

CHARACTERIZATION OF THE ROMANIAN RURAL AREA IN A EUROPEAN CONTEXT

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Abstract: The complexity of the economic, social and ecological characteristics of the rural environment determines deep implications in the substantiation of sustainable rural development policies [1,5]. The rural area occupies an important place in the history, civilization and national identity of the Member States of the European Union, both in terms of economic and social dimensions and the cultural and ecological dimensions. Thus, in the sustainable development policy of the European Union, the rural area occupies an important place, the future of the EU being marked by the sustainable use of the rural area.

Key words: rural area, economic, social and cultural dimension

INTRODUCTION

The rural area is characterized by certain distinct elements and activities that give it authenticity, specificity and individuality, compared to other areas.

The set of activities, of economic, social and cultural nature, carried out in rural areas, can represent the three main functions of the rural space.

The economic function is the basic function of the rural area. This materializes in the initiation and development of agricultural and non-agricultural activities, located upstream and downstream of the agricultural production process, in rural areas [6, 14]. Thus, this function aims to promote the production of the primary sector, the sustainable capitalization of natural resources specific to rural areas, the development of agritourism as an activity related to agricultural activity, the establishment and operation of small and medium enterprises in the field of production and services and promoting handicraft activity [2, 8].

In the modern sense, the economic dimension is considered complex, being characterized by pluriactivity, currently, the rural area is no longer an "eminently agricultural" area. The increasingly complex and diversified structure of the rural economy is translated into important social implications on the quality of life of rural residents [10, 11]. Thus, it can be observed: a reduction of the migration of the rural population towards the urban centers; the possibility of carrying out economic activities, in different non-agricultural branches, materializes in maintaining young people in rural areas, creating different sources of income for the inhabitants of these areas, more complex use of labor and, the possibility of practicing part-time agricultural activities, in private-family farms [4, 7].

The economic development of rural areas is translated into a set of actions with a negative impact on the environment, which have resulted in increased pollution of rural areas, disturbance and destruction of the ecological balance, among agricultural and forest ecosystems, deterioration of landscapes and the alarming decline in the fauna and flora of these areas [9, 13]. The measures which must be taken to achieve ecological balance, return to a certain level of rurality and eradicate or reduce the negative effects, presented above, indicate the ecological function of rural space as an important element in improving this area [3, 15].

The nature of human activity, as well as the interpersonal relations within rural and intra-community communities, give to the rural area a pronounced social character.

Compared to the urban environment, where the dominant feature is *anonymity*, in rural areas, the inhabitants of these settlements know each other, in all aspects. The phenomenon of "*urbanization*", encountered mainly in peri-urban rural areas, is a negative factor, in terms of preserving the traditions and customs specific to rural communities and degrading their authenticity. However, there are quite a few areas, where we could say, where the authenticity of the village is still found, in the treasures of ethnography and folklore, in crafts, which constitute a real wealth of the rural world. In fact, rural authenticity is represented by popular culture, traditions and customs, ethnography and folklore [12].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This paper aims to characterize the European rural area and identify its main defining elements. The study is based on the consultation of numerous specialized studies conducted at both national and European level, as well as the statistical interpretation of existing data.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The area of the EU-28 is about 4.5 million km². Over half of the total area of the European Union, 52% is represented by rural areas, 38.2% by intermediate regions and 9.8% by urban regions. [2, 8, 12]

If we analyze the structure of the territory for the EU-N13 (accession states after 2004, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia), the rural regions represent 58,3% of the territory, more than the European average, while urban regions cover only 6.3%.

At EU level, we have Member States, such as Ireland, Finland, Estonia, Portugal and Austria, where predominantly rural areas represents for about 80%. Opposite peoples are states such as Cyprus, Luxembourg and Malta, where according to the classification method based on NUTS 3 regions, no predominantly rural regions are registered.

Table 1.

Characteristics of the Romanian rural area, according to the EUROSTAT-OECD typology

Specification	Romania		Mostly rural regions		Intermediate regions		Mostly urban regions	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
Total area-km2	238,391	100	142.545	59.79	94.025	39,44	1821	0.76
Total area used - km2	230.021	100	136.443	59.32	91.819	39.92	1759	0.76
Population-millions of inhabitants	20.020	100	9012	45.02	8726	43.58	2258	11.40
Population density-place/km2	87.0	-	66.1	-	95.0	-	1297.5	-

Source: Dona I., 2015 [2]

In relation to the area owned, Romania ranks seventh among the Member States of the European Union, 87% of the area being represented by rural areas. An analysis of the area occupied by rural areas, taking into account the OECD classification for rural areas NUTS 3, indicates that the predominantly rural areas account for 59.79% of the country's surface, a value higher than both the European average (52%) and the EU -N13 average (58.3%). If we add to these territories the area of intermediate areas, 39.44% (Table 1.), we can say, therefore, that in Romania, the rural area represents 99.24% of the total area.

The importance of rural areas and the primary sector. In the analysis of the economic importance of rural areas and the primary sector, in the European Union

economy, we used a series of indicators such as: GDP/inhabitant, share of primary sector in GVA, branch structure of the economy and employment.

The economic dimension of rural area

The value of GDP/inhabitant in urban and rural areas shows significant differences. Even if it represents an important sector of the economy of each state, agriculture indicates different values, in the structure of GDP, depending on the regions of the rural area. In 2014, the value of GDP/ inhabitant was lower in rural areas than in other areas, representing 72% of the EU average, compared to 88% in intermediate areas and 121% in urban areas. In the predominantly rural regions of Bulgaria, Romania and Latvia the value of this indicator was less than 40% of the EU-28 average, in the period 2011-2013, while in the Netherlands this value was 113%.

The structure of the rural economy is different in the regions of the European Union. In the EU-28 economy as a whole, the primary sector accounted for only 1.5% of GVA in 2016.

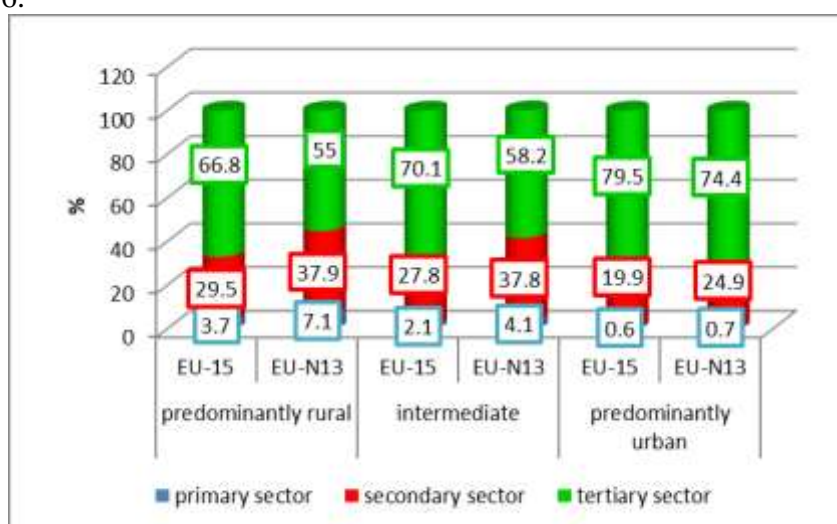


Figure 1. The structure of the economy by branches of activity, in EU-28, 2016

Source: [15]

In rural areas, the share of the primary sector in total Gross Value Added, at EU-28 level, was, in 2016, on average 4.2%, registering different values from one Member State to another. For EU-15 Member States, the share of this sector was lower than the EU-28 average, only 3.7%, while in EU-N13 Member States, the value was higher - 7.1%.

On a more detailed analysis of the share of the primary sector in total GVA, in rural areas, we will see that there are countries where this sector exceeds 10%, Bulgaria, Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia, countries such as Romania, Hungary and Greece, where value is in the range of 8-10%, but also countries where the value is very low, below 3%, Germany, Belgium and Ireland.

Employment. At EU level, most jobs are concentrated in the tertiary sector (73.8%), regardless of the reference area. However, the value differs in EU-28 Member States, 77.6% for EU-15 Member States and 58.8% for EU-N13 Member States.

The primary sector still holds an important share in the overall employed population, in rural areas, in some EU-28 Member States, such as Romania, Bulgaria, Greece and Poland, where the agricultural population represents more than 10% of the total employed population, Figure 2.

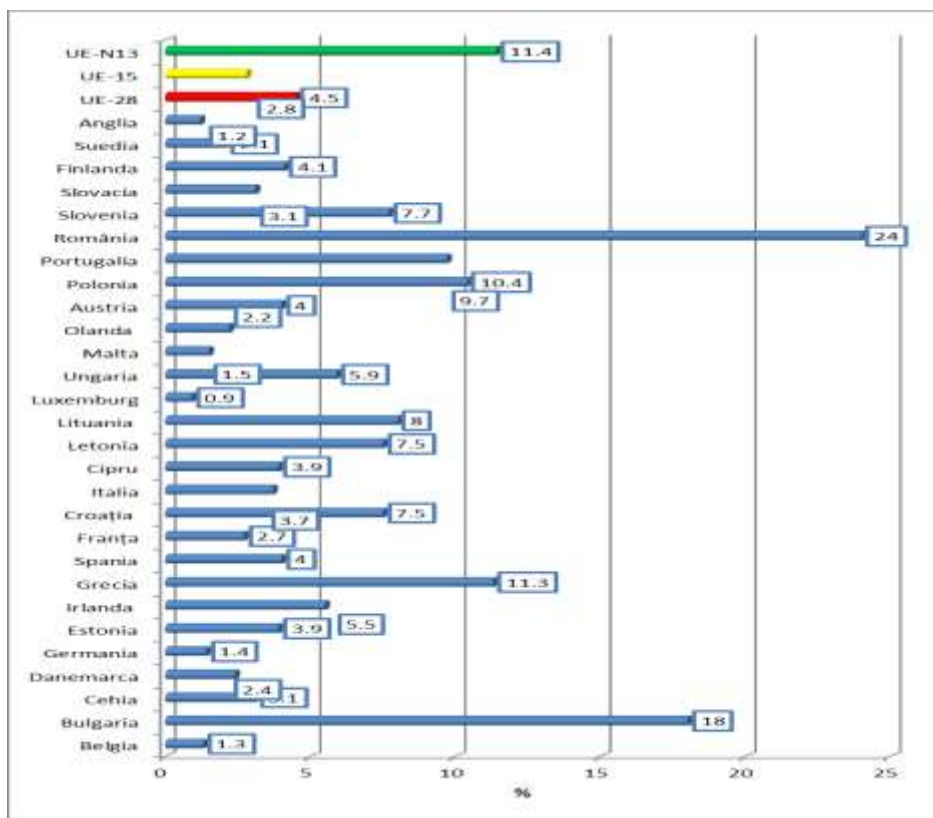


Figure 2. Share of the population employed in agriculture in total employed population, 2016

Source: [15]

The employment rate differs by region at EU-28 level. The employment rate in rural areas is lower than in the urban and intermediate regions.

Starting with 2010, the share of employment in agriculture indicates a decrease in rural areas from 16.2% in 2010 to 12% in 2016 and maintaining it at a low level in urban areas, varying between 1.2% - 1.6% in the period 2010-2016. In the period 2010-2016, at EU-28 the share of employment in agriculture decreased on average by 3.7%.

Among the EU-28 countries we find countries where the employment rate in rural areas is very high - Denmark, but also countries with a lower employment rate (Croatia, Italy and Spain), which tend to have the highest population employment rates, in densely populated areas, urban areas.

The analysis of employment and unemployment rate, by area, allows to be drawn the following conclusions:

- ❖ the employment rate of the population is generally higher in urban than in rural areas;
- ❖ employment in cities is close to the EU-28 average, while in rural areas it is lower;
- ❖ starting with 2012, the urban-rural gap in employment has begun to narrow;
- ❖ starting with 2012, there has been an increase in the unemployment rate in cities;
- ❖ in 2016, unemployment in rural areas is at the same level as in the intermediate area, being lower than in cities;
- ❖ the youth unemployment rate is significantly higher than the total unemployment rate;
- ❖ the highest level of unemployment was recorded in urban areas, as in the case of global unemployment;
- ❖ after 2013, the youth unemployment rate is declining in all areas;

- ❖ the share of unemployed young people who do not attend any form of education is higher in rural areas compared to the other two areas;
- ❖ the unemployment rate is higher in cities than in intermediate and rural areas, for both men and women;
- ❖ in intermediate and rural areas there are higher unemployment rates for women, while in urban areas high unemployment rates are recorded among men.

The social dimension of rural area

Demographic aspects. In 2016, the EU-28 population was around 510.3 million inhabitants, marked by a slow but steady growth of about 0.3% per year since 2000. Out of the total EU population, 79.5% live in EU-15 countries and 20.5% in EU-N13 countries.

At the level of the European Union, in 2016, in predominantly rural regions were registered a number of 97,364 thousand inhabitants, less than in the intermediate areas, where 183,924 thousand people were registered and urban areas where 288,480 thousand people live.

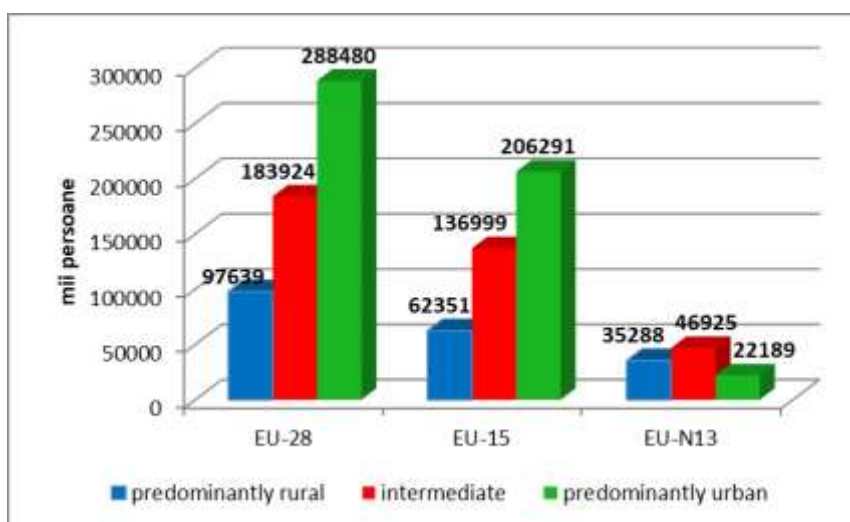


Figure 3. Population distribution, by types of regions, EU, 2016

Source: [15]

The majority of the EU-28 population lives in predominantly urban regions, 50.63% and in the intermediate regions, 32.28%, Figure 3. Exceptions are the EU-N13 countries where most of the inhabitants are in intermediate regions, 44.94%, and predominantly rural 33.80%, the two regions concentrating more than 2/3 of the population of these countries (78.74%).

The distribution of the population on the three regions (mostly rural, intermediate and mostly urban) varies greatly from one country to another (Figure 4.). Thus, over 50% of the population of Ireland, Slovenia and Romania, live mainly in rural areas. In opposition, there are 7 other Member States, Malta, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Spain, Belgium, Latvia, and Sweden, where most people live in urban areas.

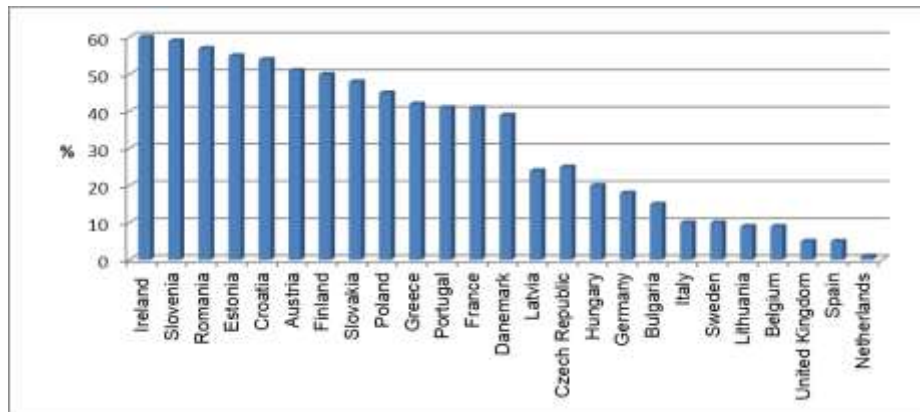


Figure 4. Share of rural population, total population, EU-28, 2016,
Source: [15]

The share of the rural population in the total population varies from one Member State to another. At the level of 2016, in Ireland, Slovenia and Romania, more than half of the population of these countries lived in rural areas.

At EU level, we also find countries such as Italy, Sweden, Lithuania, Belgium, the United Kingdom, Spain and the Netherlands, where the rural population represents less than 10% of the total population.

In the period 2006-2016, there is a decrease in the number of people living in rural areas, a situation encountered in all EU countries, except Greece, Poland and Slovakia, where there are small increases. The largest decrease in the rural population was recorded in Estonia and Romania.

A relevant indicator in the analysis of the situation of the rural space is represented by the population density. At the level of 2015, the population density in the EU-28 was 117 inhabitants per km². Thus, we meet countries where the population density is very high (Malta, the Netherlands and Belgium), but also countries such as Finland and Sweden where the lowest population densities are registered.

Between 2010 and 2015, at EU level, population density remained largely stable as a whole, but decreased in rural and intermediate regions. It is also known that in rural areas the population density is lower than in intermediate and urban regions (the classification of regions in rural, intermediate and urban areas is based on population density).

Between 2010 and 2015, population density remained largely stable in the EU as a whole, but decreased in rural and intermediate regions. In rural areas, population density is lower compared to intermediate and urban areas.

Structures by age groups of the population

In 2016, 16% of the EU-28 population was in the under-15 age category, 65% in the 15-64 age group and 19% in the elderly (65 years and over).

Since 2011, in all EU-28 regions, there has been an increase in the share of older people and, at the same time, a decrease in the share of young people, except in urban areas where it has increased slightly, + 0.1%.

The analysis of the age structure of the population, at the level of EU Member States, indicates that the young people age group has the highest value in the urban regions of the EU-15 (16%) and the lowest value in the urban regions of the EU-N13 (14.5%). In 2016, Ireland had the highest share of young people - 22%, followed by France (18.5%) and the United Kingdom (18%), while the lowest values were recorded in Germany (13%) and Italy (14%).

Elderly people category is more widespread in rural and intermediate areas of the EU-15, where the difference from the EU-N13 regions is 4.3% in rural areas and 4.0% in intermediate areas, Figure 5.

Regarding the share of the elderly, countries such as Italy, Greece and Germany indicated the highest values, approximately 21-22%, all increasing after 2011: + 0.4% for Germany, + 1.5% for Italy and + 2% for Greece. However, the largest increase in the share of older people was recorded in Hungary (+ 3.3%) and Finland (+ 3%).

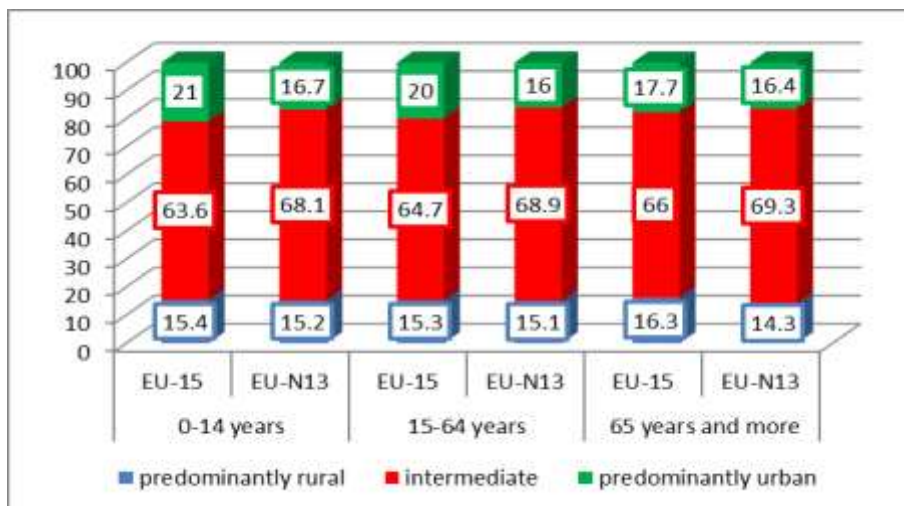


Figure 5. Structure by age groups and areas of the population

Source: [15]

The share of children and young people is approximately equal in rural, intermediate and urban areas, with the exception of urban areas in the EU-15. Also, in the EU-15, a high share is indicated by the elderly, 21% - in rural areas and 20% in intermediate areas. The share of the working age population at EU-15 level is slightly lower in rural areas compared to urban and intermediate areas. In the EU-N13 Member States, the share of the active population indicates higher values than in the EU-15, with the highest values being recorded in urban and intermediate areas.

Education. Levels of education and training in rural areas are generally lower than in the other two areas. In 2015, the highest percentage of early school leaving in the EU-28 was reported in rural areas (12.2%), while the lowest was reported in urban areas (just under 10%). The same model of educational achievement, lower, is reflected in the share of adults participating in education or training. In 2012, only 6.6% of adults aged between 25 and 64 in rural areas took part in education or training, while globally the value was 11%.

Internet access. In the European Union, in the last 10 years, there can be a significant increase in the endowment with internet, of housing. Thus, for the European Union as a whole, the increase was over 100%, high values being recorded in rural areas, where the growth rate of this indicator was over 150%, from 31% in 2007 to 79%, in 2017.

The share of EU-28 housing, Figure 6., who have access to the internet at home, reached, in 2017, a level of 85%, in rural areas, being registered a lower value, only 79%.

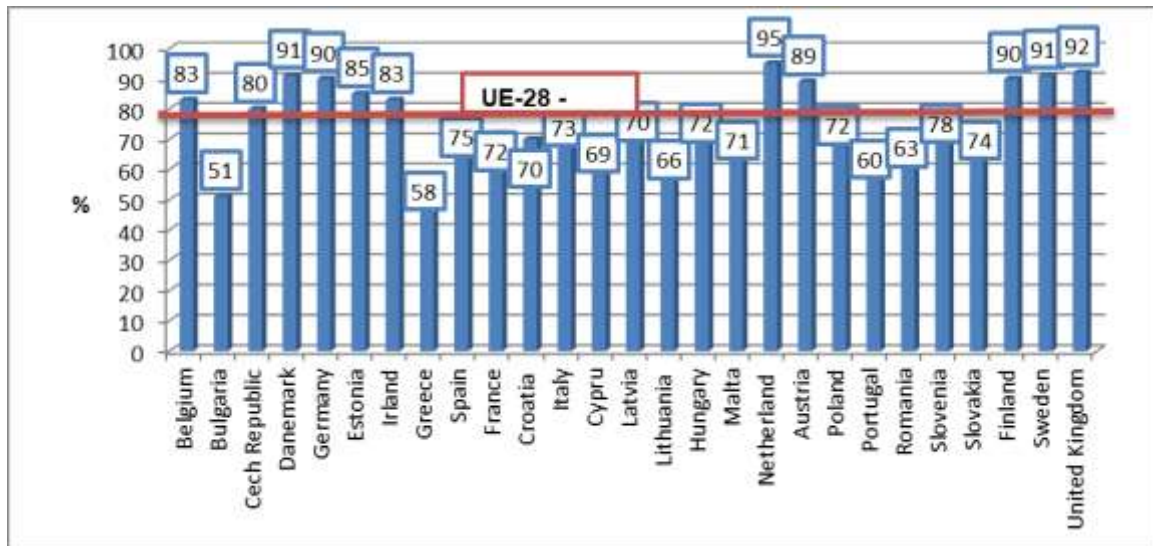


Figure 6. Share of households from rural areas with internet access, 2017

Source: [15]

The situation regarding access to the internet in rural areas of the EU-28 is different in the Member States. Thus, in 14 countries, less than 75% of households have internet access at home, in Bulgaria, every second rural household has no internet access.

Poverty. In the European Union, the rural-urban exodus is a rising phenomenon, in 2016, 41.2% of the inhabitants of the European Union lived in the city, 30.6% of them in intermediate areas and only 28.2% in rural areas. The phenomenon of urbanization and exodus from the village to the city is booming.

Regarding living standards, social exclusion and poverty, the incidence is higher in rural areas, with 25.5% of the population at risk of poverty. In the case of the other two areas, the values are lower, 24.0%, in urban areas and 22.1% in intermediate areas.

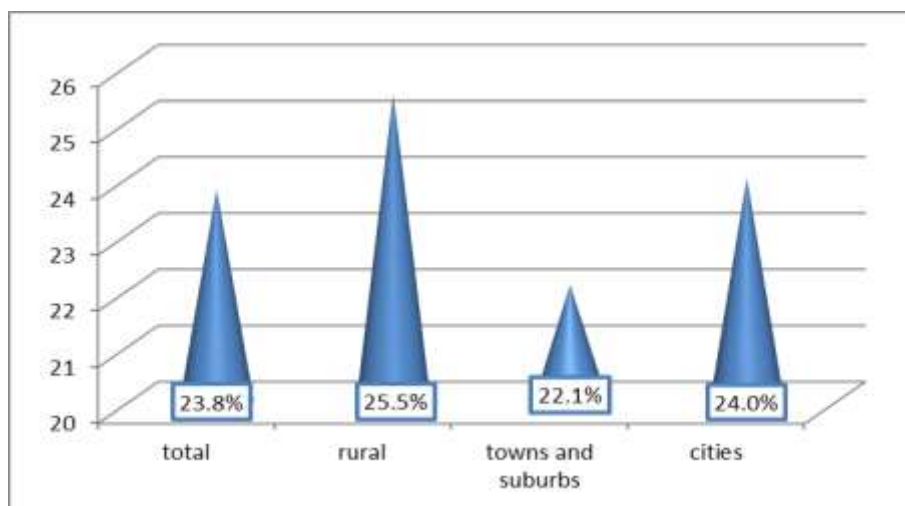


Figure 7. Poverty by area, EU-28, 2016,%

Source: [15]

At national level, the share of the population in rural areas, who face the risk of social exclusion or poverty, is over 50% (51.7%), a value much higher than the European average. Regarding the intermediate and urban areas, the share of the population at risk is lower, 33.3% in the intermediate regions and 24.3% in the urban area.

In the last 8 years, the percentage of the total population at risk of poverty has decreased in all rural areas of the EU-28, from 29.0% in 2010 to 25.5% in 2016, which has reduced the gap between rural and other areas, Figure 7.

At the level of the EU-28 Member States, the situation was very different. Thus, in terms of the risk of social exclusion and poverty, 12 EU-28 member states with low values of these indicators were registered in urban areas (Slovakia - 13%, Czech Republic - 13.8%, Poland 16.2% and Finland 17.2%), another 10 Member States with lower values in rural areas and another 6 states with lower values in intermediate areas.

An important element in the life of the village is the culture. This, mainly popular culture, ethnography and folklore, is what gives the true value and dimension to local creation, authenticity and local specificity, it is in fact the defining element of the rural community and also a way to maintain the attractiveness of the village for young people [12].

CONCLUSIONS

The economic and social transformations produced, lately, have imprinted on the rural area, a heterogeneous character, fact due to the not uniform development of the villages. Thus, at present, the profile of the European rural area is marked by the existence of evolutionary models, going from the developed rural, specific to peri-urban areas, to the traditional rural from the rural areas proper, characterized by practicing, mainly, a subsistence agriculture and poor development of rural infrastructure.

Even if the modernization of rural areas has had a positive effect in terms of increasing the living standards of the inhabitants of these areas, it is also appropriate to have a negative effect in terms of changing architecture, abandoning traditions and customs, destroying the specificity of the Romanian village. In this sense, we must pay more attention to actions on preserving traditions and customs, the authenticity of folk art and the promotion of traditional products, in fact, to put traditional culture at the center of sustainable development policies of the Romanian village.

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