

THE EUROPEAN UNION LONG TERM VISION FOR RURAL AREAS - PROSPECTS FOR BULGARIA

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Abstract

The European Union's long-term vision for rural areas outlined the challenges, opportunities and prospects for rural Europe until 2040. The initiative resulted from a broad discussion among main stakeholders, institutions and the rural community. The CAP strategic plans also contribute to the main priorities of the EU vision. The study aims to outline the main trends in rural areas, focusing on Bulgaria and highlighting recommendations for future balanced and sustainable development of rural territories. The research follows the main action areas set in the strategic paper and analyses tendencies and possible paths until 2040. The results indicate that rural areas are lagging behind in main aspects such as access to essential services, infrastructure, and challenges of depopulation and ageing. In addition, there is a lower quality of life, job opportunities, and career prospects. The balanced development of rural areas requires capacity building based on local community members' participation and increased inclusion to boost innovation implementation and green transition.

Key words: revitalization, rural development, strategic plans, local community

INTRODUCTION

Rural areas are a vital part of the European Union. They are vibrant territories that face many challenges, but have untapped potential for sustainable and balanced development. In order to transform and continue to have an important role in ensuring income, employment and food security, maintaining ecosystems and biodiversity, the European Commission presented a long-term vision for the EU's rural areas by 2040 [11]. The document highlighted the future of these territories and their importance in society.

The rural regions in the EU are diverse, and so are the challenges they face [9]. In the context of global issues, rural areas are part of the academic and political discussions [3, 30]. A common approach to rural policy at the European level is needed. Several studies have explored various aspects of the rural region's potential for generation renewal, implementation of digital technologies and achieving a green and just transition [1, 10, 24, 27, 28, and 32].

As part of multicultural Europe, Bulgarian rural areas have their features and specifics. Different researches outlined the trends and perspectives for rural Bulgaria [2, 4, 7, 20, 22, 25, 26, and 33]. The new rural vision of the EU represents an essential step toward a green future and opportunities for Bulgarian rural areas to address the emerging challenges.

The study aims to outline the main trends in rural areas, focusing on Bulgaria and highlighting recommendations for future balanced and sustainable development of rural territories.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study follows the main action areas set in the strategic document of the EU "A long-term vision for the EU's rural areas", and analyses tendencies and possible paths for these territories until 2040. Therefore, the survey is based on the Eurostat methodology [17].

Regulation (EC) No 1059/2003 and Regulation (EU) 2017/2391 set up the common classification of territorial units for statistics and territorial typologies.

The survey is based on the definition provided by EUROSTAT “for urban-rural typology (predominantly urban regions, intermediate regions, predominantly rural regions) and the degree of urbanisation (cities, towns, suburbs and rural areas)” [18].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In order to ensure the sustainable development of rural areas in the EU, the European Commission launched the EU Rural Vision based on the debate between main stakeholders, institutions and the rural community. It outlines “ten shared goals, summarised by four areas of action, embodying a long-term vision for stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040”. [11]

In 2021, the Rural Pact was established as part of the EU's long-term vision for rural areas.

The Pact was complemented by a Rural Action Plan, which includes four building blocks and nine initiatives [12].

The survey observes these four areas of action, with a focus on Bulgarian prospects and opportunities.

Stronger rural areas

Rural depopulation and the issues with generation renewal are key challenges in rural areas. Therefore, population distribution based on the degree of urbanisation and urban-rural typology is important in shaping rural policies. Germany has 83 million inhabitants in the EU and is the most populous country. By contrast, the least population is registered in Malta (around 500,000 inhabitants) [17].

Based on the Eurostat data [17], in 2021, 39% of the EU population is concentrated in the cities, followed by those living in towns and suburbs (37%) and rural areas (25%).

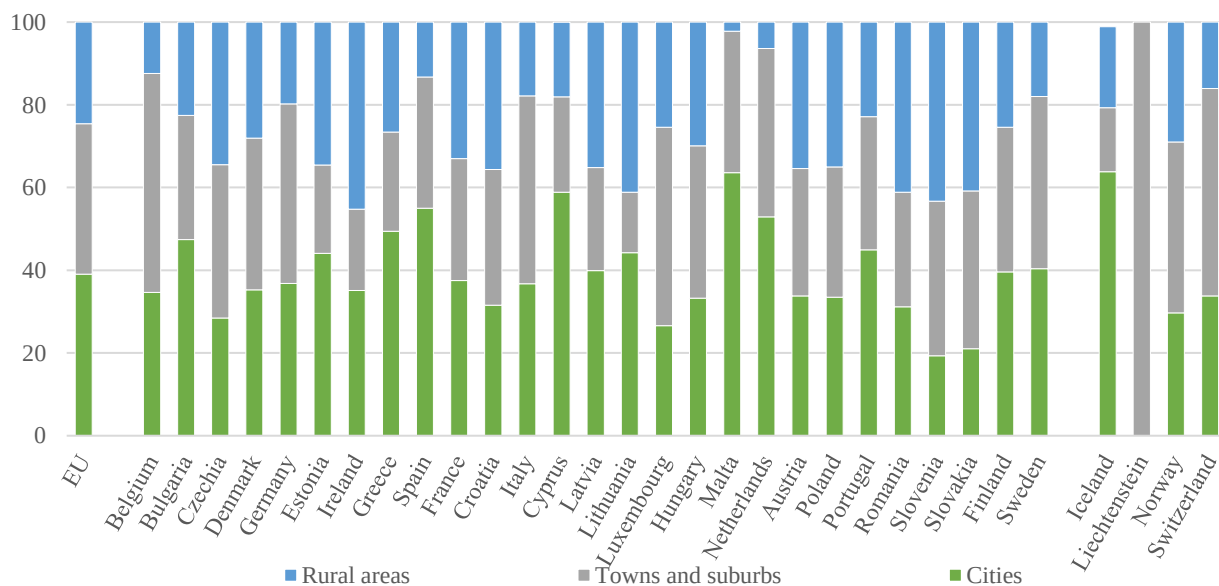


Fig. 1. Distribution of population by degree of urbanization (% share of total population, 2021)
Source: [17].

Population distribution based on urban-rural classification across urban, intermediate, and rural areas differs significantly across European countries. The highest concentration of city inhabitants is found in Malta (63%), Cyprus (59%), Spain (55%), and the Netherlands (53%). The rural areas are home to 45% of Ireland's population, followed by Slovenia, Lithuania, and Romania. Towns have the largest share of residents in Belgium,

Luxembourg, and Italy. In Bulgaria, 47% of the population is in cities, while 22% live in rural areas, according to the degree of urbanization [17].

Eurostat data [17] indicates that 38% of people live in predominantly urban areas, while 21% are in predominantly rural.

Apart from Malta, where the entire country is urbanized, the Netherlands has the highest share of residents in predominantly urban

territories (78%). In contrast, over half of Ireland and Slovenia's citizens live in predominantly rural regions. Hungary and Latvia have the most significant proportion of people residing in intermediate regions, a trend also recorded in Bulgaria. In the country, more than 80% of the population is included in this category, while 17% lives in predominantly rural areas [17].

It can be concluded that most people are concentrated in cities and towns, while rural regions face challenges such as depopulation and migration.

The educational level is crucial for achieving social and economic development [14]. Education investments are considered one of the most essential in developing human resources and capital [31].

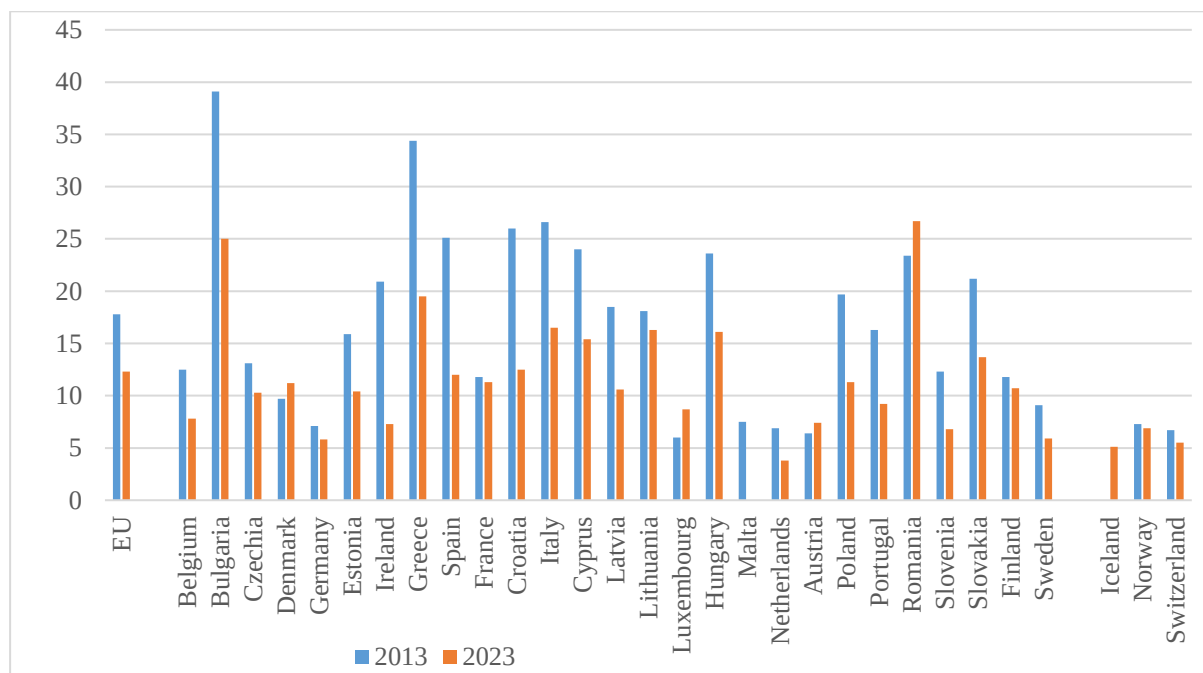


Fig. 2. Young people neither in employment nor in education and training in rural areas
Source: [17].

According to EU data [17], many young people between 15 and 29 are outside the labour force. The European pillar of social rights highlights the essential indicator that people are “not employed or are not in education and training (NEET)” [17].

In 2023, 11% of all young people in the EU are neither in employment nor in education and training. The indicator is higher in rural areas (12%) and towns and suburbs compared to cities (10%) [17].

Regarding gender – the NEET is higher for females (12%) than males (10%). This trend is observed in all three categories based on the degree of urbanisation. However, the most significant difference is registered in rural areas (4.1 points) [17].

There were three EU countries where the share of people neither in employment nor in education and training was higher among

young males than young females in 2023. In Estonia, Belgium and Portugal, the tendencies are reversed, and the NEET rate is higher for young males, while there is no difference in Spain and Finland. In Eastern Europe, the most significant gender gaps in this direction are in Czechia, Romania, Hungary and Poland. In Bulgaria, the difference is 6.1 points [17].

In 2023, the highest rates of NEET are in Romania, Italy and Greece. The share is particularly high among young females living in rural areas, especially in Romania (35%), Bulgaria (28%) and Greece (22%) [17].

The results show that the higher share of the indicators is recorded not only in rural areas but also in cities and towns. However, in rural territories the biggest difference based on gender is observed. Therefore, serious investments and targeted policy measures are needed.

The comparison of the NEET rate between 2013-2023 shows a decline of 4.9 percentage points at the EU level. The reduction is registered in all urbanization levels: rural (-5 points), towns (-4.8 points) and cities (-4.2 points).

Only Germany, Luxembourg, and Austria did increase their share of NEET. In Lithuania, there was growth in the indicator for suburbs and towns. On the other hand, it has risen in rural Romania.

The highest decrease of NEET is recorded in Greece (-14.9 points in rural areas), Bulgaria (-12.1 points), Ireland (-13.6 points.).

Although there are positive trends in Bulgarian rural regions observed for 2013-2023, in Bulgaria and Romania, the share of NEET rate is two times higher than the EU- average. In addition, the biggest difference between the indicator in cities and rural areas is registered. The NEET rate as a vital indicator for the renewal and revitalisation of rural areas shows challenging trends in Bulgaria.

Connected rural areas

Digitalisation and digital technologies give opportunities for new business models, job creation, and connection beyond location [8]. However, issues are also linked with this digital transformation that must be considered.

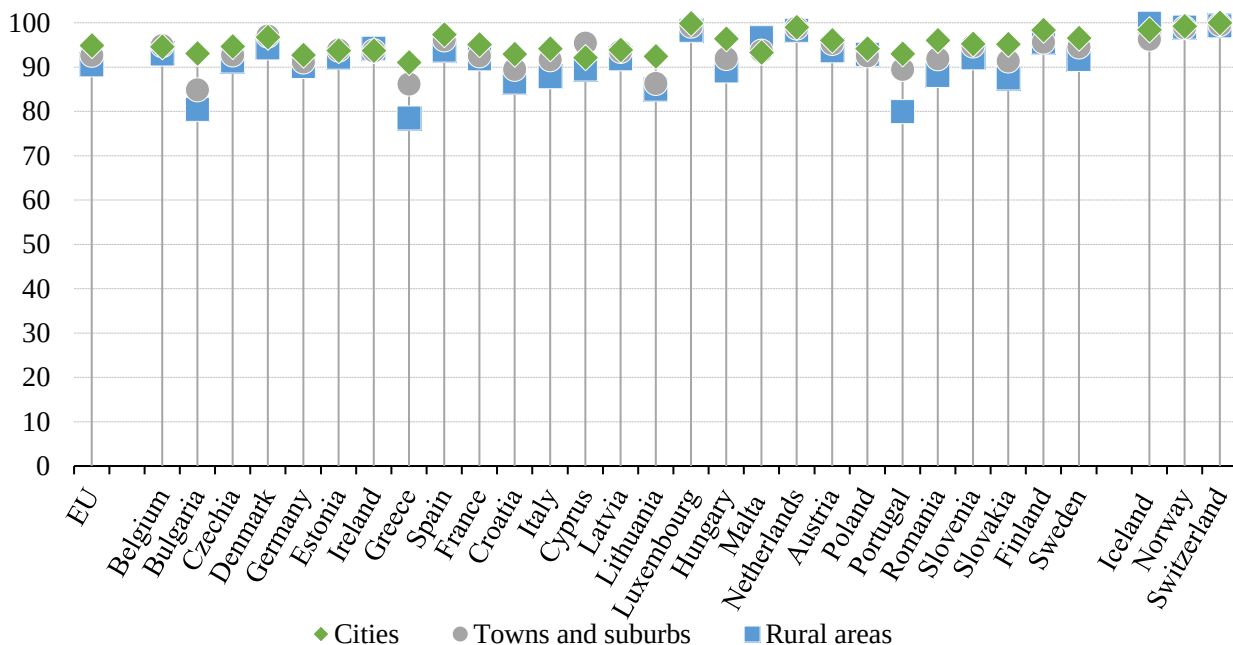


Fig. 3. Households with internet access, by degree of urbanisation, 2023
Source: [17].

The number of households in the EU connected to the Internet is an important indicator in the field of digitalization. The share has increased in recent years [17].

In 2023, 93.1% of the households in the EU have internet access - the share is slightly higher in cities (95%) compared to towns and suburbs (93%) and rural areas (91%).

In most EU countries, the highest share of households with internet access is observed in cities. The most significant level is recorded in Luxembourg (99.9%) and the Netherlands (99%).

In Malta (96%) and Ireland (94%), rural households have the highest internet access. On the other hand, there are countries with a lower share of rural areas, Portugal (80%) and Greece (79%). In Bulgaria, the indicator is 81%, around 10 points lower than the EU average.

The data shows positive trends, however, Bulgarian rural areas lag behind the average EU results.

Digital skills are currently part of everyday life and crucial for today's labour market and job opportunities [15].

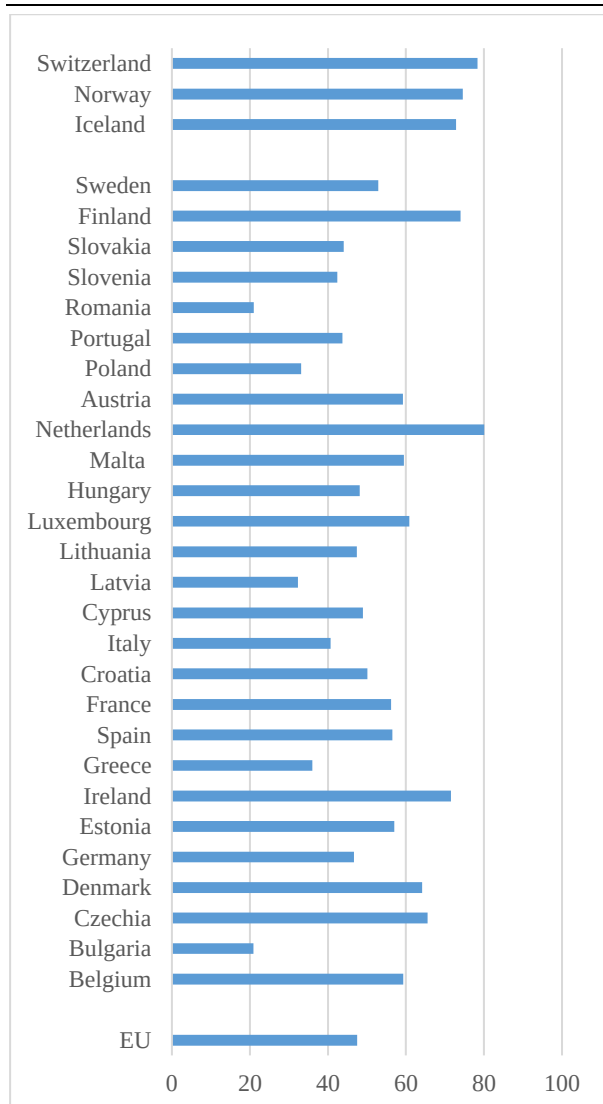


Fig 4. Share of population (16–74 years) with at least basic overall digital skills in rural areas, 2023 (%)
Source: [17].

The EU policy is directed toward developing digital skills and society. It has set a target "at least 80% of people aged 16–74 years should have at least basic digital skills by 2030." [16]. According to Eurostat [17], in 2023, almost 90% of EU citizens had at least basic communication and collaboration digital skills. The share is higher in cities (more than 91%) compared to rural territories (85%). In 2023 [17], 56% of the EU population have at least basic overall digital skills, a 24 points lower target for 2030. The results show that the set goal is ambitious and unlikely to be achieved in the following years. The share is

higher in cities (63%) compared to towns and suburbs (53%) and in rural areas (48%).

According to Eurostat data [17], in almost all Member-States, the highest indicator level is recorded in cities except Belgium, Ireland and Cyprus.

In Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands are registered the greatest level of the indicator in the cities – Finland (89%), the Netherlands (84%), and Denmark (77%). By contrast, the lowest share is observed in Romania (38%) and Bulgaria (46%) [17].

In 2023, the share of people with basic digital skills is the highest in Finland, the Netherlands and Ireland. The lowest level is indicated in Bulgaria and Romania, around 21%.

The data show serious challenges related to digital skills in Bulgaria's rural areas. In addition, the country is lagging behind the EU average in the other two categories based on the degree of urbanization.

Depopulation, age structure, and generation renewal are only part of the challenge. Bulgaria is facing a number of issues related to digitalization, especially in agriculture and rural areas [4].

Resilient rural areas

Rural areas, as part of the EU's ambitious vision for green transformation and just transition, have to be resilient to climate change and economic crises and to ensure equal rights and social protection to all citizens of the EU.

Despite the support provided by the European social model, 21% of the EU population remained at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2023 [17]. According to Eurostat data [17], between 2015 and 2019, this rate declined, but the COVID-19 crisis in 2020 caused a slight increase. In the following years, 2021 and 2022, mixed trends are noticed, while 2023 registered a decline in the indicator.

Eurostat data for 2023 [17] shows no significant differences between categories; the indicator is around 22%. While the disparities at the EU level are relatively minor, there are notable contrasts among member states.

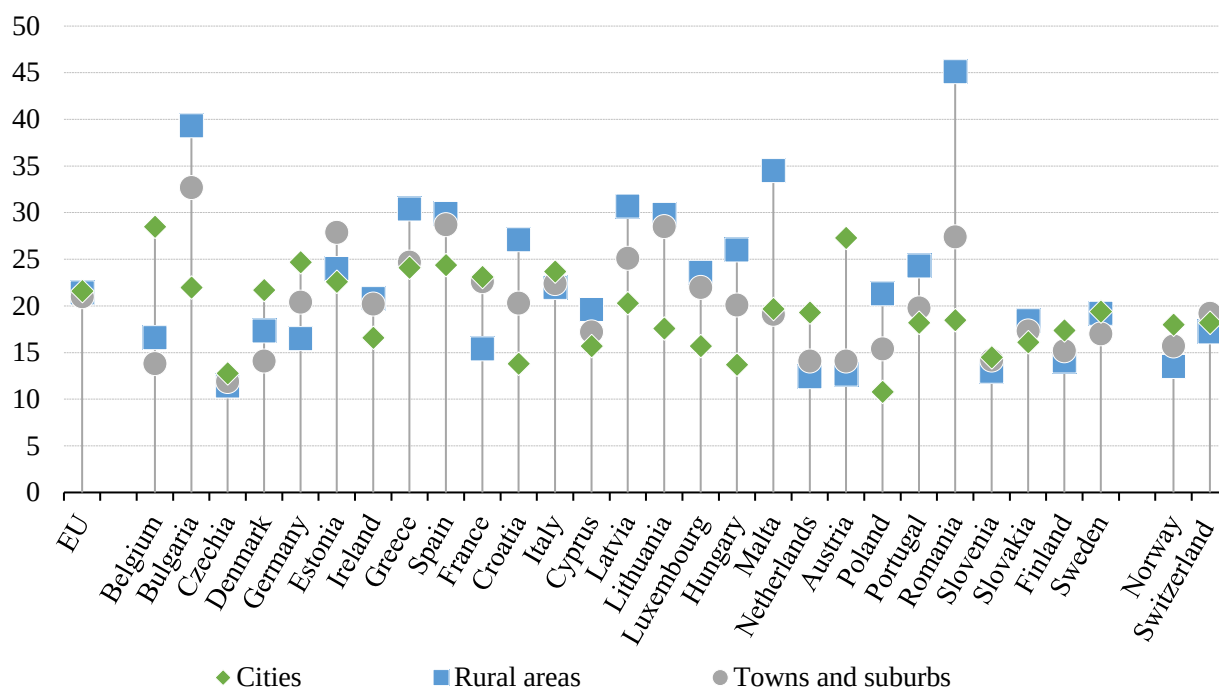


Fig. 5. People at risk of poverty or social exclusion, 2023
Source: [17].

In Romania, the share of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion is 27 points bigger in rural territories compared to the considerably lower level in cities. The tendencies are similar in Bulgaria, where the rate is 17 points higher in rural territories than individuals in the cities.

The highest level of the indicators is observed in the rural areas of eastern and southern countries, such as Romania (45%) and Bulgaria (39%) [17].

The reverse trends are registered in some Western and Scandinavian countries, where the most considerable risk of poverty or social exclusion shares are in the cities. Belgium, Germany, and Austria are among the Member states with the most substantial share of the population at risk of poverty or social exclusion in cities.

The lowest indicator level in cities is observed in Ireland, Romania and Poland, while in the towns and suburbs, the share of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion is the lowest in Czechia, Denmark and Belgium. The smallest rate in rural areas is recorded in Czechia, Denmark, Austria and Finland.

The results in Romania and Bulgaria outline the contrasts between cities and rural regions. The data indicate a low capacity for boosting

economic potential, which leads to higher poverty and inequality [5].

The uneven income distribution can hinder economic development and lead to various negative processes, such as higher levels of unemployment and a bigger share of the population at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

According to Eurostat [17], in 2023, almost 20% of people in the EU had an income of at least 150% of the median income. The most unequal was the distribution in cities (24%) compared to towns and suburbs (18%) and rural areas (14%). The data indicates that the most significant inequalities are recorded in the cities.

In Romania (37%), Bulgaria (36%), and Lithuania (34%), the level of inequality in the cities is the highest [17]. The indicator is not the biggest in the cities, only in five Member-states. In Ireland, Malta and Latvia, the uneven distribution is concentrated mainly in towns, while in the Netherlands, the most significant level is registered for people living in rural territories.

Gender equality and the gender pay gap are crucial aspects of social resilience and significant global challenges.

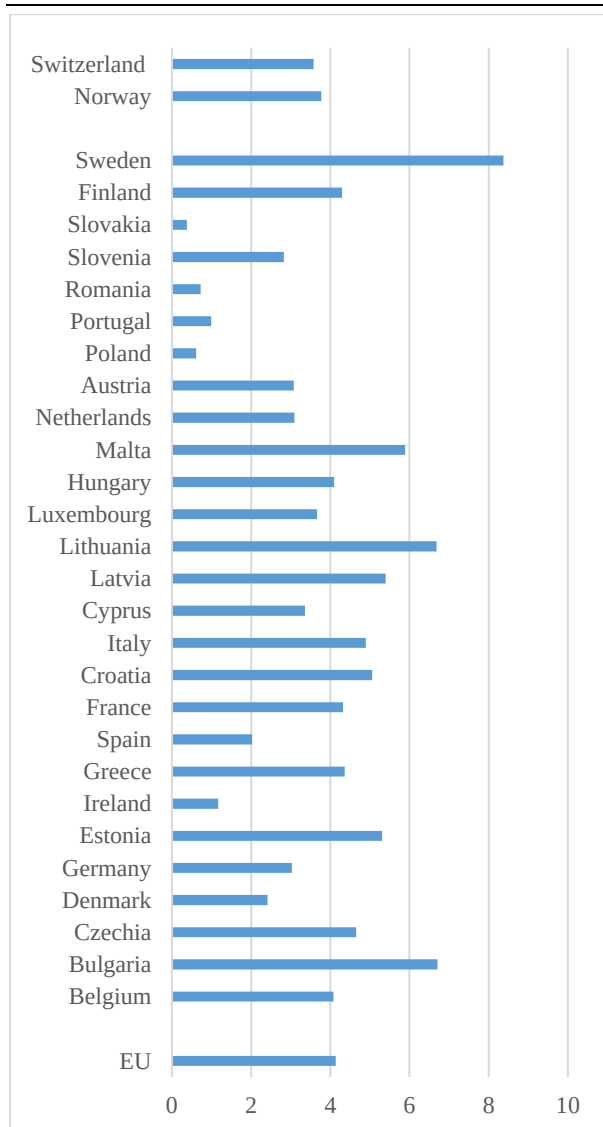


Fig. 6. Gender gap for median equivalised net income in rural regions, 2023 (%)
Source: [17].

Considerable progress has been achieved in fostering gender equality in the labour market, with the EU playing a key role in advancing women's rights and opportunities [19, 23, and 29].

All Member-states share the commitment and prioritize the reduction of the gender pay gap. The Directive 2006/54/EC on equal opportunities and treatment of men and women is the right step towards fair opportunities. According to Eurostat data [17], in 2023, the median equalised net income for males was €20 867 compared to €19,858 for females. The

figure 6 represents an average rate that includes the total population, also the unemployed, and gives different insight than gender pay gap statistics.

The indicator in the EU average shows a slight difference in the three categories based on urban typology.

In all Member-states, median equivalised net incomes for males are higher than for females. Only in Slovakia the trend is reversed, and the indicator for females was bigger than for males.

The most significant gaps are registered in the three Baltic countries and Hungary among the cities' population. The indicator is the highest in towns and suburbs in Latvia, Lithuania and Czechia. In rural areas, the differences between median equivalised net incomes for males and females are the smallest. However, the indicators are highest in Sweden, Bulgaria, and the Netherlands. By contrast, the differences are the slightest in Slovakia, Poland and Romania [17].

The data shows that the gender gap is the smallest in rural areas, a positive trend indicating more equal opportunities for males and females.

Prosperous rural areas

Economic development is a major aspect of revitalising rural areas. The EU's cohesion policy is focused on supporting the lagging regions [13].

GDP per inhabitant (PPS) is a key measure of economic development, growth, and living standards [35].

In 2021, GDP/inhabitant in the EU in predominantly urban territories is 28% higher than the indicator in intermediate and predominantly rural areas.

Most member states, predominantly urban territories, record the highest GDP/per capita. However, Austria is an exception, where GDP/inhabitant in intermediate was 2% higher than in predominantly urban areas.

At the EU level, GDP/inhabitants in predominantly urban areas is 1.65 times greater than in rural regions [17].

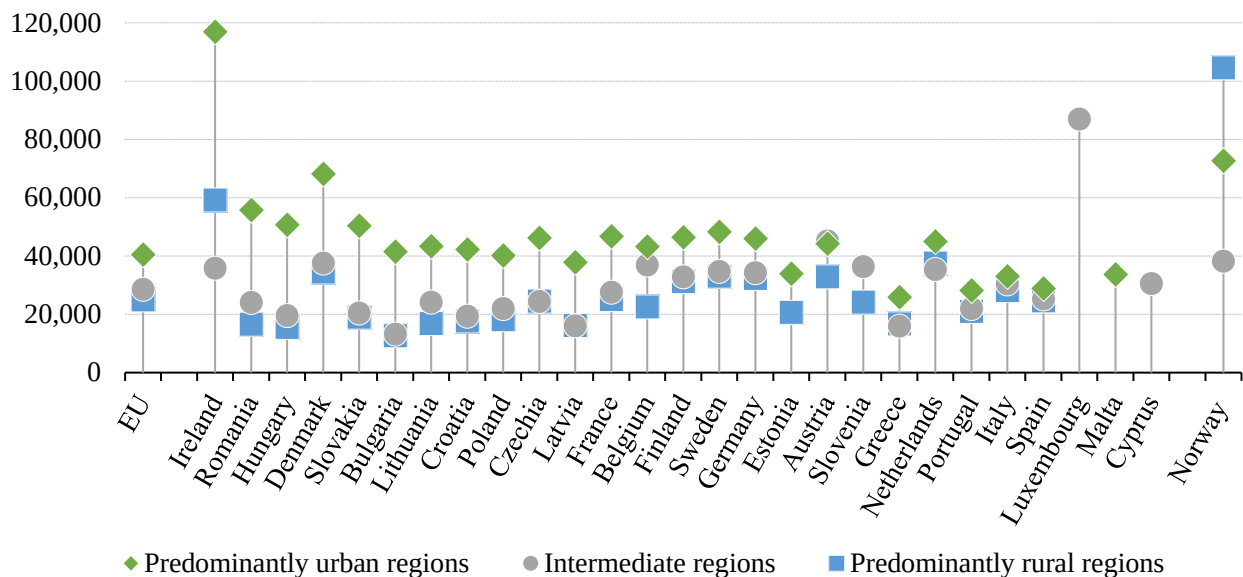


Fig. 7. GDP per inhabitant, 2021 (PPS)
Source: [17].

Significant intraregional disparities are outlined in some member states. In Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary, GDP per capita in urban regions is more than three times higher than in rural areas. Conversely, the smallest

differences are observed in Portugal, Austria, the Netherlands, and Italy, where GDP per capita in urban territories is only 1.4 times bigger than in rural regions [17].

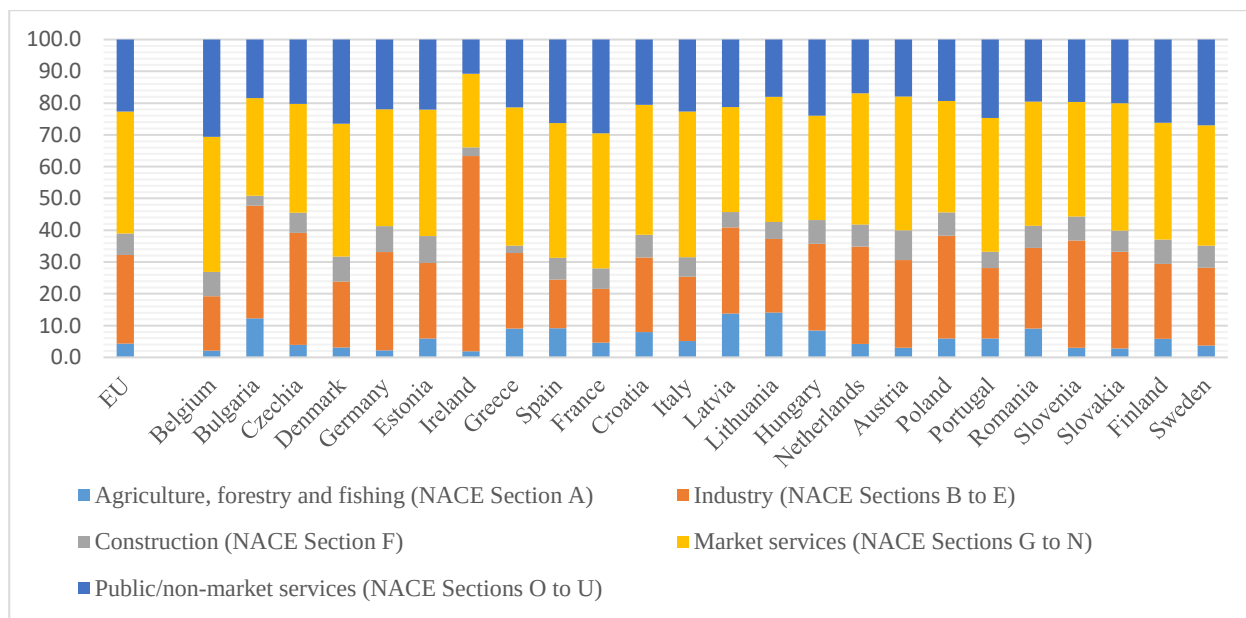


Fig. 8. Gross value added in predominantly rural areas, 2021
Source: [17].

The gross value added by sectors is also an important indicator of the regional economy structure. The analysis is based on the NACE methodology [17]. According to Eurostat data [17], the market services dominate GVA in the EU in all three categories based on urban-rural

typology. The sector plays a crucial role in urban regions, generating 58% of the GVA. On the other hand, agriculture, forestry and fishing account for the most significant part of GVA in rural areas. They have the highest share in Latvia (14.1%), Lithuania (13.8%) and

Bulgaria (12.3%) [17]. In Bulgarian rural regions, industry is the most important in generating GVA (35%). However, the sector accounts for more than 65% of GVA in Ireland [17]. The main reasons for the observed trends are related to the pharmaceutical companies in the Irish rural areas. In Ireland, Bulgaria, and Czechia, the industry is leading in the rural economy, while market services have the biggest share in the other Member-states. In Bulgaria, rural tourism is also important in generating the GVA [34]. Based on the results, it can be summarized that agriculture still plays an important role in the Bulgarian rural economy. The sector is the main source of income and employment.

Prospects and scenarios for Bulgarian rural areas

Rural areas are vital for the sustainability and green transformation of the EU. In addition to maintaining biodiversity and ecosystems, rural territories care for the country's heritage, traditions, and culture.

In Bulgaria, rural areas are facing a number of challenges. Policy efforts have to be well-targeted and directed to overcome the current issues. The EU published a report [6] as a starting point for debate on rural development and implementation of the long-term vision for rural areas.

The report highlighted four scenarios in this regard: (1) Rurbanities scenario is linked to limited governance coordination, less cohesion and more diverse population with a lack of sense of local community (2) Rural renewal scenario is associated with sustainable solutions, bioeconomy and circular economy development (3) Rural connections scenario is related to declining population and establishment of rural hubs with digital infrastructure, agricultural digitalisation and implementation of precision technologies. (4) The Rural specialisation scenario is linked to structural transformation, lower economic and social possibilities, declining population and land concentration in a few large stakeholders. These future paths have advantages and disadvantages. The scenarios are imaginary tools that could support better policy solutions and help to avoid the negative processes related to their characteristics. As for Bulgaria, all the

scenarios are possible paths. However, Rural specialisation and Rural renewal scenarios are closer to Bulgarian reality. Both of the paths have negative effects on local communities and agricultural development. On the other hand, [21] outline four models of rural development. The first is a sectoral, followed by a multisectoral approach prioritising agriculture. The territorial model highlights broader cooperation in the rural economy, while the local model considers regional differences and local features. The local approach is at the heart of the new CAP strategic plans and outlines sustainable and balanced rural development opportunities. However, the new model requires building administrative capacity, better coordination, and cooperation among different governance levels.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the analysis, some conclusions can be highlighted:

- (1) Key indicators related to the EU's Long-term rural vision show serious differences between Bulgaria and the EU average. Bulgarian rural areas are lagging in terms of social and economic development.
- (2) Agriculture is still the main sector in the Bulgarian rural economy. Therefore, it is essential to implement sustainable practices and digital solutions proposed by the new CAP 2023-2027
- (3) Better coordination and improved administrative capacity are crucial drivers for boosting the rural economy and addressing the gaps related to skills and education.
- (4) Local models linked to the Pillar II Strategic plans are important steps towards overcoming the emerging issues. However, they require a clear vision for rural areas and better coordination among main stakeholders.

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