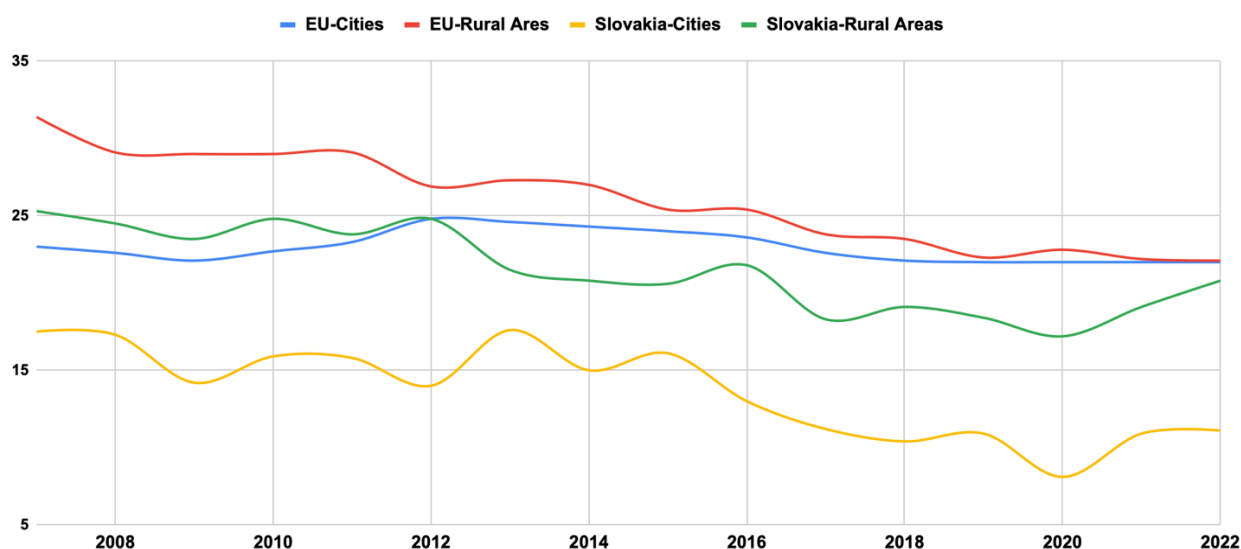


Figure 11. Persons at risk of poverty and social exclusion in Slovakia, 2007–2022 (%)

Source: Eurostat 2023.

Slovenia

Despite boasting the lowest rates of rural poverty and social exclusion in the new EU Member States (second only to Czechia) and the lowest NEET rate in the region's rural areas, Slovenia is not without its challenges related to poverty. The most vulnerable populations include elderly individuals, particularly women, those struggling with working poverty (wages below subsistence level), the unemployed, children and adolescents from low-income families, and single-person or single-parent households. Slovenia's financial social assistance programs, while supportive, fall short of improving living standards, perpetuating the very issue they aim to address – working poverty (EAPN Slovenia 2021, p. 20).

Figure 12 presents the rate of poverty and social exclusion in rural and urban areas in Slovenia and the EU between 2007 and 2022. In Slovenia, there was a correlation between poverty and social exclusion rates in rural and urban areas from 2007 to 2015. However, in 2018, while the poverty and social exclusion rate decreased in rural areas, it rose in cities. In 2022, the rate of poverty and social exclusion was 13.2% in rural areas and 16.7% in urban areas, still below the EU average.

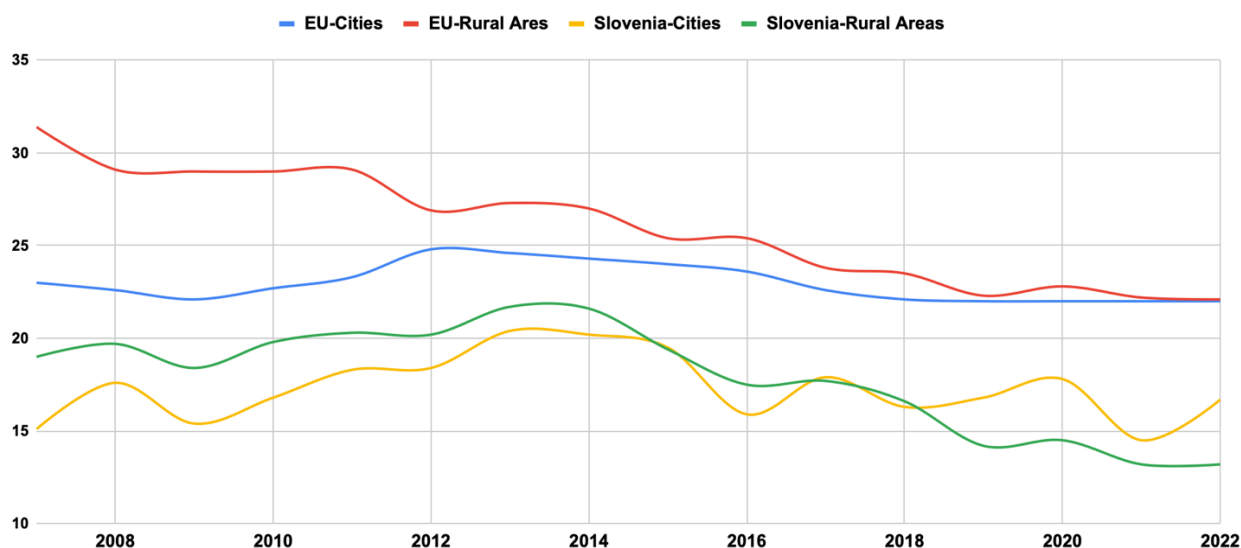


Figure 12. Persons at risk of poverty and social exclusion in Slovenia, 2007–2022 (%)

Source: Eurostat 2023.

Conclusion

The EU places significant emphasis on combating poverty as part of its sustainable development agenda, aiming to reduce it through various financial supports and projects. However, one-fifth of the population still struggles with poverty and social exclusion. Although poverty remains a challenge in urban areas, the new Member States exhibit significant disparities in poverty and social exclusion, particularly in rural areas.

Bulgaria and Romania have consistently recorded the highest rates of rural poverty and social exclusion within the EU. In Romania, almost one in two people in rural areas is affected by poverty and social exclusion, while in Bulgaria, the figure stands at 40%. Additionally, a substantial gap

persists between rural and urban areas in these two countries. Furthermore, the difficulties faced by young people in rural areas in accessing education and employment reflect the interconnected nature of these issues.

Following these countries, Lithuania and Latvia remain significantly above the EU average. This situation has fueled a vicious cycle, as low employment and education rates in rural areas have perpetuated poverty and intensified rural-to-urban migration.

Among the new Member States, Czechia has performed relatively well in terms of rural poverty and social exclusion compared to both the EU average and other new Member States. Slovenia has maintained lower poverty and social exclusion rates than the average, while these challenges have remained deeply entrenched in other countries. In Croatia, approximately one-third of the rural population is affected by poverty and social exclusion, although urban areas have performed slightly better than the EU average. In Estonia, however, one in four people in rural areas continues to experience poverty and social exclusion. Hungary, Slovakia, and Poland have maintained rates of rural poverty and social exclusion close to the EU average, indicating that a substantial proportion of their populations live in these conditions.

Given their shared socio-economic characteristics, the new Member States have had to adopt a comprehensive approach that considers the needs and priorities of all segments of society to achieve sustainable development. Therefore, developing inclusive solutions that benefit both rural and urban areas across multiple disciplines, including economics, socioeconomics, environmental studies, and sociology, is essential. At the core of this approach lies the promotion of regional awareness, the establishment of targeted financial support, and the development of employment opportunities for those in need. However, achieving this requires policies that are sensitive to the needs and demands of local communities while also preserving the region's natural resources.

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Ubóstwo i wykluczenie społeczne: kluczowe wyzwania dla zrównoważonego rozwoju obszarów wiejskich w nowych państwach członkowskich UE (2007–2022)

Ubóstwo stało się istotnym problemem globalnym, wpływającym zarówno na obszary miejskie, jak i wiejskie w krajach rozwijających się. Jego złożony i wieloaspektowy charakter, obejmujący głębokie konsekwencje ekonomiczne, społeczne i psychologiczne, sprawia, że jego zwalczanie jest niezwykle trudnym wyzwaniem. W związku z tym ubóstwo na obszarach wiejskich jest uważane za jedno z najpoważniejszych wyzwań dla osiągnięcia zrównoważonego rozwoju w Unii Europejskiej (UE). Chociaż kraje UE-15 (tzw. stare państwa członkowskie) znajdują się w relatywnie lepszej sytuacji, ubóstwo na obszarach wiejskich pozostaje palącym problemem w „nowych” państwach członkowskich, zwłaszcza w ostatnich latach. Niniejsze badanie analizuje trendy dotyczące ubóstwa na obszarach wiejskich oraz wykluczenia społecznego w nowych państwach członkowskich UE na przestrzeni ostatnich 15 lat. Wykorzystując metodę przeglądu danych, autorzy dokonują analizy trendów ubóstwa i wykluczenia społecznego w latach 2007–2022 w Bułgarii, Chorwacji, Czechach, Estonii, na Węgrzech, Łotwie, Litwie, w Polsce, Rumunii, na Słowacji i w Słowenii. Wyniki wskazują, że Bułgaria, Chorwacja, Łotwa, Litwa i Rumunia znacząco odstają od średniej unijnej pod względem zwalczania ubóstwa na obszarach wiejskich wśród nowych państw członkowskich.

Słowa kluczowe: zrównoważony rozwój obszarów wiejskich, ubóstwo, obszary wiejskie, Unia Europejska