

Vulnerability of the families with children at risk of poverty

Abstract

In the last 25 years, the population has had many challenges and difficulties in covering goods and services on the market, which has foreshadowed an expansion of vulnerability and poverty for many families in Romania. The analysis of different types of family structures, incomes and areas of residence has highlighted better years for certain types of incomes, but also less good years, as a result of: increased inflation; increased exchange rate, which further influenced the purchasing power of the Romanian leu on the market for purchasing goods and services; increased fuel prices or wage cuts. European statistics studying the phenomenon of poverty reported that higher values of the risk of falling into poverty were recorded in Bulgaria, Spain and Romania. The figures indicate that there are still significant challenges, which require additional actions to protect vulnerable children in these countries. On the other hand, the lowest values were observed in Slovenia, Cyprus and the Czech Republic, demonstrating notable progress in these Member States. Slovenia had the lowest percentage of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion of all EU countries included in the report. Among all member states, Romania achieved the most significant reduction in the risk of poverty and social exclusion at the national level, in 2024.

Keywords: poverty, social exclusion, families with children, pensioner families, minimum consumption, national strategy for social inclusion and poverty reduction for the period 2022-2027.

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Introduction

In Romania, in the period 1989–2024, the population had difficulties in covering the goods and services on the market, which foreshadowed an expansion of vulnerability and poverty for many families in our country. From the analyses carried out on different types of family structures, incomes and areas of residence, there were advantageous years for some types of incomes of the population, but also completely unfavorable years, as a result of some economic policy measures: increase in inflation, increase in the exchange rate which further influenced the purchasing power of the Romanian leu on the market for purchasing goods and services,¹⁻³ increase in the price of fuel or of the cubic meter of hot or cold water, salary cuts, etc.

The families that overcame difficult economic situations were: the family of two adults with two average salaries, from the urban area; the family of two adults with one dependent child, from the urban area, with an income consisting of two average salaries and the child allowance; the family of two pensioners, from the urban and rural areas, of which one of the pensioners is paid at the level of the average state social insurance pension; the unemployed families from the urban and rural areas, in which one partner is paid with the average salary in the economy.

Covering the minimum decent consumption means studying the various human needs related to: biological aspects, hygiene, education, health, culture of people. The complexity of this minimum consumption arises from the multitude and variety of elements, which intertwine to satisfy individual and family consumption needs, but also from the close relationship between these needs and the economic-social framework in which they manifest and develop. The relativity of the minimum standard of living stems from the fact that it is not given forever, but changes depending on several factors, among which the most important would be: the level of economic development reached

by the country, the social and professional environment, climatic and geographical conditions, the level of civilization and culture, the level of income, the size of the family, traditions and customs, etc.

Individuals or families who cannot reach the minimum threshold of decent living are considered poor. The inability to secure the goods and services fundamental to their existence should lead the authorities to these individuals to help them materially, financially or through any other social assistance services.

Absolute poverty implies that a person does not have access to meeting fundamental needs (the individual cannot feed himself or wear clean clothes, does not have access to housing etc.). This situation leads the person and his family to a life of many deprivations.

Relative poverty is assessed in relation to the evolution of the society in which the phenomenon is assessed. The new poor are people who were previously able to meet their basic needs, but who, for various reasons, are deprived of access to a socially acceptable way of life. These reasons why a person and his family can fall into poverty are: long-term unemployment, a serious illness, over-indebtedness, the death of a family member, divorce, are some of the causes that generate poverty.⁴

Vulnerability of people at risk of poverty

Romania continues to have the highest risk of poverty in the EU, although between 2008 and 2023 it registered significant progress according to Eurostat data. At national level, the at-risk-of-poverty rate decreased from 44.2% to 32%, as can be seen in the image below (Figure 1).

The Bucharest-Ilfov region has recorded a significant reduction in the at-risk-of-poverty rate, from 34% in 2008 to 12.3% in 2023, due to its accelerated development and its special economic status as the area with the highest standard of living. On the other hand, the North-East

and South-East regions remain the most affected. In the North-East, the poverty rate has decreased substantially, from 55.5% to 38.7%, while in the South-East, progress has been minimal, from 46.7% to 45.3%.

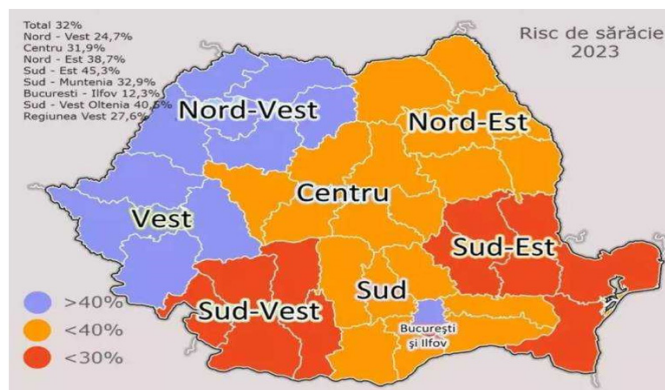


Figure 1 At-risk-of-poverty rate in Romania by development region, 2023(%). Source: Eurostat, 2024.⁵

The South-West Oltenia, North-West, Center and South-Muntenia regions have recorded progress in reducing poverty between 2008 and 2023. South-West Oltenia has decreased from 56.6% to 40.5%, but it remains one of the most affected areas. The North-West (24.7% in 2023) and the Center (31.9% in 2023) had considerable decreases, supported by a diversified economy and European integration. South-Muntenia reduced the poverty rate to 32.9%, but at a slower pace than other regions. Romania recorded a poverty risk rate of 21%, compared to a European average of 21%. Moldova and Oltenia were the regions with the highest risk of poverty, according to data from the European Statistical Office (Eurostat), while at the opposite end, the lowest risk of poverty was in the Bucharest-Ilfov region, where only 2% of residents are in this situation (Figure 2).

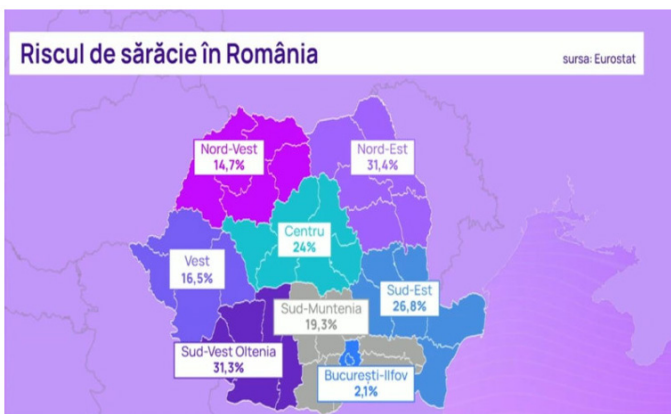
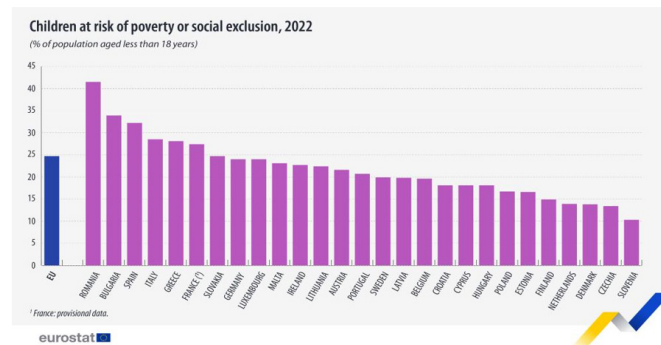


Figure 2 Regional distribution of the risk of poverty in Romania according to Eurostat data (2023). Source: Eurostat, 2024.⁵

In 2024, the percentage of children under 18 in the European Union at risk of poverty and social exclusion decreased to 24.2%, marking a decrease of 0.6% compared to the previous year (24.8%). This positive trend reflects the continuous efforts of EU Member States to combat poverty and improve social conditions for young citizens.

In 2022, at the European Union level, 24.7% of children (around 20 million under 18) were at risk of poverty and social exclusion. Compared to 2021, this percentage increased slightly by 0.3%. In

2022, the highest value was reported in Romania (41.5%), Bulgaria (33.9%) and Spain (32.2%). At the opposite end, Slovenia (10.3%), the Czech Republic (13.4%) and Denmark (13.8%) recorded the lowest percentage (Graph 1).

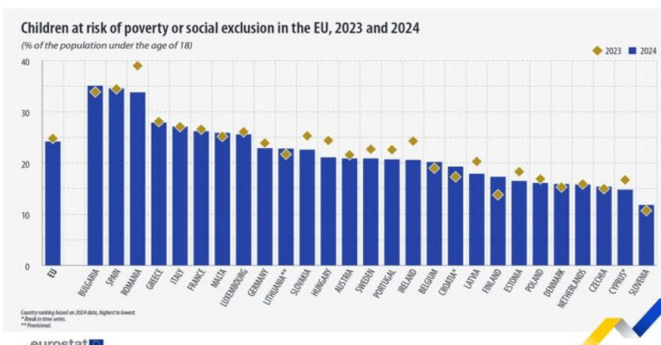


Graph 1 Children at risk of poverty and social exclusion, 2022 Source: ILC_PEPSOIN.⁶

According to data provided by Eurostat on its official Facebook page,⁷ the highest risk values were reported in Bulgaria (35.1%), Spain (34.6%) and Romania (33.8%). These figures indicate that there are still significant challenges, which require additional action to protect vulnerable children in these countries. On the other hand, the lowest values were observed in Slovenia (11.8%), Cyprus (14.8%) and the Czech Republic (15.4%), demonstrating notable progress in these Member States. Slovenia had the lowest percentage of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion of all EU countries included in the report.

- a) Bulgaria: 35.1%
- b) Spain: 34.6%
- c) Romania: 33.8%
- d) Slovenia: 11.8%
- e) Cyprus: 14.8%
- f) Czech Republic: 15.4%.

Among all Member States, Romania achieved the most significant reduction in the risk of poverty and social exclusion in 2024 (-5.2 pp), compared to the previous year 2023 (Graph 2).



Graph 2 Children at risk of poverty and social exclusion in the EU, 2023 and 2024.⁸

In early 2025, the Romanian Ministry of Labor, Family, Youth and Social Solidarity launched the selection process for 2,000 communes that will benefit from funding under the project “Provision of integrated services in rural communities – facilitating access of

vulnerable people to efficient and quality basic services”, with a total budget of 815 million euros, co-financed by the European Union, through the Social Inclusion and Dignity Program 2021 – 2027.⁹ The program, carried out in partnership with the Ministry of Education and Research, the Ministry of Health and the National Agency for Social Payments and Inspection (ANPIS), aims to increase social inclusion and reduce poverty.

Integrated Community Teams (ECIs) consisting of specialists in social assistance, health and education will operate in the 2,000 rural communities, who will find personalized solutions for each beneficiary, according to the Ministry of Labor. The project implementation period will be January 2025 – December 2029. The benefits brought by the project are: the formation of integrated community teams (health, social assistance and education specialists) in 2,000 communes; providing direct support to vulnerable people: food packages, home care services, educational and professional counseling; equipping and arranging spaces for the provision of social services; providing equipment and resources for local specialists; financial support for 200 SPAS employees who wish to pursue higher education in the field of social assistance.

In light of these considerations, the target group of the National Strategy for Inclusion and Poverty Reduction for the period 2022-2027 and the Action Plan for the period 2022-2027 is represented by the group of poor people and people at risk of social exclusion, including people who, due to unforeseen circumstances, are facing transitional situations of poverty or social exclusion.¹⁰

The specific objectives and measures consider the following categories:

People at risk of poverty (AROP)/relative poverty – incomes that are below the threshold of 60% of the median income, expressed per equivalent adult. Thus, the objective is to achieve a reduction in the number of these people by at least 7% by 2027 compared to the reference value for 2020. Simultaneously with the reduction in the number of people in relative poverty, the objective of the Strategy is to reduce the level of income inequality, measured by the Gini index.

People in severe material deprivation (SMD). In 2018, approximately 3.2 million people were in DMS, but given the downward trend (in 2007 approximately 8 million people were in DMS, and in 2016 approximately 4.7 million) the objective is to achieve a reduction in the number of these people by at least 20% compared to the 2020 reference value by 2027.

People living in low work intensity households (LWI). In 2018 approximately 1.1 million people lived in LWI households, the objective for 2027 being to reduce the number of these people by at least 20% compared to the 2020 reference value.

Discussions

The families or individuals that we can consider vulnerable and at increased risk of falling into poverty are:

- i. Children and young people in the period of preparation for reintegration into society after a period of special protection (including those deprived of parental support);
- ii. Elderly people (alone or dependent and/or with long-term care needs); people with disabilities (children and adults);
- iii. People with a low level of education; people living in marginalized urban or rural areas; long-term unemployed;
- iv. Roma people who are direct or indirect victims of discrimination based on ethnic criteria;
- v. Homeless people; people deprived of their liberty; released people, in the period of social reintegration;
- vi. Immigrants in a situation of vulnerability, including asylum seekers and foreigners who have acquired a form of international protection in Romania;
- vii. People who are victims of human trafficking;
- viii. People who use drugs etc.

The National Strategy for Inclusion and Poverty Reduction for the period 2022-2027 granted special attention to people who, due to unforeseen circumstances, are facing transitional situations of monetary poverty (mainly generated by lack of income) or social exclusion.

Conclusions

People may find themselves in several of these situations, as follows: some of the people mentioned above are also in relative poverty and severe material deprivation and may live in a household with low work intensity. They may also be part of the vulnerable groups listed.

Oriented towards investments in people (vulnerable and needy people, children, young people, adults, elderly people, etc.), education and training, social protection and also towards prevention, the Strategy proposes a framework that ensures opportunities and equal opportunities necessary for them to be able to maximize their potential for harmonious personal development, stable insertion in the labor market and active aging and, last but not least, social inclusion.

To reduce the phenomenon of poverty and exclusion among children 0-17 years old, who, similarly to all countries in the European Union, remain the most vulnerable group, the current Strategy continues the simultaneous approach of both child poverty and that of adults in the same household used in the previous Strategy 2015-2020, but emphasizing the transversal promotion of this approach, at the level of all its strategic objectives.

Equally, the Strategy aims, through integrated measures, at results that reflect the reduction of the large gaps between rural and urban areas, as well as social progress in poor areas and socio-economically marginalized communities.

Acknowledgments

None.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares that there is no conflicts of interest.

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