Geographical polarization of sustainable welfare in Romania: The unbearable lightness of inequality of opportunity

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Abstract

Overall living conditions improved significantly in Romania during 2010-2020, even though over the entire period Romania has been one of the countries with the highest income inequality, poverty and social exclusion rates among the EU member states. Many research and policy analyses pointed out the improvements in social outcomes, as success stories of the economic and social reforms in Romania, despite the poor results from a European comparative perspective. Yet, starting with 2015, the number of those warning about concerning disparities between rural and urban areas increased. However, no systematic analyses focused on the dynamics of these geographical disparities. Thus, the paper proposes an analysis of the dynamics of the disparities between rural communities and cities. It argues that high and consistently growing disparities in all welfare indicators between these two extreme residential types can be better understood, explained, and addressed by applying the concept of geographical polarization to sustainable welfare. The paper provides a broad overview of the determinants of the growing polarization of sustainable welfare. It argues that European and national strategies have been crucial in guiding the social reforms in Romania, but not enough to prevent substantial loss of opportunities. The fast-paced transition to a market economy and to European institutions sparked an uneven and opportunistic development of its social policy framework. Finally, the concept of polarization of sustainable welfare, intimately linked to that of inequality of opportunities, allows a change of narrative and, therefore, also a change in focus regarding the need for social intervention, from remedial re-distributive measures and policies to strategies of enhancing individual and collective capabilities to sustain welfare over time.

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Introduction

Between 2010 and 2020, overall living conditions improved in Romania. Poverty and social exclusion indicators improved, access to health care improved, level of educational attainment increased, the proportion of early leavers decreased, housing conditions improved, and cost overburden decreased. In addition, unemployment decreased, while employment rates increased, and the structure and quality of employment improved. However, many research and policy papers acknowledged the existence of significant disparities between rural and urban areas in Romania regarding the wellbeing of the population and its sustainability over this period. However, not many analyses are available regarding the dynamics of these disparities in the context of the overall improvements of the living conditions of the Romanian population.

Starting from the observation that the differences between rural areas and big cities, not only persisted over the entire period between 2010 and 2020, but the gap between these widened constantly, the paper aims to document the evolution of the differences in social indicators between rural and urban areas, and the risks associated with this, by using the concept of geographical polarization of sustainable welfare. Polarization between big cities and rural communities result in unequal opportunities, which further enforces these differences, increasing the probability of a two-tier society.

Further, the paper explores the causes underlying this process of geographical polarization in sustainable welfare. Some of these are related to the institutional arrangements, while others are related to the European and national strategies and the policies which result from these. The paper argues that the specific targets and indicators of the European strategy Europe 2020 adopted in 2010, respectively of Romania's Sustainable Development Strategy adopted in 2018, could not prevent a substantial loss of opportunities for many social groups, communities and even regions.

Finally, the paper discusses possible directions of intervention to prevent the further widening of the gap between rural and urban areas and to mitigate existing horizontal inequities, in the context of the new directions set by the European Union, the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and as a result of the energy crisis due to the Ukrainian war.

The first section explores the concepts of geographical polarization and inequality of opportunities and presents the methodological approach to the objectives of the paper.

The second section discusses Romanian disparities in poverty and social protection indicators in the broader European context and sets the stage for the analysis of the dynamics of these indicators by residential area.

The third section provides an overview of the geographical polarization of poverty, social exclusion, housing deprivation, employment opportunities, access to health and

education. This section argues that disparities along all these dimensions, when presenting the same evolution – i.e., persistent and constantly increasing –, convert into geographical polarization in welfare.

The fourth section discusses the role played by the social policy-making framework – i.e., European and national strategic documents – in making social measures fail in preventing welfare polarization.

Section five explores the possible causes for these developments, considering historical structural and policy related variables.

Finally, the sixth section suggests a few directions for social policy interventions, which might be able to provide sustainable welfare strategies.

Conceptual and methodological framework

Geographical disparities, polarization, and inequality of opportunities

The concept of *territorial disparities* is usually powerful enough to assess the differences between regions or residential areas along a single dimension. Social policy analyses use inequalities most frequently in relation to income, certain material resources and access to social services in order to assess the impact and outcomes of certain policy measures and, finally, the adequacy and quality of social protection provided to different groups or social categories. Thus, territorial disparity is about the unequal provision of benefits or access to resources across regions or residential areas, pointing to horizontal inequities. This is particularly important when assessing different types of social policies and programs such as health care provision, education or programs targeting low-income households, and ensuring that benefits and services reach all those in need of these/ entitled to receive these disregarding their geographical position.

When geographical disparities multiply, tend to stabilize and, most importantly, increase over long periods of time, the contrast between certain regions/residential areas becomes evident. Thus, when the contrasts, rather than single specific inequalities, become an access barrier to wellbeing, then the *concept of polarization* becomes methodologically more appropriate.

The concept of polarization was traditionally used in political theories to signal divisions along ideological lines between individuals, societal groups, or political parties, and adopted by sociologists to assess social fragmentation and division (for a literature review, see Bauer, 2019). The concept is associated with two important characteristics: segregation of positions (i.e., divisions) and divergent, eventually irreconcilable interests (i.e., potential conflict). Thus, the concept of polarization describes a situation of concentrated extreme and contrasting positions. Usually, under these circumstances, people belonging to a group are unable to communicate or interact effectively with people from another group with contrasting characteristics.

For example, the concentration of multiple deprivations, in a certain area, results in marginalized communities and poverty pockets but not necessarily in polarization. Polarization starts when a similar concentration of the opposites is identified. The

implications for policy making are obviously different; while in the first situation policy measures attempt to desegregate communities and put in place positive discrimination/remedial policies to help regain equality of chances, in the second situation policy measures aim at tackling those structural factors which hamper systematic access to benefits and services for some and increase access for others, and design policies to prevent horizontal inequities.

However, both social exclusion/marginalization and welfare polarization are related to another significant concept: *inequality of opportunities*. Inequality of opportunities signals a situation in which one is 'caught' into a reality, which predicts the chances of sustainable wellbeing of the person, more than its own abilities, effort, or educational level. As Max Ross puts it when discussing the globalization of inequalities (Ross, 2019), "inequality of opportunity means that what matters most for your living conditions is the good or bad luck of your place of birth." In liberal political theories, equipping all with the capabilities to compete on equal terms and exerting free choice regarding one's future income and wealth, results in equality of opportunities which, in turn, is a prerequisite for a more equal and fair society. Unequal opportunity and income/wealth inequality reinforce each other, creating a vicious cycle of accumulated disadvantages (European Commission, 2017).

This approach entirely changes the policy making process, redirecting intervention towards tampering inequalities while focusing on social and not individual welfare. But while equality of opportunity is crucial for the political discourse when arguing about the possible negative effects of high-income inequality, the concept is not easily measurable and assessable without using counterfactuals (Van de Gaer, D., Ramos, X., 2020). Thus, income inequality becomes the best proxy for policy making. *Income inequality* undercuts economic performance, lowers demand, increases instability, and threatens the ultimate principles of democracy (Stiglitz, 2015).

The 2008 crisis uncovered all the latent effects of inequality, reflected in high polarization among social groups, regions, and communities. Accumulated disadvantages of various social groups made the effects of the 2008 crisis linger, revealing the invisible part of the iceberg. High inequality was, ultimately, the main cause of an incomplete and slow recovery from the 2008 economic crisis around the world (Stiglitz, 2015) but also within the EU (Stiglitz, 2020).

Both high inequality and economic decline were linked to social polarization, with possible long-term effects on individual strategies. Stewart et al. (2020) shows that high inequality leads to in-groups, risk averse strategies on behalf of the less well-off, which offer lower rewards for success compared to out-group interactions.

This is the reason for choosing, to serve the underlying analysis, the concept of geographical polarization of sustainable welfare rather than that of multiple disparities. The paper attempts to present differences in social and economic outcomes between rural administrative units and big cities as contrasting and divergent realities which become, over time, more extreme, threatening equal chances for sustainable wellbeing for rural residents. Polarization, unlike multiple disparities, can initiate vicious cycles, by encouraging in-group strategies. Thus, if "we are concerned about equality of opportunity

tomorrow, we need to be concerned about inequality of outcome today" (Atkinson, 2015, p.11). In fact, as Stewart et al. (2020) shows that even when triggers of polarization fade away, polarization may persist 'by choice'.

Methodological approach

For the purposes of the current analysis, geographical polarization is defined as a concentration of opposing characteristics related to sustainable welfare in rural communities and big cities.[2]

The choice of these two endpoint clusters on the scale of the degree of urbanization was determined by the configuration of Romanian administrative units. In 2010,[3] almost all Romanians were living either in cities (i.e., 36%) or rural areas (63%). The proportion of people living in rural areas was by far the highest across all EU member states, more than 2 times higher than the EU average. Only 1.1% of the population was living, in 2010, in towns and suburbs. In 2020, their proportion increased to 27.2%, with people migrating mainly from rural areas but also from more dense urban centers. Finally, in 2020, about 43% of the population was living in rural areas and 29% in cities.

The choice for focusing not only on welfare, but on sustainability of welfare, is justified by the different policy implications of this approach; focusing on welfare will emphasize the static approach, favoring redistributive remedial strategies, while focusing on the sustainability of welfare will emphasize a dynamic approach, centered on the acquisition of capabilities (Sen, A., 1985) and long-term thinking. While approaches to sustainable welfare are extremely diverse (see O'Mahony, 2022, for a detailed literature review), the paper adheres to the perspective adopted by the Stiglitz-Sen-Fittousi commission: the difference between current wellbeing and sustainable wellbeing lies in the stock of capital (natural, physical, human, social) on which the persistence of wellbeing over time depends (Stiglitz et al., 2009).

The characteristics considered to describe – in broad general terms – sustainable welfare, refer to monetary income, poverty, social exclusion, material deprivation, employment status, educational attainment level, health status, housing conditions and affordability. Thus, the polarization of sustainable welfare is thought of as a multidimensional concept. Finally, the choice of the variables is partially constrained by the available data broken down by the degree of urbanization from the European living conditions and labor force surveys.[4]

Further, the concept of polarization also has a statistical meaning. Due to the configuration of the breakdown variable, polarization along each individual dimension will be measured by comparing the difference in the concentration of each characteristic used

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[2] As defined by the Eurostat classification of communities by their degree of urbanization are cities (with high living density), towns and suburbs and rural areas, see https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/degree-of-urbanisation/methodology.

[3] Eurostat database, SILC-survey, ilc_lvho01.

[4] Eurostat database, SILC and ELFS.

to describe individual welfare (i.e., its frequency) in the two, end-point residential clusters[5], to the incidence of the characteristics in the overall population.

Thus, using the concept of geographical polarization of sustainable welfare in describing the evolution of the most important social policy outcome indicators, the paper proposes a new perspective in identifying causes underlying the current disparities and inequalities in welfare between big urban and rural areas. This triggers a different approach towards preventive and remedial intervention.

Finally, the analysis will focus on the period of 2010-2019. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a series of temporary measures were adopted that modified, up to a certain extent, the pre-pandemic trends. An analysis of these latter measures, as well as that of the most recently adopted measures addressing the impact of the economic and social crisis generated by the Ukrainian war are beyond the scope of this paper.

While the chosen approach is not statistically watertight, its shortcomings are overridden by the convenience of using aggregated data. While the paper pleads for the usefulness of the concept of polarization of sustainable welfare, the concept requires further theoretical substantiation.

Social inequalities in the broader European context: Stating a hidden social problem

Romania is a country marked by significant contrasts in both economic and social sectors (World Bank, 2018). Despite the many positive developments resulting from social reforms triggered by national and European strategic documents, inequalities between rural and urban areas and regional disparities not only persisted but also increased during 2010-2020. However, the visible improvements in the economic situation and overall social welfare were only the peak of the iceberg.

J. Stiglitz points out the growing inequalities and great divides which accompanied the increase in economic wealth over the past half of the century, a period which should have been one of shared prosperity (Stiglitz, 2015). In his manifesto for a reinvention of European rules, Stiglitz emphasizes that "the economy is not an end but a means to an end" (Stiglitz, 2020, p. 3) and that "societies that are more equal produce more sustainable economic growth and demonstrate greater political stability" (Stiglitz, 2020, p. 213).

Blanchet, Chancel and Gethin (2019) provide a longitudinal perspective (1980-2017) on inequalities across Europe and European countries by trying to identify winners and losers of the overall European growth, and how different income groups and countries have been affected by taxes and transfers. Their analysis shows that during the period of 1980-2017 inequality across Europe did not decrease; while the difference between Eastern Europe and the overall European average in 2017 was similar to that before the fall of the USSR (35% below the European average), per adult income in Southern European States declined concomitantly with an increase in income of the Northern European countries (Blanchet, Chancel, & Gethin, 2019, p. 4).

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[5] Out of the three clusters based on the degree of urbanization. The two endpoint clusters are cities and rural areas.

Furthermore, evidence points to an increase in inequalities within most of the European countries, due both to the less wealthy getting poorer and to the wealthy getting even more rich. "In the 1980s, the average disposable income of the richest 10% was around seven times higher than that of the poorest 10%; today, it is around 9 ½ times higher", states the OECD COPE report on socio-economic division in Europe (OECD Centre for Opportunity and Equality, 2017, p. 7). Overall, in the OECD-EU countries, including countries traditionally more egalitarian, the Gini coefficient increased, on average, by 7% over the period 1980-2014, from 0.28 to 0.3 (OECD Centre for Opportunity and Equality, 2017, p. 8). In 2017, the European Commission acknowledged the increased importance of rising inequality across Europe (European Commission, 2017). Thus, the end is not economic growth per se, but the improvement of "living standards and well-being of the people within the country in ways that do not impose harm on people outside the country" (Stiglitz, 2020, p. 3).

While almost all countries across Europe experienced an increase in inequality, in Eastern Europe the dynamics of inequality has been more dramatic, with an average annual income growth rate of the top 0.001% of more than 12 times higher than the bottom 50%, compared to 5 times higher in Western Europe, over the period 1980-2017 (Blanchet, Chancel, & Gethin, 2019, pp. 32, Table 1). In 2015, Romania was the country with one of the highest levels of inequality across the EU, next to the Baltic countries and Bulgaria (European Commission, 2017). Further, poverty in most of the Balkan countries, with Romania at the top, was in 2017 significantly higher than the EU average, contrasting with the 1980 situation when poverty rates were lowest across Europe (Blanchet, Chancel, & Gethin, 2019, p. 32). Finally, this affected especially young people, including children, who replaced the elderly as the most vulnerable age group to poverty and social exclusion risks (OECD Centre for Opportunity and Equality, 2017, p. 8), bringing about the winter of European discontent.

Same data, different narratives: The story of welfare polarization

Romania's social progress in a comparative perspective

In the meanwhile, in Romania, the incidence of monetary poverty, material deprivation, housing deprivation or social exclusion has been during the entire period between 2010 and 2020 above the European Union (EU) average and placed Romania among the EU countries with the highest poverty risks (Romanian Government, 2018; Pop, 2015; World Bank, 2018). However, despite the extreme position in which Romania found itself, most social indicators improved over the analyzed period, except for monetary poverty and income inequality. Table 1 presents both the 2019 values of the main social indicators and their evolution over the period 2010-2019, comparative with the general EU trend (i.e., incidence and growth rates).

From a comparative perspective, in 2019, the risk of poverty was about 1.5 times higher than that of the EU level, while the incidence of material and housing deprivation

was about 3 times higher than the EU average. The same holds true for the proportion of people with unmet medical needs (see Table 1).

Table 1. Romania and European Union:
Growth rate (2010/2019) and 2019 values of the welfare indicators (%)

	growth rate 2010-2019		2019 values	
	Romania	**EU**	**Romania**	**EU**
At-risk-of-poverty (AROP)	10.2% ↗	0% ↔	23.8	16.5
Relative AROP gap by poverty threshold	5.4% ↗	6.6% ↗	33.0	24.3
Persistent AROP	-6.7% ↘	7 % ↗	16.8	10.7
Income quintile share ratio S80/S20 for disposable income	14.7% ↗↗	2.6% ↗	7.0	5.1
Gini coefficient of equivalised disposable income	3.9% ↗	0.3% ↔	34.8	30.6
Severe material deprivation (SMD)	-52.5% ↘↘	-37% ↘↘	14.5	5.3
At-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion (AROPE)	-24.8% ↘↘	-10.5% ↘	31.2	21.2
Severe housing deprivation	-43.9% ↘↘	-33.9% ↘↘	14.2	3.7
Proportion of people overburdened by housing costs	-45.6% ↘↘	-5.6% ↘	8.6	10.1
Overcrowding rate	-11.9% ↘	-10.9% ↘	45.8	15.6
Self-reported unmet needs for medical examination due to too expensive or too far to travel or waiting list	-55.9% ↘↘	-40.6% ↘↘	4.9	1.9
Early school leavers	-20.7% ↘↘	-25.9% ↘↘	15.3	10.3
People (25-64 years) with tertiary education (%)	35.3% ↗↗	28.6% ↗↗	18.4	33.3
Adult participation rate in education and training (last 4 weeks)	-14.6% ↘	10.3% ↗	7.0	17.1
Youth not in employment, education or training (NEET rates)	-9.9% ↘	-17.1% ↘↘	17.3	13.6

Note:
- EU values for 2010 correspond to 27 countries, while the 2019 values correspond to 28 countries.
- Indicators as defined by the Eurostat.

Data source: Eurostat online database, SILC and LFS survey (ilc_lio2, ilc_li11, ilc_li21, ilc_di11, ilc_di12, ilc_mddd11, c_peps01, ilc_mdho06a, ilc_lvho07a, ilc_lvho05a, hlth_silc_21, lfsi_emp_a, edat_lfse_30, trng_lfs_14, edat_lfse_29)

While poverty indicators established Romania as one of the poorest EU countries over the entire period, the situation reached its worst during 2014-2016, due to the economic austerity measures taken in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis and the 2010 Euro crisis, respectively. Children, and especially teenagers, were by far the most affected age group, followed by the youth and the Roma population (WB, 2014, study Împreună), with the most extreme values regarding their exposure to poverty and social exclusion throughout Europe.

On the other hand, looking at the evolution of these indicators provides a more optimistic view. Apart from the monetary poverty (AROP) and income inequality (S80/S20 and Gini coefficient), all welfare indicators showed an improvement in the living conditions of the overall Romanian population (see growth rate 2010-2019, Table 1). The incidence of severe material and housing deprivation decreased by over 40% (see Table 1), and so did the proportion of those overburdened by housing costs. However, the highest decrease was in the proportion of people reporting unmet needs. Overall, the improvement in social outcomes was more spectacular in Romania compared to the EU average (Table 1, growth rate for Romania, comparative with the growth rate for the EU).

Both the comparative perspective and the dynamics of social and welfare indicators provide extreme narratives, describing Romania as one of the poorest European countries but also as one of the fastest to improve and recover.

Changing lens: The polarization perspective

However, changing the lens and looking at the evolution of these same indicators by residential area, another narrative unfolds: the narrative of welfare polarization. Disparities between cities and rural areas, as well as among the eight development regions of Romania increased significantly and consistently. Finally, differences between Romanian cities and rural areas regarding most social indicators were substantially higher than the differences observed in the overall EU space (Table 2).

Table 2 presents the evolution of the gaps between cities and rural areas, regarding the various social indicators selected to describe the overall welfare of the population. The gap – calculated by comparing the difference between cities and rural areas in the value of an indicator to the value of the indicator in the total population – is used as a measure of polarization. According to this indicator, the highest polarization between cities and rural areas is observed regarding monetary poverty, level of educational attainment and proportion of early school leavers. Housing deprivation is another dimension in regard to which high polarization can be observed. While material deprivation and a series of employment related indicators - low work intensity (as part of the AROPE indicator), unemployment and youth neither in employment, education, or training - exhibited lower gaps compared to the first set of indicators in 2010, these increased significantly over the analyzed period.

Only in the case of a few indicators, such as the overcrowding rate and participation rate in education and training, did the gap decrease.

Finally, what is even more striking is the fact that in Romania (a) the gaps between cities and rural areas are significantly higher compared to the overall EU space and (b) the evolution of these gaps in Romania is in complete opposition with the overall EU trend. While in Romania polarization increases, differences between cities and rural areas at the overall EU level fade away (Table 2).

Table 2. Romania and EU: The evolution of the gaps between cities and rural areas 2010-2019 regarding selected social indicators

|	Gap between cities and rural areas 2019/2010			Gap between cities and rural areas 2019/2011		
	Romania			**EU**		
At-risk-of-poverty (AROP)	-122%	↗	-136%	-32%	↘	-9%
Severe material deprivation rate (SMD)	-35%	↗	-70%	-48%	↘	4%
Persons living in households with very low work intensity (population aged 0 to 59 years)	-29%	↗	-73%	17%	↗	26%
At-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion (AROPE)	-47%	↗	-96%	-27%	↘	-2%
Severe housing deprivation	-74%	↗	-137%	21%	↘	-16%
Proportion of people overburdened by housing costs	-23%	↗	-71%	32%	↗	50%
Overcrowding rate	14%	↘	3%	-25%	↘	8%
Proportion of people (16 and over) with very good or good self-perceived health	2%	↗	5%	8%	↘	7%
Self-reported unmet needs for medical examination due to too expensive or too far to travel or waiting list (hlth_silc_21)	-25%	↗	-37%	-37%	↘	11%
Early school leavers (18-24 years)	-116%	↗	-118%	-16%	↘	-12%
People (25-64 years) with tertiary education (levels 5-8)	142%	↗	160%	51%	↗	55%
People (25-64 years) with less than primary, primary and lower secondary education (levels 0-2)	-106%	↗	-133%	-17%	↘	-16%
Participation rate in education and training (last 4 weeks)	65%	↘	39%	32%	↗	36%
Young people neither in employment nor in education and training (NEET rates)	-49%	↗	-72%	-16%	↘	-14%
Median equivalised net income, Euro	55%	↗	71%	30%	↘	15%
Employment rates (15-64 years)	-2%	↗	10%	2%	↘	1%
Unemployment rate (15-64 years), %	26%	↗	-55%	1%	↗	23%

Note:

- EU values for 2010 correspond to 27 countries, while the 2019 values correspond to 28 countries.
- Gaps are calculated as the difference between indicators' values for cities and rural areas, as a proportion of the value at the national level. Thus, a negative gap indicates higher values in rural areas compared to cities, while a positive gap indicates higher values in cities. Increases and decreases, respectively, in gaps are assessed based on differences in absolute terms.

Data source: Eurostat online database, SILC and LFS survey (ilc_lio2, ilc_li43, ilc_mddd11, ilc_mddd23, ilc_lvhl11, ilc_lvhl23, ilc_peps13, ilc_peps01, ilc_mdho06a, ilc_mdho06d,ilc_lvho07a,ilc_lvho07d, ilc_lvho05a, ilc_lvho05d, hlth_silc_18, hlth_silc_21, edat_lfse_30, edat_lfs_9913, trng_lfs_14, edat_lfse_29, ilc_dio3, ilc_di17, lfs_r_ergau, lfs_r_urgau).

On top of it, increasing regional disparities overlap with the widening gaps between cities and rural areas (Figure 1). Figure 1 presents disparities between the eight development regions of Romania along the most important social indicators for which data broken down to the regional level is available. Disparities are calculated by using the variation coefficient. Data show that the most significant variations are associated with indicators of employment and labor force quality (tertiary education, adult learning and training and work intensity). While employment rates vary less among regions, the quality of employment varies significantly, leading to high variations in poverty indicators as well (Figure 1). Opportunities to access the labor market vary widely across regions, especially in 2019. Today's inequality of opportunities in the labor market will lead, in the future, to polarization among the elderly between pensioners with access to higher income levels and health care and those outside the social insurance system, who have a precarious access to income and health care services.

Figure 1. Romania: Regional disparities between the 8 development regions 2010/2019 (NUTS2 regions) (coefficient of variation, %)
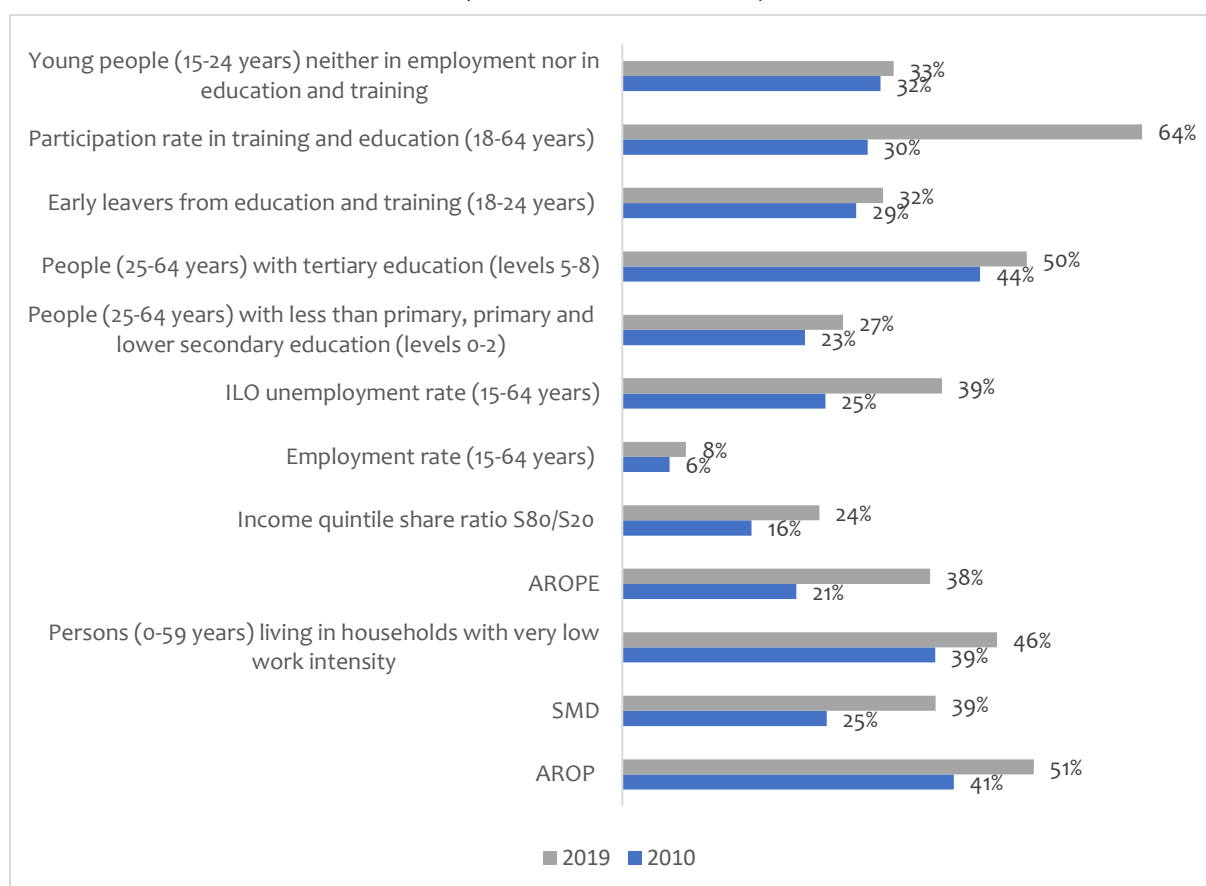
Data source: Eurostat online database, SILC and LFS (ilc_li41, ilc_mddd21, ilc_lvhl21, ilc_peps11, ilc_di11_r, lfst_r_lfe2emprt, lfst_r_lfur2gan, edat_lfs_9918, edat_lfse_16, edat_lfse_04, edat_lfse_38)

Regional disparities, with a less linear evolution over the period 2010-2020, amplify the effects of increased exposure to poverty of rural residents and lead to even more persistent disadvantages.

How contrastingly different are big cities from rural areas in Romania?

Polarization in poverty exposure and material deprivation

High density urban areas in Romania[6] show significantly lower exposure to poverty than cities across most of the EU countries; between 2017 and 2019 Romania was the country with the lowest at-risk-of-poverty (AROP) rate in cities among all EU member states, with a 3 times lower rate than the EU average, i.e., 5.8% in 2019.[7] In high contrast to the Romanian cities, rural areas exhibited, over the analyzed period, the highest exposure to poverty among all EU member states (39% in 2020, two times higher than the EU average). On average, EU countries reduced the disparities between cities and rural areas by 72% during the period 2010-2019 while in Romania disparities continued to grow (Table 2). In 2019 the gap between rural residents and residents of big urban centers was 15 times higher than the average EU gap (Table 2).

Further, despite the decreasing trend in the incidence of severe material deprivation (SMD)[8] at the national level as well as within cities, towns/suburbs and rural areas, the disparities between high density urban areas and rural areas increased since 2010, from 35% to 70% in 2019 (Table 2). The same holds true for at-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion (AROPE), a combined indicator.[9] Finally, while the EU trend points towards the decrease in disparities between cities and rural areas, the polarization increased constantly in Romania during this period.

Disparities between Romania's eight development regions in regard to all poverty indicators increased between 2010 and 2019 (Figure 1), especially after 2016. The most vulnerable region is the North-eastern region, followed by the South-eastern region, alternating with the South-western region. On the opposite end, the Bucharest-Ilfov region is the region which is the least exposed to monetary poverty while the North-western region had, over the entire period, the lowest exposure to severe material deprivation.

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[6] Cities, according to the Eurostat classification.

[7] Eurostat online database, Eu-SILC survey, ilc_li43.

[8] Severe material deprivation rate, a EU-SILC indicator, adopted by the Social Protection Committee, is defined as the inability to pay for at least four of the following items: (1) sustaining rent, mortgage or utility bills, (2) keeping one's home adequately warm, (3) facing unexpected expenses, (4) eating meat or proteins regularly, (5) going on holiday, (6) possessing a television set, (7) possessing a washing machine, (8) possessing a car, (9) having a telephone (see https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Glossary:Material_deprivation).

[9] AROPE is an indicator which has been put in place by the European Commission to monitor the EU2020 strategy, and it indicates the percentage of a population who are either at-risk-of-poverty, or severely materially deprived or who are living in a very low work intensity household (for further clarifications see https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Glossary:At_risk_of_poverty_or_social_exclusion_(AROPE)).

Overall, the north-western region, the central region and the Bucharest-Ilfov region experience the lowest exposure to poverty or social exclusion.

Polarization in income

Differences in the median income level between residents of cities and rural areas as well as among Romania's development regions are not only persistent but have also been increasing since 2015. In 2019, the *median equivalized net income* for city residents was two times higher compared to residents of rural areas, whereas the ratio among children reached 2.5.[10] In 2019, the per capita median equivalized income gap between cities and rural areas in Romania was 4.7 times higher than the EU average gap (Table 2); among children, differences were even higher, with a 7.6 times higher gap. Disparities are lower among the elderly, 65 years and over. The gap between rural and urban areas also increased among people with higher income levels.

In addition, both the composition of the household's income and the level of monetary income, respectively of the work-related income varies significantly across areas with different urbanization levels. In 2019, income from salaries made up 79% of the total income of an urban household, compared to only 63% of the total income of a rural one, whereas the level of this income was 2.2 times higher in urban areas.[11] Differences between regions persist as well, and variations between regions are higher among households of workers in agriculture and unemployed.[12] Finally, income inequalities with structural determinants are strongly associated with unequal opportunities.

Polarization in employment and in-work poverty risks

In Romania, employment status makes an important difference in the households' wealth, even more so than in most of the EU countries (Figure 2).

In 2019, the exposure to monetary poverty among those declaring themselves 'employed but not employees'[13] was 11.4 times higher than among the employees, i.e., 55.8% compared to 4.9%. For this category of employed, the exposure to poverty and social exclusion was in 2019, 2.7 times higher than at the EU level (Figure 2). By contrast, the

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[10] Eurostat, EU-SILC, ilc_di03, ilc_di17.

[11] Romanian National Institute for Statistics, TEMPO-online, BUF105I, available at
http://statistici.insse.ro:8077/tempo-online/#/pages/tables/insse-table.

[12] TEMPO-online database, BUF105J, available at http://statistici.insse.ro:8077/tempo-online/#/pages/tables/insse-table.

[13] This category includes the self-employed but also the so-called category of 'contributing family members'. These are persons who do not directly derive a monetary income from their work; these are mostly engaged in small family businesses or subsistence agriculture. OECD defines contributing family workers as 'a person who holds a self-employment job in a market-oriented establishment operated by a related person living in the same household, and who cannot be regarded as a partner because of the degree of his or her commitment to the operation of the establishment, in terms of the working time or other factors to be determined by national circumstances, is not at a level comparable with that of the head of the establishment' (https://stats.oecd.org/glossary/detail.asp?ID=443).

exposure to poverty of employees has been constantly below the EU average level, among the lowest across Europe.

Figure 2. Romania and EU: In-work poverty indicators by employment status, 2019 (%)
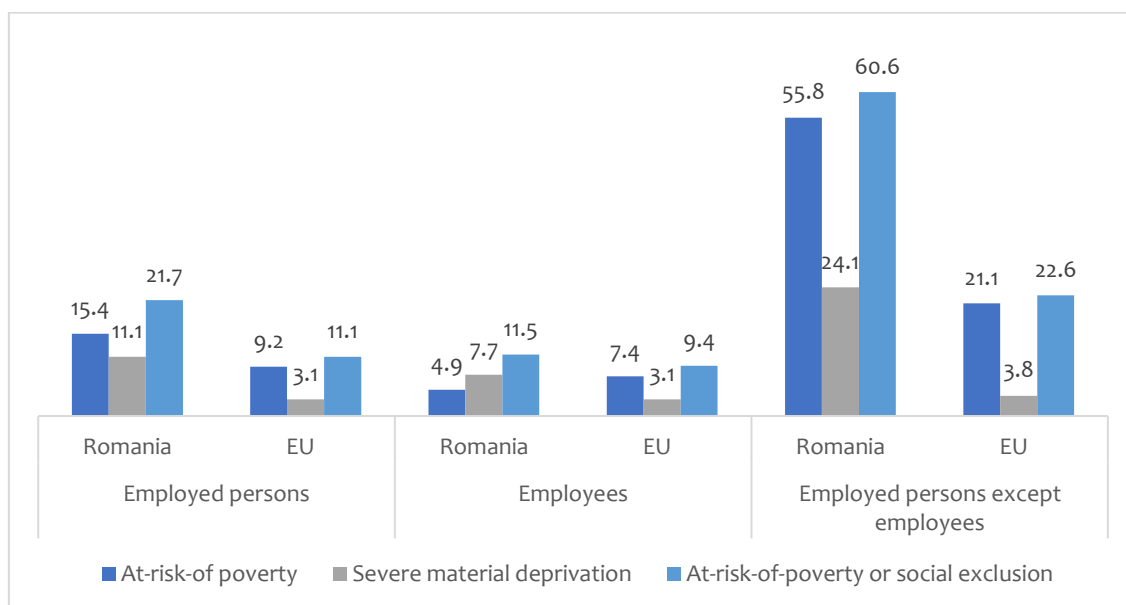
Data source: Eurostat online database, SILC survey (ilc_iw01, ilc_mddd12, ilc_peps02)

The gap in poverty indicators – monetary poverty, material deprivation and social exclusion indicators - between employees and employed who are not employees is huge, compared to that between cities and rural areas, and increased constantly between 2010 and 2019 (Table 3).

Table 3. Romania and EU: Gaps in poverty indicators between employees and employed persons except employees 2019/2010 (18-64 years)

	Romania		EU	
	2010	**2019**	**2010**	**2019**
At-risk-of-poverty (AROP)	-267%	-331%	-176%	-148%
Severe material deprivation (SMD)	-105%	-148%	-39%	-23%
At-risk-of- poverty or social exclusion (AROPE)*	-142%	-196%	-120%	-123%

(*) For AROPE the reference year is 2015, not 2010 as data started to be collected and aggregated into this indicator only in 2015
Data source: Eurostat online database, SILC survey (ilc_iw01, ilc_mddd12, ilc_peps02)

This is the result of both (a) a particular configuration of the labor market, with a still high proportion of unpaid workers (i.e., contributing family members) among the employed who are not employees and (b) a mix of labor market policies and social protection measures that do not only encourage self-employment but also puts self-employed at disadvantage (Pop, L.M., 2019; Pop L.M., 2021; Pop, L.M., 2023).

Thus, differences in employment structure between cities and rural areas trigger a polarization in poverty indicators between rural and urban. Even though over the past decade the proportion of employees in rural areas increased significantly and while that of unpaid self-employed (i.e., contributing family members) decreased significantly, the employment structure in urban areas still differs from that in rural areas. In 2019, the proportion of employees in the employed population (15 to 64 years) in urban areas was 1.6 times higher than that in rural areas (i.e., 94% compared to 56%), whereas the proportion of self-employed (including contributing family members) was significantly higher in rural areas, i.e., 42% compared to 5% in urban areas.[14] Similarly, the proportion of contributing family members was higher in rural communities - 15%, compared to only 1% in urban areas. Overall, Romania's contributing family workers, in 2019, made up one-third of the EU's contributing family workers, while only about 4% of all EU employees are Romanian.[15]

Over the ten years under scrutiny, inactivity and unemployment rates decreased in urban areas, while remaining rather constant in rural areas.[16] In 2019, before the pandemic, more than half of the unemployed and two-thirds of the young ones were residing in rural areas.[17] On top, almost two-thirds of the rural unemployed never worked.[18] This suggests that a significant part of the workforce, especially in rural areas, is faced with no sustainable employment opportunities and is swinging between informal or seasonal jobs, unemployment and plainly subsistence agriculture. The risk of poverty among the unemployed was, in 2019, 50%, compared to 34% among those not employed.[19]

Polarization in education

While employment opportunities and labor market policies, including school-to-work transition programs, are one side of the coin, the other side of the coin is the quality of the workforce. Access to quality education remains a significant challenge, especially in rural areas. Due to an underfunded and unreformed pre-university educational system, overall educational outcomes are meagre and lead to a polarized society.

The overall graduation rate for lower secondary education (class 5th to class 8th) decreased during 2010-2017 (Ministry of National Education, 2018, p. 39). In 2017, one in four 8th grade urban graduates failed to pass the math examen of the national evaluation exams, while half of the rural graduates failed the math exam; in addition, while 20% of the urban candidates obtained grades equal to or higher than 9 (on a scale from 1 to 10, with 5 being the passing grade), only 5% of the rural candidates managed this (Cernat, 2017). According to this analysis, more than half of the rural graduates who had relatively high math grades in school could not manage to pass the national math exam, while in urban

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[14] TEMPO-online (Romanian National Institute for Statistics -NIS), Labour Force Survey, AMG1102.

[15] Eurostat database, Labour Force Survey, lfsa_egaps.

[16] Calculations based on Tempo-online, Labour Force Survey, POP105A, AMG145B.

[17] This indicator refers to unemployed, as defined by the International Labor Organization and data are retrieved from Tempo-online (NIS), Labour Force Survey AMG130H.

[18] Tempo-online (NIS), Labour Force Survey AMG138D, AMG139D.

[19] Eurostat database, SILC survey, ilc_li04.

areas the proportion is less than half. In 2019, only 73% of those taking the national evaluation exam passed, while the attendance rate was 94%.[20] In 2020, in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, the situation worsened as 38% of the rural graduates failed the national exams, compared to only 15% in urban ones.[21]

The 2018 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) shows that Romania was behind most of the EU countries, with scores placing Romania far below the OECD average. According to Eurostat data,[22] the percentage of underperforming students in 2019 has doubled in Romania compared to the EU average, ranging between 41% and 47% in the three subjects. Furthermore, gaps between the high performers and underperformers increased, especially in math and science, and so did gaps between socio-economically advantaged and disadvantaged groups. The gap between these latter two groups was larger than that across OECD countries in 2018. Data also shows a higher segregation of high-performing students compared to the OECD average, while low-performing students are clustered to the same extent as the OECD average (OECD, 2019).

In rural areas, low achievement levels are also accompanied by a high proportion of *early school leavers* (i.e., 22.4%, in 2019[23]). The proportion was, in 2019, 5.2 times higher than the proportion among students in urban centers (i.e., 4.3% in 2019). The gap between rural areas and cities was, in 2019, 9.8 times higher than the average EU gap (Table 2).

Early childhood education, a proven equalizer of chances among children from various socio-economic backgrounds, is still weak in Romania, and services are unevenly distributed. Despite high enrolment rates in kindergarten educational programs (3 to 6 years), early childhood education services are unable to address the specific needs of children from vulnerable families, resulting in persistent and even increasing discrepancies between rural and big urban areas (Ministry of National Education, 2018, p. 7), and between Roma children and non-Roma children (WB, 2018).

Age-related enrolment rates in primary and lower secondary education decreased, concomitant with an increase in dropout rates and with persistent differences between urban and rural areas, especially among children in lower secondary education (Ministry of National Education, 2018, pp. 12-13). In addition, the overall transition rate to high school decreased and the dropout rate from vocational education increased since 2015; participation rates in education and training of the population 18 to 64 years are consistently lower – about 2.4 times lower – than the average rates for the EU countries.[24]

Thus, not surprisingly, Romania had, in 2019, the lowest proportion of higher educational attainment among the population aged 25-64 years[25] across Europe. The difference is even more striking in rural areas. Romania had, in 2019, not only the lowest

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[20] https://stirileprotv.ro/evaluare-nationala-2019/rezultate-evaluare-nationala-2019-notele-publicate-pe-edu-ro.html.

[21] https://www.edupedu.ro/diferente-majore-rural-urban-in-rezultatele-evaluarii-nationale-aproape-jumatate-dintre-elevii-de-la-sate-au-luat-sub-5-la-matematica-consiliul-national-al-elevilor/.

[22] Eurostat database, educ_outc_pisa.

[23] Eurostat database, edat_lfse_30.

[24] Eurostat, trng_lfs_14.

[25] Eurostat database, edat_lfs_9913.

proportion of rural residents with higher education (i.e., 6%), but a proportion that was 4 times lower than the EU average for rural areas.[26] By contrast, the proportion of people with low educational attainment is, on average, higher than the EU level; in 2019, 35% of the rural population had completed at most 8 classes, compared to only 7% in big cities and 20% in towns and suburbs. The gap between rural areas and cities regarding the proportion of those with low education was, in 2019, 8 times higher in Romania compared to the average EU gap.[27]

This is significant, as in Romania education 'pays off' even more than in other European countries. If in Romania the risk of poverty for those with low education was, in 2019, 51%, i.e., 1.7 times higher than the EU average, then the risk of poverty among those with tertiary education is 4.4 times lower than the EU average[28] (Figure 3). The main reason for this huge difference is that tertiary education is associated with standard employment forms (i.e., being an employee), while a lower educational level is associated with informal employment, unpaid employment, and precarious forms of self-employment. The young population is even more affected by this disparity, resulting in a high gap in the proportion of youth not in education, employment or training between cities and rural communities (Table 2). Thus, gaps in poverty indicators between cities and rural areas are significant and increased over the analyzed period partially due to polarization in welfare between those with low educational attainment and those with high educational attainment (Table 4).

Figure 3. Romania and EU: Poverty indicators by educational attainment level, 2019 (%)
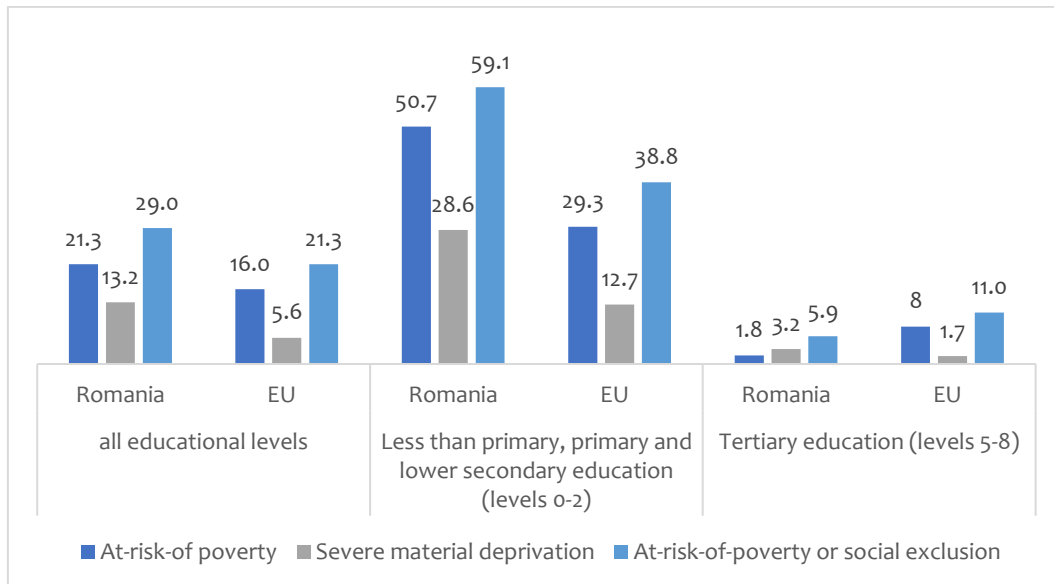
Data source: Eurostat online database, SILC survey (ilc_lo2, ilc_li07, ilc_mddd14, ilc_peps04)

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[26] Eurostat database, trng_lfs_14.
[27] Ibidem.
[28] Eurostat, EU-SILC and ECHP surveys (ilc_li04).

Table 4. Romania and EU: gaps in poverty indicators between persons with low educational attainment (levels 0-2) and persons with tertiary education (levels 5-8) 2019/2010

	Romania		EU	
	2010	**2019**	**2010**	**2019**
AROP	200%	230%	118%	133%
SMD	141%	192%	143%	196%
AROPE	139%	183%	2%	131%

Data source: Eurostat online database, SILC survey (ilc_lo2,ilc_lio7, ilc_mddd14, ilc_peps04)

Finally, low and unequal participation rates in education and training as well as the high social segregation in educational outcomes are reflected in lower educational mobility in Romania compared to other countries in the regions (see WB, 2018, pg. 43: table 3.1).

Polarization in health and access to primary and preventive health care services

Life expectancy, while among the lowest across the EU member states, is highly polarized according to the educational attainment level, especially for men (EC, OECD, EOHSP, 2019). Preventable and treatable mortality rates are among the highest across EU member states, financing of health care services is still extremely low and the allocation of funds is skewed towards inpatient care with a very low emphasis on prevention (EC, OECD, EOHSP, 2019).[29] This affected mostly rural areas.

The number of family doctors, of which most of them private agents entering a contractual relationship with the National Health Insurance House, has been consistently low since 2012, with a significant deficit in rural areas. In fact, the number of family doctors in rural areas decreased since 2012, while the number of family doctors in urban areas increased slightly[30], leading to an even more significant gap [31]. In 2019, the ratio of rural population to family doctors was over two thousand, a ratio 1.5 times higher than in urban areas. Thus, even though the proportion of people with self-reported unmet needs for medical examination decreased (Table 1), the gap between cities and rural areas widened (Table 2).

Polarization in housing conditions

Quality of housing, homelessness and exclusion from housing remains one of the most concerning dimensions of life quality in Romania. While the proportion of owners among people 18 and over is much higher in Romania compared to the EU average (i.e., 96.2% compared to 72.5%), housing conditions are well below the EU average; in fact, Romania scores highest among the member states on the proportion of people with severe housing

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[29] https://www.euro.who.int/__data/assets/pdf_file/0009/419472/Country-Health-Profile-2019-Romania.pdf.
[30] NIS, Activity of the health care units in 2019.
https://insse.ro/cms/sites/default/files/com_presa/com_pdf/activ_unit_sanitare19r.pdf.
[31] Federation of Family Physicians, https://www.facebook.com/FederatiaMF.

deprivation[32] (see also Table 1). While the overcrowding rate is similar in urban and rural areas, rural communities are worse off when it comes to the accumulation of housing disadvantages. In 2019, 5.7 times more rural residents were living under severe housing deprivation: almost one in four people, compared to a mere 4% in big cities.[33] The gap between cities and rural areas was, in 2019, 8.6 times higher than the average EU gap (Table 2).

Homelessness and housing exclusion represented, during this entire period, a persistent social reality due to a lack of consistent legislative framework, systematic national policies, and strategic objectives in the housing sector. Segregated living environments – taking the form of social housing neighborhoods or (quasi)informal settlements – became an increasingly visible social reality associated with social exclusion and poverty, lack of employment opportunities and lack of access to basic social services and often to public utilities as well.

Marginalized communities have been found in 83% of the cities and 35% of the rural communes.[34] About 3.2% of the total urban population (2.6% of the urban households, respectively) and 6.2% of the rural population (5.3% of the rural households, respectively) are living in marginalized communities. The share of dwellings estimated for these marginalized communities was 2.5% in urban areas and 5.2% in rural ones, the latter taking the form of informal settlements (WB, 2017). Overall, 564 thousand people were estimated to live in rural marginalized communities and 343 thousand in urban marginalized ones during 2014-2016 (WB, 2014, 2016, 2017).

Finally, the transition of over one-quarter of the population towards medium dense areas (small towns or suburbs) during 2010-2020, resulted in a concentration of contrasting characteristics in big cities and rural areas.

The analysis points out to two distinctive, dominant, and contrasting profiles regarding sustainable welfare: wealthy urban centers populated by educated, well paid employees and residents with high access to social services and benefits, versus poor, deprived rural communities populated by a low-educated workforce in precarious employment with high levels of unemployment and low employment opportunities and a population with low access to basic social services. This creates two 'closed-circuit' groups, where opportunities to adopt successful strategies for individual welfare are unevenly distributed. Further, it can lead to a 'precarity trap' in rural communities, from which the only way out is to change groups, i.e., to migrate towards big urban centers or, at least, towards towns or suburbs, where individual opportunities are not entirely determined by the residential status.

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[32] Eurostat database, EU-SILC (ilc_mdho06a); Eurostat defines severe housing deprivation as the simultaneous occurrence of overcrowding together with at least one of the following housing deprivation measures: leaking roof, no bath/shower and no indoor toilet, or a dwelling considered too dark, see https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Glossary:Severe_housing_deprivation_rate.

[33] Eurostat data base, EU-SILC (ilc_mdho06d).

[34] Administrative units comprising one or more villages.

The social policy framework: The mirage of visionary strategies versus the hardcore institutional reality

The discussion about what led to the marked polarization between the populations of big urban centers and that of rural areas starts with a brief overview of the policy framework under which most of the policy measures were adopted and social reforms were carried out.

Romania's social reforms, similar to other East-European countries, could not keep pace with the accelerated economic reforms (Pop, 2013). In addition, becoming an EU member state pushed Romania into aligning to European policies in a short time span, well beyond its capacity to effectively implement these policies. The price paid for this accelerated development is a modern primary legislative framework that is not supported by the institutional, administrative, and professional capacity of the public administration.

After Romania's EU accession, most reforms in the social protection sectors were preceded and accompanied by national strategic documents (i.e., national strategies). During 2010-2020, national strategies were adopted in most areas of social protection (e.g., poverty reduction and social inclusion, health, active ageing, social inclusion of Roma minorities etc.). Even if some were slower to emerge, all of these were in line with the European strategies, European Council directives and UN conventions to which Romania adhered to.

In the absence of systematically gathered and aggregated administrative data, the national strategies provided exhaustive assessments and diagnoses. Further, in the absence of adequate social legislation, national strategies provided guidance and direction. Their role on the policy making scene was similar to that played by the ropes used by Ulysses to tightly-chain himself to the mast and not follow the mermaids' seductive voices. Similarly, governments bound themselves to certain courses of action by adopting national strategies in order to not default to favoring a more reactive policy making strategy.

However, despite the benefits of these strategies (i.e., opportunities to understand current realities and mechanisms of ensuring coherent reforms), they did not put in place concrete action plans, accompanied by effective indicators. Most of the majestic goals, carefully designed by these strategies, turned into pitiful indicators, which, in fact, were the ones guiding policy measures and reforms. Operationalization, i.e., converting the majestic goals into concrete action plans and monitoring indicators, was the Achilles' heel of these strategies. Targets and indicators, if set, were, at most, following those overarching indicators, translated into national targets set by European strategies.

In June 2010, the European Council adopted the EU 2020 Strategy,[35] a 10-year strategy. The narrative of the Strategy revolved around a 'smart, sustainable and inclusive growth' of European space. However, the operationalization of this ambitious goal reflected by the set of 8 targets set for the EU area and the translation into national goals for each member state left out measures addressing social disparities, an important

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[35] https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/economic-and-fiscal-policy-coordination/eu-economic-governance-monitoring-prevention-correction/european-semester_en.

prerequisite for sustainable and inclusive growth. Although EU 2020 emphasizes territorial cohesion as a means of achieving sustainability and inclusiveness, it fails to provide an operational framework to monitor and measure inequalities across the European space (Becker et al., 2020).

The adoption by the UN General Assembly in 2015 of a strategy to achieve sustainable development by setting a set of 17 goals changed the operational definition of inclusiveness, by shifting the focus on ensuring a basic level of wellbeing to all, based on the principle of 'no one left behind'. In 2018, Romania adopts a sustainable development strategy (Romanian Government, 2018) in accordance with the UN sustainable development goals (SDG). The Strategy, with the principle of social equity at its core, acknowledges the need to "create a cohesive society able to benefit from improvements in education and health care systems, a reduction in gender inequality and the urban-rural divide" (Romanian Government, 2018, p.18). The social indicators used to monitor the SDG to which Romania adhered[36] covered health, education, and monetary poverty, yet in areas of social inclusion, these were limited to poverty rates, gender pay gaps and proportion of the population (children and adults) in jobless households and income inequality. Hence, indicators failed to capture, again, the rural-urban divide as well as the quality of employment.

In fact, during the last four years before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the European Commission's country recommendations for Romania focused on the need to improve activation policies, the minimum income guarantee scheme, educational services to enhance employability, and increase access to quality of educational services (especially for Roma and rural children) and health services, especially to primary health care. Disparities and polarization were tackled in the broader context of the EU with little regard to the specific and extreme situation in which Romania found itself.

Even for those targets of the EU 2020 strategy that were met at the end of the monitoring period, the gap between rural areas and cities increased. Table 5 illustrates this evolution. While the employment rate and the proportion of higher education among young adults did in fact increase, urban-rural disparities increased as well signaling a higher pace of improvements in urban areas. Further, the main social indicators adopted to monitor the social development strategy (Romanian Government, 2018) showed a similar evolution. Most of the social indicators used to monitor the progress of the strategy (in the field of social inclusion, poverty, housing, education and employment) are shown in Tables 1 and 2. Selected indicators, for which the broken down data by degree of urbanization is available, show an improvement at the level of the overall population over the analyzed period, accompanied by the widening of the gap between cities and rural areas.

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[36] The Romanian National Institute for Statistics, indicators of sustainable development, https://dezvoltaredurabila.gov.ro/romania-are-un-nou-set-de-indicatori-de-dezvoltare-durabila-si-un-agregator-de-date-nationale-si-europene-cu-acces-public.

Table 5. EUROPA 2020 - Targets and Indicators for Romania 2010/2020

	Targets for 2020 for Romania	Baseline value		Status of the set target	Gap between cities and rural areas	
		2010	2020		2010	2020
Employment rate (20-64 years)	70%	64.80%	70.80%	met	-3%	9%
Early school leaving	to be reduced to less than 11.3%	19.30%	15.60%	unmet	-116%	-121%
Proportion of persons between 30 and 34 years with tertiary education	to be increased to 26.7% or above	18.30%	26.40%	met	151%	153%
At risk of poverty	reducing the number of persons at-risk-of-poverty by 580 thousand	21.6% (4,379 thousand persons)	23.40% (4,524 thousand persons)	unmet	122%	137%

Data source: Eurostat (lfst_r_ergau, edat_lfse_30, edat_lfst_9913, ilc_li02, ilc_li43)

Finally, in 2019, the European Council supersedes the EU 2020 strategy with the Green Deal for a carbon-neutral society by 2050.[37] The 'just transition mechanism' becomes, in the context of this latter strategy, a tool towards a climate-neutral economy, based on a fairness principle of not leaving anyone behind in the process (EC, 2019). Later, the strategy was revisited to respond to the crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in a new vision – 'a more egalitarian and stronger Europe' - and a concrete financing program adopted by the European Parliament in 2020, the NextGeneration EU. Romania's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) covers, although tangentially, the disparities between rural areas and big urban cities. It mentions rural areas, as one of the indicators for establishing disadvantaged communities for targeting investments (along with the number and proportion of children, the incidence of poverty or social exclusion, the number/proportion of minimum income guarantee beneficiaries, unemployment, and school dropouts). It also acknowledges the fact that the risk of poverty and social exclusion among adults with disabilities in rural areas and the inactivity among rural residents are higher. It also draws attention to the deficit of specialized social services and staff in rural areas, with an important impact on the provision of long-term care for the elderly (Romanian Government, 2021). However, NRRP represents a promising start in tackling a long-buried problem.

The lack of operational targets and monitoring indicators, accompanied by a rather poor institutional structure, low administrative capacity, and lack of professionals/ specialized social services at the local level, resulted in elaborated legal frameworks, unmatched by institutional structures to effectively put these in practice. The story of the

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[37] European Commission, A European Green Deal, https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en.

national strategies in social protection shows how good intentions ended up turning into bad results – unexpected outcomes, high costs and, finally, lost opportunities.

Romania improved its legislative framework in the field of social protection – from health care and education to social services and benefits and social insurance system. These efforts resulted in fairly encompassing legal and regulatory frameworks, covering a wide range of risks, with few exceptions (e.g., housing policies, provision of services and securing rights for persons with disabilities, active labor market policies); but even in the areas where legislation is still lacunar, progress has been made. However, assessing social outcomes by the legislative framework proves highly disappointing. The lack of regulatory legislation or a regulatory legislation which proved not to be fine-tuned to the institutional and administrative Romanian realities crippled the outcomes. As Stiglitz puts it, "substance and process are inseparable. How a policy is executed within and across national boundaries can be as important as the policy itself" (Stiglitz, 2020, p. 9). Social reforms resulted in some overall improvements, yet without much concern for social inclusiveness and sustainability.

Determinants of high inequality and growing polarization

Inequalities and deep-rooted division lines are not only polarizing big cities and rural areas,[38] marginalized communities and non-marginalized communities, but also Romania's regions. Significant and persisting variations regarding the risks of poverty, social exclusion or access to basic social services can be observed also across development regions (Figure 1) and even counties.[39] These are particularly important, as they can easily undermine developmental sustainability, increase societal costs in the long-term and, further, threaten the dream of a cohesive and inclusive society.

Inequalities and current regional polarization in welfare are the result of many overlapping factors – structural, contextual and policy related factors. On a structural level, Romania inherited an extremely ruralized workforce, with a high proportion of self-employed working in agriculture, most of whom are in subsistence agriculture (Pop, L.M., 2019; Ilie, S., 2021; Pop, L.M., 2023). As shown in Section 2, many of these people were unpaid workers, while a majority were employed in precarious work forms. While over the analyzed period the employment structure in rural areas changed, agricultural activities continue to be associated with precarious work. Finally, no effective labor market policies and reforms in agriculture preserved the inherited cleavage between rural and urban areas.

In addition, national and European strategic documents failed to provide, as shown in section 3, an effective framework for adequate social interventions for preventing the further deepening of regional inequalities. This translates into both unevenly developed measures and programs within the social sector and ineffective methodological norms,

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[38] Smaller towns and suburbs represent a grey area, where – according to other indicators, as closeness to a big city, infrastructure, or the dynamic/complexity of the labour market – chances, opportunities and welfare can be more easily influenced.
[39] The lack of consistent data regarding social indicators at the sub-national level makes it harder to identify stable patterns and structural divisions.

which regulate the implementation process of social policies and measures. This represents the contextual level.

Finally, a series of 'unfortunate' policy-decisions consolidated the deep-rooted rift between big cities and rural areas.

Decentralization represents one of the first such policy decisions. In line with the principle of subsidiarity, which Romania tacitly adhered to when designing its social protection system, most of the social services and social assistance programs have been partially decentralized. While decentralization is, in theory, the best solution to create a flexible, needs-based and quick-to-respond social protection system; in the Romanian institutional landscape, decentralization resulted in increased territorial disparities and inequalities. The responsibilities assigned to the local public administration, in the context of Romania's territorial partitioning in administrative units and regional levels, could not match the financial capacity of small, rural communities, which represent about 90% of all administrative units in Romania.

While most of the social benefits are centralized (paid from the state budget and managed by state or regionally deconcentrated agencies), all social assistance services are decentralized – in terms of provisioning and financing. Preventive social assistance services and integrated community based social services are supposed to be provided, managed, and mostly financed from local budgets, while specialized social assistance services are provided and financed by regional public authorities. Educational services are also partially financially decentralized. The maintenance of, and investments in creches, kindergartens and schools are the responsibility of local authorities, along with the expenditures for many other school-based activities, which are only partially covered by the state budget. Further, family physicians (providing primary health care services) are mostly private agents, subcontracted by the social insurance health care system without an effective incentive system to cover poor/remote areas. Local authorities are, again, responsible for providing a certain level of incentives.

However, small, rural communities barely have the resources and the capacity to provide the most basic services; the poorest communities are also those with the highest level of need for services. Thus, during the past decade, many of the decentralized services and benefits started to be partially re-centralized, to ensure a minimum provision level across all regions and areas. However, the defective decentralization in social programs and services continues to represent a barrier in reducing regional disparities and territorial inequities.

A second major problem contributing to the preservation of geographical disparities is the *financing* of many social programs and policies *by means of short-term European funded programs,* rather than securing a consistent and stable funding mechanism relying on the state budget and/or local budgets. Relying on short-term, theme-centered, external financing favors a fragile and unstable social protection system, based on pilot projects rather than on mainstream ones. This affected mostly low-income communities, with neither the capacity to attract these funds nor financial back-up mechanisms in place.

Another problematic issue is related to the social benefits in Romania and refers to *the lack of a transparent and systematic, thus predictable updating mechanism*. Romania put in place a wide array of social benefits, which multiplied during the past years. But until 2022, the levels of social benefits, with few exceptions, were dependent on the discretionary of the political system. For example, most of the social assistance benefits (e.g., minimum income guarantee, means-tested family support allowance, benefits for persons with disabilities, season benefits for compensating heating expenditures) are expressed as a proportion of what the law calls the 'social reference index', an index with an uncertain definition, adopted as part of the legislation for the protection of unemployed, in 2002. The index was supposed to provide a consistency between work-related incomes and social benefit incomes, to make sure that the latter are effective yet do not create a disincentive to work. However, the value of the social reference index did not change between 2008 and 2022. In 2022, a mechanism of automatic annual updating of the index, with the inflation rate from the previous year was put in place. Until 2021, social benefits increased solely due to either political interest or some external pressure.

Finally, the fiscal measures in place during the analyzed period put a significant burden on the self-employed. The cost of social protection was unaffordable for most self-employed, due to the high social contribution level and no support, as in the case of the employees, from employers or the state. High levels of social contributions and a minimum insured income set at the statutory minimum wage level (which increased over 200% in a few years) suffocated the self-employed and created serious disincentives for these to seek formal employment. The transfer of the entire responsibility for the payment of the social contribution to the employees, as a result of the 2018 fiscal reform, did not change the inequities between employees and self-employed, especially among low-income earners (Pop, L.M., 2023). High fiscal burden resulted in a high level of informal employment and, further, in precarious work for an important segment of the employed population (Preoteasa, A.M., 2015; Pop, L.M. and D. Urse, 2017; Ilie, S., 2021).

A detailed analysis of these determinants is beyond the scope of this paper. However, while the legislative framework in areas such as unemployment and labor market, social assistance, pensions, education, and health improved significantly during the past decade, important reforms in all areas of social protection are still needed. As shown in section 3, broad objectives of inclusiveness, equality, and sustainable development which revolve around national and European strategies are not able, in the absence of a more comprehensive operational framework, to guide policy reforms towards sustainability and equitable growth.

Towards what? Debates, current developments, and future directions for sustainable and community friendly policymaking

In 2014, an ample mapping process of marginalized urban and rural communities in Romania was initiated (World Bank, REGIO, 2014; World Bank, 2016). According to the gathered data in 2015, around 900 thousand Romanians, representing about 4.5% of the total population were living in extreme poverty in marginalized communities. Their

concentration was higher in rural areas, comprising about 6% of the rural population, while about 3% of the urban population lived in ghettos without access to basic public infrastructure and social services (World Bank, 2016).

In 2017, while the European Commission draws attention to the inequalities within the EU member states (EC, 2017); the Romanian government acknowledged, as part of the pre-assessment within the country's partnership framework with the World Bank,[40] the significant disparities in income, employment opportunities, poverty, education, and health between rural and urban communities, as well as between the eight development regions of Romania (Romanian Government, 2017). In 2015, income inequalities were highest, while the inequality reducing effect of taxes and transfers among the lowest across the EU member states (EC, 2017). The number of reports about Romania, which acknowledged the gap in poverty risks between rural and urban areas, especially regarding children, increased significantly (see WB, 2018). Unequal access to health, education, housing, social assistance services, employment services and opportunities between rural and urban areas and among development regions was leading to even higher future polarization, a process which was stressed by a variety of European and international forums and organizations. Thematic reports of the European Social Policy Network unraveled these disparities among children (Pop, 2014; Pop 2015), youth (Pop, 2022) and working adults (Pop and Urse, 2017; Pop, 2018; Pop, 2019; Pop, 2021). UNICEF, Worldvision and Save the Children Romania produced a series of reports on access to education, health and social assistance services while initiating projects to overcome these disparities (e.g., Gazibar and Giuglea, 2019; UNICEF, 2017; Save the Children Romania, 2017, 2018). Systematic assessments, on which national strategies were grounded, provided important evidence for the fractured Romanian reality in areas such as housing, poverty and social exclusion, and employment (e.g., Worldbank, 2015a - regarding the national housing strategy; Worldbank, 2015b - regarding the social inclusion and poverty reduction strategy, Worldbank, 2021- regarding the national strategy regarding the rights of persons with disabilities).

Finally, the monitoring report on the progress of the *Sustainable development strategy* in the EU clearly points out the extreme position of Romania in regard to multidimensional poverty in contrast to the long-term EU trend of diminishing poverty risks, as well as gaps between urban and rural areas. The report points out the need to tackle these disparities, along with regional disparities. Thus, while social policies failed to prevent geographical polarization in welfare, the need to address these disparities started to be acknowledged.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic, followed by the Ukrainian war, posed a series of challenges. Emergency remedial measures to protect the economy and to provide a minimum protection to employed, pensioners, children but also low-income households

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[40] The country partnership framework for 2019-2023 for sustainable development, available at https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/954721529638270108/romania-country-partnership-framework-for-the-period-fy19-fy23.

were put in place. While the crises opened some opportunities to improve social protection of the most vulnerable categories, it also affected the rural areas more, by depleting these areas of employment opportunities, and deteriorating even more, the quality of and access to basic social services, especially for children. Big cities, on the contrary, seem to attract all the benefits of the current social protection system, providing a variety of decent social services (schools, preventive and specialized social assistance services, health services) and higher protection of employees through a series of comprehensive work-related benefits. Marginalized communities, a stable and increasingly worrying social reality, are residential areas which deprive their inhabitants not only of opportunities but of any basic human rights. These are enclaves of premodern realities in a modern, European country.

However, the current strategies, adapted to the new socio-economic developments of the last few years since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, tend to be more sensitive to these realities, which plague Romania more than other European countries. The future of Romania, as part of the EU, is heavily dependent on its capacity to balance the need to meet European goals with the need to tackle the structural divisions between cities and rural areas as well as between employees and self-employed. While strategic goals prove to be important for the development of social policies in Romania, putting in place operational frameworks to monitor the progress towards these goals, which reflect the unique national realities, might prove to be crucial. Finally, reforming the financing mechanisms of social protection and revising fiscal policies, along with strengthening the capacity of local communities to foster social services and effective need catering are crucial intervention directions from a perspective of welfare polarization and equality of opportunities.

Thus, Romania needs to address the consequences of a social protection system which allows for significant and increasing inequalities in opportunities in an uncertain economic and political climate and threatens to hamper the crystallization of a coherent vision.

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