European Researsh Series

European Research Series

An End to Poverty in Europe?

Review of the Social Situation in Europe and Considerations for a More Sustainable and Inclusive Future

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Preface

'An End to Poverty in Europe?' reviews the social situation in the 27 EU Member States and makes some proposals and recommendations for a more sustainable and inclusive future. This report focuses on EU social policy developments amidst the landmark announcement in May 2026 of the EU's first ever Anti-Poverty Strategy which sets a target of eradicating poverty in Europe by 2050. At a time of compounding and unprecedented shocks – an apparent 'permacrisis' of social, technological, ecological and geopolitical dimensions – *Social Justice Ireland* welcomes the EU's renewed vision of a Europe without poverty and social exclusion. Yet as the continent continues to deal with the consequences of ongoing wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, transatlantic trade instability, climate change and the emerging impacts of artificial intelligence, robotics and digitisation, the EU must also confront:

- 13.3 million people unemployed
- 4.2 million people long-term unemployed
- 2.9 million young people aged under 25 unemployed
- 72.1 million people living below the poverty line - of whom over 15.6 million are children (one fifth of Europe's children are living in poverty).

As the EU continues to suffer from injuries sustained in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and ongoing geopolitical shocks, it is clear that without substantial and coordinated action, looming social, technological, environmental and economic challenges could destroy it. In this context and against the backdrop of missed poverty-reduction targets which the EU has set itself in the past, it is clear that the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy *must* succeed in its vision if Europe is to survive and thrive into the future. This ambition now needs to be backed up with real investment in a sustainable future, protecting people across the lifecycle from the very young to the very old, and embracing those of all backgrounds including those with an income and those without. Individuals and communities already vulnerable to poverty and social exclusion in Europe – women, the young, those with disabilities, recent migrants and marginalised communities to name but a few – continue to be hardest hit by an ongoing housing, energy and cost-of-living crisis and must be protected if Europe is to fulfil its vision of making poverty history.

'An End to Poverty in Europe?' is the eighteenth publication in *Social Justice Ireland's* European Research Series. This report analyses performance in areas such as poverty and inequality, employment, access to key public services and taxation. These areas are examined in light of the key social policy responses of the European Union in recent years up to and including the recently unveiled EU Anti-Poverty Strategy. The report also points to some policy proposals and alternatives for discussion. These include the right to sufficient income, meaningful work and access to key quality services in line with the overarching target of eradicating poverty in Europe by 2050.

We hope that this report can make a timely and significant contribution to moving toward this goal. A core logic underlying the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy is that future growth and adaption to a changing world in Europe does not occur at the cost of social equity. In the past, the failure to deliver a balanced policy approach between economic and social policy across the European Union has led to repeated missed targets and falling levels of ambition. Now more than ever, resilience must involve renewal or risk irretrievable reversal of the European project.

Focusing on this century alone we see that the original Lisbon Strategy (2000-2010) was deemed to be such a failure that it had to be revised halfway through its ten-year lifespan. The revised version eliminated the social aspects of policy that had been a feature of its original formulation. The EU's successor to Lisbon, the Europe 2020 Strategy (2010-2020), likewise failed to meet the targets it set out to achieve. Of particular significance was its failure to reduce poverty substantially or to even make major progress towards reaching the target set. Most recently (May 2026), the EU Commissioner with responsibility for social policy, Roxana Mînzatu, has frankly admitted that progress toward meeting the comparably modest 2030 poverty-reduction targets laid out in the successor to Europe 2020, the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, is 'barely' being made (Nielsen, 2026).

Against the backdrop of an ambitious 2050 target to completely eradicate poverty and social exclusion in Europe, this track record should prove a reminder that the European Union has long proved strong on rhetoric but weak on delivery. Yet failure to deliver on social aspects of policy, in particular on reducing poverty and long-term unemployment and improving access to quality services, has severe implications for Europe, fuelling disengagement and distrust of the EU as a democratic project increasingly removed from the day-to-day struggles of its citizens. As twentieth-century European history shows – and as a recent spate of election victories for the far-right should remind us[1] – if responsible actors do not take action to protect human rights and dignity, the consequences will prove disastrous for the most vulnerable people in Europe and beyond. In this context, the temptation of EU policymakers to subordinate social policy to other goals – be it a 'European industrial strategy' or the drive to global competitiveness articulated in the 2024 'Draghi report' – will only serve to exacerbate the challenges currently holding Europe back.

The purpose of our European Research Series is to contribute to the debate and discussion on policy issues that affect all members of the European Union. Past iterations of this research series have produced comprehensive reviews of Ireland's performance towards its Europe 2020 targets, a comprehensive examination of the impact of policies pursued by the European Union and its Members States after the financial crisis of 2008 and an extensive analysis of how European Member States performed throughout the Covid-19 pandemic and in the years since. *Social Justice Ireland's* European Research Series provides a comprehensive and detailed analysis of key issues, and it also makes a series of policy proposals at local, NGO, national and EU level. These proposals are aimed at ensuring a more sustainable and inclusive future for European citizens.

Our research has consistently shown that a more integrated social dimension across the European Union is required to ensure the European Social Model can meet the challenges of the present. This publication points to the need to develop a social welfare and support system that can adapt to changing realities and withstand future shocks. In keeping with current proposals which might meaningfully enhance the mission of the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy, this Report explores progress on Minimum Income schemes, the Living Wage, Basic Income schemes, the changing nature of work, adequate investment, access to quality services, representation and sustainability. We strongly argue that these measures remain *essential prerequisites* to future European prosperity, not barriers to it. We present this research as part of our ongoing contribution to the European policy process.

Social Justice Ireland would like to thank Dr Peter Hession for his work in producing the research for this publication. He has brought a great deal of experience, research, knowledge and wisdom to ensure that this publication is a worthwhile contribution to the ongoing discussion on how to secure a more sustainable and inclusive future for all in the European Union.

1 See Henley, Jon. 'Nearly a quarter of voters in Europe now back far-right parties', 24 June 2026, *The Guardian*, London, [Online] https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2026/jun/24/nearly-quarter-votes-europe-now-cast-far-right-parties Accessed 27.07.26.

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Executive Summary

This report examines social developments in the EU utilising a range of indicators of poverty, inequality and income, employment and unemployment. It also looks at how European countries perform on certain indicators in respect of education and health. In each case, we look at what the indicators tell us about the most recent years, and we also look back to 2019 in many cases.[2] We also examine levels of total taxation as a proportion of GDP amongst European countries in light of key indicators and also in light of their respective approaches to social investment. Finally, we set out some alternative policy approaches. The following offers an executive summary of the report's overall findings.

Poverty and Income

The review set out in this report shows how the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan (EPSRAP) target set for 2030 to reduce those **at risk of poverty and social exclusion** by 15 million is yet to be attained. Moreover, the headline target of the recently announced EU Anti-Poverty Strategy to entirely eradicate this phenomenon by 2050 remains an admirably ambitious if currently far-off goal.

Table 1 EU-27 Key Poverty Indicators 2019 and 2024

Poverty Indicators								
	People at risk of poverty or social exclusion		People at risk of poverty (60% threshold)		People experiencing Severe Material and Social Deprivation		People in households with very low work intensity	
EU-27	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Total population								
2019	92.2m	21.1	72.3m	16.5	28.0m	6.7	26.5m	8.3
2024	93.3m	21.0	72.1m	16.2	27.5m	6.4	26.1m	8.2
Children (under 18)								
2019	18.3m	22.8	15.0m	18.7	5.9m	7.5	5.2m	6.5
2024	19.5m	24.2	15.6m	19.3	6.3m	7.9	6.0m	7.5
Older people (over 65s)								
2019	16.9m	19.4	13.9m	16.1	5.4m	6.5	n/a	n/a
2024	18.1m	19.2	15.7m	16.6	4.7m	5.1		

Source: Eurostat Databases: ilc_peps01n, ilc_li02, ilc_mdd11, ilc_mdsd11, ilc_lvhl11.

2 This provides a pre-pandemic comparison and is the baseline year for the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan.

Comparing the latest year for which data is available, 2024, and the EPSRAP base year of 2019, the number of people in Europe at risk of poverty and social exclusion has actually *increased* by 1.1 million.[3] This means that currently one in five Europeans or over 93.3 million people remain at risk of poverty or social exclusion (Eurostat online database code ilc_peps01n). Despite improvements prior to the pandemic, current trends suggest a significant loss of ground and an unacceptable degree of stagnation in this measure over recent years. A recent longitudinal study tracking 'Dynamic Risk of Poverty' indicators among those who experienced poverty repeatedly over four year periods between 2011 and 2022 suggests that on average the depth of hardship failed to improve appreciably in the EU as a whole (European Commission, 2025k). Groups facing a higher risk of poverty and social exclusion include single households, migrants and people with lower education as well as their children.

In 2024, the highest rate of poverty or social exclusion was in Bulgaria where the rate marginally exceeded 30 per cent. In Lithuania, Spain, Greece and Romania the rate was over 25 per cent. The lowest rates were found in Czechia (11.3 per cent) followed by Slovenia and the Netherlands. Even though there have been marginal improvements in the most recent year in some countries with typically high rates, there continues to be great divergence between countries. Between 2023 and 2024, disimprovements in the poverty or social exclusion rates were observed in several countries including, notably, Lithuania (+1.5 percentage points) and also in some countries with traditionally relatively low rates such as Finland, Slovenia and Slovakia. The greatest improvements occurred in Romania and Ireland. It is notable that those countries identified by the European Social Policy Network as having a well-established approach to social investment (mainly Nordic and central European countries) tend to do well at protecting their populations from poverty or social exclusion relative to other countries with a less well-developed social investment approach.

The **risk of poverty rate**, a measure of relative income poverty, suggests that in 2024, 16.2 per cent of the population (EU-27) was living at risk of poverty (over 72.1 million people), unchanged relative to the rate recorded in 2023 (Eurostat online database, code ilc_li02). Other indicators point to similarly stagnating rates of improvement against the backdrop of the pandemic - the average EU-27 rate of **severe material and social deprivation** was 6.4 per cent in 2024, representing approximately 27.5 million people, only marginally down from a rate of 6.7 per cent in 2019 (and representing over 28 million people). It remains a concerning state of affairs, despite the fact that there have been improvements in this indicator in recent years.

Children (those under 18): Like other reports in this series, this report highlights again how ongoing high levels of poverty or social exclusion amongst children is one of the most challenging and serious issues faced by Europe. The rate of poverty or social exclusion that children experience continues to be higher than for the general population and about one quarter of children in Europe are affected. Thus, children who are considered to be **at risk of poverty or social exclusion** numbered 19.5 million in 2024 or 24.2 per cent (EU-27 average) (Eurostat online database, code ilc_peps01n). Positive reductions in levels of **severe material and social deprivation** occurred for children up to 2019, but the Covid-19 pandemic saw a partial reversal of this trend with increases of between +0.3 and +4.1 registered among twelve Member States (Malta, Austria, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Estonia, Czechia, Luxembourg, Finland, the Netherlands, Slovakia and Germany) between 2019 and 2024 and an overall increase in the average EU rate over the same period by 0.4 percentage points.

In short, poverty in all its forms still affects far too many children and childhood poverty remains a pressing problem because of its long-lasting effects on society and on the lives of individuals. A range of interventions are necessary to address this situation

[3] Eurostat gives -8.85m as the cumulative difference between 2010 and 2020 for EU27 (Eurostat Online database: [ilc_peps01]). From 2020 on, the methodology for calculating this dataset was amended accounting for slight discrepancies between the pre- and post-2020 measures. Comparing the two datasets for 2010 and 2022 respectively, the difference amounts to 8.4m (Eurostat Online database: [ilc_peps01n]).

including access to affordable quality early childhood education and care, along with well-designed work-life balance policies.

Older People: The situation of older people varies greatly between countries, with very high levels of income poverty and material deprivation especially in newer accession countries and also in some Mediterranean countries. The European average rate for **poverty or social exclusion** amongst those aged 65+ was 19.2 per cent in 2024 (representing 18.1m people). This marked a return to the pre-pandemic 2019 rate of 19.4 per cent. The rate was higher for those aged 75+ (20.0 per cent) (Eurostat online database, code ilc-peps01n).

The average **severe material and social deprivation** rate for this age group showed marginal improvement between 2023 and 2024 – falling to 5.1 per cent (representing approximately 4.7 million people aged 65+, EU-27) (Eurostat online database, code ilc_mdsd11). Many more older women than older men are affected by all aspects of poverty. These issues are significant for policy-makers (as well as for the individuals concerned) given that populations are ageing at an unprecedented rate; that there are many more older women than older men, and they tend to have poorer pension provision (see EU Social Protection Committee 2025).

Working Poor: In 2024, 8.2 per cent of employed people (aged 18+) were living under the poverty threshold (EU-27) and the average rate (that is, the in-work poverty rate) fell by 0.1 percentage points when compared to the previous year (Eurostat Online database, code ilc_iw01). Thus, in 2024 almost one in twelve employed people in the EU were living in poverty. Some groups are particularly affected (including younger people, people with lower education levels, and non-standard workers, poor households with children including lone parents). It is concerning that limited policy attention has been paid to this group in the EPSRAP, while the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy (EUAPS) has promised a more integrated and cross-generational whole-of-life focus.

When **income inequality** is examined there are concerns overall about increases over time and substantial differences between countries in Europe. In 2024, while in some countries (notably Nordic, some central European countries and some peripheral countries), the rich earned around four times as much as the poor or less, in other countries, notably, Latvia, Lithuania and Bulgaria, the value was above 6. The highest levels of **median disposable income** occur in Scandinavian, central and western European countries, the lowest in other newer accession members and there are very great variations in the levels. While, between 2023 and 2024, median disposable income increased in all but one Member State (Sweden).

Financial distress (defined as the need to draw on savings or to run into debt to cover current expenditures) gradually declined between 2014 and 2021 before increasing for all income quartiles in 2022 and 2023 before moderating in 2024 and 2025. The greatest distress continues to be experienced by the lowest income quartile (or lowest 25 per cent) and also by the second quartile (lowest 50 per cent). In September 2025 it was recorded at 26.2 per cent for the lowest-income quartile.

Overall, while there have been some marginal improvements in selected indicators since 2019 and for key groups, the impact of the current cost-of-living and affordability crises linked to ongoing geopolitical instability has helped slow down progress toward several of the headlines targets enshrined in the EPSRAP – particularly in relation to employment, poverty and child poverty. The social indicators suggest a deterioration for very many people living in Europe, with disimprovements for some groups in several countries. These include older people in some countries, an issue that particularly affects older women. Those working who still live in poverty are another group to be concerned about and this issue now affects a greater proportion of people than it did prior to the financial crisis. The position of young people in particular continues to be strikingly negative for very many children with potentially very serious long-term consequences.

Employment

As in previous reports in this series, we welcome the fact that employment has grown strongly in the EU since 2021. However, employment growth has recently begun to slow down as of Q1 2026 due to energy price inflation pressures placing a squeeze on job creation. It is thus more essential than ever that EU Member States and institutions grasp the opportunity to *deliver on new and more effective social rights such as the EUAPS poverty eradication pledge*.

This is all the more salient in the context of past missed goals relating to employment in both the Europe 2020 Strategy and stalling progress toward the current EPSRAP targets for 2030. This is particularly noteworthy given the modest nature of the latter's 78 per cent employment goal, a rate which has already been reached in sixteen EU Member States while six others have five years to close a considerable employment gap of between 4.1 and 10.4 percentage points to meet the EPSRAP target. These include those with the lowest employment rates in 2025 such as Italy, Romania, Greece, Spain and Belgium (looking at ages 20-64). There are also concerns about the way that the employment picture is evolving– especially regarding growth in temporary, part-time and precarious work and falling or stagnating wages. Furthermore employment recovery is not reaching all regions equally, with a recent (2025) report on EU labour markets noting 'long-lasting effects of the [financial] crisis on productivity growth in the EU and particularly in southern Europe' (Eurofound, 2025a). Moreover, the rise of telework in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic has only served to exacerbate regional inequalities in employment with ongoing 'territorial divergence' threatening to sharpen the divide between capital city regions and less urbanised areas (Eurofound and European Commission, 2024).

In 2025, the annual unemployment rate (EU-27) was 6.0 per cent (representing 13.3 million people) (Eurostat une_rt_a). The countries with the highest rates in 2025 were Spain (10.5), Finland and Greece. The long-term unemployment rate has risen slightly in the year 2025 (at 1.9 per cent of the labour force), but it still affected about 4.2 million people (Eurostat online database une_ltu_q; data not seasonally adjusted). Those unemployed for 2 years or more represented over 2.2 million people in 2025 and was stable compared to the previous year. The share of long-term unemployed as a percentage of total unemployment has fallen to 31.5 per cent in 2025, down 0.7 percentage points relative to 2024 (Eurostat online database lfsq_upgal). Thus, long-term unemployment continues to be a concern with implications in human and social terms and with financial costs and possible impacts on social cohesion. Greece, Slovakia and Spain had the highest shares of long-term unemployment in 2025. The lowest ratios were found in the Netherlands, Malta and Czechia.

Both older and younger workers experience lower employment rates than other age groups. Becoming unemployed at an older age means being more likely to remain so and to experience long-term unemployment (International Labour Organisation, 2025a).

Focusing on youth unemployment (those under 25), in 2025, the average EU-27 rate increased by 0.3 percentage points to 15.2 per cent compared to 14.9 in 2024. (Eurostat database une_rt_a). In 2025 Romania was the country with the highest level of youth unemployment (26.1 per cent) followed by Spain (24.9) and Sweden (24.3 per cent).

A related area of concern involves young people who are not in education, employment or training (known as NEETs). The EU-27 average NEET rate (ages 15-29) was 11 per cent in 2025, remaining stable relative to 2024 (Eurostat edat_lfse_20). Thus, while there have been welcome improvements in youth unemployment within recent years, the situation of young people is still difficult especially for some groups and in some countries.

Overall, despite welcome improvements in employment in the EU since 2021, there are significant ongoing challenges driven by spiking energy price inflation and a wider affordability crisis affecting Europe. These require urgent policy responses with potential linkages to the EUAPS in pursuit of the Strategy's overarching goal of eradicating poverty through expanding employment by 2050.

Education

It is welcome that progress has been made towards reaching the EPSRAP targets for 2030 to address early school leaving and to improve third level educational attainment. However, progress has stalled on some educational indicators and there is scope for improvement in many countries.

Improvements in the average (EU-27) rate of early school leaving are welcome, as is the fact that, at 9.1 per cent, the average for 2025 is now only marginally above the <9 per cent rate set by the EPSRAP for 2030. But the average rate has only decreased very marginally since 2019 by 1 percentage point – so overall progress has stalled. In 2025 the highest rates of early school leaving were to be found in Romania (15.5 per cent), Germany (13.1 per cent), and Spain (12.8 per cent). There is still a great gap between the countries with the highest rates and that with the lowest rate, Croatia (with a rate of 2.1 per cent). Because the consequences for individuals and for society are so grave in terms of increased risk of unemployment, poverty and social exclusion, this is an issue that requires ongoing attention from policy-makers and renewed ambition to surpass the EPSRAP target for 2030 in the nine Member States where it remains greater than 9 per cent in 2025.

For third level attainment, the target set in the EPSRAP is 45 per cent for 2030. In 2025, the EU-27 average was 44.8 per cent so the target is very close to being met. This is an area showing large improvements since 2019 when the average rate had been 39.6 per cent. In 2025, ten countries had rates at or over 50 per cent. However, there is nearly a 43.8 percentage point gap between the country with the highest rate (Ireland) and that with the lowest (Romania).

When we look at lifelong learning, this target measure was redefined under the EPSRAP as the total percentage of adults engaged in formal, non-formal or informal education or training in a given year with a goal of 60 per cent for 2030. At 46.6 per cent in 2022 (the latest year for which data is available for this measure under the EPSRAP) the average rate is above that last recorded in 2016 (43.7 per cent) but significantly behind the end-of-decade target goal. This is concerning given the EU past failure to reach its previous lifelong learning aims under Europe 2020. There is great variation across Europe in terms of the rates of participation. Northern European countries tend to top the table; in 2022 the top three countries were Sweden, Hungary and the Netherlands, followed by Germany, Austria and Slovakia. At the other end of the scale, the rate was lowest in Greece, Bulgaria and Poland.

One of the problems that Europe now faces is that progress not only needs to continue to be made to address the areas in which targets were set in the EPSRAP, but also to manage other issues such as low basic skills amongst disadvantaged socio-economic groups. Ongoing attention to issues of literacy and numeracy across all age groups is required. Certain countries tend to be better performers across several or all education indicators, these include, in particular, Finland, Sweden, Denmark, and the Netherlands.

Health

The Covid-19 pandemic has been termed the worst to effect Europe in a century, resulting in a marked fall in life expectancy in sixteen EU Member States between 2020 and 2021 and exacerbating long term structural problems in the European healthcare system in its wake. Between 2023 and 2024, average life expectancy fell in four EU Member States, remained stable in five and increased in 18 others. The average for the EU increased by just 0.1 per cent relative 2023 and now stands at 81.5 years. In overcoming Covid-19, Europeans have generally relied on healthcare systems which compare well internationally in terms of quality and access. Data relating to 2020, 2021 and 2022 suggests that the pandemic saw a rise and subsequent stabilisation in perceptions of unmet need for healthcare in some countries, with those in the lowest income quartile experiencing only marginal improvement between 2024 and 2025 from 3.9 per cent to 3.7 per cent (Eurostat, hlth_silc_08; Eurofound, 2021b). Perception has also been persistently different between different income groups, with the lowest perception of unmet healthcare need among top income earners and the highest amongst those who earn least.

There also continues to be variation in these perceptions across different countries. In the wake of the pandemic, the EU has been recently categorised as facing key challenges in relation to access to healthcare, related to understaffing and unmet needs (OECD, 2025a).

A significant factor in health performance throughout the pandemic was underlying inequalities in healthcare provision across the EU (Brooks, 2022) and current demographic and recruitment challenges facing European healthcare have worsened in recent years. A recent (2025) European Commission report on the role of healthcare in reducing inequality and poverty across the EU has similarly warned of the 'long-term consequences of underinvestment in healthcare' which produced a surge in unmet medical needs following the financial crash which peaked in 2014 (European Commission, 2025j). Likewise, the OECD's (2025a) recent *Health at a Glance: Europe 2025* report warns of life expectancy gaps and 'inequalities in access to care and unmet needs' among OECD countries.

Certain groups continue to experience particular health difficulties and need a particular policy focus. In the context of current health inequalities, these include younger people (aged 18-25), older people (aged 65+), women, migrants, rural dwellers, low-income earners, those neither in education nor training, those living with disabilities, those at risk of mental health and chronic health problems and those living in Member States with lowers levels of health spending in central and eastern Europe (Eurofound, 2023b).

Taxation

Without raising resources, countries cannot invest in infrastructure and services required to promote inclusion and to sustain development. Our conclusions on taxation are very much in line with our conclusions in previous years.

There is considerable variation between EU Member States in respect of total taxes as a proportion of GDP. The highest ratios tend to be found in the 'old' 14 members of the EU. Thus, the highest levels are found in Denmark (45.8) followed by France, Belgium, Austria, Luxembourg and Italy. At the other end of the scale were Ireland (22.4 per cent), Romania, Malta, Bulgaria, and Lithuania. Overall, the range is broad with a difference of 23.4 percentage points between the country with the lowest ratio (Ireland) and that with the highest (Denmark).

Amongst the countries with the highest total taxation ratios relative to GDP are some considered the most competitive in the world: the Netherlands, Germany, Sweden and Denmark and are amongst the world's ten most competitive countries with Finland ranked 11th (World Economic Forum 2020). These are countries that also tend to score highly at protecting their populations from poverty or social exclusion and they tend to be more equal societies in terms of incomes.

In general, countries in the south and east of Europe tend to have lower levels of taxation and also less well-developed social investment approaches, and higher rates of poverty or social exclusion. Amongst the newer accession countries – and with a taxation ratio just below 35 per cent of GDP - Czechia is notable for its performance in relation to prevention of poverty and social exclusion. The performance of Slovakia and Slovenia is also notable.

All of the countries that are identified by the European Social Policy Network as having a well-established approach to many social policies (Bouget et al. 2015), have tax-takes that are above a low-taxation threshold ratio of 35 per cent of GDP, and most are also above the EU average.

Chapter 1

1 Introduction

This report is one of a series that *Social Justice Ireland* has published addressing the social situation in Europe. In previous reports, we considered the impacts of the financial crisis of 2008-09, the Covid-19 pandemic and recent geopolitical shocks including wars in Ukraine and the Middle East. This report focuses on EU social policy developments amidst a landmark announcement in May 2026 of the EU's first ever Anti-Poverty Strategy which sets a target of eradicating poverty in Europe by 2050.

In the following Chapters, we consider the progress which will need to be made if the EU is serious about overcoming poverty in Europe with close analysis of the latest data relating to poverty and social exclusion, inequality, unemployment, education, health services and taxation. We also include a Chapter in which alternative policy approaches are discussed to address some of the challenges outlined in the report including geopolitical instability, climate change, technological transformation and an ongoing cost-of-living and housing crisis which pose unprecedented risks to social equity. In this light, we then finish with some recommendations. The report thus tackles problems currently facing Europe with the aim of informing EU investment policy on rebuilding our society and economy in line with the goal of completely eradicating poverty in Europe by 2050.

Like preceding reports in this series, this year's report is essentially an annual review focusing on development in the most recent years with reference to contemporary economic, social, environmental and geopolitical developments framing EU policymaking. The following sections of this Introduction offer a detailed analysis and background to the existing instruments and legislation relevant to EU social policy, this year with particular focus on the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy.

1.1 'We are barely making it': Towards an EU Anti-Poverty Strategy

When the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) was unveiled in 2017, it came in the wake of its predecessor's quiet but inexorable failure; by the time the Barroso-era 'Europe 2020 Strategy' concluded three years later, its most ambitious targets remained unattained including its headline goals of increasing EU-wide working-age employment to 75 per cent and reducing those at risk of poverty and social exclusion by 20 million compared to 2008. For this reason, many critical voices in civil society, academia and politics greeted the EPSR as a virtual 'dead letter' on arrival, a perception which gained credence amidst the conscious blurring of EU social policy into wider metrics of human development such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals 2030 agenda from 2019 (Anderson, 2021; European Commission, 2019a). When President Ursula von der Leyen prepared to take office for the first time in 2019, she strongly prioritised the creation of a 'geopolitical Commission' focused on regional security, defence, digitisation and climate change mitigation with little of substance to offer in the field of social policy.

The impact of Covid-19 from the first quarter of 2020 altered this situation markedly as Member States and the European Commission developed a set of emergency initiatives designed to meet the unprecedented social and economic challenges posed by the pandemic. In March 2021, the EPSR was given a new lease of life with the launch of the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan

(EPSRAP) containing three headline targets traced by a 'Social Scoreboard' relating to employment, poverty and skills. The Porto Social Summit of May 2021 affirmed this revival of 'Social Europe' in the context of unprecedented Covid-mitigation measures within the EU's Strategic Agenda to 2024 including the NextGenerationEU fund, the Recovery and Resilience Facility and the issuance of collectively financed 'coronabonds' (European Council, 2019; 2021). Contrasts were drawn between the EU's Covid response and what Commissioner Paolo Gentiloni obliquely termed 'the mistakes of the past', later declaring that going 'back to austerity … would be a terrible mistake' (European Commission, 2020b; 2024b).

In the years since the extraordinary response to Covid-19 at its height in 2020-21, social policy again appeared to slip down the Commission's agenda despite the deleterious impact of the pandemic on poverty. Yet the outbreak of war in Europe following the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, destabilisation of the Middle East since the Israel-Hamas conflict of October 2023, and the re-election of Donald Trump as US President in 2024 refocused European priorities once again around militarisation, energy exposure and a green 'industrial strategy'. In this increasingly complex global context, the focus on poverty at the heart of traditional EU social policy again risked becoming subsumed into the more nebulous concepts of 'social resilience' and 'preparedness' posed by a myriad of factors including cost inflation, migration, climate, health, artificial intelligence etc (European Commission, 2025a). Against a backdrop of massive oil and gas supply chain disruption arising from the war in Ukraine and market instability stoked by the US-EU 'tariff war' in the first half of 2025, even the comparatively modest 2030 targets set by the EPSRAP began to appear unrealisable.

The most significant of these aims is to reduce those at risk of poverty or social exclusion by at least 15 million by 2030, including at least 5 million children. As of 2025, the first of these metrics has decreased by just 3.5 million while child poverty 'remains broadly stable'. In a recent frank assessment of progress – or lack thereof – toward these targets, Commissioner Roxana Mînzatu admitted what many already knew: 'we are barely making it' (Nielsen, 2026). It was this realisation, combined with shock victories for the far-right in Dutch (November 2023), European Parliament (June 2024), Austrian (September 2024) and German (February 2025) elections which set the stage for a revival of social policy led by the Belgian Presidency of the European Council which featured the first ever joint meeting of EU ministers of economic and financial affairs and ministers of employment and social affairs. These efforts crystalised in the January 2024 Val Duchesse Social Partners Summit, the March 2024 Brussels Tripartite Social Summit and the April 2024 La Hulpe Declaration on the Future of the EPSR (Vandenbroucke et al, 2024; European Council, 2024). A renewed focus on poverty thus emerged amongst a set of Commission Political Guidelines to 2029 otherwise dominated by defence and competitiveness (European Commission, 2024a).

On 10 September 2025, these efforts appeared to bear fruit: during her State of the Union address, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced the EU's ambition to eradicate poverty by 2050 as the headline target of the first ever EU Anti-Poverty Strategy (EUAPS) (2026a). This move confounded many of von der Leyen's critics, particularly following initially discouraging signals such as the conspicuous absence of the word 'social' from any portfolio in her initial Commissioner line-up and all but a glancing mention of anti-poverty in the 'mission letter' of Executive Vice President Mînzatu (European Commission, 2024c). For some, poverty had again 'vanished' from her agenda (Afscharian, 2024). Yet this initial pessimism ignored a gradual build-up of momentum from mid-2025 including the launch of a public consultation on the Strategy from July 2025, the adoption of a strong European Parliament resolution in January 2026 and an Implementation Dialogue led by Mînzatu in February 2026 culminating in the launch of EUAPS in May 2026. The move received an enthusiastic if cautious welcome from a wide range of commentators, activists and experts across media, academia and civil society, recently being hailed as a 'historic commitment' of 'truly transformative' potential (Caritas Europa, 2026; EAPN, 2026a).

Alongside the official Commission Communication on the EUAPS, the Strategy is supported by a recent upsurge of empirical research published jointly by Eurofound and the European Commission (2024b), Eurostat (2025a), the Joint Research Centre (2026) and the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (2025k; 2026l, 2026m) relating to social protection, housing and homelessness, inequality, child poverty and in-work poverty. Drawing on key insights from these empirical studies alongside significant stakeholder input, new data and recent academic scholarship, the EUAPS aims to reduce those at risk of poverty and social exclusion to zero by 2050, thus going beyond the headline reduction target of 15 million by 2030 set in the EPSRAP. To move beyond and improve on the methodologies which underlie the EPSRAP and the Europe 2020 Strategy before it, the EUAPS seeks to offer a joined-up and dynamic approach to poverty reduction utilising three novel analytical approaches:

1. **An inter- and cross-generational lens:** This focus brings together three distinct forms of age-related poverty which have hitherto been treated in sperate silos, namely child poverty (aged under 18 years), in-work poverty (aged 18-64 years) and old-age poverty (aged 65+ years). For children and youth, the Strategy combines older and newer priorities including quality education, healthcare, housing, and family support through reinforcement of the European Child Guarantee and Youth Guarantee. Among working-age adults, the emphasis is on labour market participation, quality jobs, social protection, skills development, employment activation and income support for those unable to work building on the Minimum Wages Directive. For older people, it promotes adequate pensions, long-term care and longer working lives. The Strategy thus seeks an integrated life-cycle approach to poverty to better tackle intergenerational transmission.
2. **A focus on structural inequalities:** This approach adopts a 'horizontal' perspective to structural factors affecting poverty regardless of age. The first strand highlights discrimination and stigma, highlighting how women, migrants, Roma communities, people with disabilities, and LGBTQI+ individuals face heightened risks of poverty and social exclusion. The second strand focuses on cost-of-living challenges including food, energy, transport, health, education, care and housing expenses. A final strand highlights the effects of climate change and territorial inequalities on poverty, arguing that closer co-ordination and simplification of access can be supported by new Council Recommendations on housing exclusion and service accessibility and collaboration with the European Parliament Social Protection Committee's EU Voluntary Quality Framework.
3. **Funding and monitoring:** In keeping with the Open Method of Coordination and 'shared competency' status of EU social policy, the EUAPS calls for greater coordination on poverty reduction among Member States as well as among EU institutions, regional authorities, civil society, social partners, businesses and those experiencing poverty. On funding, it notes the role required by the European Social Fund Plus, Cohesion funds, the Social Climate Fund, and the Recovery and Resilience Facility. It also encourages private-sector and philanthropic investment through a new Coalition Against Poverty, partnerships with institutions like the European Investment Bank and a new EU Social Inclusion Award. Finally, the EUAPS proposes enhanced monitoring and data collection to better capture affordability, deprivation and territorial disparities.

Aside from the several novel methodological advances evident in the EUAPS, the most substantive new dimension in the Strategy relates to housing. This focus builds on the June 2021 Lisbon Declaration which established the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness with the parallel goal of 'ending homelessness by 2030' not contained in the EPSRAP (European Commission, 2021). President von der Leyen went on to declare housing a 'social crisis' during her 2025 State of the Union address, having appointed Dan Jørgensen the first ever Commissioner for Housing to oversee the recently (December 2025) launched EU Housing Agenda encompassing the European Affordable Housing Plan, the Pan-European Investment Platform for Affordable and Sustainable Housing and the European Housing Alliance. This notable momentum is also reflected in the EUAPS, with homelessness explicitly deemed 'the most extreme form of poverty and social exclusion' affecting 1 million EU residents. Here too, the Strategy's tie-in to a proposed Council Recommendation on Fighting Housing Exclusion reflects recent (June 2026) warnings from the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (2026) that lack of housing is becoming a critical threat to human rights in Europe.

The EUAPS sets forth these approaches alongside the frank admission that 'stronger, sustained and more coordinated efforts are needed to come closer to the [European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan] 2030 target' of reducing overall poverty by 15 million and child poverty by 5 million. The EUAPS thus represents a significant raising of ambition against a backdrop of recent failures associated with both the Europe 2020 Strategy and the stagnation in progress toward the goals of the EPSRAP (Crespy and Menz, 2015; Graziano and Hartlapp, 2019; Andry, 2022). Moreover, apart from the 2050 aim, the EUAPS does not impose new targets on the EPSRAP and risks the accusation of 'kicking the can down the road' in pursuit of a glittering but far-off goal. Long before the missed targets of either the Europe 2020 Strategy or the EPSRAP, an aspiration towards 'the eradication of poverty' was first articulated in the EU as a founding element of the 'Lisbon Strategy' put in place over a quarter of a century ago. Thus, while welcoming the latest 2050 target many stakeholders have greeted the EUAPS with a mix of critical support and rational scepticism (Vanhercke, 2020).

1.2 'A political choice': Critical Assessments of the EUAPS

Above all, groups including the recently created umbrella Coalition on the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy (Coalition on the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy, 2025) have welcomed the 2050 target as evidence that Brussels now recognises 'the eradication of poverty is a *political* choice' as past tolerance has also been. The Strategy has likewise met with widespread support for indicating a more subtle and nuanced understanding of poverty as a multidimensional and interconnected 'lived' and 'human-centred' phenomenon rather than an abstract metric. This 'bottom up' perspective has been praised by a range of leading civil society stakeholders who also fed into the consultation process including the European Social Network (2016), the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN, 2026a), Caritas Europa (2025), Social Platform (2025b), the European Trade Union Confederation (2025) and others. In particular, advocacy groups focused on age-specific cohorts such as Eurochild (2025a), AGE Platform Europe (2025), Eurocarers (2025), the European Youth Forum (2026) and the Confederation of Family Organisations in the EU (2026) have championed the Strategy's 'holistic' cross-generational approach while those representing marginalised groups including the European Network Against Racism (2025), EU Roma (2025), the European Disability Forum (2026) and LGBTQI+ organisations (ILGA Europe, 2026) have welcomed its focus on structural inequality.

Yet several of the same stakeholders have also voiced major concerns surrounding long-standing limitations on the EU's capacity to follow through on such an ambitious goal. First and foremost, many have questioned the lack of new financial resources to effectively implement the EUAPS with the European Anti-Poverty Network Director Juliana Wahlgren recently urging the Commission to recognise 'there is no strategy without money' (Sheftalovich and Cokelaere, 2026). While in February 2026 progressive MEPs pressed for the inclusion of a €20 billion budget increase for the European Child Guarantee as part of the next European Social Fund Plus package to support the EUAPS, its failure to be included in the final draft has led some members of the European Parliament's Employment and Social Affairs Committee and cross-party Intergroup on Fighting Poverty to dismiss the Strategy as a 'useless document' and 'a dead letter if we don't have a solid budget' (Funchion, 2026; European Parliament, 2026a). While reports suggest a likely increase of the European Social Fund Plus budget from €50 to €100 billion in the 2028-2034 Multiannual Financial Framework, it appears this money will not be specifically dedicated to the EUAPS (Tessari, 2026).

A second widespread point of criticism relates to the practical operability of the EUAPS in the institutional context of 'shared competency' norms arising out of the Open Method of Coordination now structured by both the European Semester and the EPSRAP. This line of scepticism is twofold. Firstly, the recommendations made throughout the Strategy will remain inherently 'non-binding' if not supplemented by additional governance instruments (Social Platform, 2025b; Youth Forum, 2026). Here, stakeholders are not necessarily anticipating a wholescale reform of social policy as an EU competency but have rather pressed for bolder accompanying legislation to strengthen the aims of the EUAPS, pointing to inadequate compliance with the non-binding 2023 Council Recommendation on Adequate Minimum Income and the lack of any instrument related to universal basic services (Galeone, 2025b). The defeat of a proposal from the European Parliament Employment and Social Affairs Committee calling for a Minimum Income Directive as well as references to fair taxation policies has also been condemned (EAPN, 2026a). For a Strategy that depends on Member State co-operation, it is likewise disappointing that calls for the appointment of a dedicated EU anti-poverty co-ordinator to liaise with national 'poverty tsars' was dropped from the final draft of the Strategy (EAPN, 2025a; Social Platform, 2025a; Nielson, 2026). Secondly, the congruence of the EUAPS with the wider political economy of EU fiscal governance is questionable. Active in 2025, the EU has introduced new fiscal rules to update the existing Stability and Growth Pact's Excessive Deficit Procedure which eases some fiscal disciplines while likely demanding 'ambitious fiscal adjustments from high-debt countries'. In the aftermath of a potential debt crisis affecting France in autumn 2025, EU fiscal rules remain shrouded in a degree of pragmatic 'ambiguity' in the context of rising political challenges from the far-right, an energy-driven inflation crisis and ongoing geopolitical instability (Darvas et al. 2024). Yet the most recent (June 2026) European Fiscal Board forecast has reiterated its strong opposition to the use of fiscal 'escape clauses' for defence and possible energy spending, warning of the need to prioritise debt sustainability in the short to medium term. Past and current relaxation of fiscal rules triggered by the shocks of the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine represent a potential opening for social policy but the question of how 'resilient' the EUAPS may prove within an intensified architecture of retrenchment, austerity and deregulation remains critically unresolved (Spasova et al. 2026; EPSU, 2025; Armeni, 2026; Jacques Delors Institute, 2026).

The foregoing considerations of adequate resourcing, governance mechanisms and institutional congruence each relate back to the even more fundamental issue of definition: does the EUAPS frame poverty eradication primarily as a means to other ends – growth, resilience, competitiveness, institutional trust – or as a 'right' in itself? While welcoming the ambition of the Strategy, many stakeholders have highlighted this question as one of vital importance to judging its ultimate likelihood of success or failure. As Pietro Galeone (2005a) has urged, 'a new narrative must accompany these reforms, one grounded in dignity, rights, and empowerment not in "deservingness"'. In opposition to instrumental or conditional framings, many responses to the EUAPS demand a framework more explicitly 'anchored in human rights' and 'dignity' (Caritas Europa, 2025; Eurochild, 2025a; Wahlgren and Kouadio, 2026; Social Planform, 2026). This approach has also been echoed by those with a primary focus on human rights, including the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights whose Regional Representative for Europe recently argued for a definition of poverty rooted in 'human rights violations' (ESN, 2025). While superficially congruent with the EPSRAP approach, critics have long highlighted the latter's de facto instrumentalisation of social 'rights' to support and depend on a 'trickle down' growth agenda (Spasova et al., 2026).

Downstream from a more instrumental conception of poverty eradication as opposed to one rooted in judiciable rights is the centrality of employment to the EUAPS. This framing not only implicitly subordinates social policy to economic and geopolitical factors, but also regards it as an outcome rather than as a foundation of growth. For example, former ECB President Mario Draghi's influential report *The future of European competitiveness* (2024) makes all but two mentions of poverty: the first to praise a European economy in which 'market competition' precedes 'fight[ing] poverty' and the second to note the success of globalisation in lifting 'millions out of poverty'. In her recent State of the Union address, Commission President von der Leyen

(2025m) likewise announced the EUAPS by way of stating: 'when we talk about competitiveness we talk about jobs ... to ensure that modern employment keeps pace with the modern economy and this is ... why we urgently need an ambitious European Anti-Poverty Strategy'. The EUAPS itself emphasises 'active inclusion', stressing 'transition to quality jobs as the first and best tool to prevent poverty' and work as 'the best protection against poverty'. Notwithstanding the Strategy's putatively 'holistic', 'horizontal' and institutional approach to poverty, critics have thus stressed that the persistence of 'a narrow focus on individuals [which] risks obscuring the relational dynamics of poverty' and obscures the reality that one-in-twelve of those employed in the EU are currently experiencing poverty (AGE Platform Europe, 2025; EAPN, 2026b; Social Platform, 2025b).

A tighter linking of social rights to employment as the major driver of poverty eradication in the EUAPS arguably marks a new synthesis in EU social policy combining a resurgence of the post-2013 'social investment' approach which underlay the Europe 2020 Strategy to that of the ESPRAP since 2021. Some have gone as far as to liken recent trends to a 'socialisation' of EU policymaking through the mainstreaming of social policy into instruments like the European Semester (Zeitlin and Vanhercke, 2018). Yet the same shift has also given rise to the contradiction that while social policy has returned to prominence in recent years, its most significant achievements lie in the realm of employment rather than social protection (Kilpatrick, 2023). Thus, the most robust EU reforms derive from 'hard' directives on Work-Life balance (2020), Adequate Minimum Wages (2022), Pay Transparency (2023) and Platform Work (2024) as opposed to the 'soft' mechanisms of the EPSRAP. If the EUAPS evolves in this manner, anti-poverty campaigners may be forced to choose between embracing its employment-first bias while seeking to reduce poverty though additional 'hard' employment regulations, or to utilise the 'soft' targets of the Strategy to critique its overall limitations.

In a world marked by ongoing wars in Ukraine and the Middle East as well as climate and geopolitical instability driving an upsurge in those seeking international protection world-wide, the 'human' centred universality of the EUAPS also remains open to question. As the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN, 2026a) and Foundation for European Progressive Studies (2026) have both pointed out, the exclusion of any reference to undocumented people and refugees in the Strategy is galling, particularly in light of the recent (June 2026) coming into force of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum which marks 'the biggest rollback of rights for people seeking safety in Europe in more than a decade' (International Rescue Committee, 2026). Containing only oblique references to 'third country nationals' and 'those born outside the EU', the EUAPS omits what several stakeholders refer to as the 'missing poor' as including 'racialised communities, asylum seekers [and] refugees' (EAPN, 2024; Wahlgren and Kouadio, 2026). For those seeking a more expansive and universal 'human rights' centred conception of poverty, the omission of non-citizens from this Strategy undoubtedly represents a glaring omission which will limit its integrity and effectiveness (Caritas Europa, 2025).

The remainder of this report details the scale of the task at hand for those seeking a more genuinely humane, inclusive, equitable and sustainable model of renewal for the EU.

1.3 This Report

When considering the effectiveness of social policy initiatives in the EU, the European Social Policy Network grouped countries of the EU into the following three categories as to how they perform relative to social investment (Bouget et al. 2015):

- **Group 1:** Has well established social investment approach to many social policies; tend to have good linkages between different policy areas when addressing key social challenges;
- **Group 2:** Still to develop an explicit or predominant social investment approach, while showing some increasing awareness in a few specific areas; and
- **Group 3:** Social investment approach has not made many significant inroads into the overall policy agenda.

Chapter 1

The first group includes mainly Nordic and central European countries while the third grouping includes mainly newer accession countries from Eastern Europe along with some southern countries. See **Table 2.** We set out these groupings here as we will return to this categorisation in later sections of this report as we review the performance of countries under a number of social indicators.

Table 2 Social Investment: EU Countries And Main Policy-Making Trends

Groupings	Countries	
Group 1: Has well established social investment approach to many social policies; tend to have good linkages between different policy areas when addressing key social challenges	Austria Belgium Germany Denmark Finland	France Netherlands Sweden Slovenia
Group 2: Still to develop an explicit or predominant social investment approach, while showing some increasing awareness in a few specific areas	Cyprus Spain Ireland Luxembourg	Hungary Malta Poland Portugal
Group 3: Social investment approach has not made many significant inroads into the overall policy agenda	Bulgaria Czechia Estonia Greece Croatia	Italy Latvia Lithuania Romania Slovakia

Source: Three groups defined by European Social Policy Network; this report also acknowledges the line between the groups is not always a sharp one (Bouget et al. 2015).

Social Justice Ireland advocates that every person should have seven core rights that need to be part of the vision for the future: the right to sufficient income to live with dignity, to meaningful work, to appropriate accommodation, to relevant education, to essential healthcare, to real participation, and the right to cultural respect. See **Table 3.** *Social Justice Ireland* believes that deliberative processes are crucial to the future of Europe founded on the idea of deliberative democracy in which decisions are made based on evidence-based and enlightened debate in which decisions taken are justified and accessible to the public.

Table 3 Social Justice Ireland - Seven Core Rights

Rights						
Sufficient income to live with dignity	Meaningful work	Appropriate accommodation	Relevant education	Essential healthcare	Real participation	Cultural respect

This report is intended to be complementary to another published annually by *Social Justice Ireland* in which we track Ireland's progress in a European context in reaching the Sustainable Development Goals (over the short and long term) (see Clark et al. 2026).

In **Sections 2** to **4** of this report, we will discuss issues relevant to the realisation of some of the above rights by looking at social indicators under the headings of poverty and social exclusion, employment/unemployment, and services in health and in education. We will also look at how countries compare in respect of total taxation (**Section 5**).[4] Throughout the report we will review how countries perform under some of these headings relative to their social investment ranking outlined in **Table 2**. We will then set out some alternative approaches to policy-making in **Section 6,** and finish by drawing some conclusions and making some recommendations in **Section 7.**

4 That is, taxes on production and imports, income and wealth, capital taxes, and compulsory social contributions paid by employers and employees.

Chapter 2

2 Poverty, Social Exclusion and Income Inequality

Social Justice Ireland includes the right to sufficient income to live with dignity amongst its list of core rights that need to guide policy-making in the future. (For the full list, see **Table 3**). This is consistent with the Global Goals for Sustainable Development which involve a commitment to 17 Global Goals (also known as Sustainable Development Goals or SDGs) with targets that include ending poverty and fighting inequality, as well as tackling climate change. *Social Justice Ireland* argues for these goals to be at the core of policy-making in the years ahead.

In March 2021 the EU set a target as part of the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan (EPSRAP) to reduce the number of Europeans living in or at risk of poverty or social exclusion by 15 million by 2030. In this section, we take this as starting point by referring to how Europe is progressing toward this target and we will also look at some further indicators of poverty as well as impacts on certain groups. We will finish this section by looking briefly at income inequality and financial distress.

2.1 Poverty and Social Exclusion and other Measures

First it is necessary to refer to the issue of how poverty is defined. Under the EPSRAP, the indicator 'poverty or social exclusion' is based on a combination of three individual indicators – an income measure which is related to the median income of each country, a measure of a lack of resources and a work-exclusion measure. Specifically, these take the form of the following three indicators:

(1) **people who are at risk of poverty** - people with an equivalised disposable income below the risk-of-poverty threshold set at 60 per cent of the national median (or middle) equivalised disposable income (after social transfers) (Eurostat, ilc_li02)[5];

(2) **people experiencing severe material and social deprivation** - people whose living conditions are severely constrained by a lack of resources; they experience deprivation of at least 7 out of a list of 13 items (See **Glossary** for the full list) (Eurostat, ilc_ mdsd11); and

(3) **people living in households with very low work intensity** - those aged 0-64 living in households where the adults (aged 18-64) work less than 20 per cent of their total work potential during the past year (Eurostat, ilc_lvhl11).

The combined 'poverty or social exclusion' indicator corresponds to the sum of persons who are at risk of poverty or materially and socially deprived or living in households with very low work intensity. Persons are only counted once even if they are

5 The 60 per cent threshold is adopted in the Europe 2020 Strategy. It is also possible to examine incomes below other thresholds such as 40 per cent, 50 per cent or 70 per cent.

present in several sub-indicators. It is also possible to examine each of the indicators separately and we will do so in this report. In **Table 4** we set out a summary of the position relative to each of these indicators (referring to the period between 2019 and 2024), and we discuss each of them further below. Sometimes there can be diverging trends among the three sub-indicators because of their different nature and the three related but distinct concepts of poverty they represent. The **Glossary** at the back of this report contains more detailed definitions of the indicators used in the EPSRAP.

The dynamics of poverty (poverty over time) is an important dimension of measurement, including issues around probability of exiting and entering poverty in different groups of the population (Vaalavuo 2015). Results show great variations between countries even when those countries have similar at risk of poverty rates; there are also differences between age groups in the patterns of poverty exit and entry. However, as these dynamic measures are not widely used yet in Europe we focus on the most commonly used measures.

Table 4 People Experiencing Poverty, EU-27, 2019 to 2024

Poverty Indicators								
	People at risk of poverty or social exclusion		People at risk of poverty (60% threshold)		Severe Material and Social Deprivation		Households with very low work intensity	
EU-27	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Total population								
2019	92.2m	21.1	72.3m	16.5	28.0m	6.7	26.5m	8.3
2020	94.8m	21.6	73.4m	16.7	29.0m	6.8	27.7m	8.7
2021	95.4m	21.7	73.8m	16.8	27.1m	6.3	29.6m	9.3
2022	95.3m	21.6	72.9m	16.5	28.9m	6.7	27.2m	8.6
2023	94.4m	21.3	71.6m	16.2	29.3m	6.8	26.3m	8.3
2024	93.3m	21.0	72.1m	16.2	27.5m	6.4	26.1m	8.2
Children (under 18)								
2019	18.3m	22.8	15.0m	18.7	5.9m	7.5	5.2m	6.5
2020	19.4m	24.0	15.5m	19.2	6.7m	8.3	6.2m	7.7
2021	19.6m	24.4	15.7m	19.5	6.0m	7.5	6.7m	8.4
2022	20.0m	24.7	15.6m	19.3	6.7m	8.4	6.2m	7.7
2023	20.0m	24.9	15.7m	19.5	6.6m	8.4	6.1m	7.6
2024	19.5m	24.2	15.6m	19.3	6.3m	7.9	6.0m	7.5
Older people (over 65s)								
2019	16.9m	19.4	13.9m	16.1	5.4m	6.5		
2020	17.9m	20.1	15.3m	17.1	4.8m	5.6		
2021	17.7m	19.5	15.2m	16.8	4.7m	5.3		
2022	18.5m	20.2	15.9m	17.3	4.9m	5.5		
2023	18.4m	19.7	15.6m	16.6	5.0m	5.5		
2024	18.1m	19.2	15.7m	16.6	4.7m	5.1		

Source: Eurostat Databases: ilc_peps01n, ilc_li02, ilc_mdsd11, ilc_lvhl11.

In previous reports in this series, we concluded that, having set targets in 2010 to reduce poverty and promote inclusion in the Europe 2020 Strategy, EU Member States diverged sharply over subsequent years in reaching those targets. The **risk of poverty or social exclusion rate** (the combined indicator of poverty used in the EPSRAP) increased between 2008 and 2012 and again between 2018 and 2021. This report focuses on the period since 2019, using that year as a baseline reference point which captures the status quo prior to the Covid-19 pandemic and in line with targets set under the EPSRAP to 2030 following the conclusion of the Europe 2020 strategy. The report compares this baseline to trends based on the most recent Eurostat data available, in most cases, for the years 2023 and 2024.

The risk of poverty or social exclusion rate has improved each year since 2021 but stands at 21.0 per cent in 2024 (EU-27), still representing one in five Europeans, and amounting to over 93.3 million people (Eurostat online database code ilc_peps01n). Between 2019 and 2022, the rate increased to 21.6 per cent affecting an additional 3.1 million people. Over the longer term since 2010, Europe has reduced this number by just 10.4m people and signally failed to meet the reduction target of 20 million by 2020.

As the most recent report from the Social Protection Committee notes, the fruits of recent growth in the EU continue to be offset by 'crises ... [which] have hindered achieving a significant improvement in the social situation' meaning that meeting 2030 EPRSAP targets 'will require a significant acceleration of progress' (Social Protection Committee, 2025). Overall trends thus risk masking difficulties amongst some groups as well as divergence between Member States including persistently high levels of poverty in several countries adversely affected by geopolitical shocks which continue to fuel inflation across the EU. An ongoing cost-of-living crisis, compounded by the potential knock-on effects of the US-Iran war since February 2026, thus risks exacerbating what Eurofound has recently referred to as 'Europe's hidden social fracture' in relation to divergent trends across income, employment, housing and health (Eurofound, 2026a). This report explores the contexts which frame the prospects for a renewed social Europe amidst ongoing cost-of-living, climate and geopolitical crises, highlighting the need to look beyond and beneath headline rates of economic growth.

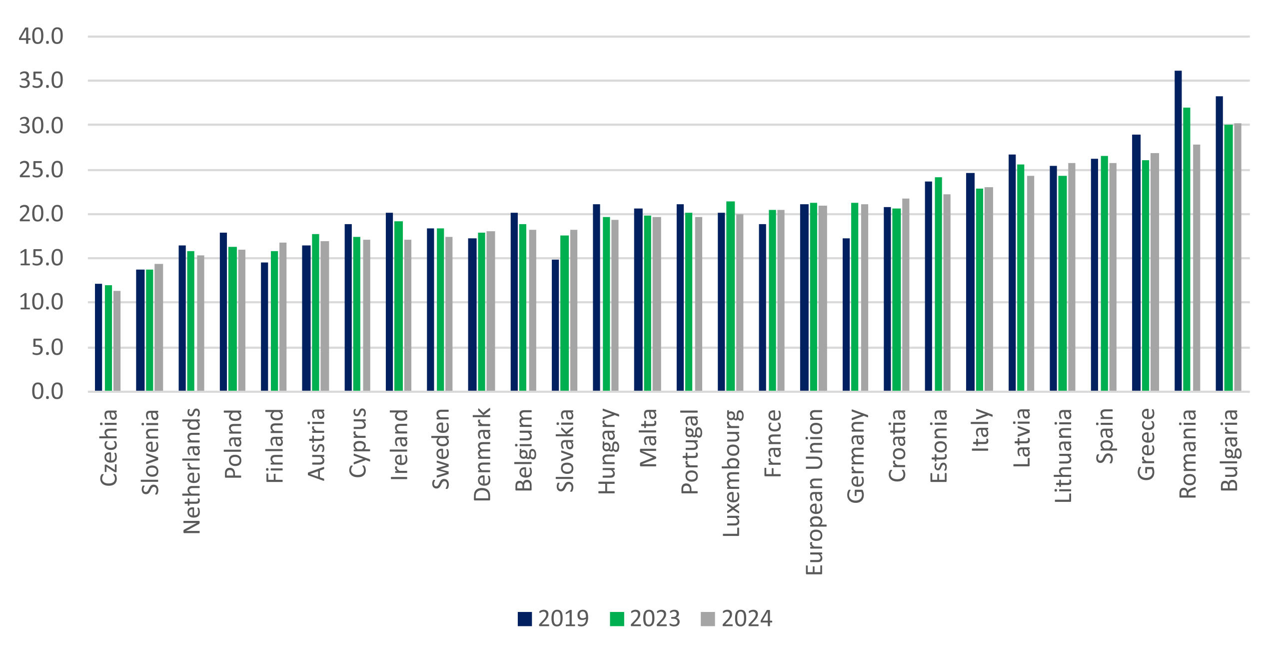
Part of this wider context includes the reality that some population groups (notably people with disabilities, people with a migrant background, ethnic minorities etc.) are more vulnerable than others in terms of access to education, services and the labour market, which in turn has translated into poorer employment outcomes, lower well-being and a higher risk of poverty and social exclusion (European Commission 2026a; 2026d). Eurostat (2025c) likewise highlights how some groups face a higher risk of poverty and social exclusion; these include single households, migrants and people with lower education levels as well as their children.

The most recent Social Protection Performance Monitor report from the European Parliament's Social Protection Committee (2025) suggests that 29 per cent of the 93.3 million people at risk of poverty or social exclusion were affected by more than one dimension of poverty in 2024. In total 6 per cent were affected by all three forms. Simultaneously, the share of those affected by only one dimension of poverty has decreased, which means that, despite the favourable decrease in the overall share of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion, the depth of hardship for those affected has increased slightly (Eurostat 2025).

In 2024, the highest rates of poverty or social exclusion were to be found in Bulgaria, Romania, Greece, Spain and Lithuania where the rates were at or above 25 per cent. The lowest rates were found in Czechia (11.3 per cent), Slovenia (14.4 per cent), the Netherlands (15.4 per cent) and Poland (also 16 per cent). Thus, Czechia, Slovenia, the Netherlands and Poland achieve a comparably high degree of prevention of poverty or social exclusion despite historically below-average GDP per capita within the EU-27, highlighting the importance of the social policies pursued (see Schraad-Tischler 2015: Schraad-Tischler et al. 2017).

Even though there have been improvements in the most recent year in some countries with typically high rates, there continues to be great divergence between countries. For example, there was a difference of 19 percentage points between the country with the highest rate (Bulgaria at 30.3 per cent) and that with the lowest (Czechia 11.3 per cent) (Eurostat, code: ilc_peps01n). See **Figure 1.**

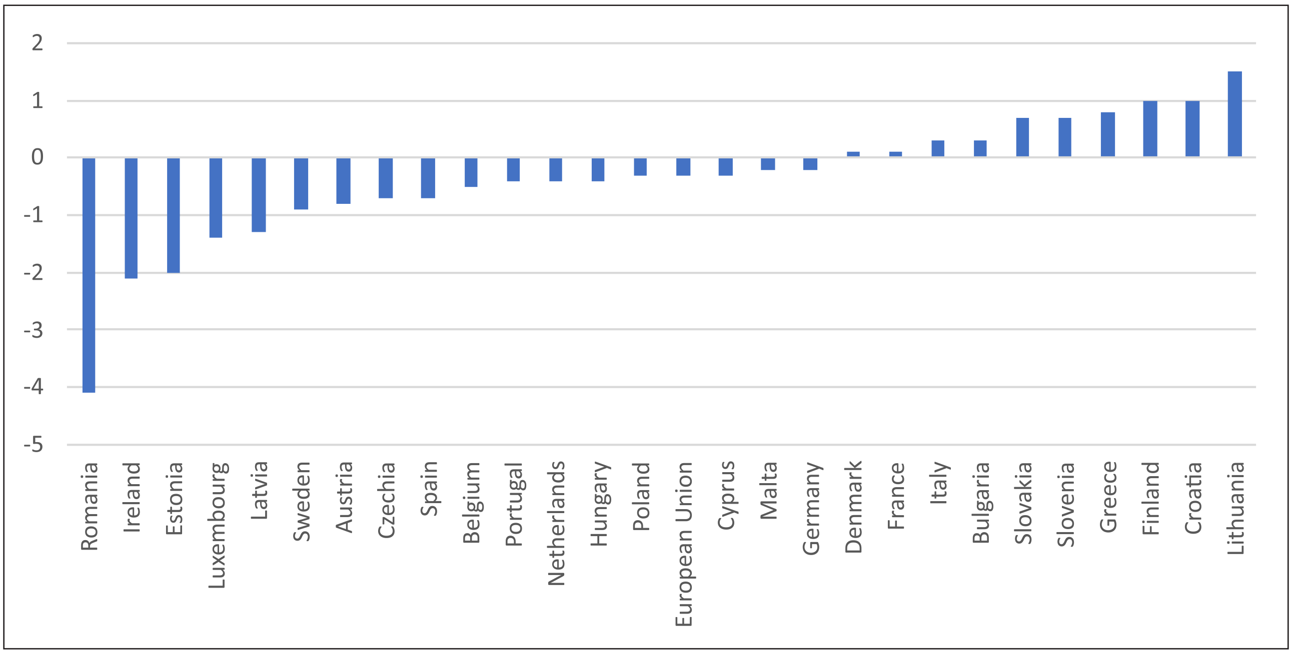
Figure 1 People at Risk of Poverty or Social Exclusion (%), EU-27, 2019, 2023 and 2024



Source: Eurostat online database code: ilc_peps01n.

Figure 2 illustrates the changes in the poverty or social exclusion rates amongst EU countries between 2023 and 2024. Disimprovements were observed in several countries including, notably, in some countries with traditionally relatively low rates such as the Finland, Slovenia, Denmark and Slovakia (Eurostat ilc_peps01n). The greatest improvements occurred in Romania and Ireland (-4.1 and -2.1 percentage points respectively).

Figure 2 At Risk of Poverty or Social Exclusion, EU-27, Percentage Point (PP) Change in Rate, 2023 to 2024



Source: Eurostat online database code: ilc_peps01.

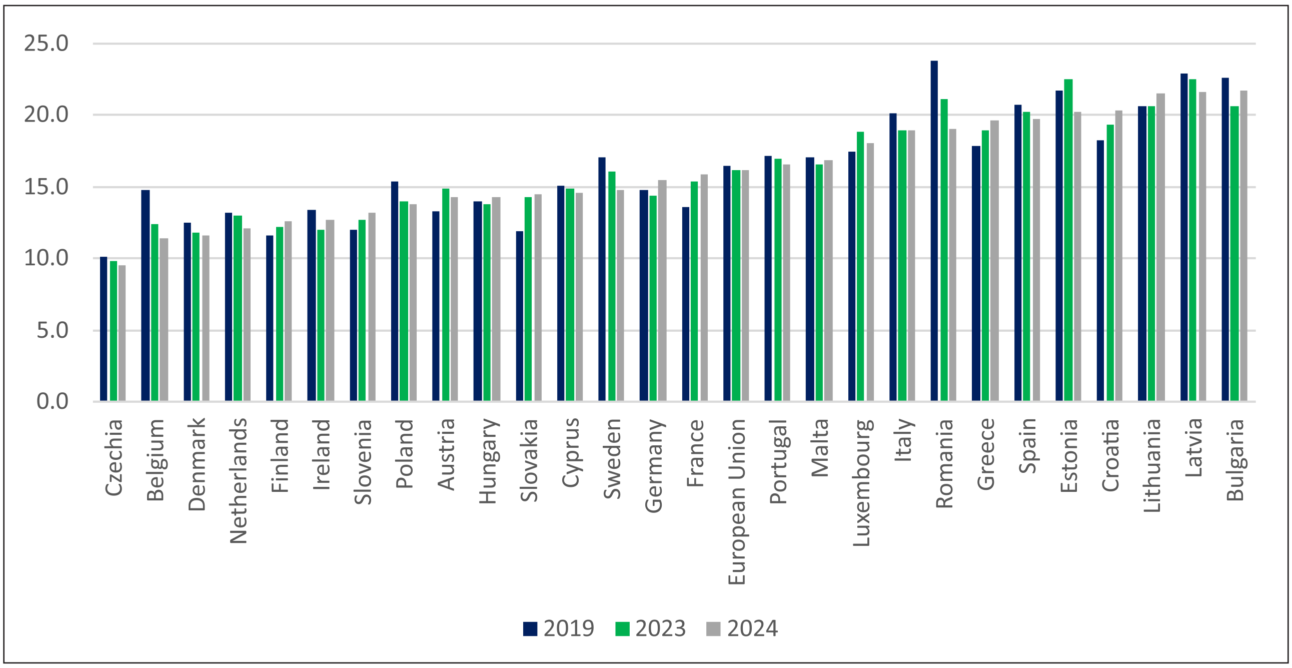
Turning for a moment to the review that we referenced in **Section 1, Table 2**, above, of the extent to which countries take a social investment approach in their policies (Bouget et. al. 2015), we can also review the performance of countries in preventing poverty or social exclusion, in light of how well they are constituted in relation to social investment. With the exception of Germany, all of the countries that are in Group 1 for social investment (identified by the European Social Policy Network as having a well-established approach to many social policies, Bouget et al. 2015) and set out in **Table 2** are ranked better than the EU average in terms of protecting people from poverty or social exclusion. These countries are Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Netherlands, Sweden and Slovenia. Germany's fall away from this core Group in 2024 for the first time since the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions data series began in 2005 represents a concerning development recently highlighted by monitors including Human Rights Watch as indicating a growing poverty 'crisis' at the heart of Europe's largest economy (2025).

When it comes to how the ten countries that are in Group 3 in relation to social investment (that is, the social investment approach has made the *least* inroads into the overall policy agenda), it appears that in 2024 (consistent with prior years), 8 of them have above average rates of poverty or social exclusion and several have the highest rates of poverty or social exclusion (Bulgaria, Romania, Greece, Lithuania, Latvia, Italy, Estonia and Croatia). From this Group 3 (with the least developed social investment approach), only Czechia and Slovakia achieve rates of poverty or social exclusion lower than the EU-27 average.

As we discussed in previous reports, Czechia has been considered, in a Europe-wide review of social justice, to demonstrate middling economic performance, but to be relatively more effective at delivering fairness in society, illustrating how social policy plays a critical role in achieving social justice (Kolar, 2026). Slovakia is considered to do relatively well in terms of protecting its population from poverty because of its comparatively even income distribution patterns (Skorupińska-Cieślak, 2025). Slovenia is considered to be showing incremental improvement on delivering social justice and to be performing comparatively well on policies affecting children and youth which we come to below (Kraljic, 2024).

We turn now to look at the **risk of poverty rate**, a relative income measure representing a percentage (in this case 60 per cent) of the median income in a given country and the most commonly agreed measure of poverty. In 2024, 16.2 per cent of the population (EU-27) was living at risk of poverty (over 72.1 million people). The rate remains the same as the 2023 average rate (16.2 per cent) (Eurostat online database, code ilc_li02) despite an overall increase in the number of people affected. Over the longer term, the 2024 rate remains within a single percentage point of that in 2010, with only marginally less people affected in 2024 than in 2010 (in 2010 the rate was 16.6 per cent, affecting 71.5 million people EU-27) (Eurostat online database, code ilc_li02). See **Table 4.** There was a large divergence between Member States with a 12.2 percentage point difference between the highest rate (Bulgaria, 21.7 per cent) and the lowest (Czechia, 9.5 per cent). See **Figure 3**.

Figure 3 People at Risk of Poverty (%), EU-27, 2019, 2023 and 2024

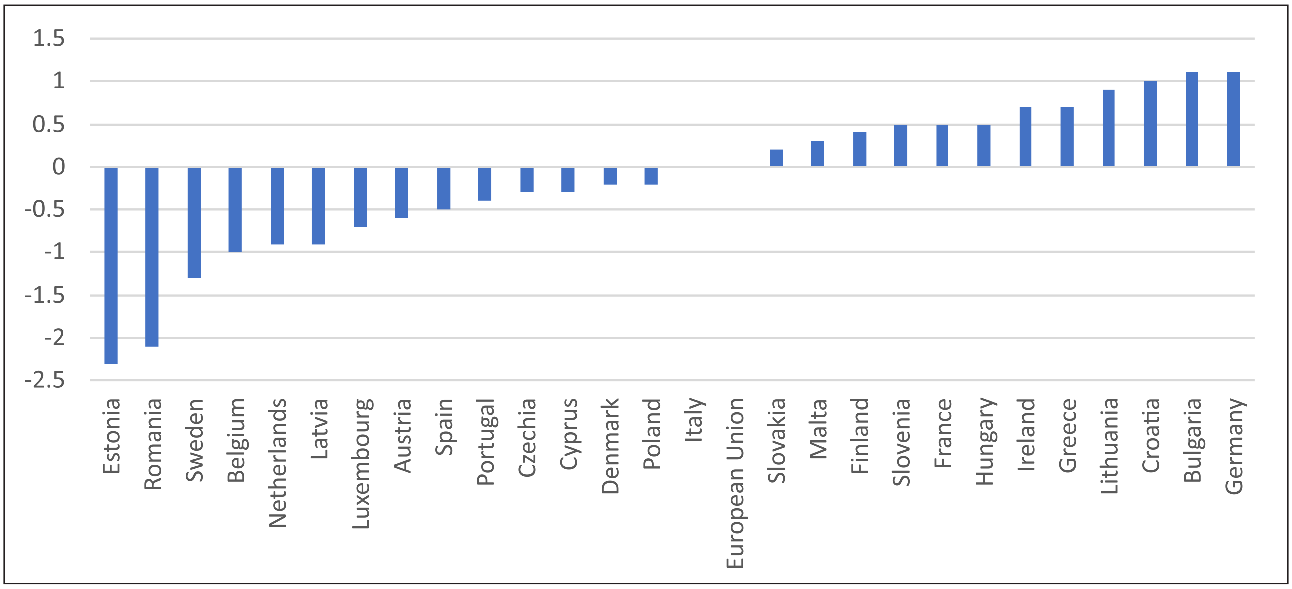


Source: Eurostat online database code: ilc_li02.

Figure 4 shows the percentage point changes in the risk of poverty rates between 2023 and 2024 for EU-27 countries. The risk of poverty indicator rose in several countries and not only amongst the countries with traditionally high rates. The rate has increased most in Germany and Bulgaria (both +1.1 percentage points) and also in Croatia, Lithuania, Greece, Ireland, Hungary, France, Slovenia, Finland, Malta and Slovakia. The most significant decreases occurred in Estonia, Romania, Sweden and Belgium (all by 1 percentage point or more).

Chapter 2

Figure 4 Risk of Poverty, EU-27, Percentage Point (PP) Change in Rate 2023 to 2024



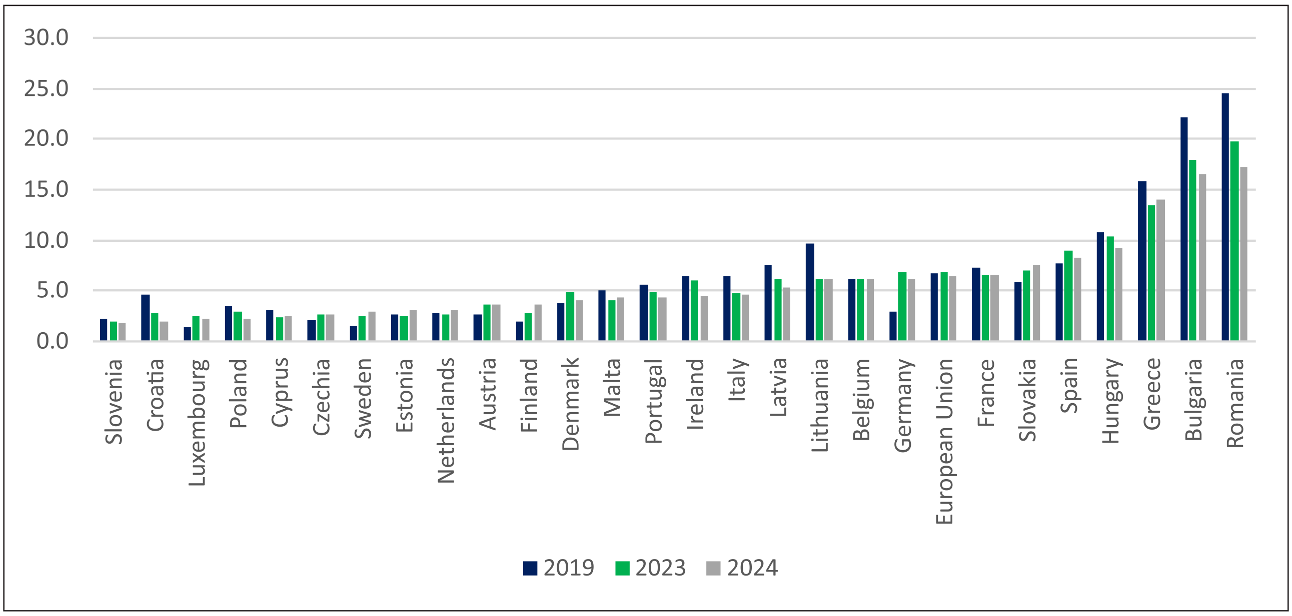
Source: Eurostat online database code: ilc_li02.

We can also look at countries' performances on the risk of poverty indicator in light of how well they perform in relation to social investment as set out in **Table 2** in **Section 1**. We find that all of the countries in **Group 1** for social investment (identified by the European Social Policy Network as having a well-established approach to many social policies, Bouget et al. 2015) remain below the EU average in terms of those at risk of poverty. By contrast, several countries with the least developed social investment have the highest rates of poverty (including Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Croatia and Estonia).

Severely Materially and Socially deprived people have living conditions severely constrained by a lack of resources. (See **Glossary** for a list of the resources that are taken into account). The average EU-27 rate of material and social deprivation was 6.4 per cent in 2024, down from a rate of 6.8 per cent in 2023. Comparing to 2019, this marks only a marginal improvement on the rate of 6.7 per cent recorded that year and remains greater than the pandemic-era low of 6.3 per cent recorded in 2021.

As **Figure 5** shows, there is a good deal of divergence across EU-27 in relation to material deprivation, with very high levels in some countries, particularly amongst the newer members of the union, and very low rates in other countries. The rates in 2024 were highest in Romania, Bulgaria, Greece and Hungary; lowest in Slovenia, Croatia, Luxembourg and Poland.

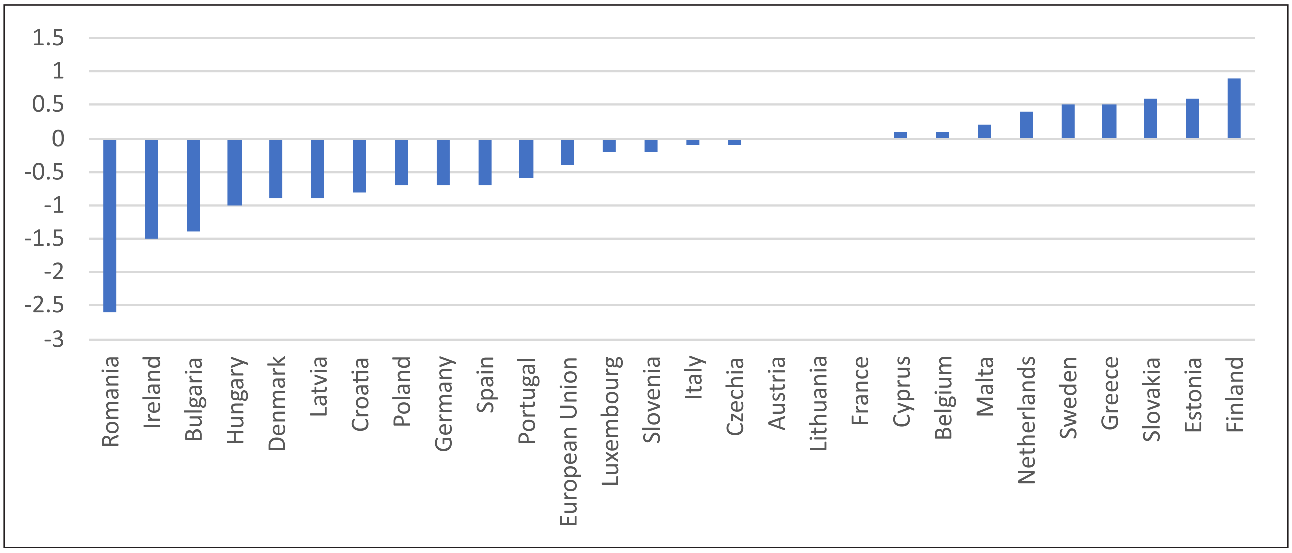
Figure 5 Severe Material and Social Deprivation Rate (%), EU-27, 2019, 2023 and 2024



Source: Eurostat online database, code ilc_mddd11.

Figure 6 shows that the rate fell in three fifths of Member States (16 of 27) between 2023 and 2024. This is welcome. However, there was also deterioration in several countries including in Finland, Sweden and the Netherlands where rates have traditionally been relatively low.[6]

Figure 6 Material and Social Deprivation, Percentage Point (PP) Change in Rate, 2023 to 2024



Source: Eurostat online database, code ilc_mdsd07.

6 From 2020 on, the EU-Labour Force Survey has been integrated into the newly designed German micro-census as subsample, causing a break in the data series for Germany. See: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/10186/6246844/LFS-2020-Note-on-German-data.pdf

The third and final measure of poverty that we review - called **Very Low Work Intensity** – is used in the ESPRAP to measure labour market exclusion. It takes account of those aged 0-64 living in households where the adults (aged 18-64) work less than 20 per cent of their total work potential during the past year. Over the long run, previous reports described significant increases in this measure after 2010, a development linked to major increases in unemployment. In 2024, the rate fell for 13 of the 27 EU Member States while the highest rates were found in Sweden Spain, Slovenia and Slovakia (Eurostat, code ilc_lvhl13).

2.2 Poverty and Social Exclusion and other Indicators – Specific Groups

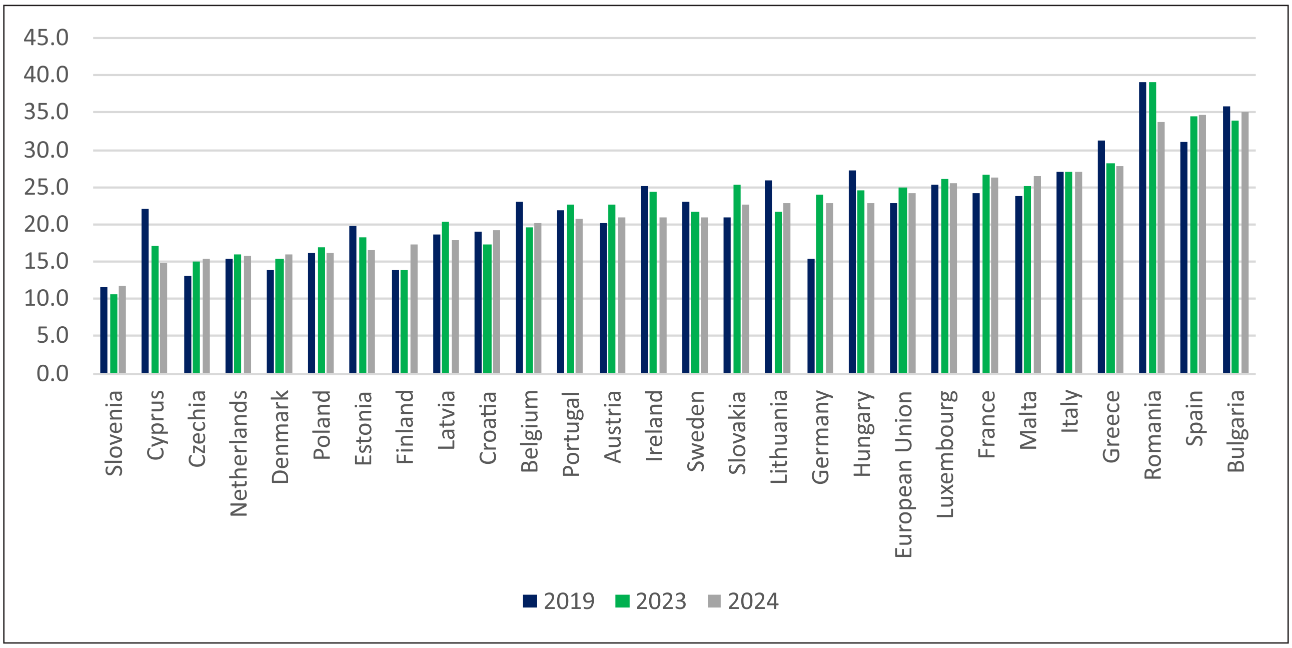
In this section we will look at some groups in more detail, again using the poverty measures that are most used at European level.

Children – Under the EPSRAP, the EU has committed to a 2030 target of reducing children at **risk of poverty or social exclusion** by 5 million compared to 2019. Despite incremental progress since the Covid-19 pandemic, Europe remains 'far off track in achieving its child poverty goals' due in part of a 'weakening in the effectiveness of social protection systems' evident in diverging experiences across Member States (Eurochild, 2025b; Social Protection Committee, 2024).

Thus, when we look at the position of children (under 18), those who are considered to be at risk of poverty or social exclusion numbered 19.5 million in 2024 or 24.2 per cent (EU-27 average) (Eurostat online database, code ilc_peps01n). This reflects a decrease of 0.7 per centage points compared to 2023, but still remains significantly above the average rate of 22.8 per cent recorded for 2019. Thus, while a marginal improvement is evident comparing 2023 and 2024, much ground has yet to be made up in reversing the negative trend of rising child poverty or social exclusion rates evident in the rising levels sparked during the Covid-19 pandemic and which continued to increase annually up to 2023.

This is evident in the most up to date data for 2024 where the highest rates of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion were found in Bulgaria, Spain, Romania, Greece and Italy. Conversely, the lowest rates are in Slovenia, Cyprus, Czechia, the Netherlands and Denmark. See **Figure 7**. Despite improvements in recent years, in some countries the percentage of children affected is very high indeed at over 30 per cent in Bulgaria, Spain and Romania, followed by Greece (27.9 per cent) and Italy (27.1 per cent). The fact that such very high numbers of children continue year on year to experience poverty or social exclusion is a major concern and has long-term consequences for the people and families concerned as well as for the EU as a whole.

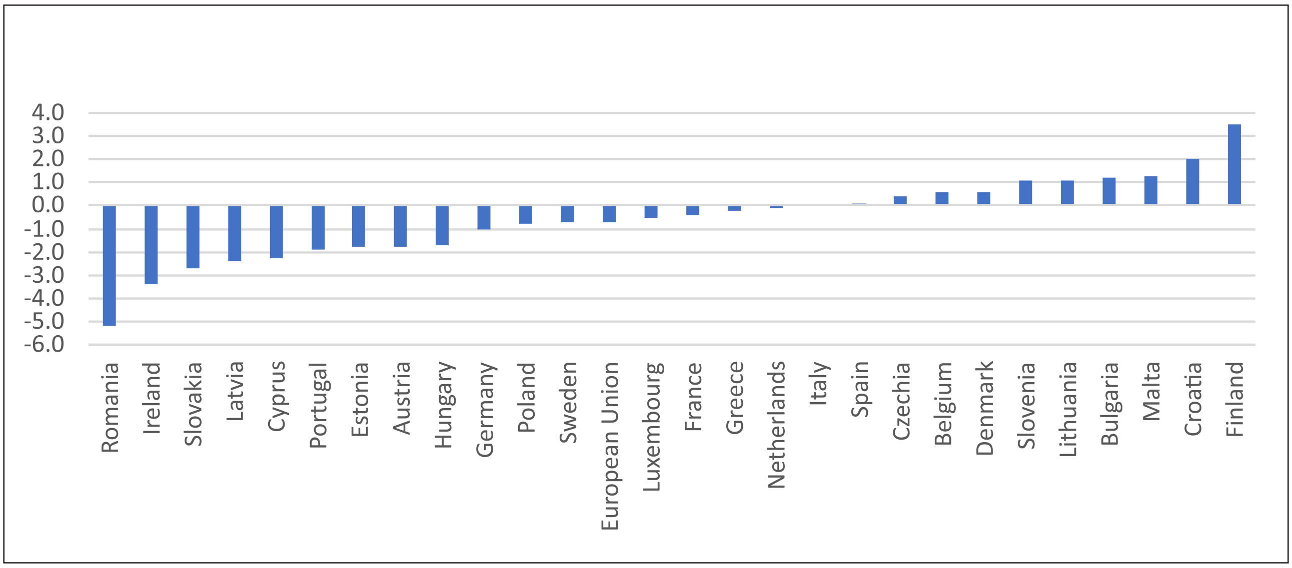
Figure 7 Children (u 18): Poverty or Social Exclusion Rate (%), EU27, 2019, 2023 and 2024



Source: Eurostat Online Database ilc_peps01n.

Figure 8 shows the percentage point changes in the rates of Member States between 2023 and 2024. The greatest disimprovement occurred in Finland (3.5 percentage points) followed by Croatia, Malta, Bulgaria, Lithuania, Slovenia, Denmark, Belgium, Czechia and Spain. The country showing the greatest improvement was Romania (-5.2 percentage points).

Figure 8 Children: Risk of Poverty or Social Exclusion, PP Change in Rate 2023 to 2024

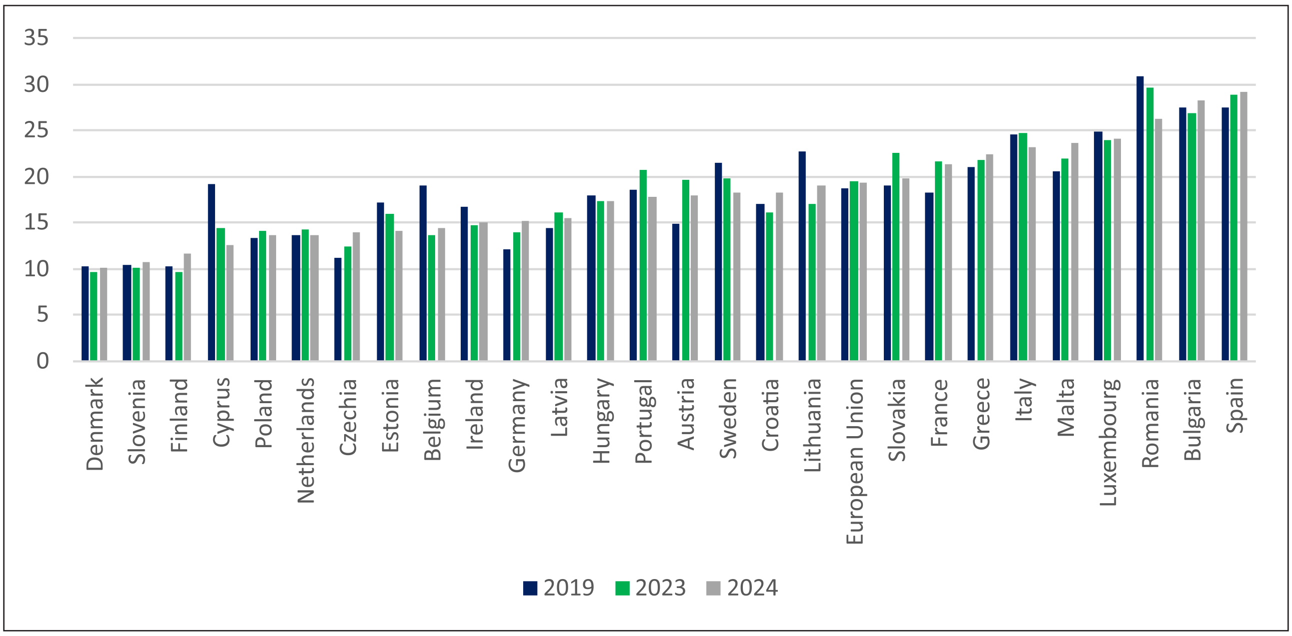


Source: Eurostat Online Database ilc_peps01n.

Taking the second indicator, children who are **at risk of poverty** (a measure of income poverty), they numbered almost 15.6 million and the rate was 19.3 per cent in 2024 (only marginally changed from the

2023 rate of 19.5 per cent) (Eurostat online database, code ilc_li02). In broader perspective, recent stasis in this measure also reflects a pattern of relative stagnation over the long run where rates have failed to meaningfully change since the aftermath of the financial crash of 2008-09 (the 2010 rate was 20 per cent). As a result of this failure, one fifth of Europe's children continue to live in situations of income poverty (that is, below the 60 per cent threshold of median income in their countries).

Figure 9 Children (u 18): Risk of Poverty Rate (%), 2019, 2023 and 2024



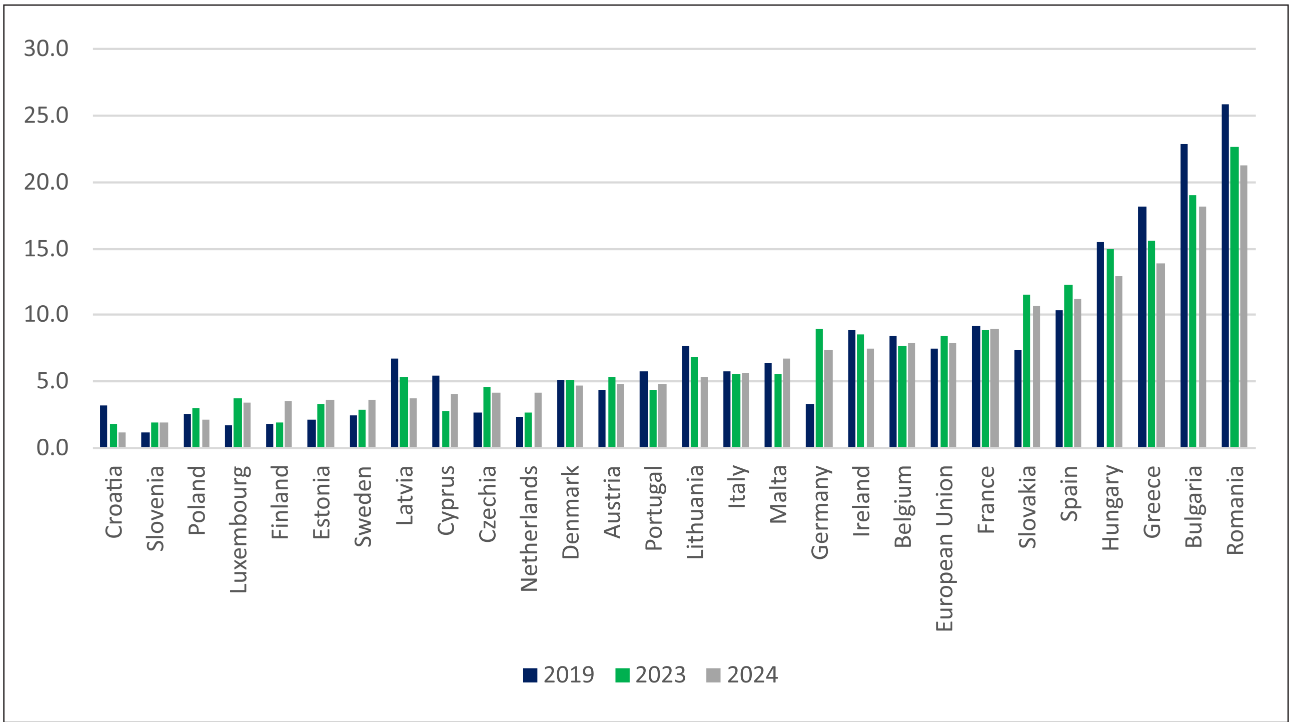
Source: Eurostat online database, code ilc_li02.

As **Figure 9** shows, in 2024, the rates were highest in Spain (29.2 per cent), Bulgaria (28.2 per cent) and Romania (26.2 per cent), where more than a quarter of children were below the poverty line. The rates in five more countries exceeded 20 per cent: Luxembourg (24.1 per cent), Malta (23.7 per cent), Italy (23.2 per cent), Greece (22.4 per cent) and France (21.4 per cent). Rates were lowest in Denmark (10.1 per cent), Slovenia (10.7 per cent), and Finland (11.6 per cent). Again, there are large divergences between countries. The greatest improvements in risk of poverty amongst children occurred (2023-2024) in Romania followed by Portugal and Slovakia. The greatest disimprovements occurred in the Croatia, Lithuania and Finland.

As the European Commission (2025k) notes, the proportion of children at-risk-of poverty varies considerably across the EU, as does the impact of social transfers on poverty reduction. The strongest poverty reduction impacts of social transfers registered in countries with low or medium levels of child poverty (Denmark, Finland, Czechia and Sweden).

As we discussed in the previous report in this series, childhood **material and social deprivation** (experiencing a severe lack of resources) worsened in most Member States throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. By 2024, the average rate was 7.9 per cent, marking a more or less stagnant situation (in fact it has marginally worsened) compared with 2019 when the rate was 7.5 per cent (Eurostat online database, code ilc_mdsd11). The newer accession countries and some southern European countries tend to have the highest rates. In 2024, Romania (21.2 per cent) had the highest rate – although there have been significant reductions in the rate in recent years. Romania was followed by Bulgaria (18.2 per cent) and Greece (13.9 per cent). While rates have fallen in Bulgaria, Romania and Greece which decreased between -4.6 and -4.3 percentage points since 2019, rates have spiked in Germany (+4.1 pp) and Slovakia (+3.3 pp) and increased by between +1 and 2 percentage points in the Netherlands, Finland, Luxembourg, Czechia, Estonia and Sweden. These figures vindicate UNICEF's (2020) projection that child poverty would remain above pre-Covid levels for 'at least five years' in many EU countries. By contrast, this indicator conveys a very different picture for many other countries. For example, low rates are in evidence in Croatia and Slovenia with rates below 2.0 per cent). See **Figure 10**.

Figure 10 Children (u18): Severe Material and Social Deprivation (%) 2019, 2023, 2024



Source: Eurostat online database, code ilc_mdsd11.

Focusing on changes between 2023 and 2024, the rate decreased in 17 of the 27 EU Member States but has increased or remained the same in the remainder, marking a slowdown in progress relative to recent years. The greatest improvement has occurred in Hungary (-2.1 percentage points) followed by Greece (-1.7 percentage points) and Latvia and Germany (-1.6 percentage points each). But the rate increased in some countries, notably Finland, the Netherlands, Cyprus and Malta (all of whom registered increases of between 1.0 and 2.0 percentage points).

Improvements in the indicators discussed relative to children are welcome. However, it is also of concern to see some disimprovements in recent years in some countries. Overall, it is clear that the dangers of ongoing high levels of child poverty, social exclusion and deprivation are very serious. Poverty tends to persist over time and be transmitted across generations, which means that children born into poverty bear a higher risk of poverty in adult life than the average population (European Commission, 2024f). For example, the Centre for Economic Policy Research (CEPR, 2024) has recently suggested that Europe's 'Great Gatsby Curve' – a measure of intergenerational inequality and social mobility – indicates a persistent rate of intergenerational poverty across the EU countries. Moreover, it is true that the risk of poverty or social exclusion particularly affects families where parents could not benefit from an extensive education. In 2024, 11.0 per cent of children aged under 18 whose parents' level of education was high were at risk of poverty or social exclusion, compared with 61.2 per cent of children whose parents' level of education was low (European Commission, 2025d). Thus, education, which is a strong determinant of poverty or social exclusion for adults, also strongly influences whether children are at risk of poverty or social exclusion (Limani et al., 2020; Eurostat, 2021).

The European Pillar of Social Rights recognises the importance of protecting children from poverty and states that "children from disadvantaged backgrounds have the right to specific measures to enhance equal opportunities" (Principle 11). A dynamic perspective on poverty (that is, experience of poverty over time) underlines the key role of proactive policy measures, like social investment, or preventative social protection and services, whose results are only visible in the long run and are often not prioritised (Vaalavuo 2015). A survey of social justice across Europe concludes that the northern European countries, in particular, offer a positive example of how child poverty can be quite effectively fought if socially disadvantaged groups receive targeted support through a functioning tax-and-transfer system; that study also points to the need to work towards a more sustainable remedy through achieving greater equality in the education system and the labour market (Schraad-Tischler et al. 2017).

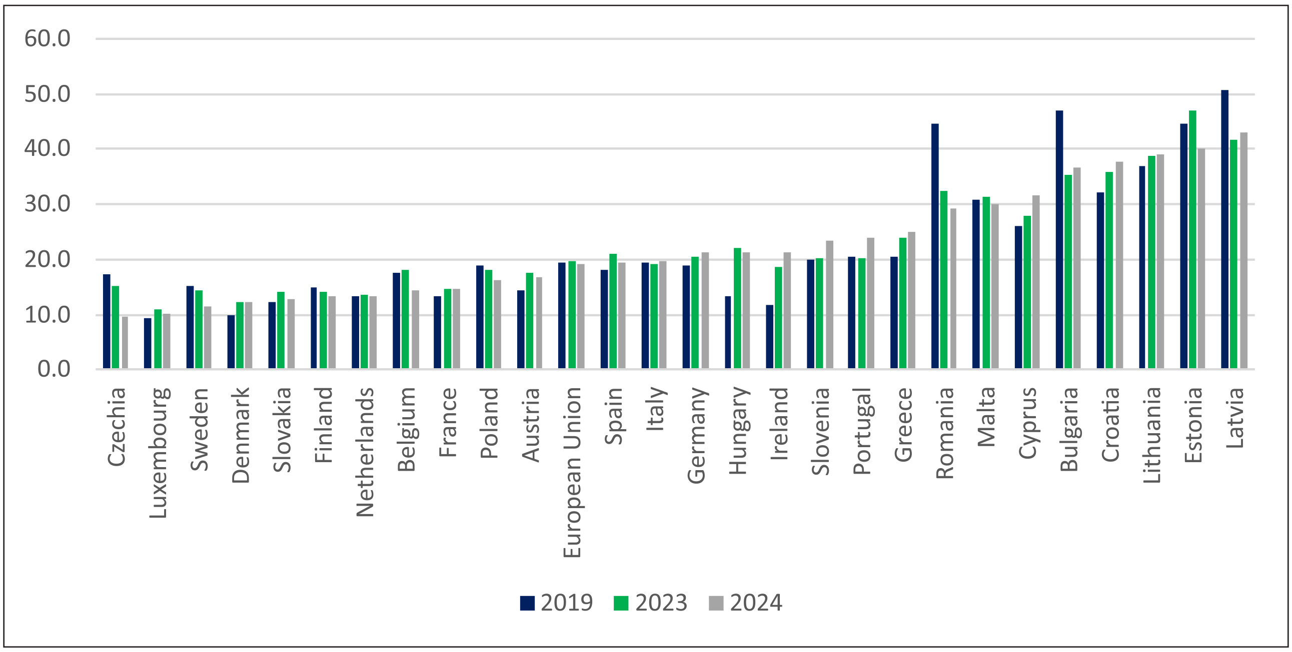
The European Commission's recent Joint Research Center study, 'Addressing poverty in the EU' (2026) notes that access to affordable quality early childhood education and care, along with well-designed work-life balance policies, is key to improve children's life prospects, while at the same time supporting the labour market participation of their parents, notably mothers. The ability to tackle the challenges of child poverty and youth exclusion will be decisive in Europe's capacity to guarantee a long-term future to its citizens.

Older People – When we consider the position of older people (usually taken to mean those over 65), and again using the most commonly used poverty indicators, the European average rate for **poverty or social exclusion** was 19.2 per cent in 2024 (representing 18.1 million people). This marked a slight decrease on the 2023 rate (19.7 per cent). The rate was higher for those aged 75+ (20.0 per cent) (Eurostat online database, code ilc-peps01n). This issue is significant for policy-makers (as well as for the individuals concerned) given that populations are ageing at an unprecedented rate.

Poverty or social exclusion affects nearly twice as many women as men in older age. For those aged 65+, the rate for women was 21.5 per cent (representing 11.4 million people), whereas for men it was 16.3 per cent (representing 6.7 million people) (2023). The rate for women aged 75+ is even higher at 22.8 per cent (5.9 million people), whereas that for men aged 75+ is 16.0 per cent (or 2.8 million people). Of relevance here is the fact that the pension gap between men and women remains large and is likely to persist, and that people who are in non-standard work or are self-employment often face less favourable conditions for accessing and accruing pension rights (Eurostat, 2025d). The growth of precarious work situations, which we deal with later in this report, makes this an issue of increasing concern.

There is great variation in the poverty or social exclusion rates of older people across Europe. See **Figure 11**. The newer accession countries tend to have higher rates. These include Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Croatia and Bulgaria (all with rates over 35 per cent) and also Malta and Cyprus (over 30 per cent) (2024). The lowest rates in 2024 were found in Czechia (with a rate of 9.5 per cent), Luxembourg and Sweden (each with rates under 12 per cent). Between 2023 and 2024, the largest increases in this rate occurred in Portugal and Cyprus (both +3.6 percentage points), Slovenia (+3.1 percentage points), Ireland (+2.7 percentage points) and Croatia (+1.8 percentage points). Estonia, Czechia and Belgium had the greatest decreases (in excess of -3.5 percentage points).

Figure 11 Older People: Poverty or Social Exclusion (%), EU-27, 2019, 2023 and 2024



Source: Eurostat online database, code ilc_peps01n

When we look at the **at risk of poverty rate** (that is, a measure of income poverty using the 60 per cent of median income level), the 2024 average rate for those aged 65+ was 16.6 per cent or almost 15.7 million people (EU-27). This is identical to the rate of 16.6 per cent affecting some 15.6 million people in 2023 (Eurostat ilc_li02). Failure to achieve a meaningful decrease in this measure confirms a trend of stagnating rates since 2019 when it stood at 16.0 per cent affecting 13.9 million people (Eurostat ilc_li02). Thus, approximately 1.8 million more older people are experiencing income poverty in Europe in 2024 than in 2019.

The highest rates occurred in 2024 in some of the newer accession countries of Latvia (41.4 per cent), Estonia (39.4 per cent), Croatia and Lithuania. The lowest rates were seen in Czechia (8.3 per cent) and Slovakia (8.9 per cent) (Eurostat online database ilc_li02). Again, as we discussed above (relative to the poverty or social exclusion measure), there is a significant gender difference between men and women at older ages, with risk of poverty affecting far more women (18.7 million women) than men (14.0 million) (2024).

The average **severe material and social deprivation** rate for this age group was 5.1 per cent representing approximately 4.7 million people aged 65+ (EU-27) in 2024 (Eurostat online database, code ilc_mdsd11). The rate has fallen marginally since 2023 (at 5.5 per cent) with numbers decreasing from 5.0 to 4.7 million. Again, the rate is higher for older women than older men and many more women are affected. There is great variation in the levels of this form of deprivation across Europe, with approximately 19.7 percentage points difference between the country with the highest rate, Bulgaria (21 per cent), and those with the lowest, Luxembourg, Sweden and Cyprus (in these three countries it represents less than 1.5 per cent). See **Figure 12**. Again, some of the newer accession states tend to have the highest rates such as Romania (19.6 per cent).

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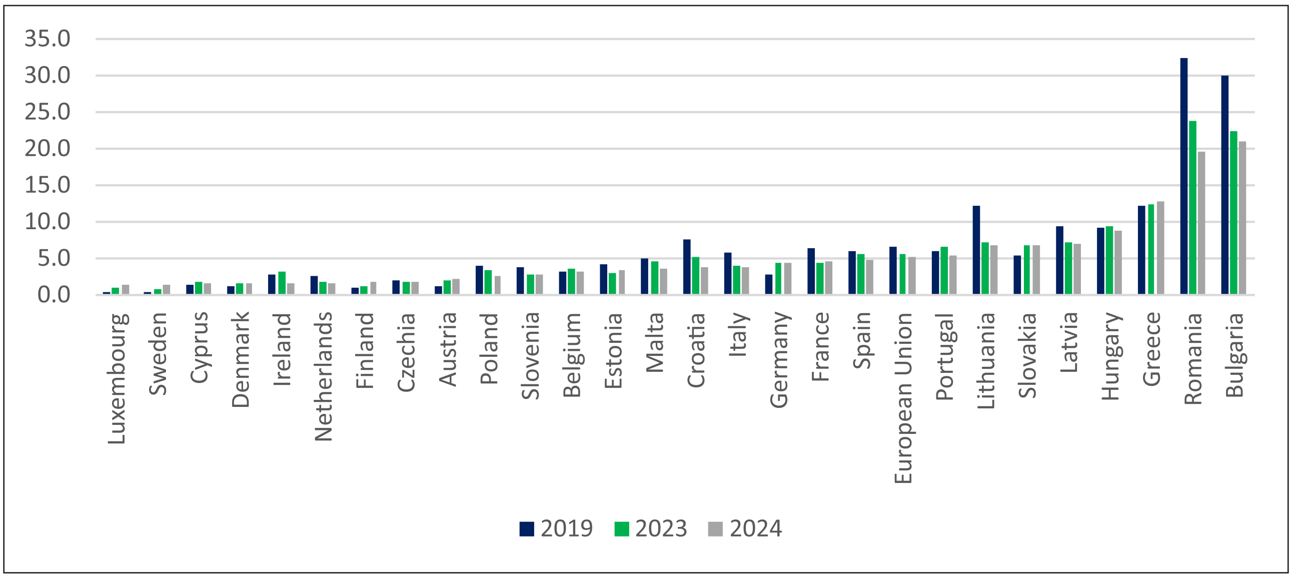
Figure 12 Older People: Severe Material and Social Deprivation Rate (%), 2019, 2023 and 2024



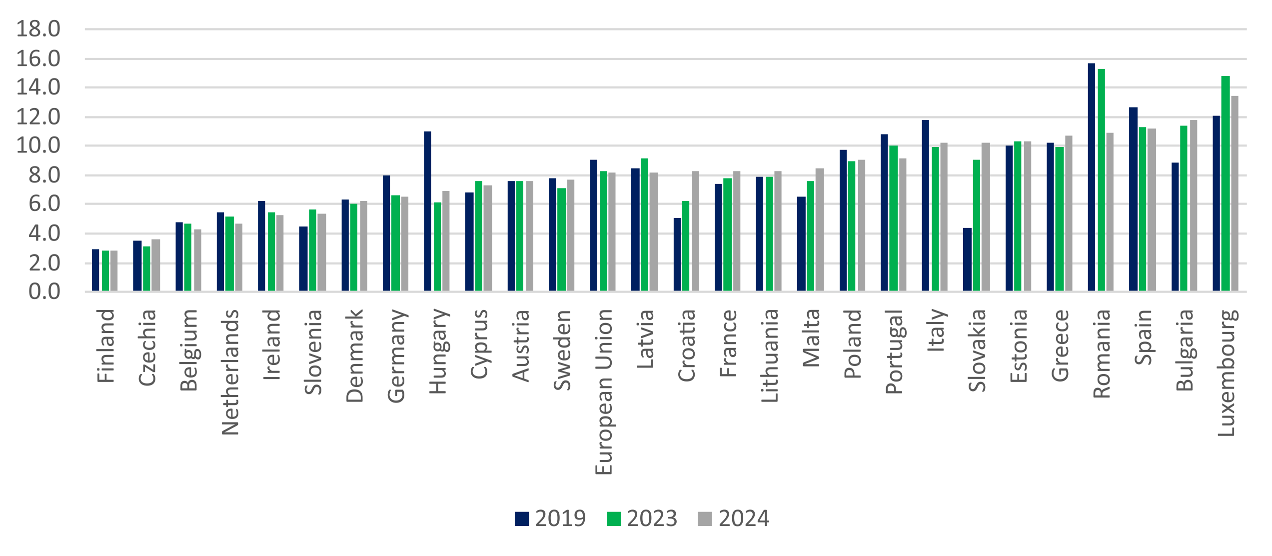
Source: Eurostat online database, code ilc_mddd11, ilc_mdsd11.

As the Social Protection Committee (2023) notes, the Covid-19 pandemic produced a distinctive 'adverse impact on the well-being of older people' as evident in poverty indicators including severe material and social deprivation. Comparing 2019 to 2024, the latter measure has thus risen in 9 of 27 EU Member States (Cyprus, Denmark, Greece, Finland, Luxembourg, Austria, Sweden, Germany and Slovakia) of between +0.2 and +1.5 per cent, in several cases eradicating any marginal improvements made between 2015 and 2019.

Overall, this indicator suggests cause for concern with increases in the average rate occurring in several Member States between 2023 and 2024, most notably in Sweden, Greece and Finland where there was an increase of between 0.5 and 0.7 percentage points. France, Austria, Estonia and Luxembourg showed the next biggest increase (each between +0.3 and 0.4 percentage points). This is a trend to watch given that disimprovements are happening all at a time of population ageing as well as growth in Europe.

Working Poor – The final group that we examine in this section is the working poor. The in-work at-risk-of-poverty rate refers to the percentage of persons in the total population who are at work (employed or self-employed) but at risk of poverty - again, based on the relative income level - below the risk-of-poverty threshold, at 60 per cent of the national median equivalised disposable income (after social transfers).

Figure 13 In-Work Risk of Poverty Rate, EU-27, 2019, 2023 and 2024



Source: Eurostat Online database, code ilc_iw01. Employed people aged 18+.

In 2024, 8.2 per cent of employed people (aged 18+) were living under the poverty threshold (EU-27) representing a marginal improvement since 2019 when the rate was 9.1 per cent (Eurostat Online database, code ilc_iw01). Over the long run, the average rate has stagnated since 2010 when it had been 8.5 per cent.

The highest rates in 2024 occurred in Luxembourg (13.4 per cent), Bulgaria (11.8 per cent), Spain (11.2 per cent), and Romania (10.9 per cent). The lowest rates occurred in Finland (2.8 per cent) and Czechia (3.6 per cent). See **Figure 13**.

This means that approximately one-in-twelve employed people in the EU live in poverty on an ongoing basis and, obviously, that getting people into work is not always sufficient to lift them out of poverty. The European Commission (2026i) argues that income from employment often needs to be complemented by adequate benefits, stressing in particular the 'importance of ... adequate levels of child and family benefits' for working parents. A report from the European Social Policy Network (Pena-Casas et al. 2019) suggests that in certain categories of the population (including younger people, people with lower education levels, and non-standard workers, poor households with children including lone parents) in-work poverty is significantly higher and has in some cases been increasing significantly in recent years. Many factors can contribute, but European Commission (2026i) has most recently linked non-standard forms of employment to the persistence of in-work poverty, noting those on temporary contracts remain twice as likely to be at risk of poverty (13.4 per cent) as compared to those in permanent positions (5.2 per cent) in 2025.

While governments typically combine measures such as minimum income, minimum wage, income replacement or supplement, active labour market policies, tackling labour market segmentation, family and in-work benefits that directly influence in-work poverty, addressing it is often not a stated policy goal (Pena-Casas et al. 2019). Moreover, a number of other policies and measures (such as childcare, housing and healthcare) which may only have an indirect impact on in-work poverty are equally important to address this complex issue (Pena-Casas et al. 2019).

The International Labour Organisation (2025a) and the European Economic and Social Committee (2022) have recently cited evidence suggesting a strong and persistent link between higher trade union density and lower in-work poverty rates. Limited policy attention is paid to this group (there is not, for example, a specific focus on them in the EPSRAP strategy). There is a clear need for a specific policy focus on this group and better documenting their social situation.

2.3 Income Inequality

Inequality is about exclusion; exclusion from participating up to one's capabilities in the economic, social and political life of the community. It is widely agreed that economic prosperity alone will not achieve social progress and that high inequality levels leave much human potential unrealised as well risking damage to social cohesion and economic activity and undermining democratic participation (Eurostat 2019a). One Sustainable Development Goal aims to reduce inequalities (SDG 10) focusing on inequality within and between countries.

In OECD countries (broader than Europe), the richest 10 per cent earn incomes 8.4 times that of the poorest 10 per cent. Wealth is even more concentrated than income – the top 10 per cent of wealthiest households hold 52 per cent of total wealth (OECD 2024a). These are very striking inequalities. As Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) up to 2019, Christine Lagarde (Lagarde 2018) suggested that inequality did not seem to be as big a threat in Europe thanks to strong social safety nets and redistribution. More recently (November 2024) however, speaking in her capacity as the current President of the European Central Bank she warned of the potentially adverse 'social consequences ... which could exacerbate inequality' attendant to the major geopolitical and technological challenges facing Europe (European Central Bank, 2024).

High levels of income inequality are associated with a wide range of health and social problems across countries (WHO, 2025b; Courson and Nettle, 2021).

The IMF has shown that income inequality also matters in economic terms – that is, for growth and its sustainability. Income distribution itself impacts on growth (Dabla-Norris et al. 2015). Specifically, if the income share of the top 20 per cent (the rich) increases, then GDP growth actually declines over the medium term, suggesting that the benefits do not trickle down, contrary to what has been the received wisdom. In contrast, an increase in the income share of the bottom 20 per cent (the poor) is associated with higher GDP growth. That report concludes that poor people and the middle classes matter the most for growth through a number of interrelated economic, social, and political channels.

One measure of income inequality is the **GINI coefficient**, an index ranging from 0 to 100 where 0 represents a perfectly equal distribution of income and 100 represents a perfectly unequal distribution. The higher the GINI coefficient, the greater the income inequality. According to the GINI coefficient indicator, there was a very slight decrease between 2023 and 2024 in average levels (Eurostat ilc_di12). The 2024 ratio was 29.4. The countries with the greatest income inequality (according to the GINI coefficient) in 2024 were Bulgaria, Lithuania, Latvia, Italy and Portugal. Those with the lowest included Slovakia, Czechia Slovenia, Belgium and the Netherlands. The countries with the greatest increase in this measure between 2023 and 2024 were Italy, Cyprus and Bulgaria (between +0.7 and +1.2 percentage points) followed by fractional growth in Slovakia, Germany, Croatia, Latvia, Austria, Belgium, France, Slovenia and Denmark. Moreover, this measure has increased in 8 Member States (Estonia, Croatia, France, Greece, Austria, Denmark, Hungary and Malta) and stagnated in two (Sweden and Portugal) between 2019 and 2024, illustrating a pattern of persistent inequality in the context of health, geopolitical and cost-of-living crises since 2020. See **Figure 14.**

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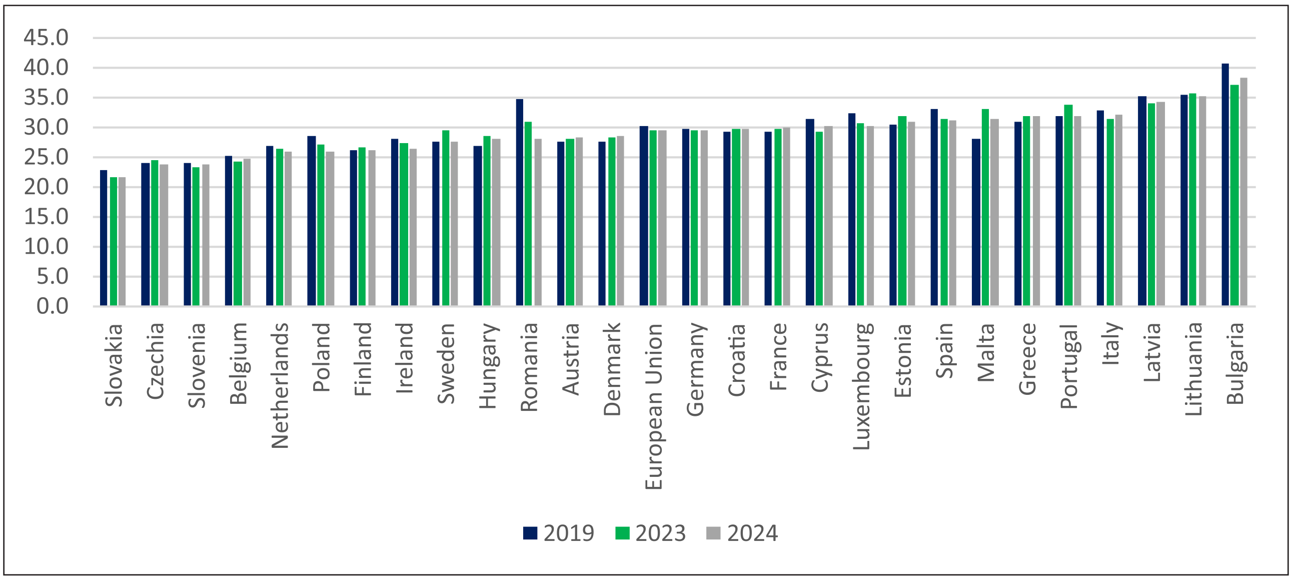
Figure 14 Income Inequality (Gini coefficient) EU-27, 2019, 2023 and 2024



Source: Eurostat online database, code ilc_di11

Another measure of income inequality is the **income quintile share ratio** or the **S80/S20 ratio,** which is a measure of the inequality of income distribution. It is calculated as the ratio of total income received by the 20 per cent of the population with the highest income (the top quintile) to that received by the 20 per cent of the population with the lowest income (the bottom quintile). The average European S80/20 ratio has remained relatively stable over the long run, decreasing slightly over time. The average was 4.89 in 2010 (EU-27), meaning that the top quintile had 4.89 times more income than the bottom quintile. This fell to 4.72 in 2023 and decreased further to 4.66 in 2024 (EU-27).

However, there are substantial differences between countries. In 2024, while in some countries (notably Nordic, some Central European countries and some peripheral countries), the rich earned around four times as much as the poor or less, in Latvia, Lithuania and Bulgaria the value was above 6. Between 2023 and 2024, the greatest increases in the ratio occurred in counties with traditionally high levels including Bulgaria, Italy and Lithuania (all from +0.22 to 0.35 per cent). The results of analysis using the GINI coefficient and using this indicator (S80/20) show that both indicators suggest a somewhat similar list of countries that can be considered most unequal. Income inequality would have been greater in all countries if social transfers had not been included In 2024, over one quarter of the median annual equivalised disposable income per inhabitant in the EU was received as social transfers from governments (e.g. pensions, social benefits, etc.) (European Commission 2026h).

2.4 Disposable Income and Financial Distress

To assess how disposable incomes compare across Europe and the changes over time, we look at disposable median net income. Disposable net income is the total gross disposable income[7] minus social security contributions and income taxes payable by employees (Eurostat 2025b). This means it represents income available to individuals and households for spending or saving. But the living standards achievable by a household with a given disposable income depend on how many people and of what age live in the household and thus household income is 'equivalised' or adjusted for household size and composition so that the incomes of all households can be looked at on a comparable basis.

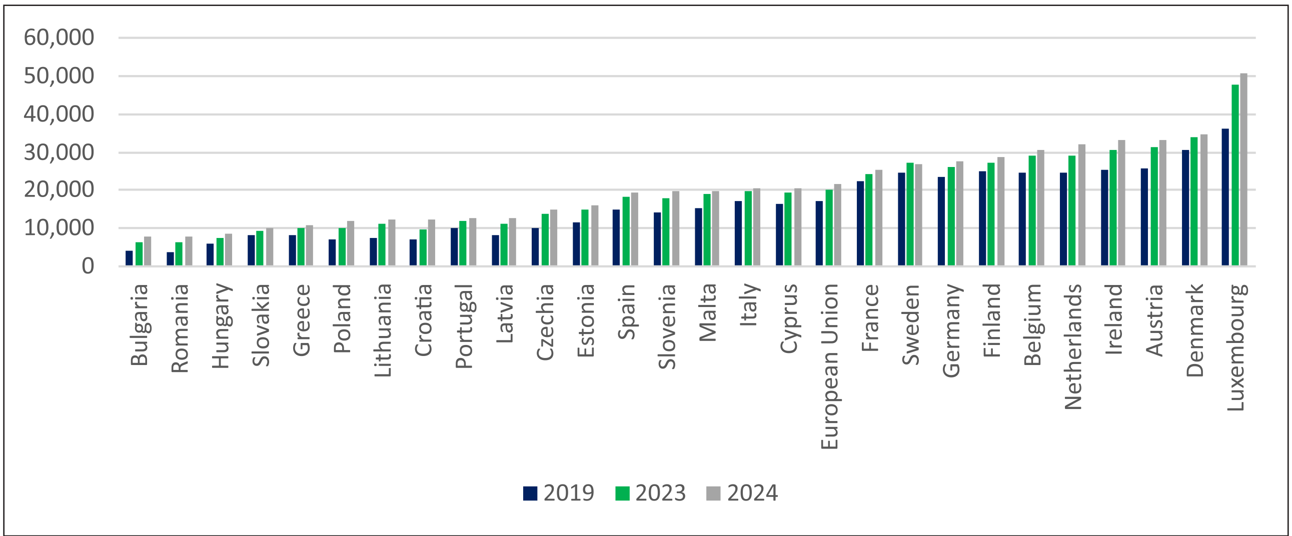
[7] That is, all income from work, private income from investment and property, transfers between households and all social transfers received in cash including old-age pensions.

The **Glossary** contains a definition of Household Disposable income and explains the Eurostat approach to equivalisation in more detail, which is used here to facilitate comparison across countries. National statistical agencies may take different approaches to equivalisation.[8]

We will look at the median income value, which involves dividing a population into two equal-sized groups: exactly 50 per cent of people fall below that value and 50 per cent are above it, because the average or mean household disposable income can be skewed by very high or very low incomes of a few having a disproportionate impact.

See **Figure 15,** which shows that in 2024 the highest levels of disposable income occurred in Luxembourg, Denmark, Austria, Ireland and the Netherlands. The lowest in Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary and other newer accession members. There is also great variation in the levels between the highest countries and the lowest. For example, the 2024 figures in the top two countries, Luxembourg and Denmark, were €50,799 and €34,843, respectively; those in the countries with the lowest levels, Romania and Bulgaria, were €7,811 and €7,837 respectively (This means that half of the people of these countries are considered to have disposable incomes above those amounts and half below.)

Figure 15 Median Disposable Annual Income (€): EU27, 2019, 2023 and 2024

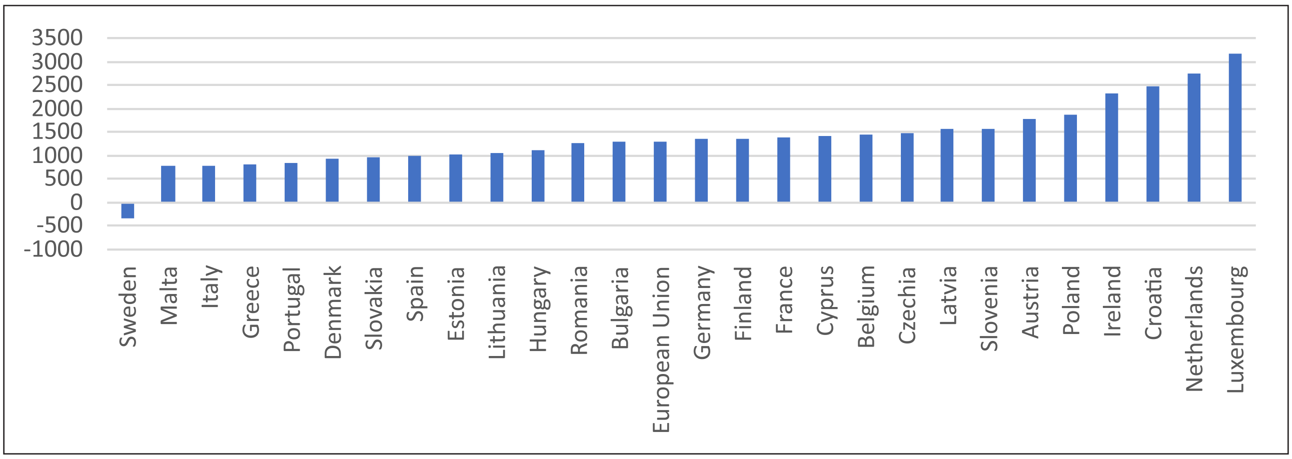


Source: Eurostat online database ilc_di03

In previous reports in this series, when we looked at the countries where the greatest changes occurred in the aftermath of the 2008-09 financial crisis. But even by 2024, while the median level for Greece increased relative to its 2019 position, it remains lower (-€1,113) than what it was in 2010. (Eurostat ilc_di03). For changes between the latest years (2023 to 2024), see **Figure 16.** The majority of countries showed improvement during that period, with Sweden being the only country in which a disimprovement was observed (-€335).

[8] Equivalence scales are used to calculate the equivalised household size in a household. For example, the equivalence scale used in Ireland attributes a weight of 1 to the first adult, 0.66 to each subsequent adult (aged 14+) living in the household and 0.33 to each child aged under 14. The weights for each household are then summed to calculate the equivalised household size. Disposable household income is divided by the equivalised household size to calculate equivalised disposable income for each person, which essentially is an approximate measure of how much of the income can be attributed to each member of the household. This equivalised income is then applied to each member of the household. Eurostat uses a different equivalence scale attributing a weight of 1 to the first adult, 0.5 to each subsequent adult and 0.3 to each child – see Glossary.

Figure 16 Change in Median Disposable Income (€), EU, 2023 to 2024



Source: Eurostat online database ilc_di03.

However, nominal changes do not tell the whole story about income changes, as inflation also has a significant influence: 'real' means that nominal figures are deflated using the consumer price index. Most recently, gross disposable household income (GDHI[9]) in the EU27 rose in real terms by 1.0 per cent in Q2 2025, a fall from the rate of 2.6 per cent recorded for Q1 2025 and the first fall off in quarter-on-quarter growth since Q3 2023 (European Commission 2025h). Analysis of income in the EU as a single distribution showed an improvement in the position of lower income groups and convergence among subsets of EU countries throughout the pandemic years, consolidating a pattern evident over the long term (Filauro, 2026). Yet when we look at the size of the European middle class (defined as the income group between 75-200 per cent of median national income) over the long run, the evidence suggests a gradual erosion from 64 per cent in 2006 to 63.8 per cent in 2021. A recent report by Eurofound (2024d) suggests that a 'strong welfare state is especially important' in seeking to reverse this trend, concluding 'most countries need to redesign benefit systems to make them more progressive … redistributing income on a larger scale'.

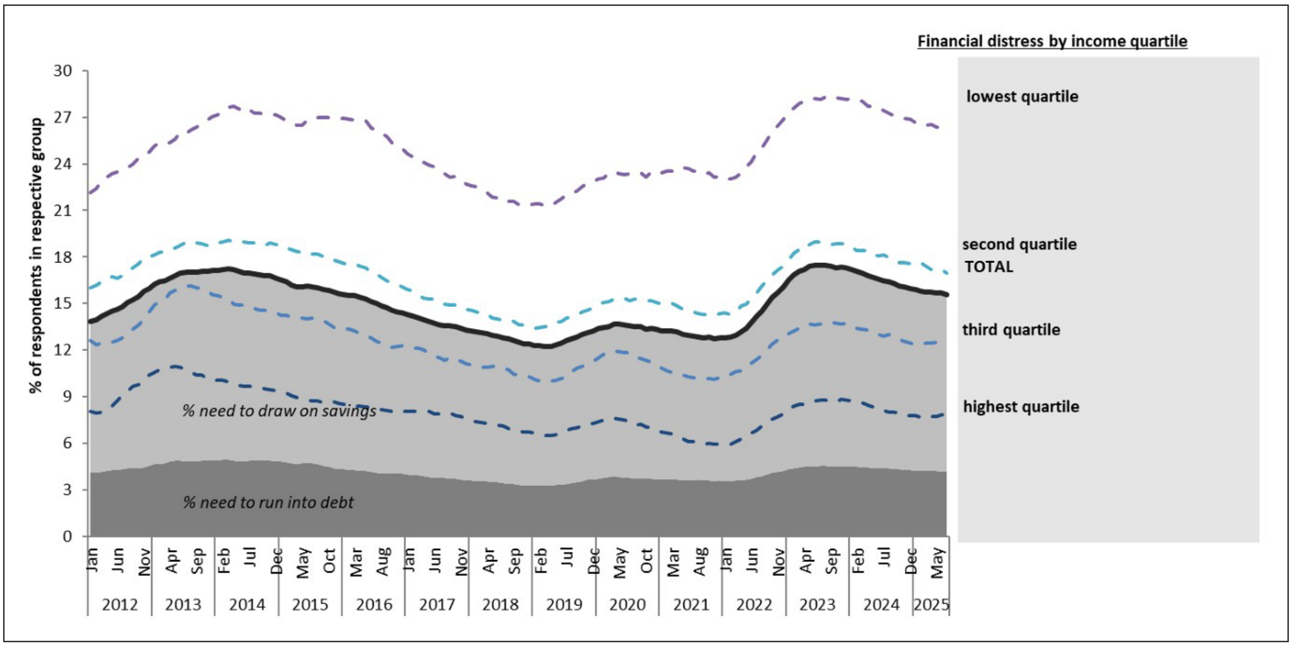
Incomes in cities are usually higher than those in rural areas (most notably in Romania and Bulgaria, where those in rural areas are respectively 20.5 per cent and 17.2 per cent more likely to be at risk of poverty or social exclusion than those for towns and suburbs), yet the urban-rural income divide remains a feature of European life across the EU (Eurofound, 2023c).

See **Figure 17,** where rates are shown for household distress across income quartiles, 2012-2025. It shows how the greatest distress is being experienced by the lowest income quartile (or lowest 25 per cent) but also by the second quartile (lowest 50 per cent).

Financial distress of households (defined as the need to draw on savings or to run into debt to cover current expenditures and based on personal perceptions) is still running at high levels especially for lower-income groups. From its historical peak of nearly 17.4 per cent recorded in August 2023, this measure declined to 15.5 per cent of the overall population in September 2025 (European Commission 2025h). However, compared to September 2024, there are major differences across Member States and population groups. Reported financial distress fell slightly for those on the lowest incomes (lowest quartile) between September 2024 and September 2025, reaching 26.2 per cent with a year-on-year decrease of 0.9 pp (percentage point). For the wealthiest, second and third quartiles, financial distress also fell over the same period.

9 The real GDHI growth for the EU is an estimation by DG EMPL, with available data from Member States. The nominal GDHI is converted into real GDHI by deflating with the deflator (price index) of household final consumption expenditure. The real GDHI growth for the EU is a weighted average of real GDHI growth in Member States.

Figure 17 Household Financial Distress (%) 2012-2025: Total, and by Income Quartiles



Source: European Commission (2025h, Chart 9): European Commission, Business and Consumer Surveys, unadjusted data, 12-months moving average (DG EMPL calculations).
Note: Horizontal lines show the long-term averages for financial distress for the population as a whole and for households in the four income quartiles. The overall share of adults reporting having to draw on savings and having to run into debt are shown respectively by the light grey and dark grey areas, which together represent total financial distress.

2.5 Poverty, Social Exclusion and Income Inequality: Summary and Conclusions

The review set out in this Section shows how the EPSRAP target for 2030 of reducing those at **risk of poverty or social exclusion** by 15 million remains unattained with significant ground to be covered in order to reach it. While the risk of poverty or social exclusion rate has improved each year since 2021 when it was 21.7 per cent, the average rate still stands at 21.0 per cent in 2024 (EU-27) (that is, more than one in 5 Europeans) amounting to over 93.3 million people (Eurostat online database code ilc_peps01n). The picture that emerges in the 2023-2024 period (2024 being the latest year for which Eurostat has published rates as we prepare this report) suggests that despite recent improvements, there is reason for concern about a range of issues and the length of time that high levels of poverty or social exclusion have persisted is unacceptable in human and societal terms. A recent report by the European Commission (2026b) highlights how some groups still face a higher risk of poverty and social exclusion, ranging from single households and migrants to people with lower education and those with disabilities as well as their children.

In 2024, the highest rates of poverty or social exclusion were to be found in Bulgaria and Romania where the rates of 30.3 and 27.9 per cent respectively. In 3 other countries (Greece, Spain and Lithuania) the rate was over 25 per cent. The lowest rates were found in Czechia (11.3 per cent), followed by Slovenia and the Netherlands. A recent analysis from European Commission (2026b) has found that while a quarter of EU citizens (excluding Luxembourg and Germany) experienced monetary poverty at least once between 2019 and 2022, 11.5 per cent remained in constant poverty and only 1.5 per cent exited poverty in these years. This strongly suggests the need to tackle both the volatility and persistence of poverty in the EU.

Even though there have been welcome improvements in the most recent year in some countries with typically high rates, there continues to be great divergence between countries. For example, there was a difference of nearly 19 percentage points between the country with the highest rate (Bulgaria at 30.3 per cent) and that with the lowest (Czechia 11.3 per cent) (Eurostat, code: ilc_peps01n). Between 2023 and 2024, disimprovements in the poverty or social exclusion rates were observed in several countries including, notably, Lithuania (+1.5 percentage points) and also in some countries with traditionally relatively low rates such as Finland. (Eurostat ilc_peps01n).

Again, it is notable that those countries identified by the European Social Policy Network as having a well-established approach to social investment (mainly Nordic and central European countries) tend to do well at protecting their populations from poverty or social exclusion relative to other countries with a less well-developed social investment approach. Thus, some of the newer accession countries and some Mediterranean countries tend to be more negatively affected by poverty (as measured by the indicators used for the EPSRAP) than Nordic or central European countries.

Looking at the second indicator used in the EPSRAP, the **risk of poverty rate**, a measure or relative income poverty, suggests that in 2024, 16.2 per cent of the population (EU-27) was living at risk of poverty (over 72.1 million people), just 0.3 of a percentage point lower than the level recorded in 2019 and 0.4 lower than 2010. (Eurostat online database, code ilc_li02). Other indicators show patterns of marginal improvement - the average EU-27 rate of **severe material and social deprivation** was 6.4 per cent in 2024, representing approximately 27.5 million people, down from a rate of 6.8 per cent in 2023 (and representing over 29.3 million people).

Children: Like other reports in this series, this report highlights again how ongoing high levels of poverty or social exclusion amongst children is one of the most challenging and serious issues faced by Europe, not least because it can affect the rest of one's life and a tendency to live in poverty can be passed on to future generations.

The rate of poverty or social exclusion that children (under 18s) experience continues to be higher than for the general population and about one quarter of children in Europe are affected. Thus, children who are considered to be **at risk of poverty or social exclusion** numbered 19.5 million in 2024 or 24.2 per cent (EU-27 average) (Eurostat online database, code ilc_peps01n). Despite marginal improvements in recent years, levels of **severe material and social deprivation** worsened for children in 12 of 27 EU Member States between 2019 and 2024. In short, poverty in all its forms still affects far too many children and childhood poverty remains a pressing problem because of its long-lasting effects on society and on the lives of individuals. A range of interventions are necessary to address this situation including access to affordable quality early childhood education and care, along with well-designed work-life balance policies.

Older People: Where older people are concerned (usually taken to mean those over 65), the European average rate for **poverty or social exclusion** was 19.2 per cent in 2024 (representing 18.1m people). This was a decrease on the 2023 rate (19.7 per cent). The rate was higher for those aged 75+ (20.0 per cent) (Eurostat online database, code ilc-peps01n). Poverty or social exclusion affects nearly twice as many women as men in older age.

The **risk of poverty rate** for those aged 65+ was 16.6 per cent affecting almost 15.7 million people (EU-27), broadly unchanged from 2023 (Eurostat ilc_li02). The average **severe material and social deprivation** rate for this age group fell between 2023 and 2024 by 0.4 percentage points to 5.1 per cent (representing approximately 4.7 million people aged 65+, EU-27) (Eurostat online database, code ilc_mdsd11). In addition to this total, it is clear that many more older women than older men are affected by poverty. These issues are significant for policy-makers (as well as for the individuals concerned) given that populations are ageing at an unprecedented rate and that there are many more older women than older men and they tend to have poorer pension provision (see Social Protection Committee 2023). The situation of older people varies greatly as between countries, with very high levels of income poverty and material deprivation especially in newer accession countries and also in some Mediterranean countries.

Working Poor: In 2024, 8.2 per cent of employed people (aged 18+) were living under the poverty threshold (EU-27) and the average rate (that is, the in-work poverty rate) remains only marginally below that seen in 2019 (8.3 per cent). (Eurostat Online database, code ilc_iw01). Thus, in 2024 about one twelfth of employed people in the EU live in poverty. Some groups are particularly affected (including younger people, people with lower education levels, and non-standard workers, poor households with children including lone parents). Until recently, limited policy attention has been paid to this group (European Commission, 2026l).

When **income inequality** is examined, there are concerns overall about increases over time. There are substantial differences between countries in Europe. In 2023, while in some countries (notably Nordic, some central European countries and some peripheral countries), the rich earned around four times as much as the poor or less, in other countries, notably, Bulgaria, Latvia and Lithuania the value was above 6.

When we examine **median disposable income**, the highest levels occur in Scandinavian, central and western European countries, the lowest in other newer accession members and there are great variations in the levels. While, within the past year (2023-2024), median disposable income has increased in all but one Member States, the level for Greece still exceeds that of 2019 but remains lower than that recorded in 2010 (Eurostat ilc_di03).

Financial distress (defined as the need to draw on savings or to run into debt to cover current expenditures) has gradually declined since 2014 but began to increase during the Covid-19 pandemic. The greatest distress is being experienced by the lowest income quartile (or lowest 25 per cent), 26.2 per cent of whom were classified as being in financial distress in September 2025.

Overall, it is clear that the legacies of the Covid-19 pandemic and the inflation and cost of living crises of recent years have served to reverse recent improvements as evident across several metrics and key groups for the years 2019-2024. The result has seen even greater shortcomings in Europe's poverty reduction targets than those predicted before the pandemic. The social indicators suggest little improvement since 2010 for very many people living in Europe, with marked dis-improvements for some groups in several countries particularly evident between 2021 and 2022. These include older people in some countries, an issue that particularly affects older women. Those working who still live in poverty is another group to be concerned about and this issue now affects only marginally less people than it did prior to the Covid-19 pandemic in 2019. The position of children, in particular, while improved somewhat since 2019, continues to be strikingly negative for many children with very serious long-term consequences for intergenerational poverty transmission.

Chapter 3

3 Employment and Unemployment

Social Justice Ireland includes the right to meaningful work amongst its core rights that need to guide policy-making in the future (see **Section 1**).

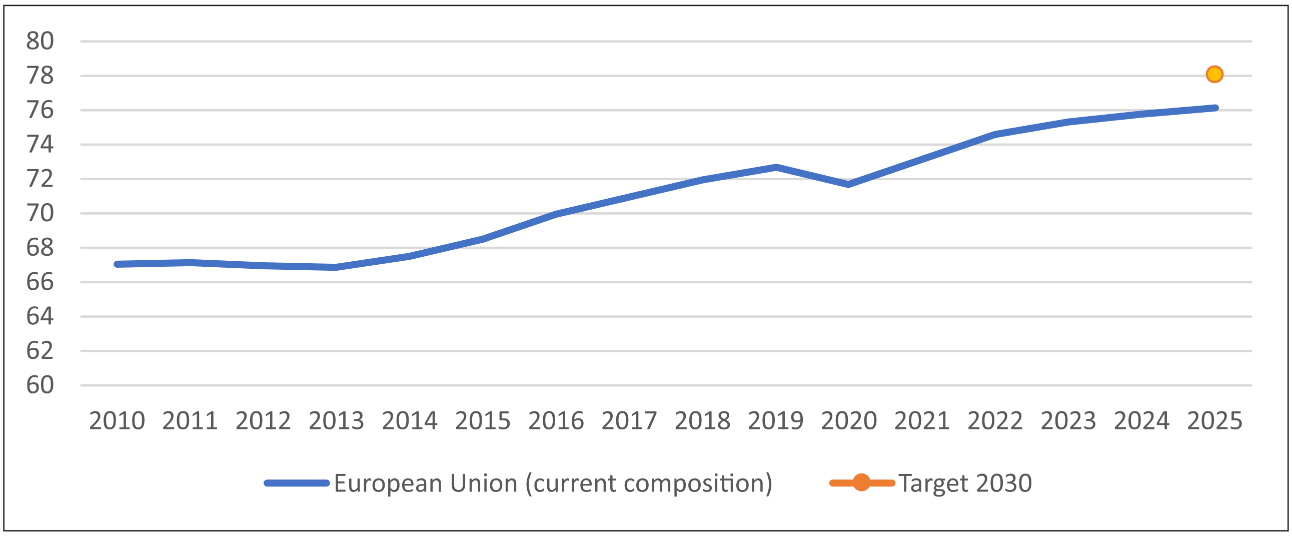
3.1 Employment

The EPSRAP has set a headline target that 78 per cent of 20-64 year-olds would be employed by 2030. From the aftermath of the financial crash to the eve of the Covid-19 pandemic (2013-2019), annual improvements occurred in this measure as shown by **Figure 18**. Following a pandemic-related dip in 2019-2020, the employment rate has resumed a pattern of growth with a rate of 76.1 per cent recorded for 2025 (up from 75.8 in 2024).

The latest data for the second quarter of 2025 indicates that employment across the EU is now at its highest level since the beginning of the Eurostat series in 2000 (European Commission, 2025h). Yet ongoing growth in headline rates risk obscuring incipient dynamics, such as a stagnating gender employment gap and a falling rate (-1 pp) of employment among those with lower educational attainment between Q2 2024 and Q2 2025 highlighting the 'growing impact of digitalisation, AI and autonomous system' (European Commission, 2025h).

The data explored in this chapter reflects the emerging impact of these new dynamics on the EU employment rate against the backdrop of employment trends over the past decade.

Figure 18 Employment in Europe (%), Ages 20-64, EU-27, 2010-2025



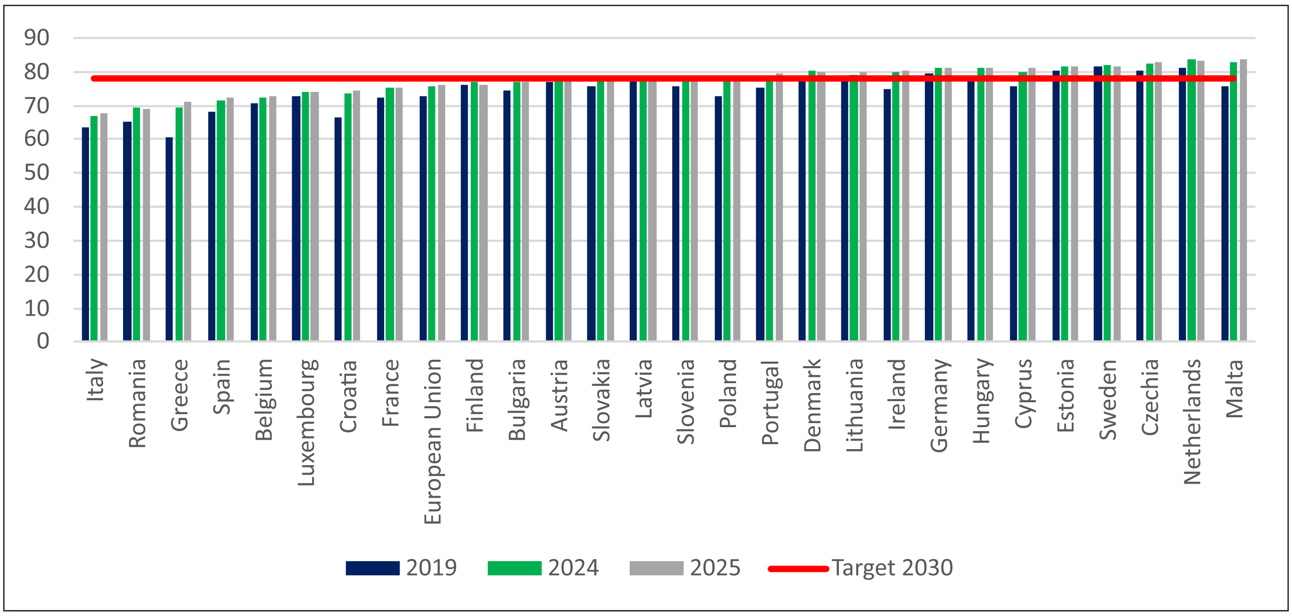
Source: Eurostat online database, code lfsi_emp_a.

As **Figure 19** shows, there are significant variations in the employment rates in different countries. Malta has the highest rate (83.6 per cent in 2025), while Italy continues to have lowest (67.6 per cent in

2025), a 16.0 percentage point difference between the two countries. Sixteen EU Member States Countries have already exceeded the EPSRAP target of 78 per cent (Slovakia, Latvia, Slovenia, Poland, Portugal, Denmark, Lithuania, Ireland, Germany, Hungary, Cyprus, Estonia, Sweden, Czechia, Netherlands and Malta). Of the remaining eleven, one subset located in the south of the EU remain especially far away from achieving the target including Italy (67.6 per cent), Romania (69 per cent) and Greece (71 per cent) followed by Spain, Croatia and Bulgaria. A second subset include wealthier northern European economics several of which have traditionally higher rates of structural unemployment including Belgium (72.8 per cent) and Luxembourg (73.9 per cent) followed by France, Finland and Austria.

A recent World Bank (2026) report suggests that job-creation in the EU is currently highest in small open economies including Ireland, Malta and Luxembourg as well as in lower-cost peripheral economies such as Spain, Portugal, Poland and Romania. This dynamic is being driven in part by multinational 'nearshoring' with rising productivity likely to occur in emerging EU markets like Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia and Poland as a result of 'wider adoption of digital technologies, particularly software and AI-enabled tools'. By contrast, the traditional 'powerhouse' of European job creation, Germany, had shed over 341,000 industrial jobs between Q1 2019 and Q1 2026 shifting from 'labour shortages to hiring freezes' (Storbeck, 2026). The latter's reprisal of its 1990s moniker as 'the sick man of Europe' bodes badly for the long-term prospects of EU employment growth (Elliott, 2026; The Economist, 2023).

Figure 19 Employment (%), ages 20-64, EU-27 Countries, 2019, 2023 and 2024



Source: Eurostat online database, code lfsi_emp_a. Line shows EU 2020 strategy target of 75 per cent and EPSRAP 2030 target of 78 per cent.

When we look at demographic sub-groups, the EU employment rate varied across all population groups between Q2 2024 and Q2 2025, falling for those aged 15-24 (-0.2 percentage points), increasing for those aged 25-54 (+0.2 percentage points) while the greatest increase effected the oldest cohort aged 55-64 (+1.4 percentage points) when compared with the same quarter of the previous year (European Commission 2025h). The employment rate decreased for low-skilled workers (-1.0 percentage points) compared with an increase for medium (+0.1 percentage points) and no change for high skilled workers. This does not of course mean that there are not also ongoing challenges for these groups including for older workers, which we come back to below.

A sizeable gender employment gap of 10.0 per cent persists in 2024, with 80.8 per cent of men employed compared to 70.8 per cent of women. The rate has fallen only marginally since 2019 when it was 11.3 per cent (European Commission, 2026f). The current cycle of the EU *Gender Equality Strategy 2026-2030* launched in March 2026 retains the target of reducing the gender employment gap to 5.8 percentage points or less by the end of the decade (European Commission, 2026c). Yet progress toward this goal remains constrained by sharply uneven progress, with the lowest gaps for 2024 in Finland (0.7 pp), Lithuania (1.4 pp), Estonia (1.7 pp) and Latvia (3.3 pp) a fraction of those on the opposite end of the distribution with the highest in Italy (19.4 pp), Greece (18.8 pp) and Romania (18.1 pp) (Eurostat code: sdg_05_30). Due to the intersectional dimensions of the gender employment gap (embracing socio-economic background, educational attainment, origin, ethnicity etc.) meeting the 2030 target will require a comprehensive approach to labour market participation in conjunction with anti-poverty, social protection and upskilling measures (European Network Against Racism, 2020 Debusscher, 2024; Lux and Lange, 2026).

Another critical vector of inequality which strongly intersects with gender as well as other key demographic categories (such as younger workers and those from migrant backgrounds) is that of persistent temporary, part-time and precarious work patterns and falling or stagnating wages. Erratic working hours have become a common experience for European workers (Zwysen, 2025). According to Eurofound (2025g) while overall precariousness in the EU labour market peaked in 2016, it continues to disproportionally affect young people, women, those with lower educational attainment and foreign-born employees as well as those employed in low-skilled occupations and across the service sector.

In 2024, 17.1 per cent of the EU labour force works part-time and 31.7 per cent of employed women with children worked part-time (Eurostat, 2025g). Young workers and female workers consistently exhibit the highest rates of temporary work, often exceeding 50 per cent in some countries. Young women have been identified as the group most exposed to precarious employment conditions due to the interaction of age and gender inequalities. Moreover, those with lower levels of educational attainment exhibit both higher exposure to temporary employment and less likelihood of exiting it over time (Eurofound, 2026d). Earlier studies have likewise found that over half of involuntary part-timers (57 per cent) work in lower service occupations, such as sales and customer service work. Managers, on the other hand, are much less likely to be working part-time involuntarily (Eurofound 2019a).

While temporary work contracts have often been defended on the basis that they provide a 'stepping stone' to more permanent work (European Economic and Social Committee, 2023), recent evidence suggests a mixed picture at best; as Eurofound (2026d) reports, making this transition depends heavily on national labour market institutions, where in some sectors and Member States temporary work can facilitate labour market entry while in others it tends to reinforce long-term insecurity and labour market segmentation. Despite final transposition of the Transparent and Predictable Working Conditions Directive in August 2022 with the intention of more tightly regulating 'zero hours' style contracts, the International Labour Organisation (2023) have recently reported rates of extra-contractual 'informal' or casual employment in Europe as high as 17.8 per cent in Hungary and 9.8 per cent in Poland. Such workers face more inflexible working time arrangements and greater financial insecurity resulting in a cycle of difficulty accessing credit, precautionary saving and reduced consumption which can deepen the risk of falling into poverty and social exclusion (Friedrich and Teichler, 2024).

As indicated in the most recent *Labour Market and Wage Developments in Europe* report (European Commission, 2025j) real wages have struggled to recover from the inflation crisis of 2022-23 when much of the progress garnered between 2013 and 2019 was partly or wholly reversed in many EU Member States. In 2025, real wage growth in the EU27 stood at 2.7 per cent, yet real wages remain marginally lower than they were in 2019 (-1.7 pp) with strong divergence across Member States. Comparing 2019 and 2025, real wages in Finland, Italy, France, Czechia and Greece thus continue to lag behind their pre-pandemic levels while in Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, Belgium, Malta and Estonia the recovery remains tenuous at a rate of between +0.5 and +2.5 percentage points. Slovakia, Spain, Cyprus, Ireland and Luxembourg have seen stronger growth of between +2.5 and 10.0 percentage points, yet it has been in a group of largely eastern European countries where real wages have recovered most dramatically at rates ranging from between +15.0 to +36.0 percentage points including Poland, Slovenia, Latvia, Hungary, Lithuania, Romania, Croatia and Bulgaria. While the European Commission (2025j) and ECB (2025b) have hailed real wages 'bouncing back' in a 'largely recovered' EU27, recent estimates suggest real wage growth may end up 'close to zero' in 2026 (Strauss and Jones, 2026).

Transposed into law with a deadline of November 2024, the EU Directive on Adequate Minimum Wages sets out a framework to ensure adequate wage floors across EU Member States. Yet the Directive has been criticised for failing to mandate a statutory minimum wage and has only narrowly survived challenges following adverse judgements of the Court of Justice of the European Union in 2025 (Aranguiz, 2026). As of 2024, the ratio of the minimum wage to the average earnings increased in a majority of Member States indicating a strengthened position for low-income earners in relative terms. For lower-middle income earners in the 3rd and 4th declines of the income distribution and middle-wage earners in the 5th and 6th declines however, real wage growth largely failed to keep up with rising prices between 2019 and 2023. Against the backdrop of significant technological transformation in the medium to long-term associated with the AI revolution, the prospect of reduced social mobility, a shrinking middle class and 'job polarisation' (as already evident in ten EU Member States in 2024) indicates the need for a more ambitious marriage of 'social Europe' with the EU's 'twin' green and digital transition agendas (Goudriaan and Naranjo, 2025).

Despite very welcome improvements in headline employment rates in the EU, there are thus significant challenges ahead which require robust social policy responses at the European level. On the positive side, it is interesting that projections of the impacts of a full implementation of the Paris agreement show that the transition to a low-carbon economy could raise GDP and employment – amounting to an additional 1.2 million jobs in the EU by 2030, mostly in growing green(ing) sectors, which would be largely due to investment for transition (European Commission 2023a). These impacts, however, would vary a lot between sectors and countries. On the other hand, the EU Social Protection Committee (2020) notes that new forms of employment, and associated gaps in access to social protection and lower incomes may put a growing number of people at higher risk of poverty and social exclusion. This in turn may require that social protection systems ensure access to adequate protection for all persons in employment, including various types of self-employment and non-standard working.

The OECD (2023a) explores the impact of Artificial Intelligence on global labour markets in an *Employment Outlook* review. In doing so, it highlighted the need to consider:

- **Employment:** 27 per cent of jobs are considered highly exposed to AI with potential for increased productivity alongside threats to job quality, privacy, and autonomy.
- **Social Protection:** AI may improve job quality by removing repetitive or dangerous tasks but also has the potential to increase work intensity, stress, surveillance and to worsen inequalities and worker autonomy in the absence of strong safeguards.
- **Social Dialogue:** Trade unions and collective bargaining must help manage the transition to AI by protecting workers and shaping fair workplace rules.

The OECD likewise argues that while AI raises major ethical concerns around transparency, accountability, discrimination and privacy, existing labour and anti-discrimination laws require AI-specific updates in line with the 2024 EU AI Act. Yet advocacy groups including the European Digital Rights Network have already begun to warn of 'dangerous loopholes that enable rights violations' within the Act while the European Parliament has similarly pointed to potential 'grey areas' in the legislation addressing AI risks in the workplace (Dan, 2025 European Parliament, 2024). Thus, while the International

Labour Organisation (2025a), OECD (2023), European Parliament (2024) and Eurofound (2025a) all stress the need for robust collective bargaining to ensure an effective regulatory framework for AI, the 2026 EU AI Digital Omnibus has been criticized by the European Trade Union Confederation for throwing worker protections under the von der Leyen Commission's 'simplification bulldozer' (European Trade Union Confederation, 2026).

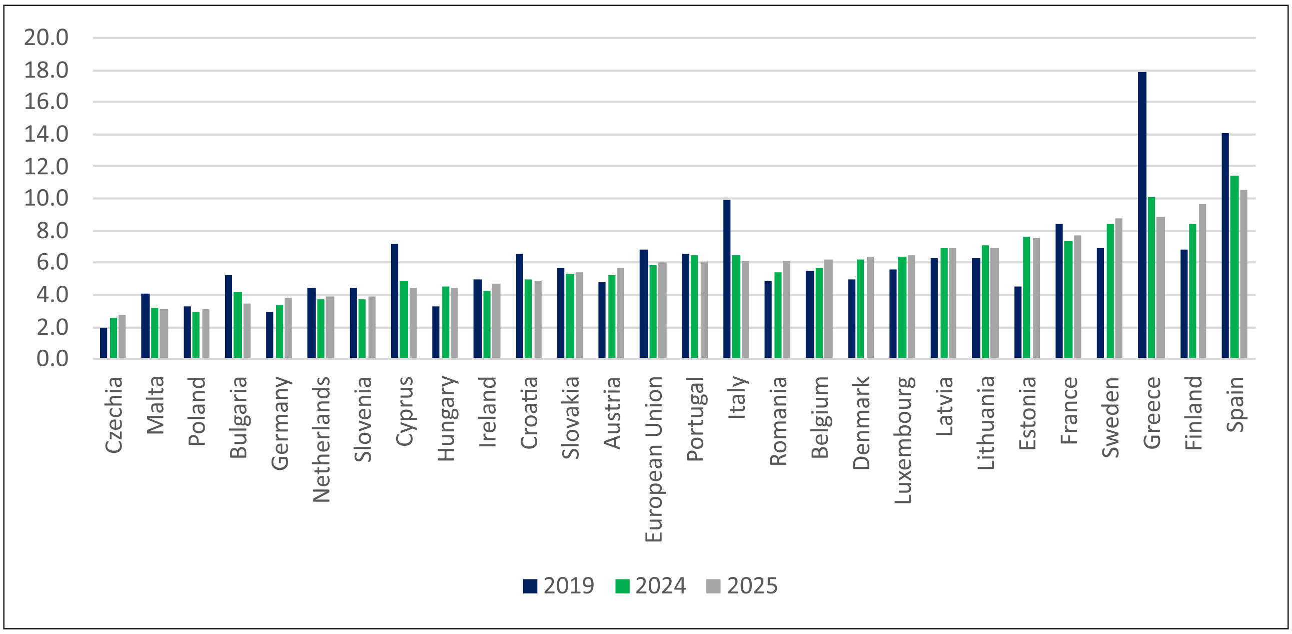
Looking ahead to likely downstream impacts of the ongoing US-Iran war and what the Executive Director of the International Energy Agency recently (28 May 2026) called 'the largest energy security crisis the world has ever faced', the OECD's latest *Economic Outlook* has downgraded its 2026 Eurozone growth projection to 0.8 per cent (OECD, 2026a). The European Commission's own Spring 2026 *Economic Forecast* (May 2026) has likewise corrected its growth projection downward while anticipating a surge of Eurozone inflation to 3.0 per cent fuelled primarily by an energy shock as the closure of the Strait of Hormuz curtails seaborne flows of oil and LNG by 15 per cent and 20 per cent respectively (European Commission, 2026k). This upward revision to the inflation forecast is projected to reduce the growth of EU households' real disposable income by 1.4 percentage points with the worse-case scenario 'wiping out the rebound in real GDP projected for 2027'. While the IMF (2026) has warned that Europe 'cannot subsidise its way out of energy shocks', Germany and Spain have both acted to cut energy-related taxes in moves likely to reanimate political debates about state intervention, progressivity and market exposure (Bofinger, 2026).

3.2 Unemployment

In 2025, the annual unemployment rate (EU-27) was 6.0 per cent, up from 5.9 per cent in 2024 (Eurostat une_rt_a). The unemployed represented some 13.3 million people (EU-27), a reduction on the 2019 figure when unemployment was 14.05 million (Eurostat une_rt_a).

Figure 20 illustrates the very great divergence between countries both in terms of the rate of unemployment and in the degree of change between 2019 and 2025. The countries with the highest rates in 2024 were Spain (10.5 per cent), Finland (9.7 per cent), and Greece (8.9). Those with the lowest rates were Czechia, Malta and Poland (all with rates under 3.5 per cent).

Figure 20 Unemployment (% active population), EU-27, 2019, 2024 and 2025



Source: Eurostat online database une_rt_a

As we prepare this report in 2026, the trend for unemployment continues to be one of stagnation around the continuing current (seasonally adjusted) rate of 6.0 per cent reached in March 2026, a figure which has not variated by more than ±0.2 percentage points since February 2022 (Eurostat, ei_lmhr_m). Comparing 2024 with 2025, the largest reduction was registered in Finland (-0.7 percentage points), albeit from a position of having the second highest unemployment rate (9.7 per cent) among the EU27 in 2025.

As of 2025, 'labour market slack' – the term for all persons who have an unmet need for employment, including unemployed and underemployed people – stood at 11.7 per cent of the extended labour force, unchanged from an identical rate in 2024 but down from the 2019 rate of 13.7 per cent (Eurostat code lfsi_sla_a). In addition to this catch-all measure, there are three supplementary indicators used to monitor the evolution of underemployment. The first of these relates to the proportion of workers in the EU who are 'Available to work but not seeking' (which includes the so-called category of 'discouraged') and stood at 2.6 per cent of the labour force in 2025. This rate decreased by 0.1 percentage points compared to 2024. Second, the rate of 'underemployment' (the proportion of those who would like to work additional hours and are available to do so) remained stable at 2.4 per cent over the same period. Third, the metric of those 'seeking but not available for work' also remained stable at 0.9 per cent of the labour force between 2024 and 2025.

The **long-term unemployment** rate (unemployment for 12 months or more) was 1.9 per cent of the labour force in 2025 representing 4.2 million people, a rate almost half of its 2017 level of 3.7 per cent when 7.7 million people were affected. In 2025, the lowest rates were recorded for the Netherlands (0.5 per cent), Malta (0.6 per cent) and Czechia (0.8 per cent) while the highest were in Greece (5.0 per cent), Slovakia and Spain (both 3.4 per cent).

Between 2024 and 2025, the rate remained stable for the EU27 as was the case for 9 Member States (the Netherlands, Czechia, Poland, Slovenia, Hungary, France, Estonia, Croatia, Belgium and Latvia). However, improvements of -0.1 to -0.7 percentage points were registered in Bulgaria, Greece, Cyprus, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Slovakia and Malta, while disimprovements of +0.1 to +0.6 percentage points were seen in Latvia, Denmark, Ireland, Sweden, Austria, Germany, Lithuania, Romania, Luxembourg and Finland. While monitored through both the Social Scoreboard and European Semester process, the EPSRAP currently lacks any 'clearly established targets and initiatives' relating to the measure despite its centrality to labour market activisation and poverty reduction policy (Social Platform, 2025a).

Across the EU's 52 NUTS 2 regions, patterns of long-term employment are even more starkly divergent, ranging from rates of 0.4 per cent registered in Utrecht in the Netherlands to 16.3 per cent in Ciudad de Melilla in Spain (Eurostat, 2025f). The European Committee on the Regions (2023) have likewise evinced frustration that 'there has been no initiative to combat long-term unemployment since ... 2016' while calling for an 'ad hoc fund to combat long-term unemployment' in aid of 'zero long-term unemployment zones'.

Those unemployed for 2 years, constituting **very long-term unemployment,** amounted to 1.0 per cent of the total EU27 work force representing over 2.2 million people in 2025, also stable compared to the previous year (Eurostat online database une_ltu_q).

That unemployment continues to be an issue can be seen in how the proportions of Europe's unemployed people that are long-term unemployed continue to be high. This can be seen from what is called the *share* of unemployment that is constituted by long-term unemployment (that is, long-term unemployment -12 months or more- as a percentage of total unemployment). The share of long-term unemployed as a percentage of total unemployment fell from 32.2 per cent in 2024 to 31.5 per cent in 2025, a decrease of 0.7 percentage points (Eurostat online database lfsq_upgal).

There are groups that do relatively less well in the labour market. Amongst them are disabled people – for instance, in 2024 about 56.4 per cent of people with disabilities were employed in the EU compared with 75.8 per cent of people without disabilities that year (European Commission 2025i). The European

Commission's (2026g) recent report, *Enhancing the strategy for the rights of persons with disabilities up to 2030* notes that barriers to employment continue to include 'accessibility issues, failure to implement reasonable accommodation, social benefit traps and the persistence of stereotypes'. To this end, the Commission have undertaken to improve implementation of the 2022 Disability Employment Package which has faced criticism by advocacy organisations including the European Disability Forum (2023) for its 'lack of funding and legal requirements'.

The unemployment rate of non-EU nationals in 2024 (aged 20 to 64) was 65.3 per cent, trailing both the employment rates of host-country nationals (71.4 per cent) and immigrants from other EU Member States (74.9 per cent). Moreover, non-EU citizens accounted for 22.2 per cent of part-time work in total EU employment, considerably higher than the equivalent figure for EU nationals of 16.6 per cent (Eurostat, 2025e). As ongoing research continues to demonstrate, non-EU nationals remain prone to discrimination based on 'ethnic origin, religion, age, gender, sexual orientation and disability both by public authorities and private actors' (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2023; Baas, 2025).

Other demographic attributes including age likewise continue to impact the structure of the EU labour market in highly salient ways. Driven by a combination of higher retirement ages, longer life expectancy and better health, the employment rate for older workers (age 55-64) has increased dramatically from 23.8 million in 2010 to nearly 41.3 million in 2025. This is a broadly welcome development and has coincided with a continuous annual decrease in the proportion of those within this age bracket at risk of poverty of social exclusion every year bar one (2021) between 2015 and 2025 (ilc_peps01n). Yet concerns remain regarding the implications of older age unemployment as more likely to led to long-term unemployment as well as wider 'labour underutilisation' (International Labour Organisation, 2024b). A large proportion of older workers feel that it would be difficult to find a job with a similar salary if they lost their current job – 57 per cent aged over 55 think it would be difficult, while just 30 per cent of workers under the age of 35 feel the same, a finding that underpins the argument for increased training opportunities for older workers (Eurofound 2019a).

We turn next to the situation of young people who remain one of the most vulnerable groups in the labour market.

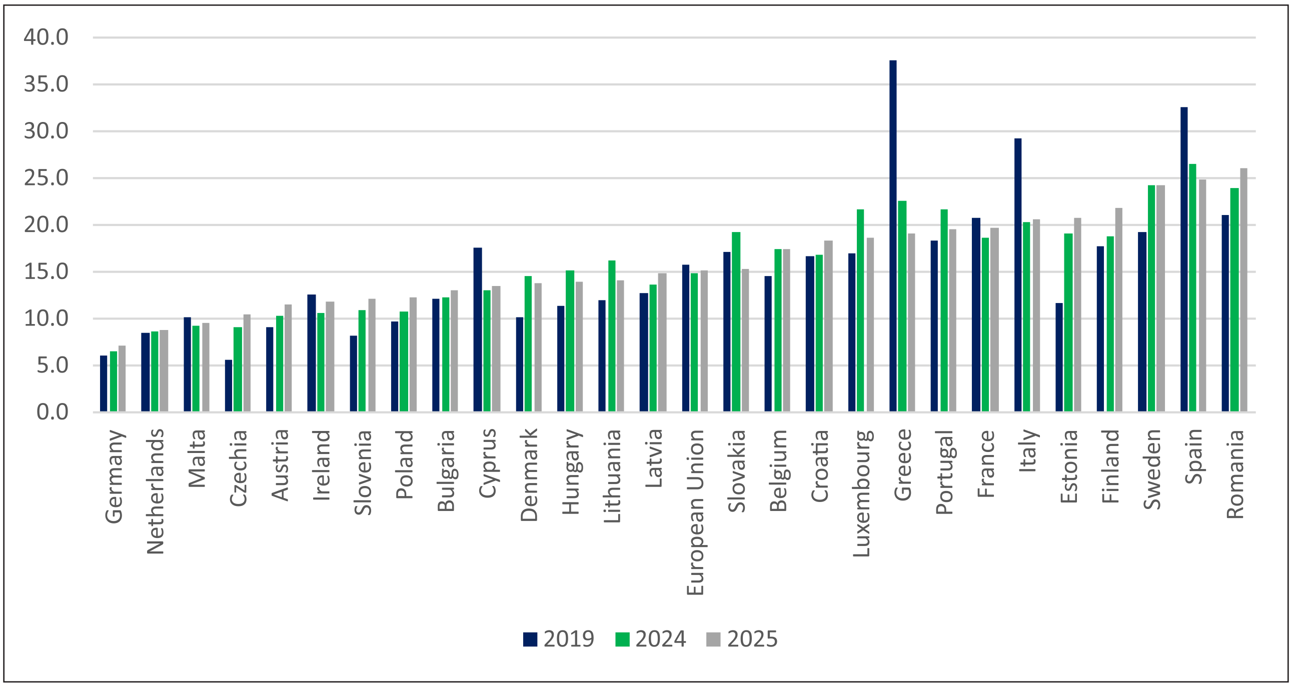
3.3 Youth Unemployment

Youth unemployment remains a chronic problem in many EU Member States with persistent warnings of a 'lost generation' continuing to the present (Hamann et al., 2026).

Since hitting a post-crisis peak of 25.2 per cent in 2013, youth unemployment dropped precipitously to a rate of 15.7 per cent in 2019 before spiking to 16.7 per cent (2020) and 17.6 per cent (2021) throughout the Covid-19 pandemic before levelling out at 14.6 per cent (2022 and 2023). Since then, however, the rate has increased on an annual basis to its current (2025) level of 15.2 per cent, representing a total of 2.9 million young people. This is a worrying upward trend which will require renewed prioritisation of measures such as the discontinued Youth Employment Initiative (2014-2020) and post-2020 Reinforced Youth Guarantee.

Figure 21 shows, that there is great variation in the rates of youth unemployment across Europe and there were very great variations in its rate of change since 2019. The rates (2025) were highest in Romania (26.1 per cent), Spain (24.9 per cent), and Sweden (24.3 per cent) (Eurostat online database une_rt_a). By contrast, at the other end of the scale, the 2025 rate in Germany was 7.1 per cent and it was less than 12 per cent in five other countries (Netherlands, Malta, Austria and Ireland).

Figure 21 Youth Unemployment (% of active population), EU-27, 2019, 2024 and 2025



Source: Eurostat online database une_rt_a. Youth unemployment refers to those under 25 years.

In a report into long-term unemployment amongst young people, Eurofound (2017a) notes that the young people concerned are difficult to reach and often lack education and work experience, and that they are also more likely to face additional challenges such as care responsibilities, poor health and lower levels of well-being than their peers. Eurofound suggests that they are not always in a position to take advantage of the economic improvements.

A related area of concern involves young people who are not in education, employment or training (known as NEETs). There are many reasons why the NEET rate is one of the most concerning indicators relative to young people – it indicates detachment and discouragement in relation to both work and education. It includes young people who are conventionally unemployed as well as other vulnerable groups such as young disabled people and young carers. Low educational attainment is one of the key determinants of young people entering the NEET category with other important factors including having a disability or coming from a migrant background (Resolution Foundation, 2025). Young people with lower education levels and early school leavers face considerably higher risk of falling into the NEET category than those with tertiary education (Crowley et al. 2023). Serious concerns have also been flagged about the so called 'missing' NEETs – young people who have a low level of education, have no work experience and are not registered with public employment services, and are therefore very difficult to reach and at risk of becoming deeply alienated (European Commission, 2018).

The EU-27 average NEET rate (ages 15-29) was 11 per cent in 2025, which was marginally lower than in 2024 (-0.1 per cent) but with some distance to cover to meet the EPSRAP target of reducing the NEET rate to 9 per cent by 2030 (Eurostat edat_lfse_20). The 2025 NEET rate (ages 15-29) was highest in Romania at 18.5 per cent followed by Italy (13.7 per cent), Bulgaria (12.3) and Greece (13.3 per cent). This means that in Romania, for example, almost one in 5 young people is in this situation. At the other end of the scale, the country with the lowest rate is the Netherlands (5.1 per cent). An increase in the NEETs rate was recorded between 2024 and 2025 in eleven Members States led by Estonia (+1.4 pp), Luxembourg (+1.4 pp) and Lithuania (+1.2 pp).

Furthermore, when we look at the NEETs rate for slightly older age groups the picture is even more concerning. The EU-27 average NEETs rate for those aged 24-29, in 2025 was 14.7 per cent, having stagnated on its 2024 rate and just 2.4 percentage points less than the 2019 rate of 17.1 per cent (Eurostat edat_lfse_20). The fact that the rate is high, and is remaining relatively high, for these 'older' NEETs is a trend that should be of concern.

Overall, there has thus been a marginal disimprovement in youth unemployment between 2024 and 2025 reversing a downward trend since 2019. As the OECD (2025b) notes some groups such as those with lower skills remain at 'risk falling further behind' as labour market disparities increase for young people in many countries. They state:

> Disparities in skills development and educational qualifications are a major channel through which socioeconomic advantage (or disadvantage) is passed across generations, with spillover effects onto employment prospects. Wage disparities ... shrink dramatically when accounting for skills differences: adults with tertiary-educated parents on average earn 9% more than those without tertiary-educated parents ... many individuals experience overlapping disadvantages across parental education and occupation, meaning that the cumulative impact of social origin on skills and earnings is often stronger than what each measure in isolation suggests (OECD, 2025b).

Against the backdrop of geopolitical and environmental instability combined with technological transformation likely to arise from the AI revolution, the OECD (2025c) has likewise warned that 'crises and megatrends have intensified the importance of individuals possessing the necessary skills to adapt'. Yet the danger of a 'skills gap' (OECD, 2025c) widening into a 'skills crisis' (Foster et al, 2025) to exacerbate widening social and educational inequalities remains a profound challenge facing every EU Member State.

3.4 Employment - Summary and Conclusions

The European Commission's latest economic forecast, issued on 21 May 2026, projects EU GDP to slow down from a low of 1.5 per cent in 2025 to rates of 1.1 per cent in 2026 before recovering to 1.4 per cent in 2027 (European Commission, 2026k). Drags on the pace of the EU's recovery most prominently include heightened energy inflation triggered by the closure of the straits of Hormuz following escalation of the US-Iran war in February 2026. As the EU's economy enters a second energy shock while still adapting from the first disruption to its oil and gas supplies following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Europe remains vulnerable to exogenous crises against the backdrop of faltering growth. Yet this conjuncture also represents an opening to address some of the longer-term challenges outlined in this chapter, from rising youth unemployment and skills to inclusion and equity.

Looking ahead, the consequences of heightened trade fragmentation cotinine to loom large within the broader EU macroeconomic picture (ECB, 2026). While the US-EU trade agreement reached on 17 July 2025 has reduced some uncertainty, evidence suggest that US tariffs continue to weigh on EU growth: in Q1 2026, for example, total EU exports contracted by 0.1 per cent in the fourth consecutive quarterly decline partly attributable to 'tariff tensions' (Eurostat, 2026). Recent assessments indicate that some of the regions and industries most exposed to trade disruptions, notably pharma, chemicals and advanced manufacturing, overlap with areas already facing acute labour vulnerabilities (Whelan, 2026). At the same time, concerns regarding trade diversion and industrial overcapacity from China have moved to the centre of EU economic and policymaking, highlighting the growing importance of 'derisking' supply chain security (Ohlen, 2026; Kiorri and Heinz, 2026). In this context, it is vital that EU policymaker's embrace a vison of global competitiveness which recognises social inclusion as a core strength of the European growth model and vital to its renewal, a missing dimension many have identified as the "Achilles' heel" of the ECB President Mario Draghi's influential 2024 *Future of European Competitiveness* report (Draghi, 2024; European Economic and Social Committee, 2026; Kirton-Darling and Barthès, 2024).

This is particularly true in light of the fall-off in ambition represented by the minimal targets of the EPSRAP compared with those of the preceding Europe 2020 strategy. As we have seen throughout this chapter, there remains significant variations in the employment rates across different countries. Central and northern European economies in particular have already exceeded the EPSRAP 2030 target of 78.0 per cent employment, while other countries, especially in the south and periphery, are very far away from achieving it. The lowest employment rates in 2025 were found in Italy, Romania and Greece (looking at ages 20-64).

However, there are concerns about the way that the employment picture is evolving in recent years, especially in relation to rising youth unemployment and stagnating long term unemployment. Another issue is that employment recovery is not reaching all regions equally, as employment growth has been much stronger in the capital city regions of countries relative to rural and peripheral areas (European Committee of the Regions, 2023).

In 2025, the annual unemployment rate (EU-27) was 6.0 per cent (representing 13.3 million people) (Eurostat une_rt_a). The numbers concerned are close to the pre-pandemic level recorded in 2019 of 14.5 million. (Eurostat une_rt_a). The countries with the highest rates in 2024 were Spain (10.5 per cent), Finland (9.7 per cent), and Greece (8.9).

The long-term unemployment rate remained static between 2024 and 2025 at 1.9 per cent, affecting about 4.2 million people (Eurostat online database une_ltu_q). Those unemployed for 2 years or more represented over 1.9 million people in 2025). The share of long-term unemployed as a percentage of total unemployment fell from 32.2 per cent in 2024 to 31.5 per cent in 2025, a decrease of 0.7 percentage points (Eurostat online database lfsq_upgal). Thus, long-term unemployment continues to be a concern with implications in human and social terms and with financial costs and possible impacts on social cohesion. In 2025, the lowest rates were recorded for the Netherlands (0.5 per cent), Malta (0.6 per cent) and Czechia (0.8 per cent) while the highest were in Greece (5.0 per cent), Slovakia and Spain (both 3.4 per cent).

Both older and younger workers experience lower employment rates than other age groups. Becoming unemployed at an older age means being more likely to remain so and to experience long-term unemployment (Eurofound, 2025c). Focusing on youth unemployment (those under 25), in 2025, the average EU-27 rate increased to 15.2 per cent (as a percentage of active population) relative to the 2024 rate of 14.9 per cent (Eurostat online database une_rt_a). Romania is currently the country with the highest youth unemployment rate (26.1 per cent), followed by Spain (24.9 per cent), and Sweden (24.3 per cent).

A related area of concern involves young people who are not in education, employment or training (known as NEETs). Low educational attainment is one of the key determinants of young people entering the NEET category with other important factors including having a disability or coming from a migrant background (Eurofound, 2024c). The EU-27 average NEET rate (ages 15-29) was 11 per cent in 2025, 0.1 per centage points lower than for the previous year (Eurostat edat_lfse_20). The 2024 NEET rate (ages 15-29) was highest in Romania where almost one in 5 young people is in this situation. Furthermore, when we look at the NEET rate for slightly older age groups the picture is even more concerning. Overall, while there were welcome improvements in youth unemployment in the years prior to the pandemic, recent energy shocks, rising inflation and a slowdown in employment growth have combined to worsen the position of the young in labour markets in the short run and is likely to aggravate existing trends affecting certain groups.

Against a backdrop of massive change and instability, the OECD (2025b) continues to advocate the need for rejuvenated lifelong learning and the development of skills tailored to a rapidly changing global and EU labour market. Here, the importance of workforce resilience, equity and inclusion remains paramount in the face of the unprecedented challenges posed by AI, ongoing energy crises, the climate transition and geopolitical instability. In this vein, the OECD (2025b), International Labour Organisation (2025c) and International Monetary Fund (2026) all agree that our current conjuncture demands fundamentally political solutions, stressing the need for social dialogue and democratic policy choices to meet the future and actively steer outcomes. As this report emphasises, tackling inequalities related to socio-economic background, gender, disability, age and ethnicity in relation to education, skills and work remain critical preconditions for Europe to survive and thrive in an era of enormous change.

4 Key Services

Amongst the core rights that need to guide policy-making in the future identified by *Social Justice Ireland* (See **Table 3** in Section 1, above) are the right to appropriate accommodation, to relevant education, to essential healthcare, and to real participation. At least three functions of welfare systems are recognised: social investment (through education, for example), social protection (providing safeguards across the life-cycle) and stabilisation of the economy (by cushioning shocks when unemployment increases). As well as income support, access to enabling services (such as early childhood education and care, education and training, transport, housing, job assistance, healthcare and long-term care) also play an essential role in reducing depth of poverty and supporting people to improve their living conditions and employment prospects (Social Protection Committee 2023). It is interesting that a recent OECD report (2023b) found that perceived quality of public services remains a key driver for higher trust in institutions.

In this Section, we look at two of these vital supports – education and health. Access to both is now listed amongst the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan (EPSRAP).

4.1 Education

As mentioned in **Section 1**, *Social Justice Ireland* includes the right to relevant education amongst its core rights that need to guide policy-making in the future. The EPSRAP strategy has set the following 2030 targets in the field of education –

- Reducing early school leaving rate to below 9 per cent, and
- Completion of third level education by at least 45 per cent of 25-34 year-olds.

In this section we will look at progress towards achieving these targets along with the situation in relation to lifelong learning and adult literacy. It is worth noting that in Sustainable Development Goal 4, 'Quality Education', the European Union seeks to ensure access to equitable and quality education through all stages of life, aiming to increase the number of people with relevant skills for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship and envisage the elimination of gender and income disparities in access to education (Eurostat 2025h). The achievement of universal literacy and numeracy and the acquisition of knowledge and skills to promote sustainable development are also considered crucial for empowering people to live independent, healthy and sustainable lives. The European Pillar of Social Rights (principle 1) states that:

> Everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market.

Early School-Leaving

Reducing early school-leaving has been seen as a 'gateway' to achieving other EPSRAP Strategy targets. For example, in other parts of this report, we have pointed to how lower levels of education leaves people at greater risk of a range of negative outcomes – such as unemployment or experiencing neither education nor training (becoming a so-called 'NEET). Early leavers from education and training are defined as those aged 18-24 with at most lower secondary education and who were not in further education or training during the last four weeks preceding the survey.[10]

The average early school leaving rate across Europe in 2025, the most recent year for which data is available, was 9.1 per cent. The 2025 rate was down marginally from the 2024 level of 9.4 per cent. The level has only marginally improved in recent years, remaining close to its pre-pandemic 2019 level of 10.1 per cent (Eurostat database, edat_lfse_14). As a recent report from Intereg Europe's Policy Learning Platform (2025) argues, a renewed effort will be needed to ensure EPSRAP binding targets for 2030 are reached. See **Figure 22.**

There are wide disparities between European countries when it comes to the rate of early school leaving. In 2025 the highest rates of early school leaving were to be found in Romania (15.5 per cent), Germany (13.1 per cent), Spain (12.8 per cent) and Estonia (10.2 per cent). There is still a very great gap between the countries with the highest rates and that with the lowest rate, Croatia (with a rate of 2.1 per cent).

Comparing 2025 with 2019, the greatest improvements have occurred in Malta (-5.6 percentage points), Bulgaria (-5.3 percentage points) and Italy (-5.1 percentage points). There have been disimprovements in other countries, including some with traditionally relatively low rates such as Lithuania (+1.9 percentage points) and Slovenia (+0.9 percentage points).

Improvements in the rate of early school leaving are welcome. However, because its consequences for individuals and for society are so grave in terms of increased risk of unemployment, poverty and social exclusion it is an issue that requires ongoing attention from policy-makers (European Commission 2026e). As stated above, 61.2 per cent children of parents with only lower secondary education were at risk of poverty or social exclusion and 54.6 per cent of 18–24-year-old early leavers were either unemployed or inactive in 2024 (European Commission, 2025d).

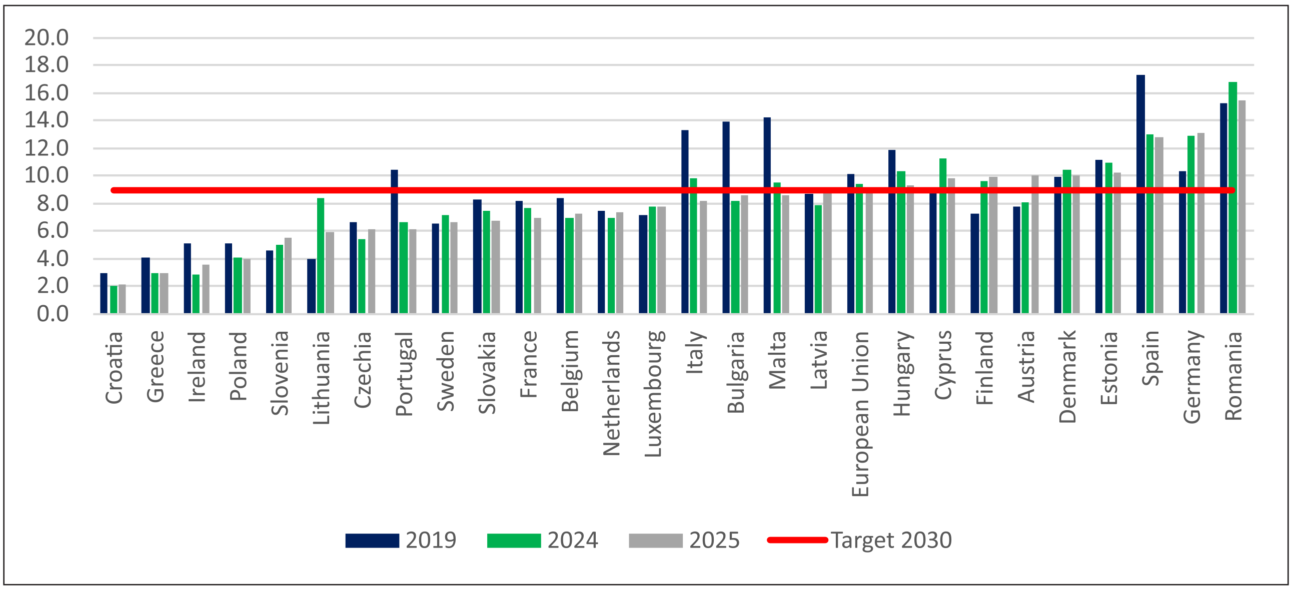
Furthermore, some groups such as disabled people are particularly vulnerable - the proportion of early school leavers among young disabled people is 24.6 per cent in 2024, which was much higher than the 8.0 per cent rate for non-disabled younger people the same year (European Commission 2025f).[11] Across the EU, rates of early leaving from education and training are also higher for people who live in a country different from the one they were born in (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, 2025a).

Evidence garnered for the most recent European Commission *Education and Training Monitor* (2025g) continues to highlight the crucial role played by high quality early childhood education and care in reducing educational disadvantage and promoting social mobility over the long term. Here, investment in accessible and affordable early childhood services can be seen to generate strong benefits for children from disadvantaged backgrounds in particular, supporting later educational achievement and reducing the risks of early school leaving and future risks of poverty and social exclusion. Such services also support parental employment in the short run, particularly among mothers, thus helping to reduce elements of poverty, including food poverty, dramatically (European Commission, 2022a). Comparative studies continue to indicate that countries with well-developed systems of early childhood and family support demonstrate the potential for maximising social inclusion and equity across generations (Välimäki et al., 2024).

10 Lower secondary education refers to ISCED (International Standard Classification of Education) 2011 level 0-2 for data from 2014 onwards and to ISCED 1997 level 0-3C short for data up to 2013. The indicator is based on the EU Labour Force Survey (Eurostat online database edat_lfse_14).

11 This relates to 2016 and (for statistical reasons based on which surveys the rates are derived from) the comparable rate for non-disabled young people is 12 per cent, which is different to that derived from the EU ELS – the different rates come from SILC and are used in the report cited here so as to be able to compare with early school leavers with disabilities (See European Commission 2019a).

Figure 22 Early School-Leaving (%), EU-27, 2019, 2024 and 2025



Source: Eurostat online database, edat_lfse_14. Line shows the 2030 Target of 9 per cent.

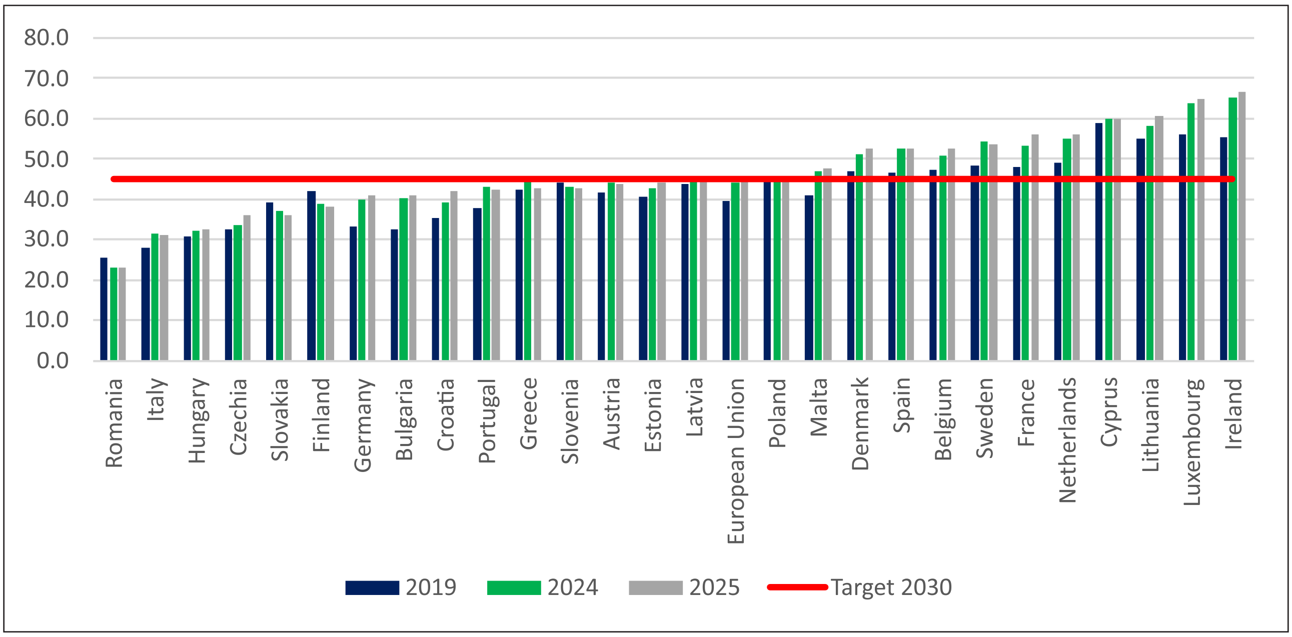
Completion of Third Level Education

When it comes to third-level education, the EPSRAP target aims for 45 per cent of 25 to 34-year-olds to have completed a tertiary education qualification by 2030. In 2025, the EU-27 average was 44.8 per cent with the target thus likely to be met next year if current trends continue. This is an area showing large improvements since 2019 when the rate had been 39.6 per cent (Eurostat online database code edat_lfse_03). Many countries exceed the target, as **Figure 23** shows, with Ireland, Luxembourg, Lithuania, Cyprus, the Netherlands, France, Sweden, Belgium, Spain and Denmark at the top of the league (all with rates at or over 50 per cent), and Romania (23.0 per cent), Italy (31.1) and Hungary (32.6) at the bottom. There is a 43.8 percentage point gap between the country with the highest rate (Ireland) and that with the lowest (Romania) (2025).

The average rate improved between 2024 and 2025 (0.7 percentage points). In thirteen countries there was a disimprovement in the rate, amongst which were Greece (-1.7 percentage points), Slovakia (-0.9 percentage points), Finland (-0.9 percentage points) and Sweden (-0.9 percentage points). But the rate improved in the remaining fourteen Member States, with the greatest improvements in France and Croatia (both +2.6 percentage points).

Chapter 4

Figure 23 Tertiary Education Attainment (%), EU27, (ages 25-34) 2019, 2024 and 2025



Source: Eurostat online database code edat_lfse_03. Line shows the 45 per cent target set by the EPSRAP

In previous reports we have made the point that progress not only needs to continue to be made to address the EPSRAP targets in education, but also to manage problems that have emerged/worsened in recent years. For example, the results of the 2022 PISA[12] tests created alarm about the level of competence of 15-year-old Europeans, showing that rates of underachievement in mathematics, reading and science grew for most EU countries relative to 2018 (European Commission 2024d). Overall, 30 per cent of EU students failed to reach a minimum proficiency level in mathematics while 25 per cent failed to do so in reading and science. This was a step backwards compared to 2018 and the EU as a whole is seriously lagging behind in all three domains.

This shortfall is also evident in relation to targets set in EU's strategic framework for cooperation in education and training under which targets were set for 2030 – the European Education Area strategic framework (EEASF). Progress towards the EEASF benchmark that less than 15 per cent of 15-year-olds should be low-achievers in mathematics, reading and science remains limited: the 2022 PISA test results indicate current 'low achiever' levels in the European Education Area stand at 29.5 per cent for mathematics, 26.2 per cent in reading and 24.2 per cent in science (low achievers are students who have failed to reach level 2 of the PISA test) (European Commission, 2025b). This latest round of PISA results affirm a global trend which show Asian school systems such as China and Singapore getting the best results. Of EU countries, Sweden, Poland, Ireland, Finland, Estonia, Denmark and Czechia scored above the OECD average across all three areas, while Slovenia, Latvia, Belgium and Austria did so in two of three (OECD, 2023c). The next round of PISA tests, which took place in spring 2025 and are due for publication in late 2026, will provide an additional point of comparison against the longer-term trend of stagnating performance for EU counties between 2009 and 2018 and decline during the last test round in 2022 (European Commission, 2024h).

As the Commission notes (2020a), there is strong evidence that low achievers at the age of 15 will remain low achievers as adults, because the lack of basic skills strongly reduces the likelihood of

12 The OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a triennial international survey which aims to evaluate education systems worldwide by testing the skills and knowledge of 15-year-old students. See http://www.oecd.org/pisa/aboutpisa/.

a person achieving a satisfactory labour market outcome. The poor PISA scores were linked to social background, measured by parents' education attainment level – having parents with only low-level education reduces students' chances of achieving high scores in PISA and attaining high skill levels during adulthood (Neuman, 2022; OECD, 2023c). As the European Commission notes, in some countries, the relatively tight connection between parental background and a person's achievement means that the educational system is unable to ensure equality of opportunity. Along with lifelong learning, promoting early childhood education for all can be effective in establishing a level playing field that reduces inequalities at an early stage in the life and work cycle (European Commission 2025g).

A related issue is the cohort of young people not in education, employment or training – or NEETs, as discussed in **Section 3** of this report. As mentioned there, this is considered one of the most concerning indicators relative to young people. A recent academic literature review study concerned with NEETs identified education as playing a key role in keeping people out of this category, as the probability of becoming NEET decreased as educational level increased (Rahmani et al. 2024).

Among the factors that the OECD points to in terms of integrating young people into the world of work are education systems that are flexible and responsive to the needs of the labour market, access to high-quality career guidance and further education that can help young people to match their skills to prospective jobs (OECD 2025b). Most recently, this has been stressed again by the OECD in the context of the impact of AI in EU workplaces, including the provision of 'training and upskilling [which] can help people and institutions adapt' including the most vulnerable youth populations such as NEETs (OECD, 2026b).

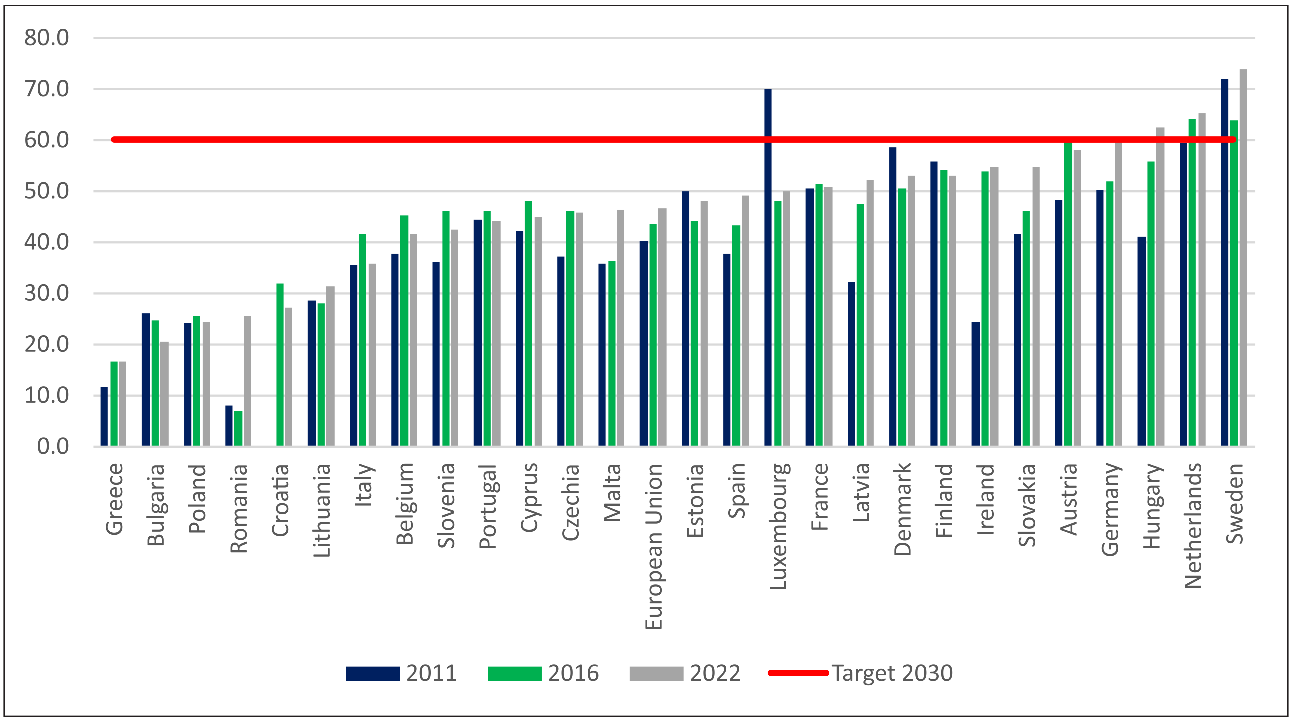
Lifelong Learning

Lifelong learning can play many important roles in the life of an individual, not least offering a second chance for people who may not have had good experiences in school first time around. In economic terms it is recognised that countries need to invest not just in initial education and training systems but also in lifelong learning to ensure that skills are used, maintained and updated. This is obviously of particular importance in ageing societies, not just in human terms, but also because there is more and more emphasis on extending working lives. Furthermore, reviewing the very great difficulties that some young people have in transitioning from school to work, the OECD notes how many leave education without the skills needed for the labour market or to continue further in education (2025d). Hence, they argue, efforts should concentrate on ensuring that those with low-skills participate in adult learning as well as improving adult learning programmes.

Despite their apparent greater need for training, the participation of low-skilled people in lifelong learning/training activities (both when employed and unemployed) is much lower than for other groups (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, 2023). The EPSRAP 2030 target for lifelong learning is for at least 60 per cent of all adults to participate in training or education annually. This headline goal aims at ensuring a skilled workforce can support the digital and green transitions through instruments such as the 2020 Pact for Skills and the 2022 Council Recommendation on Individual Learning Accounts. While this target has raised the overall level of ambition in this area, much remains to be done to build up further supportive infrastructure to maintain the growth of lifelong learning in the long run. For example, the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (2026) has recently described bolder growth scenarios to 2040 as relying on advances in common quality-assurance frameworks, credit-transfer systems, increased validation of non-formal and informal learning and greater portability of qualifications across borders.

There is great variation across Europe in terms of the rates of participation. In 2022 (the most recent year for which data is available for the EPSRAP target measure for lifelong learning) the top three countries were Sweden (73.9 per cent), the Netherlands (65.2 per cent) and Hungary (62.4 per cent). They were followed by Germany, Austria, Slovakia and Ireland. At the other end of the scale, the rate was lowest in Greece (16.6 per cent), Bulgaria and Poland. Thus, there is close to a 57.3 percentage point difference between Sweden with the highest rate and Greece with the lowest. See **Figure 24.**

Figure 24 Lifelong Learning, (%) EU-27, 2011, 2016 and 2022



Source: Eurostat online database, **trng_aes_100**

There have been dis-improvements in the rates in three countries between 2016 and 2022. Some declines were slight, but the most notable decline was Italy (-5.8 percentage points, 2016-22). Improvements occurred in several countries with the most notable improvement (+18.6 percentage points) in Romania – the country which had the very lowest rate recorded for 2016. Malta and Sweden (both +10.1 per centage points) also showed improvements.

European countries with the highest levels of participation in lifelong learning for both employed and unemployed people have traditionally also enjoyed high transition rates out of unemployment and lower transition rates from employment to unemployment, which obviously has positive implications for the prevention of long-term unemployment (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, 2025b). The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (2025c) has likewise drawn attention to the fact that 'workplace learning' is emerging as a core priority among countries vying to be the world's most competitive economies. Here, countries like Sweden, the Netherlands, Germany, and Austria stand out as being among the top five countries in terms of lifelong learning participation rates as well as competitiveness according to the World Economic Forum (2020). As a report carried out by the International Labour Organisation has recently argued, in the context of AI and as a 'critical foundation for inclusion and resilience ... lifelong learning should be elevated as a strategic policy priority' (International Labour Organisation, 2026a).

As mentioned in **Section 3** of this report, the OECD (2025e) has recently again drawn attention to the need for adult learning in the context of a range of broad societal challenges including the rapid onset of automation, digitisation and AI. They highlight the need to move away from a model of front-loaded education – whereby recognised skills are mainly developed in schools and universities and subsequently used at work – to a system in which skills are continuously updated during the working life to match changing skills needs and the need to anticipate changes and adapt policies to better target disadvantaged groups.

Adult Literacy

As we noted in previous iterations of this report, problems relating to **adult literacy** represent a challenge for individuals and for societies. In 2023, around one in five adults (21.8 per cent) lacked basic proficiency in both literacy and numeracy (European Commission, 2025g). Given this concerning situation, it is particularly disappointing that the EPSRAP lacks any specific adult literacy target, with advocacy groups such as the European Association for the Education of Adults and European Basic Skills Network calling for 'stronger governance, increased investment, and innovative approaches to adult education to ... promote equality, social inclusion, and competitiveness' (EAEA and EBSN, 2024).

The Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) defines literacy as the ability to 'understand, evaluate, use and engage with written texts to participate in society, achieve one's goals, and develop one's knowledge and potential' (OECD 2024e). It also examined reading digital texts and involved 5 levels of skill graded from below level 1 to level 4/5. The results from the assessment are reported on a 500-point scale; a higher score indicates greater proficiency; to help interpret the scores, the scale is divided into proficiency levels. Each level of proficiency is described within the study. For example, an indication of the types of tasks that respondents can complete at level 1 in literacy is as follows:

> A person who scores at Level 1 in literacy can successfully complete reading tasks that require reading relatively short texts to locate a single piece of information, which is identical to or synonymous with the information given in the question or directive and in which there is little competing information (OECD 2016).

Numeracy is defined as: 'the ability to access, use, interpret and communicate mathematical information and ideas in order to engage in and manage the mathematical demands of a range of situations in adult life' (OECD 2016). **Table 5** shows the findings in respect of the 21 European countries that participated in all three rounds, the latest published in 2024.

Table 5 Average Literacy/Numeracy Proficiency among Adults, Ages 16-65 (2024)

	Average Literacy proficiency	Average Numeracy Proficiency
Significantly above average	Finland Netherlands Sweden Belgium (Flanders) Denmark Estonia Czechia	Finland Netherlands Sweden Belgium (Flanders) Estonia Denmark Czechia Slovakia
Not significantly different from the average	Germany Austria Slovakia Ireland Poland Lithuania France	Germany Austria Ireland Poland Lithuania France Hungary
Significantly below the average	Hungary Slovenia Spain Italy Greece	Slovenia Spain Italy Greece

Source: OECD (2024b, 2024e). For Belgium, Flanders was the participating area.

The average literacy score for the OECD member countries participating in the assessment was 260 points. The lowest average scores were observed in Portugal (235 points), Poland and Lithuania (that is, amongst participating EU countries), while Finland (296 points), Sweden and the Netherlands record the highest. This means that an adult with a proficiency score at the average level in Portugal can typically only successfully complete tasks of level 2 literacy difficulty; in Finland the corresponding level of difficulty is higher - level 3.

The average numeracy score among the OECD member countries participating in the assessment is 263 points. Looking only at participating EU countries, Finland has the highest average score (294 points) followed by Sweden and the Netherlands and Estonia while Portugal (233 points) and Italy (238 points) record the lowest average scores.

In both literacy and numeracy proficiency, some participating countries do significantly better than average – Finland's performance (topping the table in both literacy and numeracy) is notable. Also scoring relatively high in both are the Netherlands, Sweden and Belgium.

Adult skills matter, because as the OECD (2024e) have argued, where large shares of adults have poor skills, it becomes difficult to introduce productivity-enhancing technologies and new ways of working, which in turn stalls improvements in living standards and tends to widen income inequality. Of key significance in this context are several headline targets connected to the EU's Digital Decade strategy including the aim of increasing adult 'digital literacy' (defined as basic digital skills) to at least 80 per cent of all adults aged 16-74 by 2030. As of 2025, 60.4 per cent of EU adults are estimated to possess such basic digital skills, with levels diverging sharply between those Member States who already exceed the 2030 target led by the Netherlands (83.6 per cent), Ireland (82.8 per cent), Denmark (81.5 per cent) and Finland (80.9 per cent). Those on the reverse of the 'digital divide' with the lowest basic rates in 2025 include Romania (31.8 per cent), Bulgaria (38.3 per cent), Slovenia (46.5) and Latvia (48.4 per cent) (Eurostat code isoc_sk_dskl_i21). Reflecting current Commission priorities, the most recent *State of the Digital Decade* report (2025l) emphasises the importance of digital literacy in terms of cybersecurity as much as upskilling.

Furthermore, in all countries, adults with lower skills are far more likely than those with better literacy skills to report poor health, to be less involved in political processes and to have less trust in others.

We can also look at these countries in light of the education indicators already discussed (early school leaving, third level attainment of 25-34 year olds, and participation in lifelong learning of adults). It is interesting to note that certain countries tend to be better performers across several or all indicators. These include, in particular, Finland, Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands. Luxembourg is ranked relatively highly on most indicators though they did not participate in the survey of adult literacy. Overall, this examination suggests that the policies pursued by these countries seem to impact a range of different groups positively.

Croatia tops the league for the lowest early school leaving rate but performs below average on other measures and they did not participate in the adult literacy survey. Poland likewise performs notably well on early school-leaving (ranked fourth highest performing after Croatia, Ireland, and Greece, 2025) and is above average on third level attainment and below average on lifelong learning. The performance of Lithuania is third highest amongst EU-27 countries in third-level attainment; they are the sixth best performing on the early school leaving rate but they do not perform above the EU average in lifelong learning.

Denmark, Sweden and Finland, as well as Slovenia, Lithuania and Estonia are considered to perform well in terms of granting equal access to education (European Commission, 2023b). Finland and Estonia were singled out in surveys of social justice from Bertelsmann Stiftung for education systems that provide both equity *and* quality education where children even from socially disadvantaged family homes experience prospects equal to those of children from socially better-off families (Schraad-Tischler 2015; Schraad-Tischler et al. 2017).

It is clear that these are complex and dynamic issues involving policy impacts on different groups and age cohorts over time and in which the policies pursued can have quite different outcomes in relation to different indicators and for different groups. It is also true that certain countries seem to pursue policies that produce better outcomes across a range of groups.

4.2 Education - Conclusion

It is welcome that progress has been made towards reaching targets set EPSRAP to address early school leaving and to improve third level educational attainment. However, progress has stalled on some educational indicators including adult literacy and numeracy and there is significant scope for improvement in many countries.

Improvements in the average (EU-27) rate of early school leaving since 2019 is welcome, with the rate for 2025 standing at 9.1 per cent remains marginally above the target of 9 per cent or lower set in the EPSRAP strategy. While the 2030 target looks set to be met in 2026 if existing trends continue, there remain wide disparities between European countries when it comes to the rate of early school leaving. In 2025 the highest rates were to be found in Romania (15.5 per cent), Germany (13.1 per cent), Spain (12.8 per cent) and Estonia (10.2 per cent). There is still a great gap between the countries with the highest rates, and that with the lowest rate, Croatia (with a rate of 2.1 per cent). Some groups (including disabled people) continue to have relatively high rates. Furthermore, because its consequences for individuals and for society are so grave in terms of increased risk of unemployment, poverty and social exclusion, it is an issue that requires ongoing attention from policy-makers even after the likely meeting of the 2030 EPSRAP target next year.

For third level attainment, the target set in the EPSRAP strategy is that at least 45 per cent of 25-34 year-olds should complete third level. In 2025, the EU-27 average was 44.8 per cent so the target has very nearly been reached. This is an area showing improvements since 2019 when the average rate had been 39.6 per cent. In 2025, twelve countries had rates of third level attainment at or over 45 per cent. However, there is a 43.8 percentage point gap between the country with the highest rate (Ireland) and that with the lowest (Romania) (2025).

One of the problems that Europe now faces is that progress not only needs to continue to be made to address the areas in which targets have been set for 2030 under the EPSRAP, but also to manage other issues such as low basic skills amongst disadvantaged socio-economic groups. Ongoing attention is required to issues of literacy and numeracy across all age groups. One issue is the phenomenon of NEETs, young people not in education, employment or training (see **Section 3** of this report). Education plays a key role in keeping people out of the NEET category.

When we look at lifelong learning, relatively very low rates of participation in many EU countries represents a lost opportunity both for individuals and for societies and economies. Under the EPSRAP, the headline target for lifelong learning is for at least 60 per cent of all adults (aged 25 to 64) to participate in training or education every year by 2030. There is great variation across Europe in terms of the rates of participation. Northern European countries tend to top the table; in 2022 (the most recent year for which data is available for this measure), four of the top five countries included Sweden, the Netherlands, Germany and Austria. At the other end of the scale, the rate was lowest in Greece, Bulgaria, Poland and Romania. There is a 57.3 percentage point difference between Sweden with the highest rate and Greece with the lowest. Certain countries tend to be better performers across several or all education indicators. These include, in particular, Finland, Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands.

4.3 Health Services

As mentioned in **Section 1**, *Social Justice Ireland* includes the right to essential healthcare amongst its core rights that need to guide policy-making in the future. In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and its aftershocks, the issue of access to healthcare and of reducing health inequalities has become central to broader issues of resilience and preparedness in the face of potential future 'health crises' (European Commission, 2025e). While the complex legacies of the pandemic have exacerbated such inequalities, the ambition of the EPSRAP in this area reflects an abundance of aspiration but little effective action: thus, while Principle 16 (Healthcare) and 10 (Healthy Work Environments) promulgate 'the right to timely access to affordable, preventive and curative healthcare' and a 'high level of protection of [workplace] health and safety' the Plan lacks concrete health-related targets.

Though the EU's formal role in European healthcare remains limited to a 'supporting competency', the emergence of the European Health Union during the Covid-19 pandemic from November 2020 has done something to address this vacuum: measures like the EU4Health fund (2021-), the EU Beating Cancer Plan (2021-), EU Global Health Strategy (2022-), EU Mental Health Initiative (2023-) and European Health Data Space (2025-) have advanced the state of EU health co-ordination to a new level in what many regard as a classic iteration of 'crisis-driven integration' (Brooks et al. 2022). This phenomenon has also arguably found expression in the expanding remit of the EU's major health-related agencies, including the long-established European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control and the European Medicines Agency as well as the more recently created (2021) Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Authority (Wouters et al. 2024).

Yet for the most part, it is the state of healthcare systems across individual EU Member States which continues to define the overall picture of European health provision. EU citizens generally enjoy strong access to healthcare, their life expectancy remains among the highest in the world while infant mortality rates have dropped to very low levels. Though down from a pandemic-era peak of 9.6 per cent of GDP recorded in 2021, the average OECD health expenditure in 2024 was 0.5 per cent greater than its pre-pandemic level in 2019 (OECD, 2025f). In international terms, European countries thus stand out globally as leaders in healthcare and provision (OECD, 2025g).

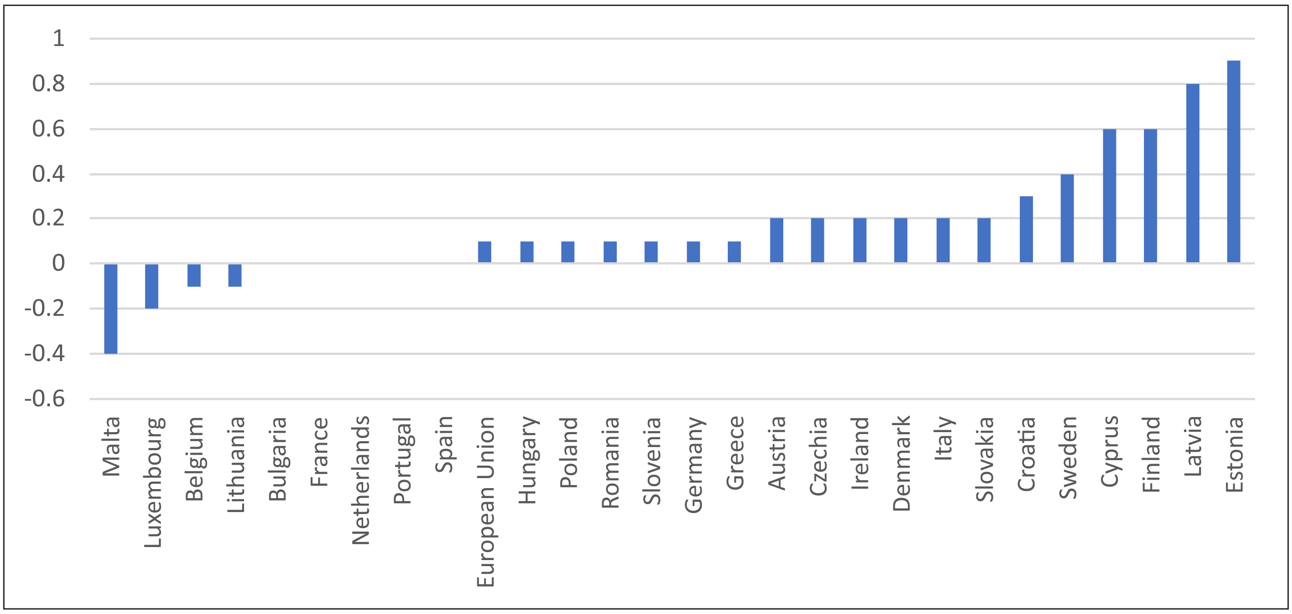
Despite a broadly positive overall picture, differences in access, quality and outcomes both within and between individual Member State healthcare systems remain highly significant. For example, a recent study carried out by EuroHealthNet and the Centre for Health Equity Analytics (2025) based European Social Survey data between 2014 and 2024 has found evidence of inequalities across the EU, noting Europeans with lower educational attainment are approximately twice as likely to report poor health as those with higher education levels. The report goes on to show how, between 2014 and 2024, countries such as Poland and Slovenia have managed to effectively reduce internal health inequalities while also improving overall health outcomes, while others such as Belgium and Lithuania have experienced both deteriorating health outcomes and widening disparities. Between these two poles, countries like Ireland and Sweden saw decreased health inequalities as overall health outcomes worsened while others, including Hungary, Austria, and Germany saw the opposite with overall progress accompanied by widening inequalities. The report has been welcomed by key stakeholders as making the argument that 'EU and national action on social inequalities in health is feasible and needed' (WHO, 2025a; UNESCO, 2025).

These findings are corroborated by the OECD's most recent *Health at a Glance: Europe* (2025a) report which likewise describes a concerning pattern of widening inequalities across Europe with a focus on both health outcomes and system resilience. The report points to two major challenges: first, Europe's healthcare worker 'crisis' where 20 EU countries reported a shortage of doctors and 15 countries a shortage of nurses in 2023 adding to a collective deficit of some 1.2 million healthcare workers overall. Second, the report suggests Europe is facing a 'major demographic challenge' with the proportion of people aged over 65 years projected to rise from 21 per cent in 2023 to 29 per cent by 2050. Moreover, these challenges have compounded health inequalities intensified by the pandemic. For example, mortality from cardiovascular diseases is now seven times higher in Central and Eastern Europe than in Western Europe while a mental health crisis particularly affecting young people is failing to be adequately dealt with by strained healthcare infrastructures. Added to this, socioeconomic differences persist in areas such as obesity and chronic disease; among all adults in the EU for example, over half were overweight or obese in 2022 with a 14 percentage point difference between those with low and high levels of education.

European health inequalities of the kind described by the OECD (2025a), WHO (2023) and others also continue to influence headline indicators such as life expectancy. This key measure of health increased in EU countries over the past decades, but this rise has slowed since 2010 in many countries (OECD, 2020a) and markedly declined in all but nine EU Member States between 2020 and 2021 due to the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. As **Figure 25** illustrates, eighteen EU Member States experienced a rise in life expectancy between 2023 and 2024, with the greatest increases registered in Estonia (+0.9 years), Latvia (+0.8 years) and Finland and Cyprus (both +0.6 years). Disimprovements were seen in four countries: Lithuania and Belgium (both -0.1 years), Luxembourg (-0.2 years) and Malta (-0.4 years). Five countries saw no change including Bulgaria, France, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain.

Large inequalities in life expectancy persist not only by gender (women still live nearly 5.5 years more than men on average), but also by socioeconomic status; on average across EU countries, 30-year-old men with a low education level can expect to live about 7 years less than those with a university degree or the equivalent.

Figure 25 Life Expectancy EU-27, Change in Years, 2023 TO 2024



Source: Eurostat online database**, demo_mlexpec.**
Note: Refers to projectors for those less than one year of age.

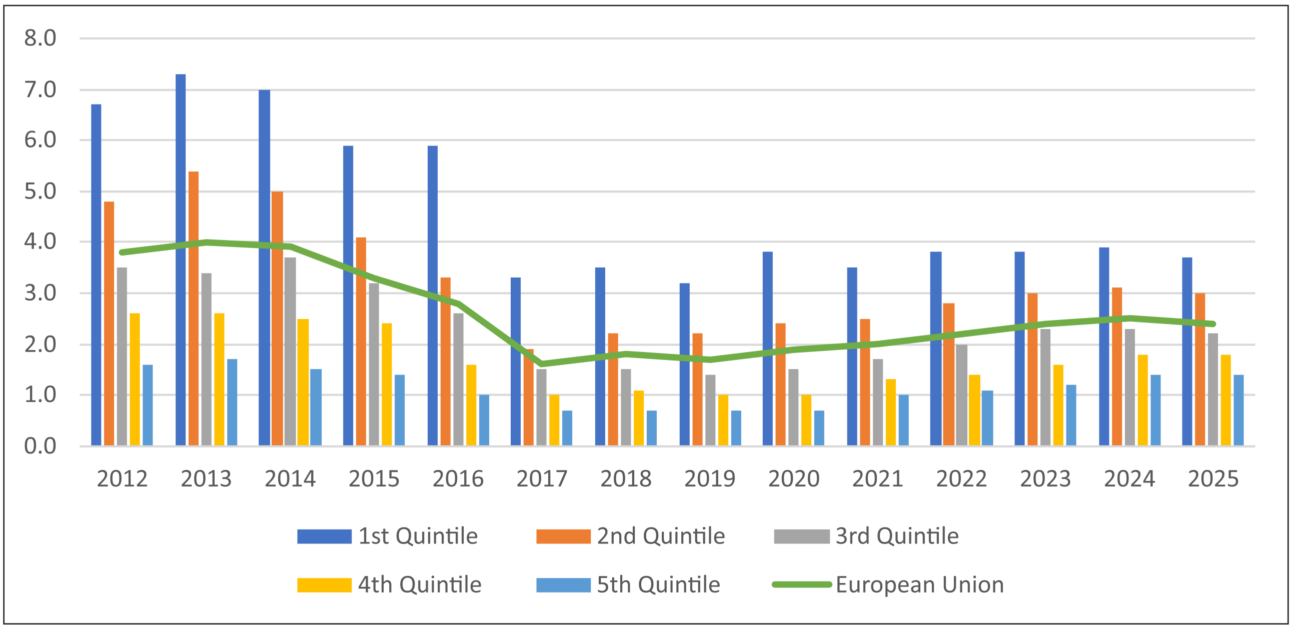
There is great diversity in healthcare systems across the EU. A recent study of 20 European countries (Sieber et al., 2022) demonstrates the positive effects of social spending in reducing inequalities in health, with particular reference to groups aged 50 to 96 years of age. Based on a similar review of differences between health regimes in all European Member States, Nordheim and van der Wel (2025) have similarly emphasised the importance of convergence both between and within health systems as 'welfare states can improve health and reduce health inequalities, especially in less developed welfare states through broad and inclusive programmes'.

As in previous iterations of this report, we will look at different approaches that allow an examination over time. The first is self-reported unmet need for medical help from Eurostat. The second, involves looking at overall perceptions of the quality of health services from the European Quality of Life Survey (Eurofound 2017b; 2019b). Eurostat publishes rates of self-reported unmet need defined as the share of the population perceiving an unmet need for medical examination or treatment (online database hlth_silc_08). This is one of the social protection indicators used in the social protection performance monitor

(SPPM) by the EU's Social Protection Committee (The Social Protection Committee, 2023).

A number of reasons may be given for inability to avail of medical treatment, in this case we look at reasons associated with problems of access (could not afford to, waiting list, too far to travel). The average rate of perceived unmet need for medical treatment (due to difficulties with access) was falling up until 2009 when it started to increase again. It reached 4.0 per cent across the EU27 in 2013 with noticeable improvement between 2013 and 2019 up to the eve of the pandemic. The average rate for the EU27 was 2.0 per cent in 2021 rising by 0.2 percentage points to 2.2 in 2022. (Eurostat online database code hlth_silc-08).

Figure 26 Self-reported unmet need for Medical Examination or Treatment Due to Problem of Access (%), EU-27, 2012-2025, By income Quintile



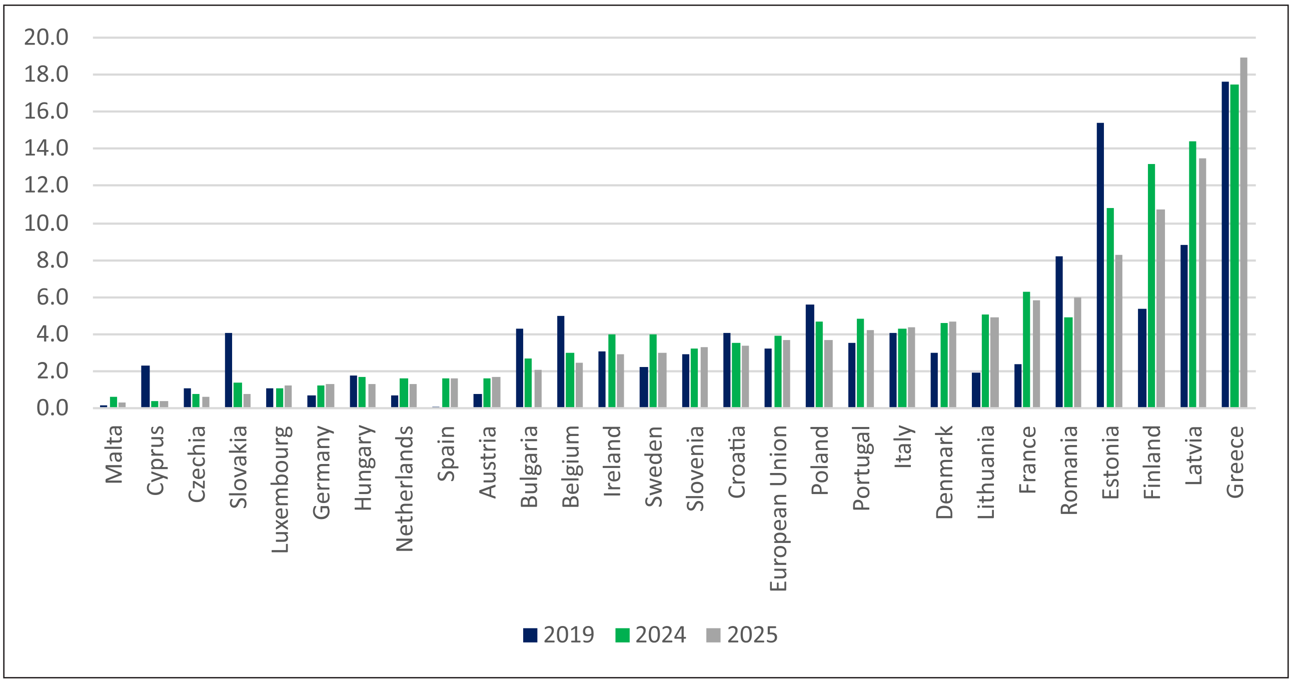
Source: Eurostat online database hlth_silc_08. Reasons associated with problems of access: 'could not afford to, waiting list, too far to travel'. 16 Years and older.

However, as **Figure 26** shows, the perception is different between different income quintiles with more perceived unmet need in the poorer quintiles. As in previous years, in 2025, it was least perceived in the top income earners (5th quintile) (1.4 per cent) and most amongst the lowest earners (or 1st quintile) (3.7 per cent). In short, as the EU's Social Protection Committee (2023) notes, there is a clear income gradient as those in the lowest income quintiles more often report an unmet need for medical care, and the gap between the lowest and highest quintiles rose during the crisis years. Between 2024 and 2025, there has been a slight decrease (-0.1 percentage points) in the average rate and in the perception of unmet need in the lowest income group (-0.2 percentage points) with no change in the second lowest cohort (quartiles 1 and 2).

Figure 27 provides a snapshot of how citizens of individual EU Member States in the lowest income bracket (1st quintile, bottom 20 per cent) perceived changes in their healthcare needs in the context of the pandemic. Looking at this bracket we find that between 2024 and 2025, the average EU rate of unmet health needs decreased (-0.2 per cent) to 3.7 per cent, with decreases also effecting those on the lowest incomes in seventeen countries (Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Poland, Sweden, Latvia, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Portugal, Belgium, France, Hungary, Netherlands, Malta, Czechia, Lithuania and Croatia). Amongst these, non-marginal declines of between

-1.0 and -2.5 were evident in five countries including Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Poland and Sweden (Eurostat, hlth_silc_08).

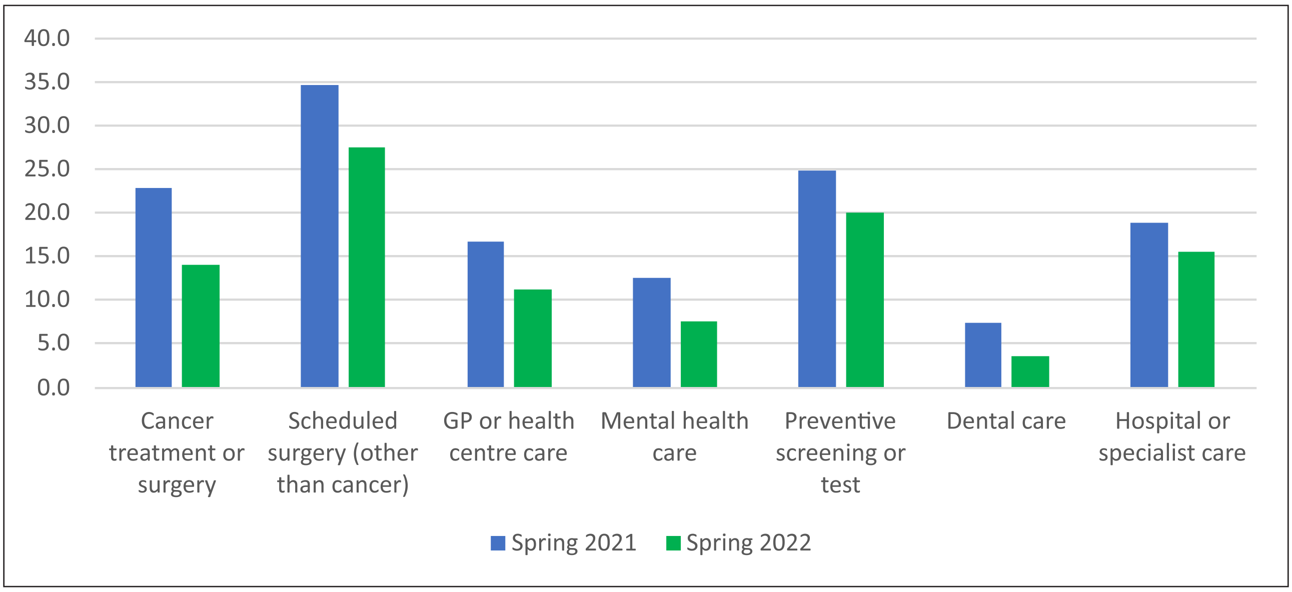
Figure 27 Self-reported unmet need for Medical Examination or Treatment Due to Problem of Access (%), EU-27, 2019, 2024 and 2025, 1st income Quintile



Source: Eurostat online database hlth_silc_08. Reasons associated with problems of access: 'could not afford to, waiting list, too far to travel'. 16 Years and older.

Relative to the complex health impacts of the pandemic years, the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey recorded sharp spikes in EU27 averages of reported unmet needs due to problems of access (covering all reasons) at the height at the pandemic between spring 2021 and spring 2022 (Eurofound, 2022). Yet the most recent data presented in Figure 27 reflects the persistence of unmet medical needs among low-income earners in the aftermath of the pandemic with significant differences among Member States to 2024 (Eurofound, 2025b). A snapshot of specific types of unmet medical needs at the height of the pandemic is presented in **Figure 28**, with evidence of downward stabilisation between spring 2021 and spring 2022 albeit with persistently high rates in areas such as scheduled surgery (27.6 per centage points) and preventative screening (20 per centage points).

Figure 28 Unmet need for healthcare by type of healthcare during previous 12 months (%), 2021 and 2022



Source: From Eurofound 2022 (Living, working and COVID-19, Figure 6).

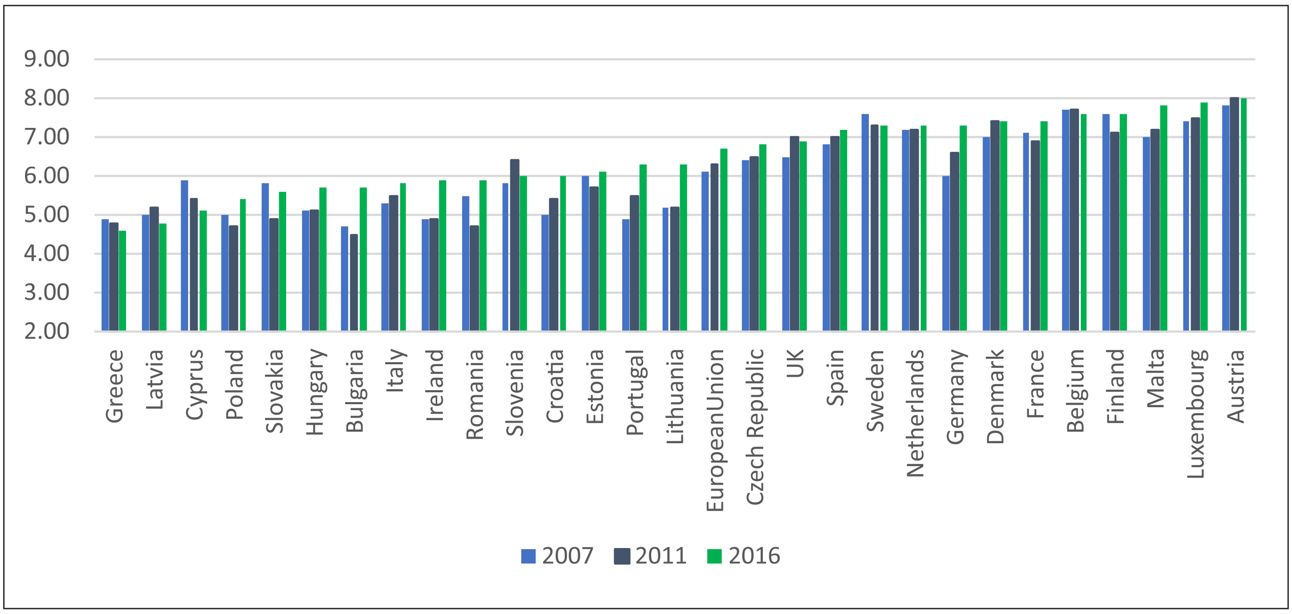
Reviewing both pandemic-era and more recent data, it is evident that the pandemic served to inflame underlying health inequalities across and within Member States which continue to impact the demographic and workforce challenges currently facing European heath systems (OECD, 2025a). This is likewise reflected in the latest annual report from the EU's Social Protection Committee (2025), which highlights how Member States must take action to 'close health gaps by tackling health inequalities both across and within countries'.

More detailed background to these mounting challenges is evident in the European Quality of Life Survey carried out at the end of 2016 and due to be updated later this year (2026).[13] While the latest data has not yet been published, it is nonetheless informative to review progress in survey results over recent years which offer key insights into the dynamics of evolving health inequalities across the EU. See **Figure 29**. Notably, satisfaction with healthcare and childcare improved in several countries where ratings were previously low.

Overall the survey found that how people rated the quality of public services had improved since 2011. But, unfortunately, in several countries, participants rated the quality of health services less favourably in 2016 than in 2011 (Latvia, Slovenia, Cyprus, Greece and Belgium). Thus, the perceived quality of public services still varies markedly across EU countries (Eurofound 2017b).

[13] https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/en/surveys-and-data/surveys/european-quality-of-life-survey/eqls-2026

Figure 29 European Quality of Life Survey: Perceived Quality of Health Services, 2007, 2011, 2016



Source: From Eurofound 2017c (online database, EQLS, Data visualisation, year 2016) and Eurofound 2017b, Table 12, p 54.
Note: Rating on a scale 1–10, where 1 means very poor quality and 10 means very high quality. Q59: 'In general, how do you rate the quality of the following two healthcare services in [COUNTRY]? Again, please tell me on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 means very poor quality and 10 means very high quality'.

Furthermore, people in lower income groups reported less improvement in the quality of services. For example, in 17 countries, those from the lowest income group (quartile 1, lowest 25 per cent) rated the quality of their health service more negatively than those in the top income group (quartile 4, top 25 per cent) in 2016 (Eurofound, 2017c). The European Quality of Life Survey concludes that there are persistent inequalities on some indicators and that for low-income groups, improvements on several dimensions were more limited in terms of overall quality of public services, perception of social exclusion and risk to mental health (women in the lowest income quartile being consistently at higher risk over the last decade) (Eurofound 2017b). The results of ongoing research suggests pre-existing health inequalities have been both exposed and deepened during the Covid-19 pandemic, with vulnerable social groups disproportionately negatively affected (Mishra et al. 2021).

According to Eurofound (2023a), groups at particular risk of health inequality include:

- **Younger people:** There are strong indications of increased risk of mental health problems among those aged 12–24 years with those in precarious employment or with limited economic resources facing increased risks of long-term health and wellbeing challenges.
- **Older People:** Older adults are more likely to experience chronic illness disability and greater healthcare needs. There is mounting evidence that older people are also vulnerable to mental health difficulties tied to isolation and loneliness, with the likelihood of depression increasing with age in all but three EU Member States.
- **People with lower education:** Individuals without tertiary education are more likely to report chronic illness, poorer mental wellbeing and worse overall health outcomes. Educational inequalities are also closely linked to health literacy, employment opportunities, income levels and access to healthcare services.
- **Manual workers**: Workers in blue-collar or manual occupations face higher risks of chronic illness and poorer health compared with white-collar workers. They were also less likely to benefit from remote working arrangements during the pandemic, increasing their exposure to health risks and employment insecurity.

Finally, one health issue relating to children is highlighted in research showing that eligibility for healthcare services for certain groups of children is not always clearly defined or well-established and only a few Member States have legislation guaranteeing children a right to healthcare, regardless of legal status (Palm 2017). Children with no regular residence status are the most vulnerable group, and others may fall between the cracks or be left with insufficient coverage.

In the context of unexpected shocks ranging from inflation crises to health emergencies, already vulnerable groups become even more exposed to loss of access to healthcare. This became starkly evident in the context of the pandemic, when 7.9 per cent of respondents to the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey stated they were unable to make scheduled payments related to healthcare, an increase of 1.4 percentage points compared to three months earlier. This resulted in what Eurofound have termed an 'affluence gap', with 44 per cent of those in arrears reporting unmet needs, compared to 19 per cent of people without arrears. Of additional concern is the finding that for those who lost their job in spring 2020, one third (32 per cent) reported in June-July 2021 that they had unmet medical needs compared to 21 per cent of those who had not lost their job (Eurofound 2021b).

The EU's Social Protection Committee (2021) has likewise affirmed that the experience of the pandemic demonstrates a need for universal access to quality healthcare in the EU and 'demonstrated the value of strong safety nets [and] ... access to quality care for all'. The committee suggests that issues which need to be addressed include health inequalities and access to healthcare faced by the most vulnerable (including high out-of-pocket costs in some countries), and they suggest shifting the focus towards primary care and prevention, as well as promoting healthier life-style habits and digital healthcare solutions.

All of the above suggests that rising health inequalities are now set to assume a high degree of valency as EU Member States continue to grapple with the demographic and workforce challenges against a concerning backdrop of divergence and exclusion. Despite incremental improvements in recent years, it remains clear that low-income people are amongst those, along with certain other groups, who will require a special focus to ensure that they benefit from general improvements in a more co-ordinated system of EU-wide healthcare.

4.4 Health - Conclusion

Overall, the quality of healthcare is high in the EU in comparative terms. However, in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, healthcare systems across Europe continue to experience significant workforce deficits while facing the major demographic challenges associated with an ageing population. Moreover, European healthcare is still marked by deep-rooted health inequalities both within and between Member States affecting access to healthcare as well as overall health outcomes. Socioeconomic factors like occupation, education, age and location exert a major influence over health outcomes which remain particularly acute in areas including cardiovascular disease and cancer care (European Commission, 2024e).

In the five-year period from 2014 to 2019, there was a welcome downward trend in the average perception of unmet need for healthcare across the EU (due to problems of access: online database hlth_silc_08). However, the perception is different between different income groups, and, as in previous years and now against the backdrop of the pandemic, it was least perceived in the top income earners and most amongst the lowest earners. Between 2024 and 2025, there has been a slight decrease of -0.2 percentage points in reported unmet medical needs from 3.9 per cent to 3.7 per cent among the lowest income quintile. However, the 2025 rate continues to exceed that for 2019 when it stood at 3.2 per cent. The most recent data reported by Eurostat (hlth_silc_08) thus confirms a failure to return to pre-pandemic levels of unmet health needs.

While the creation of the European Health Union in 2020 marked a step forward in EU leadership on a matter of formally 'supporting competence', measures designed to co-ordinate 27 separate national healthcare systems remain limited if expanding in scope. Long prior to the shock of Covid-19, the European healthcare landscape contained significant contrasts in terms of outcomes and access. In one pre-pandemic cross-country comparison for example, the health systems of the Netherlands, Denmark, Belgium, Finland, Luxembourg, Sweden, France and Germany were the top performers amongst EU countries (European Health Consumer Powerhouse 2018). Elsewhere, gradual or outright privatisation of healthcare systems in Europe between 1989 and 2019 has been seen to generate 'greater socioeconomic inequalities' including increased unmet health needs (Moise and Popic, 2024). The impact of austerity on European health systems in the wake of the financial crisis of 2008-09 has likewise helped create deep structural inequalities which long predate the pandemic but were exacerbated by it (Kavanagh et al. 2021; Eurofound, 2023a).

As the cost of European health provision continues to rise amidst a wider cost-of-living crisis, certain groups continue to experience difficulties in accessing quality care (Willis Towers Watson, 2026). Such inequalities still need to be addressed as disparities in areas such as life-expectancy which remain high between socioeconomic groups. Some of the groups whose needs have been most recently highlighted include younger and older people at risk of mental health, an issue which has intensified throughout the pandemic (Eurofound 2021a). Other vulnerable groups include those suffering from chronic health problems, those living in rural areas and those not in education or employment. The physiological vulnerability of older people has been foregrounded dramatically throughout the pandemic itself (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, 2021b). Finally, those in Member States marked by sharp internal regional inequalities as well as social groups at risk of falling though the 'gaps' of means-tested provision have been highlighted as likely sites of social investment in an ambitious European Health Union (McKee and Ruijter, 2024).

5 Taxation

Taxation plays a key role in shaping societies by funding public services, supporting economic activity and redistributing resources to make societies more equal. Appropriate and equitable taxation levels and their targeting is also a subject of much debate and contestation within individual countries. Eurostat publishes information on taxes which allows comparison across countries and we will look at total taxation across countries in this section. We will then consider this in light of some indicators of social inclusion and social investment.

5.1 Total Taxation as a percentage of GDP

Taxation can be analysed as including or excluding compulsory social security contributions. One definition used by Eurostat encompasses all direct and indirect taxes received including social security contributions[14] – and that is the one used in this section. The tax-take of each country is established by calculating the ratio of total taxation revenue to national income as measured by gross domestic product (GDP). Taken as a whole, the European Union is a high-tax area relative to some other countries such as the United States and Japan.

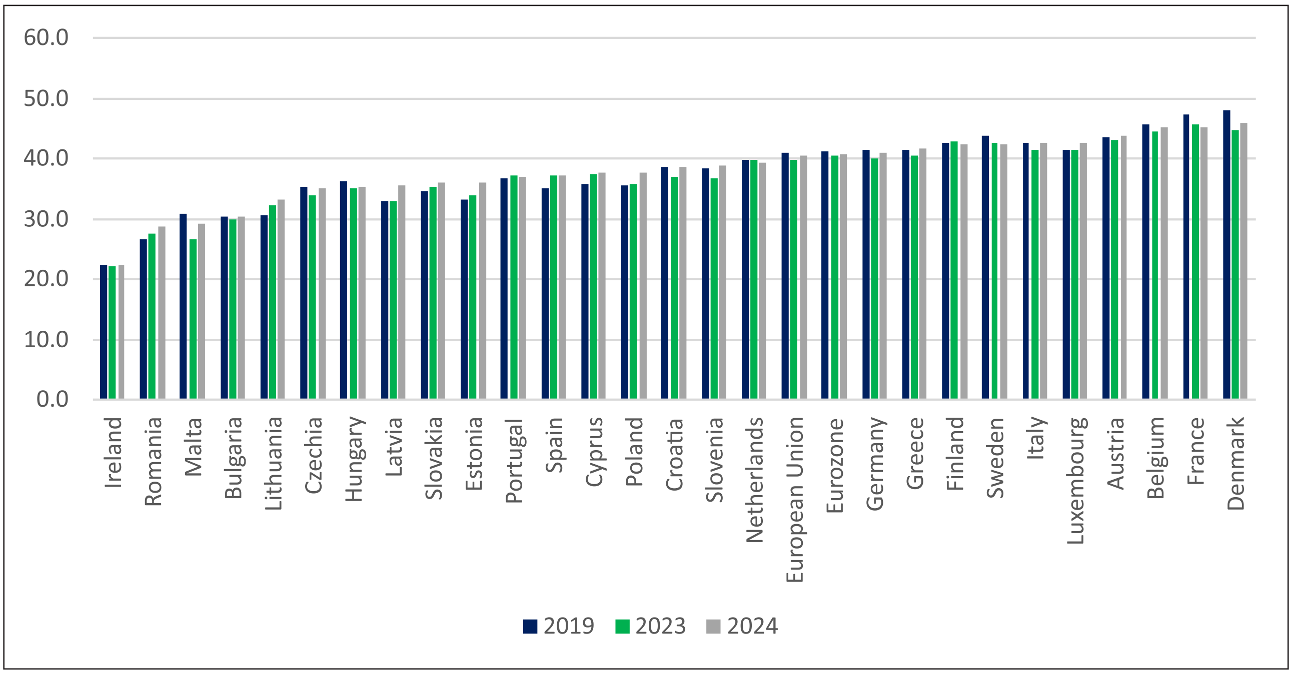
As a ratio of GDP, in 2024 tax revenue (including net social contributions) accounted for 40.4 per cent of GDP in the European Union and 40.8 per cent of GDP in the euro area (EA-19). Compared with 2023, an increase of 0.5 of a percentage point in the ratio are observed for the EU-27 while the rate for the Eurozone has dropped by 0.4 per cent. In absolute terms, from 2023 to 2024, EU-27 tax revenue increased by €387 billion and euro area tax revenue increased by €292 billion (Eurostat, gov_10a_taxag).

However, as **Figure 30** shows, there is considerable variation between Member States in the EU in respect of total taxes as a proportion of GDP. Ten countries had total taxation ratios greater than the EU average of 40.4 per cent (in 2024). It was highest in Denmark (45.8 per cent of GDP), France (45.3 per cent of GDP), Belgium (45.1 per cent of GDP), Austria (43.8 per cent of GDP) followed by Luxembourg (42.7 per cent of GDP), Italy (42.6 per cent of GDP), Sweden (42.3 per cent of GDP), and Finland (42.3 per cent of GDP); the lowest shares were recorded in Ireland (22.4 per cent of GDP), Romania (28.8 per cent of GDP), Malta (29.3 per cent of GDP), Bulgaria (30.5 per cent of GDP) and Lithuania (33.3 per cent of GDP). Thus, the highest levels are found in the 'older' countries of the EU, including Denmark, France, Belgium, Austria, Sweden and Finland.

Overall, the range is broad with a difference of 23.4 percentage points between the country with the lowest ratio (Ireland) and that with the highest (Denmark). Between 2023 and 2024, increases in the tax-to-GDP ratios were observed in twenty-two Member States. In percentage points, the highest increases in per cent of GDP from 2023 to 2024 were recorded by Malta (+2.6 percentage points to 29.3 per cent), Latvia (+2.5 percentage points to 35.5 per cent), Estonia (+2.1 percentage points to 36.1 per cent).

14 That is, taxes on production and imports, income and wealth, capital taxes, and compulsory social contributions paid by employers and employees (see Eurostat 2014:268).

Figure 30 EU-27 Total Taxes (including SSC) as a % of GDP, 2019, 2023 and 2024



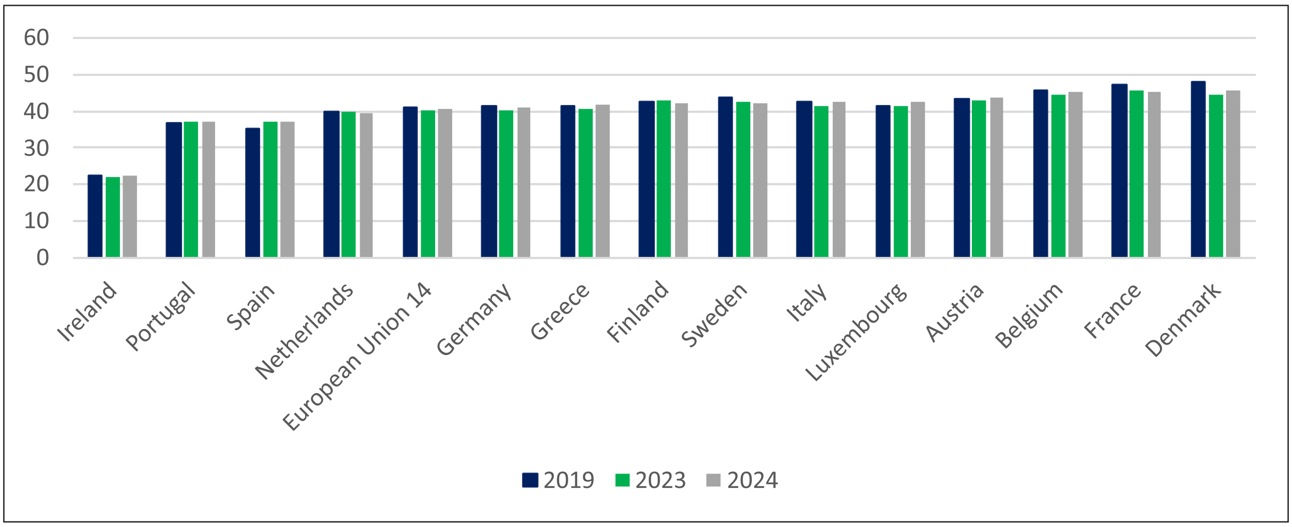
Source: Eurostat Online database: **gov_10a_taxag**. Total receipts from taxes and social contributions (including imputed social contributions) after deduction of amounts assessed but unlikely to be collected

Decreases in the tax-to-GDP ratio or stable ratios were observed in five EU Member States (Finland, the Netherlands, Sweden, France and Portugal). The largest decreases in the tax-to-GDP ratio were observed in Finland (-0.6 percentage points), the Netherlands and Sweden (both -0.3 percentage points).

Figure 31 outlines the tax ratios set out for EU-14 countries including those pre-2004 EU Member States with traditionally higher ratios located in Western Europe. This shows an average ratio of 40.6 per cent for EU-14 for 2024, slightly above the average for EU-27 countries (40.4 per cent). When looked at in this way it is again Ireland that has the lowest ratio, followed by Portugal and Spain. It must also be acknowledged in the case of Ireland that the highly globalised nature of the Irish economy as well as taxation policies pursued inflates GDP as a measure of activity – but even notwithstanding this, Ireland's ratio compares poorly with many other countries, especially with its peers amongst the older accession countries (FitzGerald, 2023).

Eurostat appears to take 35 per cent of GDP as a ratio that represents a relatively low-tax approach (Eurostat, 2025i). In the EU-14 (the 'old' Member States of the EU) all countries except Ireland have a tax take above the 35 per cent threshold, with the next lowest ratio in Portugal (37 per cent). It is also worth noting that amongst the countries with the highest total taxation ratios relative to GDP are some of the countries considered the most competitive in the world. According to the World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness index 2020, the Netherlands, Germany, Sweden and Denmark are amongst the world's ten most competitive countries followed by Finland (ranked 11th) and France (ranked 17th) (World Economic Forum, 2020).

Figure 31 EU-14 Total Taxes (incl SSC) as a % of GDP, 2019, 2023 and 2024



Source: Eurostat Online database: gov_10a_taxag. Total receipts from taxes and social contributions (including imputed social contributions) after deduction of amounts

According to estimates recently published in the European Commission's *Annual Report on Taxation* (2025c), the EU27 tax-to-GDP ratio is projected to fall through 2025 and into the short term due to a 'shrinking of revenues from environmental and property taxes and high nominal GDP growth due to high inflation'.

5.2 Total Taxation in light of Some Social Inclusion Indicators

We can also review total taxation in light of a number of the issues that have already been considered in previous sections of this report such as how well countries perform in relation to poverty and social exclusion as well as social investment. We are again talking in this section about total taxation (including social security contributions) as a percentage of GDP.

In **Table 6** we rank them for taxation to GDP ratio. We divide countries into three groups – those with total taxation levels above the EU average, a middle grouping with taxation levels below the average but at/above a level of 35 per cent, and a third group with taxation levels below 35 per cent. We can look at these taxation levels in light of levels of poverty or social exclusion set out in **Section 2** of this report. There are 17 countries that have below average rates of poverty or social exclusion (in 2024). The majority of these (14 out of 17) have taxation ratios above 35 per cent. Amongst the top 10 countries in terms of protecting their populations from poverty or social exclusion (all with rates of poverty or social exclusion at or below 18 per cent in 2024), central and Scandinavian countries feature prominently including Finland, Netherlands, Denmark, Austria and Sweden all of which are above the 35 per cent tax ratio threshold (threshold that signals a low-tax economy).

Table 6 EU-27: Total Taxation as % GDP (2024)

	2024
Above EU-27 average	
Denmark	45.8
France	45.3
Belgium	45.1
Austria	43.8
Luxembourg	42.7
Italy	42.6
Finland	42.3
Sweden	42.3
Greece	41.7
Germany	40.9
Below EU-27 average (40.4%)	
Netherlands	39.4
Slovenia	38.8
Croatia	38.6
Cyprus	37.6
Poland	37.6
Spain	37.3
Portugal	37.0
Estonia	36.1
Slovakia	36.0
Latvia	35.5
Hungary	35.3
Below 35% threshold	
Czechia	35.0
Lithuania	33.3
Bulgaria	30.5
Malta	29.3
Romania	28.8
Ireland	22.4

Source: Taxation: Eurostat Online database: gov_10a_taxag.

Czechia has a poverty or social exclusion rate of 11.3 per cent, the lowest rate in 2024 (EU27), and also a taxation rate below the EU at 35 per cent. Czechia is considered to be relatively effective at delivering fairness in society due to effective government policies to reduce unemployment and well-targeted social transfers. As mentioned already, Slovenia (with a taxation to GDP ratio of 38.8 per cent in 2024) is considered to do well in poverty reduction, especially on the areas of children and youth (Sompolska-Rzechuła and Kurdyś-Kujawska, 2022). For its part, Slovakia is also one of the better performing countries on poverty prevention (with a poverty or social exclusion rate in 2024 of 18.3 per cent) and with a taxation to GDP ratio below the EU average but above the 35 per cent threshold (36 per cent in 2024). Thus, it too is considered to perform relatively well in poverty prevention due mainly to the country's comparatively even income distribution patterns (Michálek, 2023). As part of the context, it must be acknowledged that income levels in most post-communist countries still lag behind those in Western Europe. However, as of 2025, Czechia has overtaken both Spain and Portugal in GDP per capita (PPP) terms while Slovenia and Lithuania have surpassed Portugal (Eurostat code prc_ppp_ind_1). In addition to the overall level of taxation, a range of historical and institutional factors are probably also relevant to the outcomes achieved as are the social policies pursued (Schraad-Tischler and Kroll 2014).

We can also look back at income inequality in light of taxation ratios. In **Section 2, above**, we looked at the S80/20 measure of income inequality (Eurostat ilc_di11). A similar list of countries appears to also have the highest total taxation ratios and they are also some of the countries with the lowest rates of income inequality. And, correspondingly, amongst those countries with the highest levels of inequality are also those with the lowest levels of taxation (again relative to GDP).

It is also of interest, that the social justice index use by Bertelsmann Stiftung consistently finds that opportunities for every individual to participate broadly (in things like education, health services and the labour market) tend to be best developed in northern countries. For example in the last report in that series (2019) northern European states of Denmark, Finland and Sweden top the list for social justice (Hellmann et al. 2019).

Social Investment

How well countries perform on social investment is discussed in **Section 1,** above. In **Table 6** we compare countries' rankings for total taxation against the way that they have been ranked on their approach to social investment (following the schema of Bouget et al. 2015 – see the Introduction to this Report). As we reported in previous years, all of the countries that are in Group 1 for social investment (identified by the European Social Policy Network as having a well-established approach to many social policies, Bouget et al. 2015), have tax takes that are considerably above the 35 per cent line, and most are also above the EU average. These countries are Austria, Belgium, Germany, Denmark, Finland, France, Netherlands, Sweden and Slovenia.

When it comes to the ten countries that are in Group 3 in relation to social investment (the lowest group - that is, the social investment approach has not made significant inroads into the overall policy agenda), it appears that seven have taxation levels below the EU average and four have taxation rates that are below the 35 per cent line (many of them considerably so).

Table 7 EU-27 Total Taxation as % of GDP (2024) and Social Investment Approaches

Taxation to GDP ratio 2023		Social Investment Approach
Above EU-27 Average		
Denmark	45.8	Group 1*
France	45.3	Group 1
Belgium	45.1	Group 1
Austria	43.8	Group 1
Luxembourg	42.7	Group 2**
Italy	42.6	Group 3***
Finland	42.3	Group 1
Sweden	42.3	Group 1
Greece	41.7	Group 3
Germany	40.9	Group 1
Taxation below European Union (EU-27) average: 40.4%		
Netherlands	39.4	Group 1
Slovenia	38.8	Group 1
Croatia	38.6	Group 3
Cyprus	37.6	Group 2
Poland	37.6	Group 2
Spain	37.3	Group 2
Portugal	37.0	Group 2
Estonia	36.1	Group 3
Slovakia	36.0	Group 3
Latvia	35.5	Group 3
Hungary	35.3	Group 2
Below 35% threshold		
Czechia	35.0	Group 3
Lithuania	33.3	Group 3
Bulgaria	30.5	Group 3
Malta	29.3	Group 2
Romania	28.8	Group 3
Ireland	22.4	Group 2

Source: Taxation: Eurostat Online database: I gov_10a_taxag. Bouget et al. 2015.
* **Group 1**: Has well established social investment approach to many social policies; tend to have good linkages between different policy areas when addressing key social challenges
** **Group 2**: Still to develop an explicit or predominant social investment approach, while showing some increasing awareness in a few specific areas
*** **Group 3:** Social investment approach has not made many significant inroads into the overall policy agenda

Two of these countries (Greece and Italy) have a taxation ratio that is above the EU average. Thus, both represent an exception, having a taxation ratio above the EU-27 average and still appearing in the worst grouping in terms of the development of a social investment approach.

5.3 Taxation - Conclusion

Without raising resources, countries cannot invest in infrastructure and services required to promote inclusion and to sustain development. Our conclusions on taxation are very much in line with our conclusions in previous years.

There is considerable variation between Member States in the EU in respect of total taxes as a proportion of GDP. The highest ratios tend to be found in the 'old' 14 members of the EU. Thus, the highest levels are found in Denmark (45.8 per cent in 2024), France, Belgium, Austria and Luxembourg. At the other end of the scale were Ireland (22.4 per cent), Romania, Malta and Bulgaria. Overall, the range is broad with a difference of 23.4 pps between the country with the lowest ratio (Ireland) and that with the highest (Denmark).

Amongst the countries with the highest total taxation ratios relative to GDP are some considered the most competitive in the world: the Netherlands, Germany, Sweden and Denmark are amongst the world's ten most competitive countries followed closely by Finland (ranked 11th) and France (ranked 17th) (World Economic Forum 2020). These are countries that also tend to score highly at protecting their populations from poverty or social exclusion and they tend to be more equal societies in terms of incomes.

In general, countries in the south and east of Europe tend to have lower levels of taxation and also less well-developed social investment approaches, and higher rates of poverty or social exclusion. Amongst the newer accession countries – and with a taxation ratio the same level as the 35 per cent of GDP threshold in 2024 - Czechia is notable for its performance in relation to prevention of poverty and social exclusion. The performance of Slovakia and Slovenia is also notable.

Chapter 6

6 Alternatives: Some Issues for Discussion

Social Justice Ireland has for some time argued (see, most recently, Clark et al. 2026) that some measures used to pursue economic growth (policies and values) are often barriers to social progress and environmental sustainability. As highlighted in the introduction to this report considering the recently unveiled EU Anti-Poverty Strategy, there is now a widespread acknowledgment that shortsighted austerity policies pursued in the past served neither social nor economic progress in the long run. As the EU currently struggles with a cost-of-living and affordability crisis driven by ongoing geopolitical instability, it is now clearer than ever that alternatives are needed to ensure the EU can fulfil its ambitious goal of eradicating poverty in Europe by 2050. Increasingly, discussion among policy analysts and international agencies surrounding emerging challenges such as AI, digitisation and a green growth agenda seem less interested in the panacea of 'trickle down' growth to eradicate poverty, protect the environment and promote social inclusion (Social Justice Ireland, 2025). The ongoing conflict in Ukraine and the Middle East, combined with the climate emergency, technological transformation, global economic competition and transatlantic trade instability are together putting pay to the anachronism that 'there is no alternative' to market fundamentalism. Yet as the old orthodoxies of the neoliberal era give way to an era of 'permacrisis', it is more important than ever that action is taken to secure an inclusive and sustainable future for Europe.

Wellbeing is a fundamental objective of EU policies: Article 3 of the *Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union* states that the Union's aim is to promote 'the well-being of its peoples'. Good social protection systems are vital not only to social wellbeing but also to economic development. As we mentioned in the introduction to this report, some lessons are being drawn from past failures in Europe to articulate a more robust vision of sustainable growth, with organisations like the OECD emphasising the need for a new approach to policymaking which integrates economic governance to wider social, environmental and humanitarian impacts (OECD, 2020b). Interrelating employment with the long-term impact of social inequity, both the European Commission's High-Level Group on the Future of Social Protection and the Welfare State (2023) and recently proposed EU Anti-Poverty Strategy (2026) suggest that while:

- 'Higher employment in quality jobs is key to provide income to all households and secure sustainable financing of public expenditure' (European Commission, 2023c).
- 'The cost of non-action to combat poverty is significant and multifaceted [as] poverty undermines social cohesion, weakens democracy and holds back Europe's economic potential' (European Commission, 2026).

The experience of combatting the Covid-19 pandemic at EU-level, including the issuance of common debt via 'coronabonds', relaxation of fiscal rules, and new financial instruments of unprecedented scale including the NextGenerationEU package, the Recovery and Resilience Facility, and SURE fund, all served to consolidate a decisive break with the disastrous austerity policies which followed the financial crisis in Europe. Yet against the backdrop of sharply increased geopolitical instability since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, ongoing conflicts in the Middle East since 2023, and Donald Trump's re-election in 2024, Europe now risks deprioritising wider policymaking at the cost of a narrow focus on security and competitiveness.

Against predictable voices asserting once again that a commitment to social equity amounts to nothing more than European 'self-indulgence' in an unstable world, *Social Justice Ireland* holds that now more than ever economic development, social development and environmental protection remain complementary and interdependent (The Economist, 2025). In the spirit of the EU's ambitious commitment to eradicate poverty by 2050, this means that Europe must plan for an inclusive and sustainable future overcoming myopia, shortsightedness, fearmongering, xenophobia, defeatism or the reactionary extremism currently rising across much of the EU.

As we outlined in the introduction to this report, for *Social Justice Ireland,* every person has seven core rights that need to be part of the vision for the future: right to sufficient income to live with dignity, to meaningful work, to appropriate accommodation; to relevant education, to essential healthcare, to real participation and the right to cultural respect. In this report, we have looked at how these rights are currently being realised or otherwise in the areas of income, work, education and healthcare. In this Section, we discuss some current debates and point to some potential policy alternatives in the areas of income, work and service-provision. Our intention is not to prescribe any particular approaches, but rather to outline some pointers toward strategies that are currently being employed or are currently the subject of increasing debate and consideration.

6.1 Right to Sufficient Income

Debates about how to achieve adequate income often involve discussions of (1) minimum wage, and, increasingly, the living wage, (2) minimum income schemes, and (3) basic income schemes. We will briefly discuss each of these approaches. As noted already in this report, new forms of employment, and associated gaps in access to social protection and lower incomes, may put a growing number of people at higher risk of poverty and social exclusion. This requires that social protection systems ensure access to adequate protection for all persons in employment, including various types of self-employment and non-standard working (Social Protection Committee 2025). Following initial advances in employment legislation spearheaded by the Juncker Commission including the Work-Life Balance (2019) and Transparent and Predictable Working Conditions (2019) directives, progress in this area had arguably expanded to varying degrees under the Presidencies of Ursula von der Leyen to embrace Minimum Wages (2022), Pay Transparency (2023), Platform Work (2024) and Minimum Income (2023).

Minimum Wage and Living Wage

As part of its Global Coalition for Social Justice, the International Labour Organisation encourages the use of a minimum wage to reduce working poverty and provide social protection for vulnerable employees (2025b). A minimum wage is the lowest remuneration (set hourly, daily or monthly) that employers may legally pay to workers. It is recognised that setting minimum wages at appropriate levels can help prevent growing in-work poverty. According to the International Monetary Fund (2024), minimum wage policy typically aims to improve income distribution, and it may also have important implications for economic efficiency.

As of 2025, twenty-two out of 27 EU countries apply a generally binding statutory minimum wage and five others – Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Italy and Austria – set one by way of sectoral collective agreements (Eurofound, 2025e). However, a recent Eurofound (2024a) investigation suggests 'significant heterogeneity in non-compliance rates across countries' in Europe. For example, a recent report relating to Ireland found that up to 7.8 per cent of minimum wage workers in the country are paid below the minimum wage for reasons other than those permitted under legislation (O'Sullivan, 2022).

There are different opinions on the usefulness of minimum wages, one criticism being that they only apply to those in paid employment, not self-employed or those doing family work or caring

(OECD, 2019). Despite limitations, the International Labour Organisation has concluded that they remain a relevant tool for poverty reduction. Also, the OECD has suggested that governments should consider broadening minimum wage coverage where it does not currently include part-time workers (OECD, 2025h). They do so in the context of addressing the issue of why falling unemployment rates have not resulted in wage growth (in other words, why isn't a higher demand for workers driving up pay). Moreover, a comprehensive recent study of the relationship between employment and minimum wage growth in Ireland between 2016 and 2025 found there is 'no evidence that recent minimum wage increases in Ireland increased the likelihood of minimum wage employees losing their jobs' (Redmond et al. 2026). Reflecting similar findings elsewhere, it is notable that the employment effects of moderate minimum wage increases have been found to be mostly negligible (Dube, 2020).

When launched in 2021, the EPSRAP asserted the right of workers 'to fair wages that provide for a decent living standard' and suggests that 'adequate minimum wages shall be ensured in a way that provide for the satisfaction of the needs of the worker and his / her family *in the light of national economic and social conditions*' (Principle 6 – emphasis added). It went on to propose 'a legal instrument to ensure that workers in the Union are protected by adequate minimum wages' which led directly to the 2022 Directive on Adequate Minimum Wages, an EU-wide framework covering minimum thresholds, wage growth and purchasing power to govern national minimum wages (Schreurs and Huguenot-Noël, 2024).

The latter represents a significant advance in promoting wage adequacy and collective bargaining in Europe which, despite facing an existential and potentially enormously consequential legal challenge brought before the European Court of Justice in 2025, has emerged 'alive and kicking' with only minor amendments (Muller and Schulten, 2025). While celebrating its survival, critics continue to point to the Directive's inherent limitations including the absence of binding adequacy benchmarks (Pietrogiovanni, 2026). As cited in the Introduction to this report, these constrains reflect wider critiques of the 2026 EU Anti-Poverty Strategy which relies heavily on an employment-centred approach to poverty eradication at the expense of social protection and wider structural determinants of inequality (Caritas Europa, 2026). For all its limitations, the Directive is nonetheless regarded as 'a milestone in the development of Social Europe' and its recent survival from judicial challenge has been greeted with widespread relief within the European labour movement and beyond (Gilmore, 2025).

The **Living Wage** assumes that work should provide an adequate income to enable people to afford a socially acceptable minimum standard of living. It differs from the minimum wage approach, in being an evidence-based rate grounded in consensual budget standards based on research to establish the cost of a minimum essential standard of living. Notwithstanding the regulatory framework created by the Directive on Adequate Minimum Wages in force since 2022, recent inflationary pressures have highlighted the limitations of statutory minimum wages where food, housing, energy and childcare costs are rising more rapidly than earnings.

The ongoing cost-of-living and affordability crises have thus renewed interest in the Living Wage as a concept rooted in the United Nations Convention on Human Rights definition of the minimum as 'things which are necessary for a person's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social well-being'. As the OECD have recently noted, the Living Wage should 'meet a worker's basic needs but also to respect their dignity and promote the financial resilience of their families'. (OECD, 2023d). The cost of a minimum essential standard of living or minimum income standard will vary by household type and composition, location, and employment pattern, yet in all cases earning below the living wage suggests that employees are forced to do without certain essentials to make ends meet. As the ILO have recently suggested, its calculation might best follow clearly stated and transparent processes specified for specific household compositions and situations supported by tripartite social dialogue and collective bargaining processes (ILO, 2024a).

The Living Wage idea is not a new one, with the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) having launched its European Wage Alliance campaign in 2018 which has since been followed by allied initiatives including the Europe Floor Wage Campaign (2020) and Living Wage Action Day (2024). Advanced campaigns, including that of the UK Living Wage Foundation (2026) have recently reported that there are now more than 16,000 accredited Living Wage Employers across the UK, including half of the FTSE 100 and major household names such as IKEA, Aviva, Nationwide and Everton FC. Together, accredited employers account for approximately one in seven employees in the UK, reflecting mainstream adoption of the Living Wage concept.

While small businesses are usually perceived as having fewer resources available and thus to be less able to afford to pay higher wages, SMEs nonetheless make up over half of the 2,800 employers who have signed up voluntarily to pay the Living Wage. SMEs that have adopted a living wage perceive benefits related to employee motivation and productivity, staff retention, employee relations and ability to attract high quality staff as well as benefits for business reputations. It is interesting to note that the SMEs concerned were operating in so-called low-waged sectors such as hospitality, retail, social care and manufacturing in England, Wales and Scotland (Werner, 2021).

Progress toward a living wage in the EU varies considerably across Member States, with Ireland, Belgium and the Netherlands at the forefront with national campaigns, specialist research and government working groups advancing the concept in public policy and debate (Haapanala and Marx, 2025). In this context, it is disappointing that recent Eurofound (2026c) research and publications, including the *Minimum wages in 2026: Annual review*, contain virtually no references to the 'living wage' as an idea or economic measure, and it remains conspicuously absent from the recently unveiled EU Anti-Poverty Strategy.

Minimum Income Schemes

Adequate and effective social protection systems are the bedrock of a truly Social Europe, within which minimum income schemes are a safety net of last resort to ensure that no one falls below an adequate minimum income (EAPN, 2022). Minimum income schemes are protection schemes of last resort aimed at ensuring a minimum standard of living for people of working age and their families when they have no other means of support. They vary in coverage, comprehensiveness (that is, their availability generally to low-income people) and effectiveness.

In the years since the Covid-19 pandemic when governments came to rely heavily on extant Minimum Income schemes in an unprecedented context, many traditional concerns about guaranteed and minimum income programmes relating to affordability and fears that they will disincentivise work have become less convincing. For example, recent research into reformed and extended national models – such as that of Spain since 2020 – suggests positive design and implementation can help ensure recipients do not become demoralised or incapable of participation in active inclusion measures and in seeking work (Cruces et al, 2026).

Moreover, unlike recent EU Minimum Wage legislation such as the 2022 Directive discussed above, it is significant that Minimum Income measures have been found to benefit those broadly at risk of poverty and social exclusion rather than those in employment alone. As the IMF recently (2021a) concluded when surveying a subset of European national welfare state systems, while 'many countries seem to reduce work disincentives at a high cost in terms of … poverty alleviation', there remains 'ample room in many European countries to enhance the generosity of benefits since low benefits undermine the primary objective of these schemes'. Endorsement of this type from an organisation which has a history of privileging structural adjustment and austerity measures over poverty reduction and redistributive policies makes its current endorsement of Minimum Income schemes all the more remarkable (Pan et al. 2026).

Gradual growth toward acceptance of the need for an EU-framework around Minimum Income measures has thus accelerated in recent years. The most important initial framing of this ambition took shape through the 2017 EPSR, which enshrines the right to a minimum income as one of its 20 core principles. It states:

> Everyone lacking sufficient resources has the right to adequate minimum income benefits ensuring a life in dignity at all stages of life, and effective access to enabling goods and services. For those who can work, minimum income benefits should be combined with incentives to (re)integrate into the labour market. (Principle 14).

A review of minimum income schemes across Europe carried out the following year found that they played a vital role in alleviating the worst impacts of poverty and social exclusion, with subsequent research suggesting such schemes had been comprehensively 'stress tested' during the Covid-19 pandemic and demonstrated their resilience and importance (European Commission, 2019b; World Bank, 2022b). Yet the similar research also pointed to 'differential protective capacity' across the EU depending on the 'accessibility and generosity of eligibility conditions' (Employment and Social Affairs Committee, 2021b).

To build on the commitments originally contained in the EPSR in the wake of the pandemic, the 2021 EPSRAP reiterated that minimum income schemes remain 'essential to ensure that no one is left behind' while again noting that such schemes 'vary significantly in their adequacy, coverage, take-up and articulation with labour market activation measures' and 'deserve to be modernised'. To meet this goal, the EPSRAP further recommended a Council Recommendation on minimum income to 'support and complement the policies of Member States'.

The European Commission's Proposal on Adequate Minimum Income followed in September 2022, affirming that existing national minimum income schemes often suffer from inadequate benefit levels, low coverage and limited take-up while urging such measures might be better combined with access to essential services and active labour market measures. This in turn fed into the January 2023 Council Recommendation on Adequate Minimum Income which formally calls on Member States to ensure that minimum income schemes provide a dignified standard of living and assist in 'combatting poverty and social exclusion'. While not legally binding, it establishes a common European benchmark for the first time while reinforcing the principle that adequate income protection is a prerequisite for both poverty prevention and a healthy labour market. The Recommendation has been widely welcomed as a 'milestone in the European Union's fight against poverty', yet stakeholders have also urged that it must form a 'starting point towards a binding EU Framework Directive as a crucial element of comprehensive, rights-based and adequately funded EU Anti-Poverty Strategy' (EAPN, 2025b; Bonfils et al, 2024).

However, as a recent joint European Commission-Social Protection Committee (2025) report assessing Member States' implementation of the framework concludes, 'none of the Member States's minimum income schemes are fully in line with the provisions of the Recommendation'. It goes on to highlight how significant shortcomings remain across the EU regarding adequacy, coverage, take-up and access to services while suggesting that reforms will be required to strengthen European minimum income schemes if the EU as a whole is to meet the ambitious targets relating to poverty reduction in both the EPSRAP to 2030 and the EUAPS to 2050.

Basic Income Schemes

A basic income is very different to a minimum income. A minimum income seeks to ensure a minimum standard of living for people of working age and their families with no other means of support. By contrast, a basic income involves giving everyone a modest, yet *unconditional* income, and letting them top it up at will with income from other sources (Van Parijs and Vanderborght, 2017). It is paid directly with a smaller payment for children, a standard payment for every adult of working age and a larger payment for older people. It is never taxed but in essence replaces tax credits (for those with jobs) and social welfare payments (for those without jobs). Additional payments would be maintained for those with particular needs (such as those who are ill or have a disability). As defined by the Basic Income Earth Network (2026), a basic income is: an income unconditionally granted to all on an individual basis, without means test or work requirement. It is a form of minimum income guarantee that differs from those that now exist in most European countries in three important ways:

a. it is being paid to individuals rather than households;

b. it is paid irrespective of any income from other sources;

c. it is paid without requiring the performance of any work or the willingness to accept a job if offered.

If social policy and economic policy are no longer conceived of separately, then basic income is increasingly viewed as the only feasible way of reconciling two of their central objectives: poverty relief and full employment. Every person receives a weekly tax-free payment from the Exchequer while all other personal income is taxed.

As a recent World Bank (2022c) report suggests that a major advantage of a Basic Income is that 'universality may eliminate any stigma affecting beneficiaries'. As several key architects of the policy have noted, a rights-based rationale for Basic Income rooted in citizenship collapses notions of 'deservingness' which can attend income support targeted at 'the needy, the destitute, those identified as unable to fend for themselves' (Van Parijs, 2000). In this context, it is likewise projected to overcome the problem of non-take-up of benefits and removes unemployment traps because it does not cease if someone takes up employment, compounding the benefit – and thus incentive - of paid employment rather than substituting for it (Muñoz-Higueras, 2024). Basic Income is likewise regarded as a positive mechanism of addressing wider structural inequalities including gender-based pay inequalities because its universal character embraces forms of work other than paid work such as care within the home. It is thus unsurprising that even skeptical assessments regard Basic Income as offering a simpler and more transparent option than current tax and welfare systems (OECD, 2017a; IMF, 2018).

The history of experiments relating to Basic Income date back to the Negative Income Tax programmes put in place in several US states including New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Iowa, Indiana, North Carolina, Washington, Alaska, and Colorado between 1968 and 1982 as well as in Canada during the Mincome Experiment of 1974-1979. Interest in Europe advanced with the creation of the Basic Income European (now Earth) Network in 1986, but it was not until the financial crisis that support for Basic Income began to be felt in European parliaments through measures like the German Basic Income Petition (2008), a European Citizens' Initiative (2013-14) and a referendum in Switzerland (2016) which although defeated gained the support of one quarter of voters for Basic Income. Yet it was to be the Covid-19 pandemic which proved a 'watershed' in mainstream considerations of Basic Income support policies as a normal – and for some inevitable – trajectory of social protection in advanced economies (Reveley, 2021).

Given the nearly ubiquitous resort to emergency mechanisms of income support, furlough schemes and enhanced welfare mechanisms in the context of the Covid-19 crisis, the pandemic arguably led to *de facto* 'experiments' in Basic Income provision (UNESCO, 2021). This breakthrough benefited from isolated but high-profile pilot studies carried out in the years immediately preceding the pandemic, including studies in the Netherlands, Catalonia and Finland from 2017. The results of the latter – the first randomised control trial of its kind in the world – targeted at 2,000 unemployed people in receipt of an income of €560 per month. The results suggest higher levels of subjective well-being and less mental strain than the control group but with no significant differences in labour market behaviour (KELA, 2020; ESPN, 2019). Its success helped build momentum toward a 2018 Council of Europe resolution acknowledging the benefits of a 'basic citizenship income' to 'guarantee equal opportunities for all more effectively than the existing patchwork of social benefits, services and programmes' (Council of Europe, 2018). Yet when it was published in May 2020, the final report of the Finnish pilot assumed vital significance in the unexpected context of a global pandemic (Kangas et al. 2020).

In recent years, practical applications of Basic Income have continued but the concept remains entirely absent from EU-level policy debates as Minimum Wages and Minimum Income have moved to the fore; the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy, for example, fails to make a single mention of it. As post-Covid Minimum

Income schemes take shape, such as Spain's Ingreso Mínimo Vital since 2020 and Germany's Bürgergeld since 2023, Basic Income is currently being pursued via more marginal initiatives like the Welsh Basic Income Pilot (2022), Catalonia's stalled Renda Bàsica Universal and via sectoral schemes such as Ireland's Basic Income for Artists (Johnston, 2022). The renewal of the latter for 2026-2029 has seen it cited by the European Commission as a potential model for emulation, but the momentum built up during the 2017-2022 period has arguably 'died down' as EU policy shifts to affordability and fighting poverty via employment (Goldhill, 2022). As is evident in the Commission's European Semester (2019c) reviews of the 2017-18 Finnish pilot and in the recent upsurge in European Commission (2024g) research on poverty, the primacy of 'quality jobs' and concerns around labour market activisation have lately tended to obscure the dynamism of what remains a radical departure in social protection.

From the vantage point of 2026 however, there is good reason to anticipate and advocate for a much-needed return to prominence of the Basic Income concept in the context of an accelerating Artificial Intelligence revolution that is already transforming the nature of work. Put succinctly, if more jobs become obsolete, there will have to be ways for people to get healthcare, pensions, disability, and income supplements outside of full-time employment (West 2015). Even prior to the onset of AI, it has long been argued that a basic income scheme offers 'a powerful way of protecting all citizens from the great winds of change to be ushered in by the fourth industrial age, and of sharing the potentially massive productivity gains that it will bring' (Reed and Lansley 2016). Another argument in favour of changing our system of income generation is that it can address growing inequality as a Basic Income that grows in line with capital productivity may ensure that the benefits of automation are more equally distributed.

Endorsement of Basic Income by leading entrepreneurs currently driving AI development – from Sam Altman of OpenAI and Dario Amodei of Anthropic to Elon Musk of X and Mark Zuckerberg of Meta – has been interpreted by many as a signal of major dislocation to come (Reich, 2025). Yet the EU's 2024 AI Act – the leading framework for AI regulation globally – states that 'in the context of employment and protection of workers, this Regulation should therefore not affect Union law on social policy and national labour law... including health and safety at work and the relationship between employers and workers'. Stakeholders like the European Trade Union Institute (2021; 2023a) have thus heavily criticized the Act as primarily designed to 'foster ... AI', inaugurating what is ultimately permissive and 'intrusive' use of high-risk AI in European workplaces while leaving worker protection 'broad but weak' and fundamental labour rights fragmented and under-enforced. Calling for an 'ad hoc directive on AI in employment', the ETUI has warned of an 'AI regulatory winter' in the absence of more robust worker protections. In this context, it is clear that any compensatory Basic Income should emerge as part of a wider renewed 'eco-social contract' including robust taxation and redistributive mechanisms rather than merely to socialise the externalities of an AI-driven 'disaster capitalism' (Klein, 2023).

At this juncture, enough pilot schemes have been completed internationally – at least 160 to date – to suggest the benefits of Basic Income are difficult to deny with international bodies such as the UN (2020), ILO (2026b), OECD (2017a), IMF (2018) and World Bank (2020c) increasingly debating technical issues related to financing and application rather than fundamental viability. For example, one major study from the UK estimates the net annual cost of a modified (transitional) basic income scheme there at around £8bn or just under 0.5 per cent of GDP, something that may be judged as a relatively modest sum in relation to the benefits and the reduction in poverty that it delivers including a cut in child poverty of 45 per cent (Reed and Lansley 2016; Murphy and Ward, 2016). Yet most studies tend to reflect on the negative as much as the positive drivers of interest in Basic Income, from the looming threat of major job losses due to automation and artificial intelligence to the failure of existing welfare states to adequately protect people against poverty.

Recent polling suggests the European public is open to 'much stronger support' for Basic Income models similar to the Belgian political economist Philippe Van Parijs' (2013) proposal for a 'euro-dividend' of

200 euros for every EU residents (Nettle et al. 2021). This is a reminder that the radically empowering and emancipatory potential of Basic Income remains viable, popular and increasingly vital to the future of a poverty-free Europe. Its absence from the EUAPS thus remains a critical weakness of the European Commission's current philosophy and outlook. Yet it is the power of Basic Income to enable people to live a life with dignity, to facilitate meaningful work that is not necessarily paid employment, and to support participation in democratic decision-making and public engagement (Healy and Reynolds 2016) which makes it an **absolutely indispensable tool in the fight for social equity in contemporary Europe**.

6.2 Right to Meaningful Work

The dominant policy framework in Europe and elsewhere in response to persistent high unemployment focuses on the notion of full-employability and understands unemployment in terms of skills shortages, bad attitudes of individuals and/or disincentives to work that exist in welfare systems or other alleged rigidities like minimum wages or employment legislation (Mitchell and Flanagan 2014). It is a supply-side understanding, which can be considered to ignore other causes – such as lack of jobs and spatial spill-overs (Mitchell and Flanagan 2014).

In the wake of both the financial crisis and an unprecedented global health emergency, this interpretation continues to face mounting criticism in both political and intellectual terms. Progressive approaches to jobs policy are investigating how to achieve full employment, as a key to well-being (there being evidence that high well-being is associated with low levels of unemployment and high levels of job security), something that involves satisfying work in the right quantities within a broader economy that respects environmental limits (Greenham et al. 2011).

Thus, in the context of past failures and the recent public health emergency and cost of living crisis that followed, basic questions are now being asked about whether the market economy is capable of delivering what is needed, particularly in light of the move away from industry and manufacturing towards a knowledge economy. As discussed above, increasing developments in artificial intelligence continue to evoke rising anxiety about potential job losses. Several recent influential studies have estimated that up to 47 per cent of workers in America had jobs at high risk of potential automation and artificial intelligence (Economist 2016; OECD 2021). All of this poses the question whether the 'trickle-down effect,' that is, the wealth and job creation potential of entrepreneurs and wealthy individuals, can really deliver even full employment.

One of the debates that arises in this context is the need to recognise and value all work. Another relates to government guaranteeing work as a response to widespread unemployment, particularly long-term unemployment which has damaging consequences for individuals and for the wellbeing of society. A further approach relates to reductions in hours worked by everyone. Finally, the need for investment by government will be considered.

Valuing All Work

Ideas about who we are and what we value are shaped by ideas about paid employment and the priority given to paid work is a fundamental assumption of current culture and policy-making. Other work, while even more essential for human survival and wellbeing, such as caring for children or sick/disabled people, often done by women, is almost invisible in public discourse. But because well-being relies on work and relationships (and other things), there must be a fair distribution of the conditions needed for satisfactory work and relationships – and this is particularly important for gender equality.

Against the backdrop of a demographic change, an ageing population and acute workforce shortages in sectors such as health and social care, now more than ever there is a need to recognise the inherent value of all work including work in the home, work done by voluntary carers and by volunteers in the community and voluntary sector. Their contribution to society is significant in terms of social and individual well-being as well as in economic terms. Although estimates vary, unpaid care continues to represent an enormous economic contribution. According to Eurofound (2025f), around 80 per cent of all care in Europe is provided informally by family members and friends, with the estimated economic value of informal care equivalent to 2.4 per cent of EU GDP, exceeding average public expenditure on long-term care (1.7 per cent of GDP) (Eurocarers, 2023). Similar estimates by the UK's Office for National Statistics indicate that the economic value of unpaid household services, including childcare, adult care, cooking, cleaning and volunteering, was equivalent to 61 per cent of UK GDP in 2023, demonstrating that unpaid work represents one of the largest contributors to economic and social wellbeing (ONS, 2025).

Jobs Guarantee Schemes

Many job guarantee proponents see employment as a right. Unemployed people cannot find jobs that are not there, notwithstanding activation measures. Thus, thinking has been developed around the idea of jobs guarantee schemes. High levels of unemployment co-exist with significant potential employment opportunities, especially in areas such as conservation, community and social care. A jobs guarantee scheme involves government promising to make a job available to any qualifying individual who is ready and willing to work. Jobs guarantee schemes are envisaged in different ways with the broadest approach being a universal job guarantee, sometimes also called an employer of last resort scheme in which government promises to provide a job to anyone legally entitled to work. Apart from a broad, universal approach, other schemes envisage qualifications required of participants such as being within a given age range (i.e. teens or under, say, 25), gender, family status (i.e. heads of households), family income (i.e. below poverty line), educational attainment and so on.

The concept involves government absorbing workers displaced from private sector employment. It involves payment at the minimum wage, which sets a wage floor for the economy. Government employment and spending – providing a 'public option' and baseline wages – automatically increases as jobs are lost in the private sector (Wray et al. 2018).

Amongst those championing the idea is the Centre of Full Employment and Equity, University of Newcastle, Australia. Based on an analysis across countries, they argue that the private sector has always only been able to employ around 77 per cent of the labour force; unless the public sector provides jobs for the remaining workers seeking employment, unemployment will remain high[15] (Centre of Full Employment and Equity, 2025). Costs of Jobs Guarantee Schemes have been calculated for a number of countries and it is considered relatively cheap, in comparison with the costs associated with unemployment[16]. It also results in a multiplier effect from the contributions to the economy of the workers concerned (Tcherneva, 2020). Furthermore, such schemes are considered to promote economic and price stability, acting as an automatic stabiliser as employment (within the scheme) grows in recession and shrinks in economic expansion, to counteract private sector employment fluctuations (Wray et al. 2018).

The Job Guarantee proposal acknowledges the environmental problem and the need to change the composition of final economic output towards environmentally sustainable activities. The required jobs could provide immediate benefits to society and are unlikely to be produced by the private sector - they include urban renewal projects and other environmental and construction schemes (reforestation, sand dune stabilisation, river valley erosion control and the like), personal assistance to older people, assistance in community sports schemes, and many more (Centre of Full Employment and Equity, 2025).

Such schemes are not intended to subsidise private sector jobs or to threaten to undercut unionised public sector jobs. Any jobs with a set rate of pay or

15 Excluding, presumably, recent examples such as Ireland in the 2000s, where with hindsight it is evident that the very high levels of employment were based on an enormous boom in construction based on reckless lending and fuelled by what became one of the biggest banking crises in the world.

16 For example, in Ireland, *Social Justice Ireland* has made proposals to Government for a Part-Time Job Opportunities Programme that has already been piloted and costed. Also a costed proposal has been published in Greece by the Observatory of Economic and Social Development and other organisations (Antonopoulos et al. 2014).

in the private sector should not be considered. Only those jobs that directly benefit the public and do not impinge on other workers should be considered. Neither is a Job Guarantee Scheme intended to replace other social programmes. However, Job Guarantee Schemes could complement a social support system such as a Basic Income scheme (see above).

Job creation schemes have been implemented in different parts of the world, some narrowly targeted, others broadly-based. Examples include the 1930s American New Deal which contained several moderately inclusive programmes; a broad based employment programme existed in Sweden until the1970s; and Argentina created *Plan Jefes y Jefas* that guaranteed a job for poor heads of households (Wray 2009). The first EU Youth Guarantee scheme between 2013 and 2020 saw Member States commit to ensure that **all young people up to the age of 25 receive a high-quality offer of a job, an apprenticeship or a traineeship within four months of becoming unemployed** or leaving formal education is an example of a partial jobs guarantee scheme. While a potentially valuable initiative, one problem that arose during its implementation was that funding – often limited by the same austerity policies which aggravated youth unemployment – meant 'resource allocations [had] not been sufficient to match recommendations' (Escudero and Mourelo, 2017; Tosun et al, 2019). Other issues included the fact that 'increasing precariousness and … the tendency to only redistribute existing labour' resulted in a blunting of 'durable change' (Piqué et al, 2015). Overall assessments of the Youth Guarantee suggest it was 'effective' in reducing youth unemployment while 'fall[ing] short of initial expectations' (Barslund and Gros, 2017; Eichhorst and Rinne, 2017).

The launch of a 'reinforced' Youth Guarantee in 2020 raised hopes that, despite the limitation of past policies, the EU might move toward a more ambitious model such as the 'European Job Guarantee' backed by the European Trade Union Confederation from 2023 (ETUC, 2023b). Others argued for more robust funding from the NextGenerationEU package and a common fiscal mechanism to 'bridge gaps' within and between Member States (Argitis and Koratzanis, 2021; Zygmuntowski, 2020). As of 2026, the reinforced Youth Guarantee forms part of the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy, but with emphasis on co-ordination – including proposed 'hubs' to facilitate links to services' – and 'bridging' to the European Child Guarantee. The latter, informed by the European Commission's (2026j) 'Breaking the cycle of child poverty' communication, marks a wider shift in prioritisation from youth unemployment to upskilling and child poverty. The EUAPS recommendation to earmark 14 per cent of the National and Regional Partnership Plans to social objectives, including 'combating youth unemployment and implementing the Youth Guarantee under the 2028-2034 MFF is thus welcome. Yet as a recent European Court of Auditors (2026) report warns, 'without clearer objectives and better evidence of longterm results it is difficult to know whether public funds are truly making a difference for young people'.

As with Basic Income, Jobs Guarantee schemes have been sidelined in the EUAPS by a focus on market-driven employment growth regulated by Minimum Wage and Income instruments. Yet while the momentum has diminished at EU-level, the original Youth Guarantee scheme has been succeeded by important experiments at Member State level. These include Greece's Koinofelis Ergasia (2016-), France's Territoires Zéro Chômeur de Longue Durée (2016-), Austria's Modellprojekt Arbeitsplatzgarantie Marienthal (2020-2024), Berlin's Solidarisches Grundeinkommen (2019-2025) and the Dutch Basisbaan programmes (2020-). Apart from the Greek case, all focus on long-term unemployment with a majority of participants aged between 45 and 60 with operating budgets ranging from €5 million to €167 million (Karamessini, 2026; Flecker and Quinz, 2025). These programmes serve as a reminder that, while relegated to targeted demographics, Job Guarantees persist with benefits 'impressively demonstrated' according to the Commission's (2024i) own *Towards Zero Long-Term Unemployment* study. As previous reports in this series have emphasised, **Europe simply cannot afford to jettison such proven and effective instruments as Job Guarantee schemes if it hopes to make its ambitious goal of eradicating poverty in Europe by 2050 a durable reality.**

Shorter Working-Week

The starting point for debates about shortening the working week is that there is nothing 'normal' or inevitable about what is considered a typical working day today, and that what we consider normal in terms of time spent working is a legacy of industrial capitalism that is out of step with today's conditions. A number of proposals exist. The New Economics Foundation (NEF) proposed a rebalancing of work and time involving a new industrial and labour market strategy to achieve high-quality and sustainable jobs for all, with a stronger role for employees in decision-making and a gradual move towards shorter and more flexible hours of paid work for all, aiming for 30 hours (4 days) as the new standard working week (NEF, 2018). Active support for 'short time working' throughout the pandemic – supported through EU mechanisms such as the SURE fund – combined with the sudden turn to digital homeworking on a mass scale to transform perceptions and expectations around traditional work-time norms. Yet despite majority support for maintaining blended working arrangements (ECB, 2023), recent Eurofound (2025b) data suggests the share of employees working entirely from the workplace rose from 36 per cent in 2023 to 41 per cent in 2024, marking a shift away from the widespread teleworking following a doubling of those working from home between 2019 and 2021.

Recent Eurofound (2026b) research likewise estimates that 11 per cent of EU employees work more than 48 hours per week, highlighting that excessively long working hours remain a significant feature of the European labour market despite gradual improvements since 2005. These proposals are thus intended to address problems of overwork, unemployment, over-consumption, high carbon emissions, low well-being, entrenched inequalities and lack of time to live sustainably, to care for each other or to enjoy life. Crucial to this kind of proposal is that made above about moving toward valuing both paid work and unpaid work; it is intended to spread paid work more evenly across the population, reducing unemployment and its associated problems, long working hours and too little control over time. It is also intended to allow for unpaid work to be distributed more evenly between men and women, and for people to spend more time with their children and in contributing to community activities.

A wide range of leading economists, entrepreneurs and politicians have given their backing to the idea of a shorter working week, from John Maynard Keynes, Robert Skidelsky and Thomas Piketty to Bill Gates, Carlos Slim and Jamie Dimon as well as Spain's current Deputy Prime Minister Yolanda Díaz and recent Prime Ministers of Finland and New Zealand. Sometimes linked to productivity improvements expected to arise from AI and automation, proposals backing a shorter working week are widely considered a practical means to improve people's quality of life while creating a more productive labour force. A UK doctor, John Aston, President of the UK Faculty of Public Health (a body that represents over 3,000 public health experts in the UK), has added his voice to calls for a four-day week to deal with the problem of some people working too little others too much and to improve overall health (Brown, 2026).

Investment

Keynesian economic policies require active government intervention in ways that are 'countercyclical'. In other words, deficit spending when an economy suffers from recession or when unemployment is persistently high, and suppression of inflation during boom times by either cutting expenditure or increasing taxes: 'the boom, not the bust, is the right time for austerity at the treasury.' Learning from failed policies pursued following the financial crisis of 2008-09 and new departures made at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, it will be essential that policymakers consider investment on a sufficiently large scale to generate the job growth which allows Europe to navigate ongoing geopolitical instability and the affordability crisis.

Consistent with its earlier calls for stronger public investment following past economic crises, the OECD continues to argue that sustained investment is vital to long-term growth in Europe and globally. For example, its recent *Economic Outlook* (2025i) calls for policies to 'reignite investment for more resilient growth', combining public investment, measures to crowd in private investment, and reforms to strengthen productivity, innovation and economic resilience.

Having come under harsh criticism by leading Nobel Prize winners including Joseph Stiglitz (2021), Paul Krugman (2011) and Amartya Sen (2012) alongside many other academic and institutional economists, the EU's fiscal rules were reformed in 2024 following activation of the 'General Escape Clause' of the Stability and Growth Pact between 2020 and 2023. While leaving much of the Fiscal Compact, 'Six Pack' and 'Two Pack' legislative architecture in place, including the 3 per cent deficit and 60 per cent debt-to-GDP ratio rules, the new framework replaces the previous 'one-size-fits-all' approach with country-specific four-year fiscal plans. As stated in the Introduction to this report, the EU's current fiscal stance remains 'ambiguous' and 'pragmatic' in the face of ongoing war in Ukraine, an energy crisis driven by the US-Iran war, and recent victories for the far-right in the Netherlands, Austria and Germany (Darvas et al. 2024; Janeba and Larch, 2025). As one critic recently noted, the new rules can thus be said to tread a 'fine line between brilliant masterpiece and … déjà vu' (Hasekamp and Larch, 2026).

From July 2025, the European Commission and European Council have supported application of the National Escape Clause to defence spending for 15 Member States as part of the ReArm Europe/Readiness 2030 package. The latter amounts to 800 billion euros, higher than the unprecedented NextGenerationEU budget of €750 billion unveiled in 2020 in response to the Covid-19 crisis. The results of this shift have been transformative, with EU defence spending rising to €381 billion in 2025, up 11 per cent from 2024 and an incredible 62.9 per cent from 2020. Substantiating von der Leyen's long-stated vison of a 'geopolitical Commission', the scale of the ongoing defence 'boom' is being driven primarily by the war in Ukraine as well as due to pressure on European NATO members from the current US administration. Among traditional advocates of Social Europe, some have embraced the current boom as potentially compatible with enhanced social solidarity linked to a comprehensive 'Clean Industrial Deal' while others fear the defence build-up can only realistically continue at the expense of social spending. Most, however, agree that the ongoing relaxation of EU fiscal rules for defence sets a positive precedent for those seeking wider investment in general (Duval, 2025; Kirton-Darling, 2025).

Europe must avoid a 'zero-sum-game' pitting defence against social, educational, health, cultural, transport, agricultural, environmental and many other types of essential spending. At the very least, the evolving EU budget must work to prioritise job-intensive investment in essential sectors with potentially substantial returns. Examples could include building new infrastructure and facilities, which might include social housing, better public health or education facilities, investment in key infrastructure like water or in sustainable energy sources. Substantial investment of this kind would of itself lift economic growth rates and there would be a multiplier effect by creating further economic activity and growth, increases in taxes and decreases in social welfare spending. In this context, the current 'ambiguity' and 'pragmatism' of the EU's new fiscal rules must not be allowed to ossify into indecision or drift: it is vitally important that European fiscal governance ultimately serves to accommodate and encourage investment of this nature as a basic tool of economic policy within the capacity of governments.

As we tackle the contemporary challenges posed by ongoing geopolitical instability, an expanding cost-of living crisis and the emerging impacts of AI and automation, *Social Justice Ireland* has repeatedly argued that the European Social Model is needed now more than ever. At a European level, a lasting commitment to well-planned investment alongside as well as beyond the current defence boom will be essential to protecting the most vulnerable in future years. The revised EU fiscal rules must thus not inhibit Member States from doing large-scale investment but rather to mobilise resources with the determined political will and coordination the EU has so effectively brought to bear in the area of defence. **A large increase in public spending is essential to addressing the EU's current challenges; without it, the goal of eradicating poverty in Europe by 2050 will surely prove yet another broken promise.**

6.3 Right to Access to Quality Services

Access to high-quality services is an important aspect of social protection and forms a central plank of both the EPRAP as well as the EUAPS. The latter, for example, cites 'access to key goods and services [as] essential to people's well-being and integration in society'. Yet as many recent EU studies confirm (European Commission, 2023c; European Parliament, 2022), Member States currently offer a diverse range of service delivery models while at least five types of welfare systems are recognised as operating in Europe[17] (Abrahamson, 2010). Moreover, these models have been subject to major evolution and change up to the current moment: past trends include expansionism (from the 1950s to the 1970s) followed by uncertainty and challenge associated with neo-liberalism and a newer trend, which can be described as 'productivist' (Taylor-Gooby, 2008). The 'productivist' approach, called a 'new social investment state', emphasises social investment with a desire to maintain a range of mass services underpinned by rights-based and 'active inclusion' frameworks (Taylor-Gooby, 2008; de la Porte and Palier, 2022). In our current moment of geopolitical crisis, Ursula von der Leyen's vision of a 'geopolitical Commission' (2019d) and a renewed focus on 'competitiveness' associated with the Draghi report (2024) has reframed a 'productivist' social investment ethos around ideas of preparedness, resilience, productivity and industrial policy.

Lessons learned through recent crises – from the financial crash through Covid-19 to the current era of trade and military conflict – have thus each left their mark on the shape of current EU social policy. As stated earlier in this report, the impetus of the Social Investment Package (2013), the EPSR (2017), the NextGenerationEU fund (including initiatives such as SURE) (2020), the EPSRAP (2021), the Social Economy Action Plan (2021) and the European Pact for Social Dialogue (2025) have each influenced the current EUAPS (2026a), emphasising active labour market policies in the context of new employment regulations, a social rights agenda and a fresh focus on services in the fight against poverty. The EUAPS thus retains a focus on social investment policies including child-care, elder-care, and family-friendly labour market regulation (Hemerijck 2014; 2025). Social investment is not, however, a substitute for social protection and recent legislation relating to Minimum Wages (2022) and Minimum Income (2023) aim to function as preconditions for a social investment strategy to mitigate social inequity while stabilising the business cycle.

Yet challenges exist and continue to worsen through the ongoing cost-of-living and affordability crises in relation to the quality and equity of public services, particularly in relation to acute issues affecting housing and healthcare. Closely linked to this is Europe's demographic situation, with stagnating child poverty and an ageing population impinging on demand for services with implications across the life-course (European Commission, 2023c).

Some of the issues that are informing current debates include the following:

Securing Adequate Investment? Support for social investment in recent decades is based on the aspiration of people of all socio-economic backgrounds to be employed and to raise a family. Consequently, they have been willing to provide the investment required to provide services capable of making that possible. In difficult economic times, however, there is more and more scrutiny of social spending. As noted above, the current boom in defence expenditure in Europe has aroused worries that social spending will become more marginal, exacerbated by a potential future tightening of EU fiscal rules. The latter stresses deficit and debt reduction, polices which have in the past served to diminish social provision in Europe. In this context, there is a strong risk that support for social investment will decline. This situation is worsened as European voters continue to drift toward a far-right which poses immigration control as a false panacea to ongoing crises of affordability, stagnating child poverty, long term unemployment, regional inequality and social exclusion. This ultimately leads to a rejection of welfare spending as electorates become divided and hostile to the state, redistribution and social solidarity.

Who Provides? Public services are not synonymous with the public sector. A wide range of actors are now involved in service provision and the mix differs from

[17] The regimes can be categorised in different ways; typically, five are recognised: Continental North-western Europe, Scandinavian model, Southern/Mediterranean model, Atlantic Europe (UK and Ireland) and Eastern European (Abrahamson, 2010).

country to country (and has done so historically). As well as the public sector, these include:

- people and families,
- non-profit organisations and social enterprises,
- civil society,
- the private sector.

While it is considered that there is now more scope for private activism, the voluntary sector and civil society to be involved in service provision, the state is still in charge of regulation and this role was arguably consolidated throughout the Covid-19 crisis (Abrahamson, 2023). In relation to the private sector, EU bodies have noted that there needs to be encouragement to use the potential of social investment more through on-the-job training, in-house childcare facilities, health promotion and family-friendly workplaces via the European Care Strategy (European Commission, 2022b; Eurofound, 2025f). The Commission has also recently begun to promote private philanthropy through formal initiatives like the Coalition Against Poverty under the EUAPS alongside intensified engagement with social partners through recent Tripartite Social Summits.

The EUAPS and allied instruments have thus reinforced the importance of a mixed economy of welfare, recognising that high-quality public services depend upon effective collaboration between public authorities, families, community organisations, social economy enterprises and private providers. Yet it has been the EU and Member State's roles as strategic investors, regulators and guarantors of essential services which has reasserted itself in recent years. If successful, the promise of **good quality, integrated and person-centred service delivery undergirded by both strong EU and Member State action and robust partnerships across sectors** represents a potentially vital tool in the effort to eradicate poverty in Europe by 2050.

Public Value? The central plank of the influential 'public value' approach to the public sector is that public resources should be used to increase value not only in an economic sense but also in terms of what is valued by citizens and communities. It is associated with Mark H. Moore, who argues that public services are directly accountable to citizens and their representatives, and it requires ongoing public engagement and dialogue as well as rigorous measurement of outcomes (2013). The approach involves the following building blocks:

- providing quality services for users, which are cost effective,
- ensuring fairness in service provision,
- concentrating more on the outcomes as well as on the costs and inputs,
- building trust and legitimacy by convincing people that policy is geared toward serving the overall public interest.

These building blocks are linked and the improvement of public services is intended to generate support for them amongst users and others who pay for them indirectly through taxation. User satisfaction is shaped by factors such as customer service (that is, how well they are treated), information, choice, availability and advocacy (that is, knowing that the services will be available to them when needed and that they will be supported in getting access to them).

Moore's most recent (2025) work reinforces the argument that public sector managers should focus on creating public value rather than merely administering programmes, requiring a combination of democratic legitimacy, public support and operational capacity. In contemporary Europe this implies **delivering services that are not only efficient but also trusted, resilient and capable of responding collaboratively to increasingly complex social challenges**.

Social wage: Public services such as healthcare and schooling, childcare and adult social care, can be said to comprise a 'social wage' that helps to determine how much earned income people consider 'enough' (Coote et al. 2010). While there are different definitions, discussions of the 'social wage' generally define it as disposable income plus public provision of goods and services (such as healthcare and education). It is sometimes used in discussions of government spending and it can be a way of characterising the contribution that public services make to individuals and households.

It is thus a measure of how much better-off individuals are with the provision of publicly funded welfare services than they would be without these 'in-kind' benefits (i.e. if they had to pay the full cost of these services). Thus, the value of services such as health and social care, education and housing can be thought of as an income in-kind – or a 'social wage' – that represents a substantial addition to people's cash incomes (Sefton, 2002; Charitou et al, 2025). Although most measures of poverty and inequality do not take account of the value of these kinds of benefits in kind, their inclusion is potentially significant in monitoring the impact of public policies on the poorest households (Sefton, 2002).

Reduced public spending and a corresponding diminished social wage require individuals/households to spend on essential services and this increases barriers to access for poorer people (McCarthy, 2015). Obviously, maintaining the social wage requires that the state's revenue base be protected and the access and integrity of services to be insulated from austerity and market failure alike. Moreover, better and free public services – for everyone, not just the poor – would certainly make it easier to live on lower levels of earned income. Yet current European trends indicate the opposite, as 1 in 5 households in Europe are forced to engage in 'catastrophic spending' due to unforeseen health-care costs and a weakened safety net, impeding consumption and heightening the risk of falling into poverty (WHO, 2024).

As the EUAPS acknowledges, the extent to which these services relieve pressures on household income depends on their accessibility, reliability, quality, and overall affordability. However, in recent times public services have been become progressively curtailed, targeted and stripped to essentials by outsourcing, competitive tendering, privatisation and automation. This negative trend has been explained in terms of bureaucratisation (Herd and Moynihan, 2019), market failure (Doctorow, 2025) and 'service erosion' (Pue, 2023) .The deleterious effect of these incipient trends on key sectors undergirding the 'social wage' in Europe - including education, health and social protection – is unfortunately all too evident (Pugmire, 2024). This is why **it remains vital that the EU retains a proactive focus on the delivery of 'European public goods' to support a European 'social wage'** rather than waiting for – or tolerating – Member State or market failure (Janse et al, 2025).

6.4 Other Key Issues

There are other issues of overarching importance that are not the key focus of this report. However, we wish to refer to two of them briefly - the need for greater representation in policy-making and the need for environmental sustainability.

Representation

Any new policy directions are affected by the fact that Europeans have experienced a sense of frustration with consequent risks of alienation and social disruption. The recent Eurobarometer 'Investing in Fairness' (2025) survey revealed a deep divide in political trust, with only one in three Europeans tending to trust their national governments and parliaments, while 52 per cent reported trusting the European Union. A long-term negative trend of trust in state political institutions intensified in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008-09 before a temporary recovery and subsequent fall following the Covid-19 crisis (Eurofound, 2021c). As discussed in the introduction to this report, this lesson has been underlined by the rise of populism, Euroscepticism and recent victories for the far-right in Dutch (November 2023), European Parliament (June 2024), Austrian (September 2024) and German (February 2025) elections.

Eurofound (2025d) continues to find strong links between financial insecurity, access to quality public services and trust in institutions, while highlighting the importance of fairness and responsive public policy in sustaining social cohesion. According to the *Living and Working in the EU* survey (2025), 30 per cent of respondents reported difficulty making ends meet in 2024, compared with 22 per cent in 2023 within increase in insecurity related to housing rising as 10 per cent of respondents reported missing rent or mortgage payments and 15 per cent reporting they had fallen into arrears on utility bills. Perceptions of poverty, inequality and unequal access to opportunities remain widespread, with another recent Eurobarometer (2025) finding that 84 per cent of Europeans are concerned that too few people escape poverty in their country. These findings underline the continuing importance of high-quality public services, adequate social protection and meaningful citizen participation in strengthening democratic legitimacy.

These findings confirm the wider argument that public services are found to be *positively linked to trust*, as perceived quality of public services is a key driver for higher trust in institutions (Eurofound, 2019b; OECD, 2026c). Thus, Eurofound argues for more attention to be given to growing feelings of unfairness (between countries, regions and groups), particularly with respect to access to quality public services and for the value of public participation in the co-design of services (Eurofound, 2019b). The negative impact of 'algorithmic capture', atomisation, radicalisation and interpersonal abuse associated with damaging use of social media, AI and digital platforms – particularly affecting women, young people and ethnic minorities - represents a critical concern for the overall health of European democracy and democratic life (European Parliament, 2023; Council of Europe, 2026). This is likewise reflected in midst of the current cost-of-living and affordability crises, which are actively damaging trust in institutions and fuelling extremist sentiment; as Eurofound has recently (2024) warned: 'years of crises have eroded citizens' trust in institutions [and] without it, the very fabric of our democracy is at risk'.

Potentially very valuable tools in addressing the current conjuncture include initiatives such as the *Charter on Shared Social Responsibilities* which argues that having a well-defined deliberative process can ensure, among other things, that individual preferences are reconciled with widespread priorities in the field of social, environmental and intergenerational justice. It can also reduce the imbalances of power between stakeholders (Council of Europe, 2014). This recognises that addressing a sense of alienation or disempowerment requires new forms of 'deliberative democracy' which champion informed debate, emphasising politics as an open-ended and continuous learning process (Held, 2006). Both the EPSRAP and EUAPS envisage a partnership approach that would aim to foster joint ownership. **But the views of the weaker stakeholders – such as undocumented people, migrants, refugees and ethnic minorities – must be able to be heard and be capable of influencing decisions and results.**

Sustainability

The latest United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) *Emissions Gap Report* (2024) reinforces the urgency of climate action, concluding that, even if current nationally determined contributions are fully implemented, the world remains on course for a temperature increase of around 2.6–3.1°C by the end of the century. This remains well above the Paris Agreement target of limiting warming to 1.5°C. The UNEP also emphasises that the pace of implementation of climate change mitigation measures remains insufficient and rapid emissions reductions are required during this decade. Yet Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has meant climate policy is increasingly intertwined with wider objectives of economic resilience, industrial competitiveness and energy security demanding reduced dependence on fossil fuel imports through the REPowerEU Plan, renewable energy and greater energy efficiency. Environmental sustainability is thus now viewed not only as an ecological imperative but also as a geopolitical one, at once intensifying its urgency while diluting a purely environmental focus.

As already stated, *Social Justice Ireland* believes that the future must be one in which it is recognised that economic development, social development and environmental protection are complementary and interdependent. Pollution and depletion of resources have thrown into doubt the reliance on untrammeled market forces as the key driver of wellbeing for everyone. The current approach is patently unsustainable with the ballooning energy demands associated with expanding data-centres to power emerging AI systems representing a major environmental concern (Social Justice Ireland, 2022). As *Social Justice Ireland* argues elsewhere, narrow thinking about economic growth leads to policies that only promote one aspect of what can be called sustainable social progress and ignores other aspects – so what is needed is a view of prosperity that is inclusive of all and is socially and environmentally sustainable (Clark et al. 2026).

A successful transition to sustainability requires a vision of a viable future societal model and also the ability to overcome obstacles such as vested economic interests, political power struggles and the lack of open social dialogue (Hämäläinen, 2013). A number of approaches to a sustainable economy have been outlined, all involving transformative change (for example the 'performance economy' associated with Stahel and the 'circular economy' associated with Wijkman). Another is the concept of the 'Economy of the Common Good', based on the idea that economic success should be measured in terms of human needs, quality of life and the fulfilment of fundamental values (Felber and Hagelberg, 2020). This model proposes a new form of social and economic development based on human dignity, solidarity, sustainability, social justice and democratic co-determination and transparency and involving the concept of the common good balance sheet showing the extent to which a company abides by values like human dignity, solidarity and economic sustainability. All three pillars – economic, social and environmental - must be addressed in a balanced manner (Social Justice Ireland, 2024) to **facilitate a sustainable, democratic and socially inclusive 'just transition' beyond fossil fuels.**

7 Conclusions and Recommendations

As we stated in the introduction to this report, for *Social Justice Ireland* seven core rights need to be part of the vision for the future of Europe: right to sufficient income to live with dignity, to meaningful work, to appropriate accommodation, to relevant education, to essential healthcare, to real participation, and the right to cultural respect. For *Social Justice Ireland* economic development, social development and environmental protection are complementary and interdependent – three sides of the same reality – and we have long argued that all three must be given attention rather than allowing economic considerations to dominate. Unfortunately, in contemporary Europe, economic and security and defence issues are being allowed to dominate the policy agenda over social and environmental policy. Officials are perceived as at a distance from poor people, and this, unfortunately, is corrosive of trust in the whole European project and is capable of being exploited by certain politicians. **The EU Anti-Poverty Strategy (EUAPS), with its ambitious target of completely eradicating poverty in Europe by 2050, represents a unique opportunity to address Europe's perceived 'democratic deficit' and to renew belief in the dynamism of the European project for generations to come.**

In the wake of ongoing geopolitical instability involving war on Europe's borders, conflict in the Middle East and an ongoing cost-of-living and affordability crisis at home, it is now clearer than ever that alternatives are needed to fulfil the bold vision set out in the EUAPS. To that end, we make the following recommendations aimed at EU Leaders and EU Institutions:

1. Ensure Greater Coherence of European Policy. The EUAPS acknowledges that 'combating poverty is a collective responsibility and requires coordinated efforts at all levels' and that the Strategy's 'success will depend on the active engagement of authorities at all levels of governance, EU, national, regional and local, social partners, civil society, the private sector as well as on the involvement of people experiencing poverty themselves'. To translate this aspiration into reality, the priorities of the EUAPS – following the integration of the Sustainable Development Goals - must be mainstreamed into EU governance instruments including the European Semester, European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan (EPSRAP), the Social Convergence Framework, National Action Plans, the Multiannual Financial Framework 2028-2034 in general and European Social Fund Plus Programming in particular. This could be facilitated by:

- The appointment of an EU Anti-Poverty Coordinator to liaise with the national counterparts in Member States proposed in the EUAPS.
- Introducing a binding framework, systematic monitoring and earmarked MFF funding streams in order to build on the commitment (outlined in the EUAPS) to a Commission Recommendation in 2027 on enhancing the efficiency and integration of child related benefit systems.
- Building on the commitment (outlined in the EUAPS) to a *Joint Report on Adequate Social Protection in Old Age* in 2027 with concrete actions to address pension adequacy 'gaps', regional disparities, and poverty affecting older women to fulfil the promise of a 'multi-pillar pension system … ensuring an adequate old-age income.'

2. Address inappropriate EU governance structures that prohibit or inhibit legitimate investment by national governments including reform of the post-2024 EU fiscal rules to facilitate greater flexibility in relation to debt and deficit limitations to promote investment in social initiatives and wider sectors beyond the area of defence alone.

3. Build upon the current 2022 EU Adequate Minimum Wages Directive and 2023 Council Recommendation on Adequate Minimum Income to:

- provide a binding framework regulating minimum workplace pay and conditions and social protection regimes enforceable by a European Labour Authority with 'teeth' and a European Semester process and National Action Plans which prioritise poverty reduction.

4. Monitor and Address poverty amongst sub-groups such as children, young people, vulnerable migrants, older people and working poor with enhanced data collection and monitoring mechanisms. Child poverty is such a serious issue that it requires further action as does the issue of young people neither in employed nor in education (NEETs), the working poor and those living in poverty in old age. To achieve this, EU institutions require enhanced data collection and monitoring mechanisms to make the EUAPS promise of tackling 'multidimensional' poverty achievable in practice. This requires more integrated, nuanced, and collaborative data collection, including:

- Mainstreaming of Eurostat 'Timely Flash Estimates' and faster and more focused delivery of integrated datasets on pressing issues including child poverty.
- Better integration of EU-SILC microdata with other data collections including the Household Budget Survey, the Living and Working in the EU e-survey, the European Labour Force Survey, European Health Interview Survey, European Quality of Life Survey, European Working Conditions Survey, European Company Survey and the Adult Education Survey.
- Closer integration of data collection with opinion polling and attitudinal surveys embracing Standard and Special Eurobarometer studies in areas related to social well-being and subjective perceptions of poverty and social exclusion.

5. Focus on Youth Unemployment: Youth unemployment continues to be a serious problem despite the relative weakening of the reinforced Youth Guarantee scheme within the priorities of the EUAPS. To rebalance the current emphasis, the European Commission should strengthen the proposed 2027 toolkit to better coordinate the Child Guarantee and reinforced Youth Guarantee with a firmer focus on those slipping through the cracks including the 'invisible' youth unemployed, NEETs, and young people with disabilities, from ethnic minorities and among those born outside the EU.

6. Support Developments in the Social Economy: Leadership and support from the EU for social initiatives would benefit both people in need of support (through health and social care programmes) and societies generally. This would be consistent with the goals set out in the European Care Strategy, European Pact for Social Dialogue and the EU Social Economy Action Plan as well as the EPSRAP and the EUAPS. One opportunity which the EU is currently largely failing to build on are the several highly effective Job Guarantee schemes at Member State level which have targeted the long-term unemployed. These have received praise from social partners as well as the European Council (2016) and European Commission (2024i) but concrete action to support an EU-wide Job Guarantee for the long-term unemployed remains an obvious but critically underutilised tool for fighting poverty amongst the older working-age adults.

7. Improve Representation: EU policy-making must engage meaningfully with stakeholders representing poorer people and those most at risk of exclusion. The EUAPS stakes its own success on 'the active engagement of … social partners, civil society, the private sector as well as … people experiencing poverty themselves' and has been supported by a public consultation process and structured dialogues. Yet it is critical that genuine representation leads to participative influence rather than tokenism or rubberstamping to legitimate policy formulation. To this end, echoing proposals for better representation in EU anti-poverty policymaking raised by the European Parliament (2026b) and stakeholders (Social Platform, 2025b; EAPN, 2026b), we call for:

- Adequate, effective and transparent mechanisms for meaningful participation of people with lived experience of poverty in policy design, implementation and evaluation resulting in 'co-creation and not merely consultation'.
- An annual conference to assess the implementation of the EUAPS against clear benchmarks and indicators involving people with lived experience of poverty.
- Establish an 'EU Civil Society Monitoring Mechanism' that brings together relevant stakeholders and organises a yearly report assessing progress on the EUAPS with structured participation in the European Semester, CSRs and NFPs.

8. Structural Funds: Structural funds must be of a sufficient scale to make an impact and should be given greater priority so as to ensure significant progress is made in bridging the gap between the economic and social dimensions of policy and in promoting a social investment approach to public policies where this is absent or insufficient. The EUAPS currently commits to dedicating 14 per cent of the National and Regional Partnership Plans to 'social objectives' under the MFF for 2028-2024. This is vague and insufficient EU contribution to support the EPSRAP targets of reducing poverty by 15 million and child poverty by 5 million by 2030 as well as the EUAPS goal or eradicating it by 2050. We affirm the recognition that 'there is no strategy without money' (EAPN, 2026c). We recommend:

- Strong budgets for the ERDF at least equal to current budgetary funding levels adjusted for inflation, and provided as grants.
- A successor to the current ESF+ package which remains dedicated to EU social policy actions and is not merged with any other new or existing EU fund.
- A dedicated budget of at least €20 billion for the European Child Guarantee in the MFF for 2028–2034.

9. Adopt a Human Rights Strategy to prevent the violation of the human rights of Europe's population. This is particularly pressing given the reality of the ongoing war in Ukraine, escalating conflict in Iran and Lebanon, and the aftermath of the Israel-Hamas conflict which has left Gaza in a state of humanitarian crisis. The EPSRAP and the EUAPS cannot succeed if they do not demonstrate meaningful solidarity with the migrants, refugees and those of minority ethnic and religious backgrounds and the particular challenges and disadvantages they face in Europe. To do this, the goal of eradicating poverty in Europe by 2050 must be rooted in human rights and revolve around the fundamental dignity of the person – in other words, a universal rather than a contingent, instrumental or particularistic rationale motivating poverty elimination. As such:

- The absence of refugees from the EUAPS is unacceptable, particularly as the latest EU Pact on Migration and Asylum marks 'the biggest rollback of rights for people seeking safety in Europe in more than a decade' (IRC, 2026).
- To be effective, the EUAPS requires a more robust human rights dimension to at least recognise the place of the 'missing poor', including 'racialised communities, asylum seekers and refugees' (EAPN, 2024) in the reality of poverty in Europe.
- The EUAPS cannot succeed without embracing a 'leave no one behind' approach consistent with the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

10. Enhance Social Protection: Recent research including the report of the European Commission High-Level Group on the Future of Social Protection and of the Welfare State (2023) and policy initiatives such as the Council Recommendation on Adequate Minimum Income (2023) have pointed to gaps, barriers and inequalities within and between Member States social protection regimes. As a starting point to addressing the shortcomings of existing systems, we proposed reform of the Free Movement Directive (2004/38/EC) to ensure that mobile EU citizens, who are often excluded from social protection both in their country of origin and their country of residence, have at least access to emergency shelters, emergency healthcare, maternity care, education for children and young people, and training that support job search and integration.

We make the following recommendations for National Governments (and relevant local / regional authorities):

1. **Prioritise Social Investment:** Large-scale social investment programmes are needed to ensure a sustainable growth in the context of the ongoing cost-of-living and affordability crises affecting access to essentials including housing and healthcare. The focus would need to be tailored to each individual country/ region but might include development of renewable energy sources, health and social care infrastructure, housing, education and early childhood care infrastructure. As already stated, reform of EU fiscal rules needs to continue to facilitate – rather than impede – investments of critical importance which support growth, social cohesion and equity.
2. **Implement the European Union Anti-Poverty Strategy:** Establish processes involving national poverty co-ordinators, social partners and civil society partners to implement the European Union Anti-Poverty Strategy in ways that are legally binding, aiming for equal opportunities and access to the labour market, fair working conditions, and social protection and inclusion with the overarching goal of poverty eradication by 2050.
3. **Strengthen Welfare Systems:** Governments need to step up investment in social protection schemes to tackle inequalities, administrative barriers and systematic underutilisation within present systems. This will be vital to strengthening social cohesion as European societies grow more diverse, experience demographic ageing and adapt to a less stable global context marked by climate change, trade instability and conflict as well as the accelerating impact of digitisation, automation and AI.
4. **Adopt Effective Labour Market Measures:** Activation measures supporting unemployed people, including particularly young people, NEETs and the long-term unemployed, aiming to maintain and develop appropriate skills. These can be supported by enhanced mechanisms, including targeted Job Guarantees for the long-term unemployed such as those successfully operating in France and recently piloted in the cities of Marienthal (Austria), Berlin and Groningen (see above). Proactive engagement of vulnerable groups as opposed to welfare sanctioning or more onerous conditionality underlies such programmers, as does a focus on income security and in-work poverty.
5. **Tackle Low Pay by supporting the Living Wage concept and moving toward a Basic Income System:** Start to tackle low-paid employment by supporting the widespread adoption of the Living Wage, including giving public recognition to organisations (including SMEs) that commit to paying the Living Wage, and consider moving toward a basic income system. Here, successful Basic Income pilots in Finland (2017-18), Utrecht (2018-19) and Wales (2022-25) along with ongoing sectoral schemes such as the Basic Income for Artists scheme in Ireland (2022-) represent innovative models of income support which have served to undermine many of the arguments typically associated with opposition to such schemes i.e. financial sustainability, poor targeting, incentives to work, moral hazard etc. On the contrary, these schemes reduce administrative burdens and barrier to access while being highly affective at reducing poverty and child poverty among at risk groups.
6. **Develop Sustainable Approaches to taxation:** Sustainable and inclusive growth requires approaches to raising revenue that generate enough to support vital services and to move to a social investment approach (where that is absent or insufficiently realised). Measures should not disproportionately negatively affect low income groups, which means, amongst other things, avoiding increases in indirect taxes on essential items. In the wake of a growing movement for stronger taxation of capital alongside labour (Piketty, 2014), the OECD (2024c) has argued that well-designed taxes on capital gains, inheritance and wealth, alongside anti-tax avoidance measures including Base Erosion and Profit Shifting, can improve the sustainability of public finances. Closing tax loopholes, diversifying the tax base including taxes on capital and wealth, and updating and co-ordinating national tax codes are vital to ensuring the continued public investment

required to support inclusive growth and poverty reduction.

7. **Tackle Tax Evasion**: Tax evasion and the grey economy are a particular problem in some countries where a disproportionate burden falls on compliant tax-payers. Tax evasion must be tackled and fair taxation systems introduced in which all sectors of society, including the corporate sector, contribute a fair share and those who can afford to do pay more. This is vital in the current era of crypto currencies, digital commodities and E-Money Tokens. The ECB (2025a) estimates that 9.7 per cent of EU adults have owned or own crypto assets valued at 75 billion euro. The EU's DAC8 rules effective January 2026 provides a framework for Member States to register and report all crypto-asset transactions of EU-resident users. Member States need to build on this framework to ensure regulation keeps up with global developments and tax codes impede the growth of crypto to facilitate tax evasion and the black economy.
8. **Consider how Government could become an employer of last resort**: As exposure to a more unstable global economy intensifies and new technologies impact the labour market, European governments should consider being an employer of last resort through voluntary programmes framed so as not to distort the market economy. This might follow the example of existing Job Guarantee schemes as noted above (see point 4) or provide state subsidised employment as a voluntary 'fall back' option in the not-for-profit sector along the lines of the Danish Flexjob scheme, Sweden's state-financed Samhall AB or Ireland's Community Employment scheme.
9. **Ensure Inclusive Governance:** Engage with key stakeholders to ensure that groups at risk of poverty and social exclusion, and unemployed people can influence policy-direction and implementation, and that their experiences become part of the dialogue with European institutions to try and repair social cohesion and political legitimacy. As stated above, the active participation of those who have experienced poverty in the design, implementation and monitoring of national anti-poverty schemes has been widely recognised as being essential to their effectiveness. At a national level, there remain several outstanding models for the 'co-production' of anti-poverty initiatives in Europe, including the ATD Fourth World's *Savoirs de Croisement* (Merging of Knowledge) model as implemented through Conseil National des Politiques de Lutte Contre la Pauvreté et L'exclusion Sociale, Belgium's 'permanent dialogue' system and Scotland's Experience Panels (2017-2020) and Poverty Truth Commission (2009-).
10. **Poverty Proofing and Monitoring**: All Government decisions should be subject to a poverty-proofing process that ensures actions taken will not increase poverty under any heading or cumulatively impact negatively on any particular groups. In keeping in best practice as outlined by the OECD (2024d; 2025i) and reflected in the EUAPS, assessments should adopt a whole-of-government and life-course perspective, analysing long-term social, economic and wellbeing impacts rather than focusing solely on short-term fiscal savings. Governments should utilise microsimulation and macroeconomic modelling to evaluate the distributional effects of proposed policy changes and present their findings in a transparent and accountable manner.
11. **Avail of the social investment aspects of the programming of EU funds** to fund measures that address the social situation, including support for initiatives set out in the EUAPS and allied programmes such as the European Child Guarantee. Effective absorption of EU Structural and Cohesion Funds ran to 94.4 per cent of funds for the 2014-2020 MFF by 2023; yet as the European Court of Auditors (2025) have shown, it is delayed rather than non-absorption of funds which has most commonly impeded their effective usage, stemming from a lack of pre-planning, late approval, weak national administrative capacity, and end-of-period pressure to spend unused funds. Robust institutions, forward planning and efficient and timely working are thus essential prerequisites to garnering the full benefits of an expanded EU budget.

12. **Commit to appropriate regional strategies** that ensure that investment is balanced between the regions and territories, with due regard to sub-regional areas, aiming to ensure that rural development policy is underpinned by goals of social, economic and environmental wellbeing. Recent OECD (2025j), IMF (2021b) and World Bank (2022a) studies agree effective regional investment requires a robust 'place-based' approach to development. This approach takes cognisance of national and international political economies, assessing how particular growth models generate and reproduce disparities – 'winners' and 'losers' - in geographical, social and environmental terms. Yet only a state co-ordinating with peers and international bodies to pursue a regional policy informed by a long-term structural perspective can hope to realistically mitigate or reverse entrenched patterns of territorial inequality. Such action remains essential to protecting the integrity of European democracy in the long term.

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Chapter 9

9 Glossary

The **S80/S20 ratio** (also known as the **income quintile share ratio**) is a measure of the inequality of income distribution. It is calculated as the ratio of total income received by the 20 per cent of the population with the highest income (the top quintile) to that received by the 20 per cent of the population with the lowest income (the bottom quintile). The calculation is based on **equivalised disposable income,** which is the total income of a household after tax and other deductions, that is available for spending or saving, divided by the number of household members converted into equalised adults; household members are equalised or made equivalent by weighting each according to their age.

GINI Coefficient – The Gini coefficient is defined as the relationship of cumulative shares of the population arranged according to the level of equivalised disposable income, to the cumulative share of the equivalised total disposable income received by them.

European Pillar of Social Rights – Adopted in 2017, the Pillar outlines 20 principles and rights designed to create a fairer and more inclusive social Europe. It aims to improve living and working conditions for citizens across the EU, with a focus on equal opportunities, fair working conditions, and social protection and inclusion.

European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan – Adopted in 2021, the Action Plan sets out a roadmap for implementing the 20 principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights by 2030. It establishes headline targets on employment, skills and poverty reduction, while promoting coordinated action by EU institutions and Member States to strengthen social rights and inclusive growth.

European Union Anti-Poverty Strategy – Launched in 2026, the Strategy provides the EU's first comprehensive framework for preventing and reducing poverty and social exclusion. It brings together measures on adequate incomes, access to essential services, social inclusion and equal opportunities, with the aim of ensuring that no one is left behind in Europe's social and economic transition.

European Semester - A yearly cycle of economic policy coordination which involves the European Commission undertaking a detailed analysis of EU Member States' programmes of economic and structural reforms and provides them with recommendations for the next 12-18 months. The European semester starts when the Commission adopts its Annual Growth Survey, usually towards the end of the year, which sets out EU priorities for the coming year. For more: http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/making-it-happen/index_en.htm

Eurostat – the statistical office of the European Union

GDP - Gross domestic product, which is a measure of the economic activity, defined as the value of all goods and services produced less the value of any goods or services used in their creation (Eurostat, tec00115)

Household disposable income is established by Eurostat by summing up all monetary incomes received from any source by each member of the household (including income from work, investment and social benefits) — plus income received at the household level — and deducting taxes and social contributions paid. In order to reflect differences in household size and composition, this total is divided by the number of 'equivalent adults' using a standard (equivalence) scale, which attributes a weight of 1.0 to the first adult in the household, a weight of 0.5 to each subsequent member of the household aged 14 and over, and a weight of 0.3 to household members aged less than 14. The resulting figure is called equivalised disposable income and is attributed to each member of the household. For a lone-person household it is equal to household income. For a household comprising more than one person, it is an indicator of the household income that would be needed by a lone person household to enjoy the same level of economic wellbeing. Source: Eurostat Statistics Explained: Living Standards Statistics: http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Living_standard_statistics

In work at risk of poverty rate (or working poor) - The share of employed persons of 18 years or over with an equivalised disposable income below the risk-of-poverty threshold, which is set at 60 per cent of the national median equivalised disposable income (after social transfers) (Eurostat, tsdsc320)

NEET rate - The indicator on young people neither in employment nor in education and training (NEET) corresponds to the percentage of the population of a given age group not employed and not involved in further education or training (Eurostat, explanatory text, Code:yth_empl-150)

OECD - The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, which has 34 member countries.

People at risk-of-poverty - Persons with an equivalised disposable income below the risk-of-poverty threshold, which is often set at 60 per cent of the national median equivalised disposable income (after social transfers) (Eurostat, ilc_di03). The 60 per cent threshold is adopted in the Europe 2020 Strategy. It is also possible to examine incomes at other thresholds such as 40 per cent, 50 per cent or 70 per cent.

People at Risk of poverty or social exclusion - The Europe 2020 strategy promotes social inclusion by aiming to lift at least 20 million people out of the 'risk of poverty and social exclusion'. This indicator corresponds to the sum of persons who are: (1) at risk of poverty or (2) severely materially deprived or (3) living in households with very low work intensity. Persons are only counted once even if they are present in several sub-indicators. (Eurostat, ilc_lvhl13)

Severe Material deprivation – Severely materially deprived people have living conditions severely constrained by a lack of resources, they experience at least 4 out of 9 following deprivations items: cannot afford i) to pay rent or utility bills, ii) to keep home adequately warm, iii) to face unexpected expenses, iv) to eat meat, fish or a protein equivalent every second day, v) a week holiday away from home, vi) a car, vii) a washing machine, viii) a colour TV, or ix) a telephone (Eurostat, Ilc_mddd11).

Very Low Work Intensity – People living in households with very low work intensity are those aged 0-59 living in households where the adults (aged 18-59) work less than 20 per cent of their total work potential during the past year (Eurostat, ilc_lvhl11).

10 Statistical Issues

EU composition: The composition of the EU referred to in this report relates to the current 27 Member States. While all Member States participate in the Single Market, 20 countries have adopted the euro as their common currency, forming the euro area or Eurozone, and 29 countries (including four non-EU states) participate in the Schengen Area, which allows passport-free travel across most of Europe.

Series breaks: From 2020 on, the EU-Labour Force Survey has been integrated into the newly designed German micro-census as a subsample, creating a break with previous data series for Germany.[18] Whereas past report referred to the measure 'Severe Material Deprivation' (Eurostat ilc_mdd11) current and future reports utilise the 'Severe Material and Social Deprivation' (Eurostat ilc_mdsd11).

Time lag: The main source of comparable data on poverty and social exclusion, the EU Survey on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC), has a significant time-lag. Most of the data available for this report relates to 2023 and 2024 being the latest years for which Europe-wide data are available as we prepare this report. Data from any given year relates to data collected during the previous year. Thus, there is virtually a two year time lag in the data and the most recent data available does not give the latest picture.

Indicators: Another important point relative to the data presented here is that there are different approaches to the measurement of poverty and social exclusion. Under the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan (EPSRAP) headline targets have been set for reductions in poverty or social exclusion. The indicator, 'poverty or social exclusion' is based on a combination of three individual indicators:

(1) **Employment Target:** The employment target aims to ensure that at least 78 per cent of people aged 20–64 are in employment by 2030. It focuses on increasing labour market participation, improving job quality, reducing gender and age employment gaps, supporting the integration of disadvantaged groups, and creating more resilient labour markets capable of responding to economic, technological and demographic change.

(2) **Skills Target:** The skills target seeks to ensure that at least 60 per cent of adults participate in training every year by 2030. It promotes lifelong learning, digital and green skills, and improved access to education and vocational training. The objective is to equip people with the knowledge and competencies needed to adapt to technological change, support innovation and improve employability throughout their working lives.

(3) **Poverty Reduction Target:** The poverty reduction target aims to reduce the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion by at least 15 million by 2030, including at least 5 million children. It supports measures to improve adequate incomes, expand access to quality employment and essential services, strengthen social protection systems, and promote social inclusion to ensure that economic growth benefits everyone.

[18] https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/10186/6246844/LFS-2020-Note-on-German-data.pdf

In addition to these headline targets, the recently launched EU Anti-Poverty Strategy contains the following overarching goal to 2050:

(1) Eradicating Poverty– The EU Anti-Poverty Strategy sets the long-term ambition of eradicating poverty across the European Union by 2050. It seeks to achieve this through coordinated action to strengthen social protection, ensure adequate minimum incomes, expand access to quality employment and essential services, tackle child poverty and homelessness, and promote inclusive economic growth so that everyone can participate fully in society and live with dignity.

Relative Poverty: The first of the three indicators used in the Europe 2020 Strategy, 'at risk of poverty,' is a relative income poverty threshold, which means that it is used to assess poverty levels relative to the national median income, something that relates it to local conditions and that shifts in line with changes in general income/salary levels. It is also recognised that because relative poverty measures are related to current median (or middle, not average) income, it can be difficult to interpret at a time when the incomes of all households start to decline or rise (that is, during recessions or recoveries). In fact, where the incomes of all households fall in a recession, but they fall by less at the bottom than at the middle, relative poverty can actually decline. This can mask or delay the full picture of poverty emerging.

Comparable Data: There can occasionally be slight differences of definition and differences of interpretation between national bodies and Eurostat. Using the figures from Eurostat makes it possible to compare like with like across countries.