

# Comparison of European Union Countries Using Poverty and Social Exclusion Indicators

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**Abstract** – This paper analyses European Union countries based on indicators related to poverty and social exclusion – specifically, the at-risk-of-poverty rate, the severe material and social deprivation rate, and the very low work intensity rate. The aim of the paper is to rank the countries from best to worst according to these indicators and to determine whether the COVID-19 pandemic had an impact. The analyzed period includes the year before the pandemic (2019) and the year after the pandemic (2023). Simple multidimensional comparison methods will be used to rank the countries, including the ranking method, the scoring method, the standardized variable method, and the distance from a fictional object method. In both analyzed years, the Czech Republic ranked the highest, followed by Slovenia and Austria. The last-ranked countries were Bulgaria, Greece and Spain. The formulated hypothesis – that the level of poverty and social exclusion in EU countries was worse in 2023 compared to 2019 was not confirmed.

**Keywords** – Poverty and social exclusion, simple multidimensional comparison methods, European Union countries.

## 1. Introduction

Poverty is a serious individual and societal issue and one of the obstacles to the realization of human rights. It deprives individuals of freedom and opportunities, affecting both their present and future, life goals, and achievements. Poverty has multiple dimensions. In addition to insufficient income and a lack of material resources, the poor experience and various other disadvantages. Poverty is associated with exclusion from access to fundamental rights such as housing, healthcare, social care, education, employment, and social protection. It also leads to exclusion from participation in cultural and sports activities and decision-making on public matters.

The goal of this article is to rank EU countries from best to worst based on selected indicators of poverty and social exclusion in the year before the pandemic (2019) and the year after the pandemic (2023). Another objective is to determine whether the pandemic influenced the ranking of countries. Therefore, the hypothesis is that poverty and social exclusion levels in the European Union member states were worse in 2023 compared to 2019.

The key indicators of poverty and social exclusion monitored according to Eurostat methodology include [1]:

- The at-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion rate,
- The at-risk-of-poverty rate,
- The severe material and social deprivation rate,
- The very low work intensity rate.

**The at-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion rate (AROPE)** represents the main indicator used to monitor the EU 2030 target concerning poverty and social exclusion. It indicates the percentage of individuals at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Social exclusion refers to unequal access to basic societal resources such as employment, education, housing, healthcare, and social protection. For an individual, this refers to a situation in which even their basic living needs are not satisfied, and they are simultaneously excluded from activities and relationships in which the majority of society around them participates.

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DOI: 10.18421/TEM151-40

<https://doi.org/10.18421/TEM151-40>


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Received: 11 March 2025.

Revised: 23 April 2025.

Accepted: 26 January 2026.

Published: 27 February 2026.

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This indicator consists of three sub-metrics – the at-risk-of-poverty rate, the severe material and social deprivation rate and the very low work intensity rate.

**The at-risk-of-poverty rate** indicates the percentage of individuals in the population whose equivalized disposable income is under the poverty-risk line. The at-risk-of-poverty line corresponds to 60% of the median equivalized disposable income in a country. According to [2] the equivalent household disposable income is calculated by dividing a household's disposable income by its equivalent household size. For the calculation of the household equivalized size, the so-called modified OECD scale is used in the EU-SILC survey. According to this scale, the first adult household member is assigned a coefficient of 1, each additional member aged 14 and over is assigned a coefficient of 0.5, and each person under 14 years of age is assigned a coefficient of 0.3.

**The severe material and social deprivation rate** - Represents the proportion of the total population experiencing enforced deprivation in at least 7 of the 13 items on the updated list of material and social deprivation.

Household-level material and social deprivation items:

- Coping with unexpected expenses,
- Affording a weekly holiday away from home,
- Paying arrears on mortgage, rent, utilities, or other loans,
- Having a meal with meat, chicken, fish, or a vegetarian equivalent every other day,
- Maintaining adequate heating at home
- Owning a personal car,
- Replacing worn-out furniture.
- Ability to cover unexpected expenses,

Individual-level material and social deprivation items:

- Access to the internet,
- Replacing worn-out clothing with new items,
- Ownership of two pairs of properly fitting shoes, including weather-appropriate footwear,
- Ability to spend a small amount of money on oneself weekly,
- Participation in regular leisure activities,
- Engaging in monthly social interactions with friends or family over a meal or a drink.

**Very low work intensity rate:** Represents the proportion of individuals aged 0–64 residing in households in which members of working age have completed less than 20% of their total annual work capacity during the preceding year. The reference population has been adjusted to exclude retirees and students.

The measurement of poverty and social exclusion in the EU is carried out within the context of the Europe 2030 Strategy. The reduction of poverty is considered a primary objective of the European Commission's action plan for enforcing the European Pillar of Social Rights. It is proposed to incorporate three ambitious goals into this plan [3]:

- Achieve a 50% reduction in the proportion of people at risk of poverty by 2030,
- Guarantee access for children to education, preschool care, adequate nutrition, housing, and healthcare, and support families with a dignified income, work, and benefit entitlements,
- Develop a new legally binding tool for EU minimum income systems to guarantee adequacy and harmonized implementation among Member States.

Recent empirical research confirms that poverty and material deprivation in the European Union are multidimensional phenomena characterized by strong cross-country and regional disparities. A clear divide between older and newer EU Member States is consistently identified, with Bulgaria and Romania among the most deprived countries and Western and Nordic countries performing best [4]. Cluster-based analyses further reveal persistent groups of low- and high-poverty countries across the EU, confirming the structural nature of poverty patterns [5].

In Central and Eastern Europe, poverty is shown to be closely linked to education and labor market outcomes, with digital skills playing a crucial role in reducing poverty risks [6]. Extending the concept beyond income poverty, recent studies also highlight substantial cross-country and regional disparities in energy poverty, largely driven by national policy frameworks rather than regional characteristics [7]. Moreover, the effectiveness of economic growth and social benefits in reducing poverty differs markedly across welfare regimes, particularly between Scandinavian and Baltic countries [8].

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, one in five individuals in the EU faced the risk of poverty and social exclusion, which regards as a failure of developed European societies [3].

Overall, the literature highlights persistent structural inequalities within the EU and underlines the importance of multidimensional monitoring and targeted social policies.

## 2. Methodology

To rank European Union countries based on selected poverty and social exclusion indicators, simple methods of multidimensional comparison are used. These methods allow us to replace several indicators used for ranking countries with a single quantitative integral indicator.

Two types of variables are distinguished – stimulants (an increase in their values is positive) and destimulants (a decrease in their values is positive). In our case, all three selected indicators are destimulants.

There are four basic methods of multidimensional comparison – the ranking method, the scoring method, the standardized variable method and the distance from a fictitious object method.

### 2.1. Ranking Method

The ranking method is the simplest approach. Countries are ranked based on the values of a given indicator. For destimulants, the country with the lowest value receives the highest rank (in case of this paper 27, as 27 EU countries are compared). The country with the highest value receives a rank of 1. This process is repeated for all indicators [9].

Once the rankings for all indicators are determined, the simple arithmetic mean (average ranking) is calculated:

$$d_i = \frac{1}{k} \sum_{j=1}^k z_{ij} \quad (1)$$

where:  $d_i$  is integral indicator,  
 $k$  is the number of indicators,  
 $z_{ij}$  is the ranking of measure  $j$  in country  $i$ .

Based on the values of the integral metric, the final ranking is determined – the country with the highest integral indicator value is ranked first and the country with the lowest integral indicator value is ranked last.

In the literature, this method is commonly referred to as Weighted Sum Model (WSM). WSM is likely the most widely used method, particularly for single-dimensional problems, as it relies on the additive utility assumption, meaning an alternative's total value is the sum of weighted criteria. While WSM works well when all units are the same, challenges arise when applying it to multi-dimensional decision-making problems [10].

The study of [11] employs the Weighted Sum Model with equal performance and entropy weighting methods to assess the technical, environmental, and economic aspects of recycling concrete in sustainable construction. The Weighted Sum Model was utilized to forecast the trend of improvements in product quality [12].

### 2.2. Scoring Method

In this method, the values of individual variables are replaced with a corresponding number of points on a scale from 0 to 100. For each indicator, the country where the given destimulant variable has the lowest value is identified. This country receives 100 points for that indicator. Other countries receive between 0 and 100 points, depending on what percentage their value represents relative to the minimum value.

Points for each country are assigned using the following formula [9]:

$$z_{ij} = \frac{x_{min,j}}{x_{ij}} \cdot 100 \quad (2)$$

where:  $z_{ij}$  is the score for indicator  $j$  in country  $i$ ,  
 $x_{min,j}$  is the minimum value of indicator  $j$ ,  
 $x_{ij}$  is the value of metric  $j$  in country  $i$ .

The integral indicator is determined similarly to the ranking method, using the simple arithmetic mean of the total points obtained. The country with the highest integral indicator value is ranked first. The country with the lowest integral indicator value is ranked last.

In the literature, this method is commonly referred to as SAW (Simple Additive Weightage) and is described for example by [13]. It is a simple and a broadly employed method for multi-criteria decision-making (MCDM), particularly for less complex problems. SAW ranks alternatives by multiplying their scaled values with assigned weights and summing the results across all criteria, maintaining the proportional relationship of the original data. While SAW is valued for its simplicity, it has limitations, it does not account for fuzziness in expert judgments, is affected by self-assessment bias. Despite these drawbacks, SAW remains a foundational MCDM technique due to its ease of use.

An analysis of innovation policy in the EU transport sector, employing the Simple Additive Weighting (SAW) method was conducted for policy measure evaluation based on multiple criteria and determined their impact on fostering innovation in surface transport [14]. The progress of circular economy initiatives within EU countries highlighting disparities among member states [15].

### 2.3. Standardized Variable Method

In this method, the original indicators are transformed into a normalized form. In practice, one of the most commonly used normalization methods is standardization. For destimulant variables, the following formula is used [16]:

$$z_{ij} = \frac{\bar{x}_j - x_{ij}}{s_j} \quad (3)$$

where:  $z_{ij}$  is the standardized value of indicator  $j$  for country  $i$ ,  
 $\bar{x}_j$  is the mean value of measure  $j$ ,  
 $s_j$  is the standard deviation of metric  $j$ .

The composite indicator is again obtained by taking the simple arithmetic mean of the standardized values. As in previous methods, the country with the highest integral indicator value is ranked first, and the country with the lowest value is ranked last.

#### 2.4. Distance from a Fictitious Object Method

The essence of this method is the creation of a fictional (optimal) object  $O_0$ , where all destimulant indicators take their minimum values. Before applying this method, all indicator values are transformed into a normalized (standardized) form [17].

For each country, the average distance from this fictional object is calculated. The most commonly used measure is Euclidean distance, which serves as the integral indicator [16]:

$$d_i = \sqrt{\frac{1}{k} \sum_{j=1}^k (z_{ij} - z_{0j})^2} \quad (4)$$

where:  $z_{0j}$  is fictitious object of indicator  $j$ .

The closer a country is to the fictional object, the smaller its distance from it. The best-ranked country (rank 1) is the alternative exhibiting the minimum distance to the hypothetical object. The worst-ranked country (rank 27) is the one with the largest distance.

This method, often referred to in the literature as TOPSIS (Technique for Order of Preference by Similarity to Ideal Solution), represents a commonly applied MCDM method utilized at different levels of decision-making. As in [13] is explained, TOPSIS fundamentally seeks to select the best alternative by evaluating how close it is to the ideal solution and how far it is from the negative ideal. Alternatives are ranked according to their similarity to the ideal solution: the closer an alternative is to the ideal, the higher its rank. The development of logistics infrastructure across EU countries was evaluated via the TOPSIS method and compared the findings with those obtained through the VIKOR method [18].

The progress of eGovernment in EU countries was analyzed through the TOPSIS method, comparing results from 2013 and 2015 [19]. Institutional quality in EU countries from 2000 to 2015 was analyzed using a modified TOPSIS method with entropy-based weighting [20].

### 3. Results and Discussion

This section of the paper focuses on the comparison and ranking of European Union countries using three indicators – **at-risk-of-poverty rate, severe material and social deprivation rate and very low work intensity rate**, based on data from 2019 and 2023. The data are sourced from the website of the Statistical Office of the European Union – Eurostat [21], [22], [23].

The following graphs illustrate the values of the analyzed indicators for each EU country in 2019 and 2023. In all three graphs, the countries are ranked based on their 2023 values. The lowest and highest values in 2023 are highlighted, as well as the EU-27 average.

Figure 1 presents data on the percentage of people at risk of poverty in different EU countries in 2019 and 2023. In 2023, 16.2% of the population in the EU 27 was at risk of poverty. The lowest percentage was recorded in the Czech Republic (9.8%), while the highest was in Latvia (22.5%). The most significant decrease was observed in Belgium by 16.89%, whereas the largest increase was recorded in Slovakia by 20.17%. For the EU 27 as a whole, the rate decreased by 1.82%.

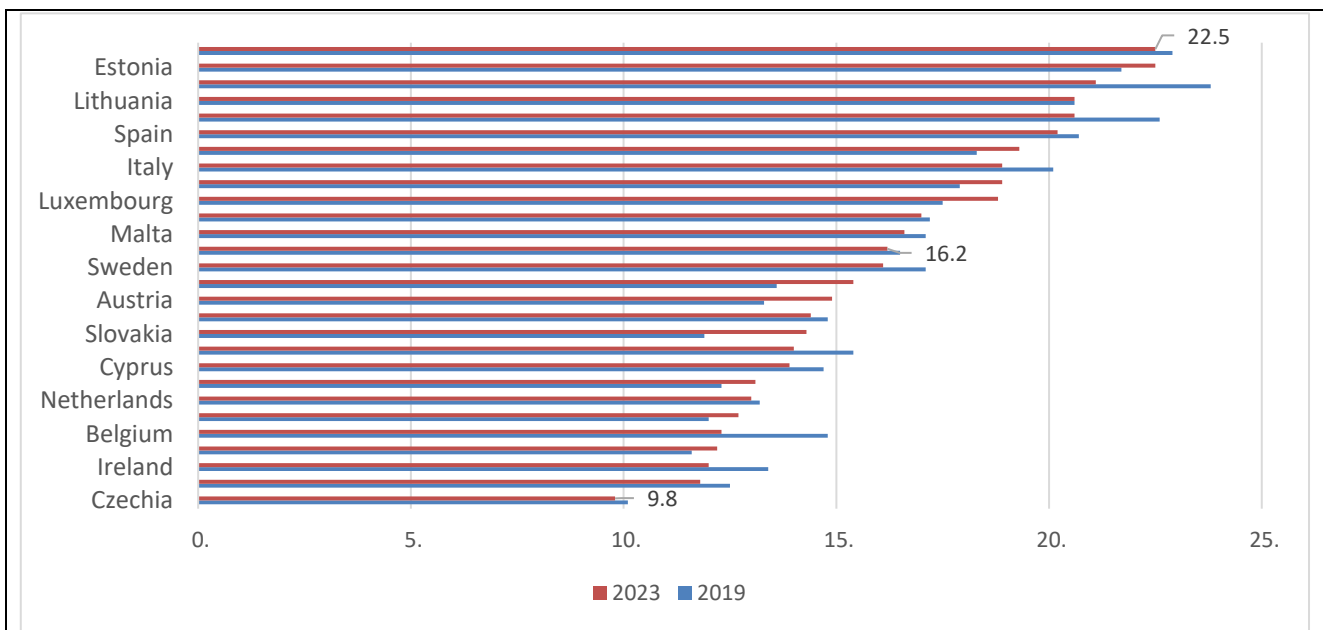


Figure 1. At risk of poverty rate in European Union countries in 2019 and 2023

Source: [21], own processing

Figure 2 provides data on the percentage of people experiencing severe material and social deprivation in various EU countries in 2019 and 2023. In 2023, 11.0% of the EU 27 population was affected by this phenomenon. The lowest percentage was found in the Czech Republic (4.3%), while the highest was in Romania (28.4%).

In most countries, this indicator declined, with the largest drop recorded in Lithuania by 37.57%. Conversely, the most significant increase in the percentage of people severe material and social deprived was observed in Sweden by 103.03%. For the EU 27, this indicator decreased by 4.35%.

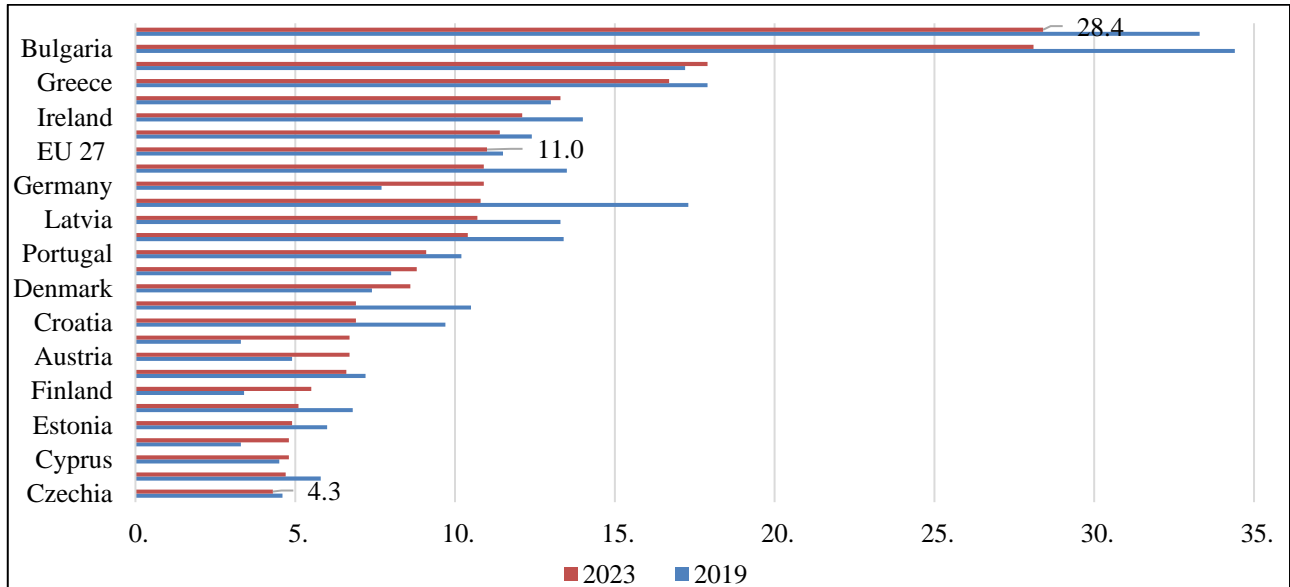


Figure 2. Severe material and social deprivation rate in European Union countries in 2019 and 2023  
Source: [22], own processing

Figure 3 illustrates the percentage of people living in households with very low work intensity in EU countries in 2019 and 2023. The results show that in 2023, 8% of the population in the EU 27 lived in such households. The lowest percentage was recorded in Malta (3.6%), while the highest was in Belgium (10.5%).

The largest decrease in this indicator was observed in Luxembourg by 43.48%, whereas the highest increase was recorded in Germany by 30.26%. In the EU 27, the value of this indicator remained unchanged.

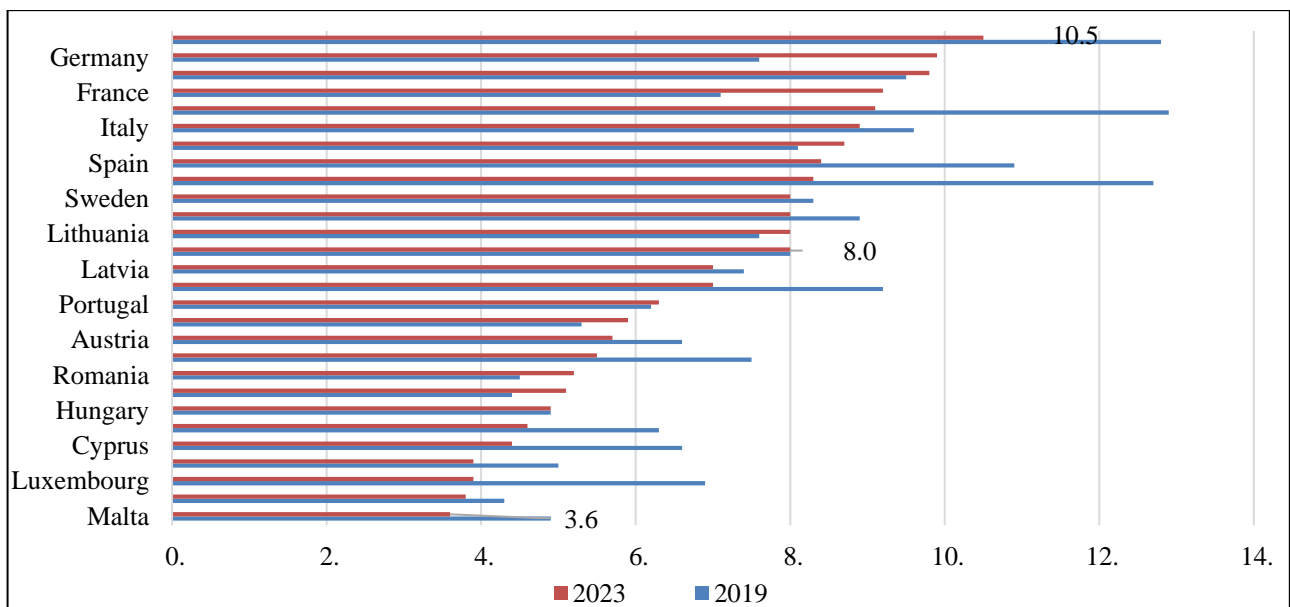


Figure 3. People living in households with very low work intensity in European Union countries in 2019 and 2023  
Source: [23], own processing

In the following graphs (Figure 4, Figure 5, Figure 6, and Figure 7), the order of European Union countries is displayed based on the calculated results values of the integral indicator in 2019 and 2023, using different methods.

Using the ranking method (Figure 4), in 2019, the top-ranked countries were the Czech Republic, Slovenia, and Finland, while the lowest-ranked were Bulgaria, Greece, and Spain. In 2023, the Czech Republic remained in first place, followed by Slovenia, while Cyprus ranked third. The lowest-ranked countries remained the same as in 2019, but in a different order - Spain ranked last, followed by Bulgaria and Greece.

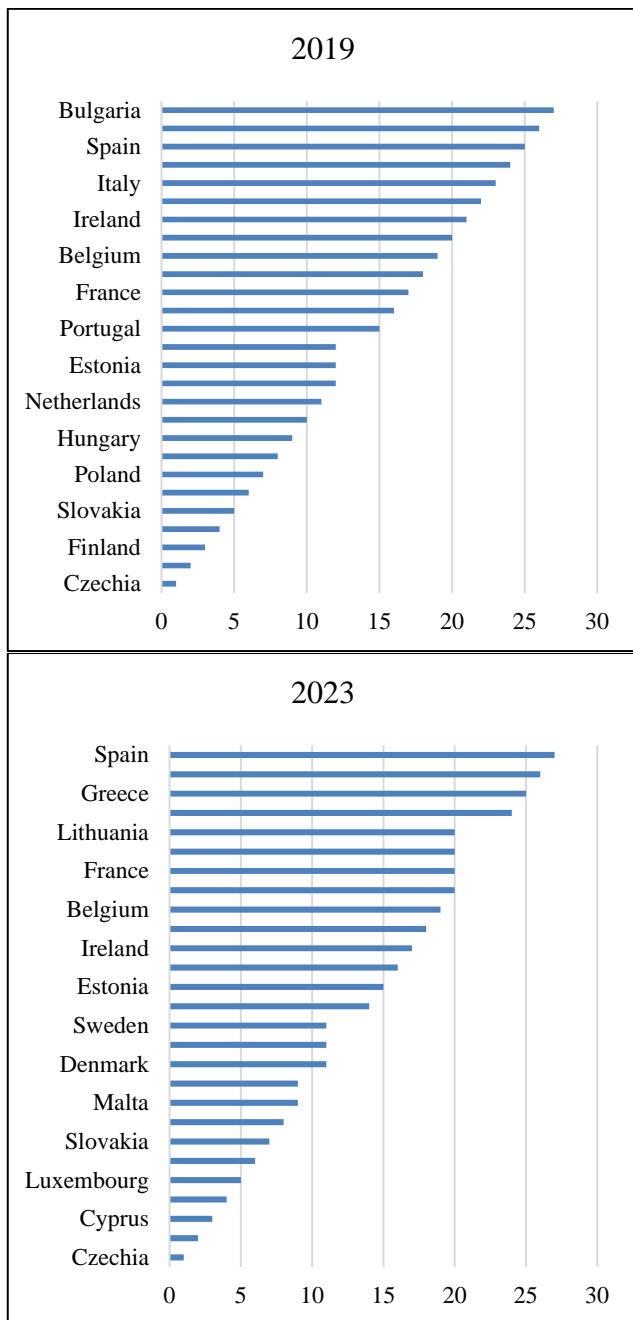


Figure 4. Countries order using order method in 2019 and 2023  
Source: Own processing

Based on the scoring method (Figure 5), the top three positions in both 2019 and 2023 were occupied by the Czech Republic, Slovenia, and Finland. The lowest-ranked countries were also the same in both analyzed years - Bulgaria, Greece, and Spain.

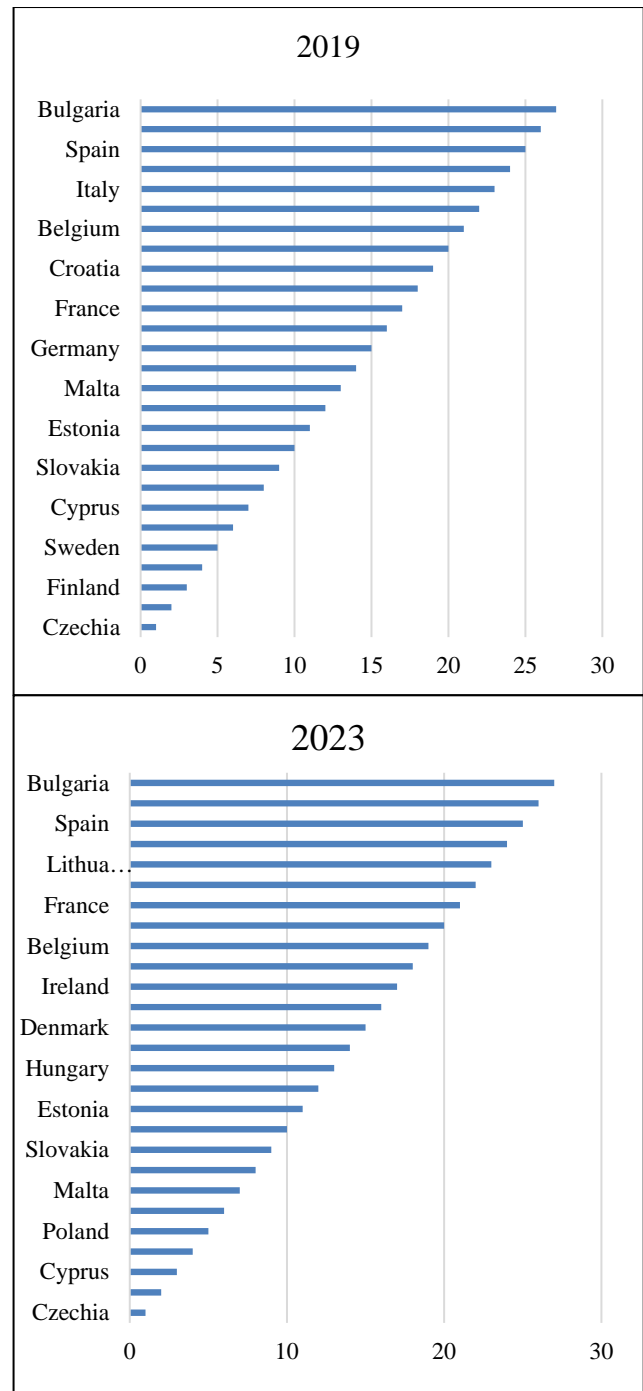


Figure 5. Countries order using scoring method in 2019 and 2023  
Source: Own processing

Using the normalized variable method (Figure 6), in 2019, the top-ranked countries were the Czech Republic, Slovenia, and Slovakia, while in 2023, the top three positions were held by the Czech Republic, Slovenia, and Cyprus. The lowest-ranked countries in both years were Bulgaria, Romania, and Greece.

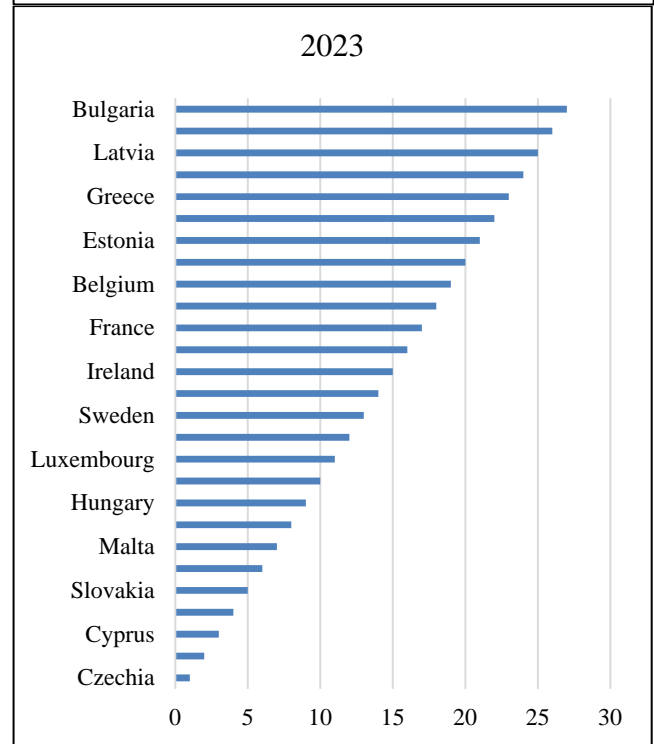
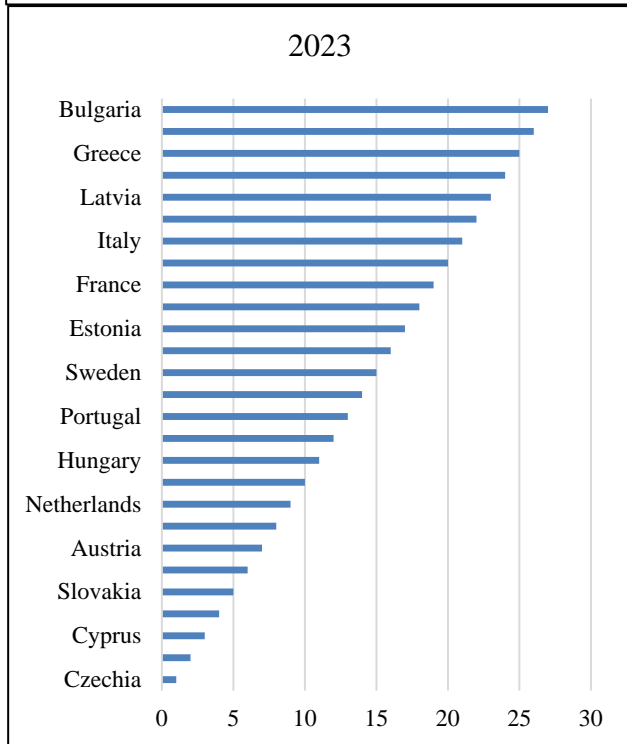
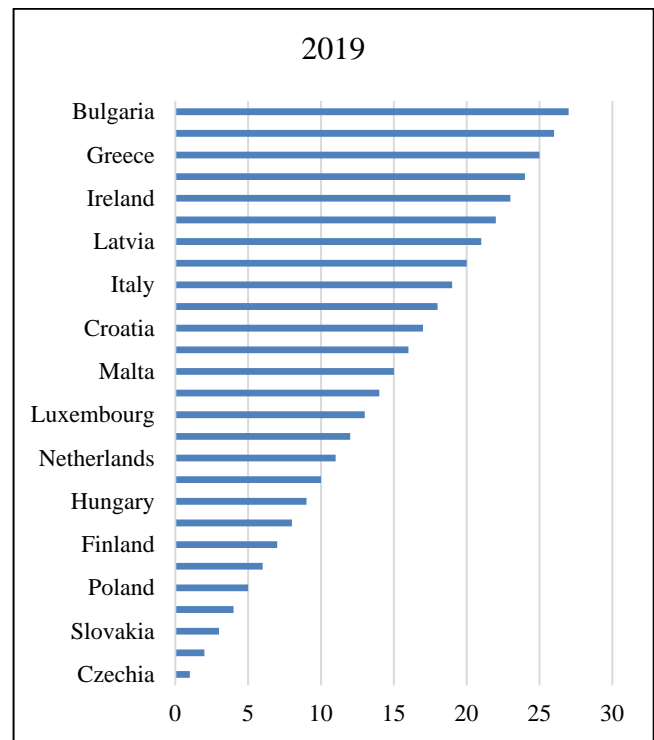
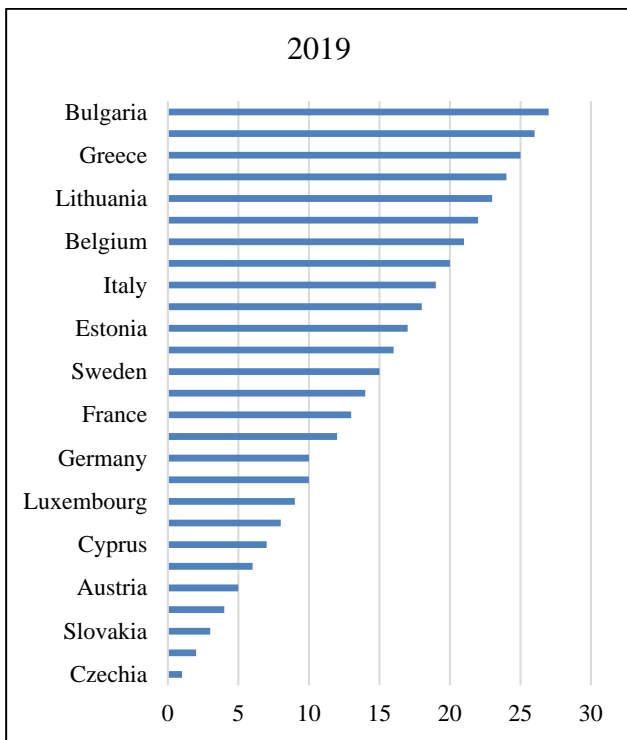


Figure 6. Countries order using standard variable method in 2019 and 2023  
Source: Own processing

Figure 7. Countries order using distance from a fictitious object method in 2019 and 2023  
Source: Own processing

Applying the distance from a fictional object method (Figure 7), the ranking of the top and bottom countries in 2019 was identical to that of the normalized variable method. The lowest-ranked countries in 2019 were Bulgaria, Romania, and Greece, while in 2023, they were Bulgaria, Romania, and Latvia.

According to the results of all four multidimensional comparison methods, the average ranking of EU countries was calculated based on indicators of poverty and social exclusion.

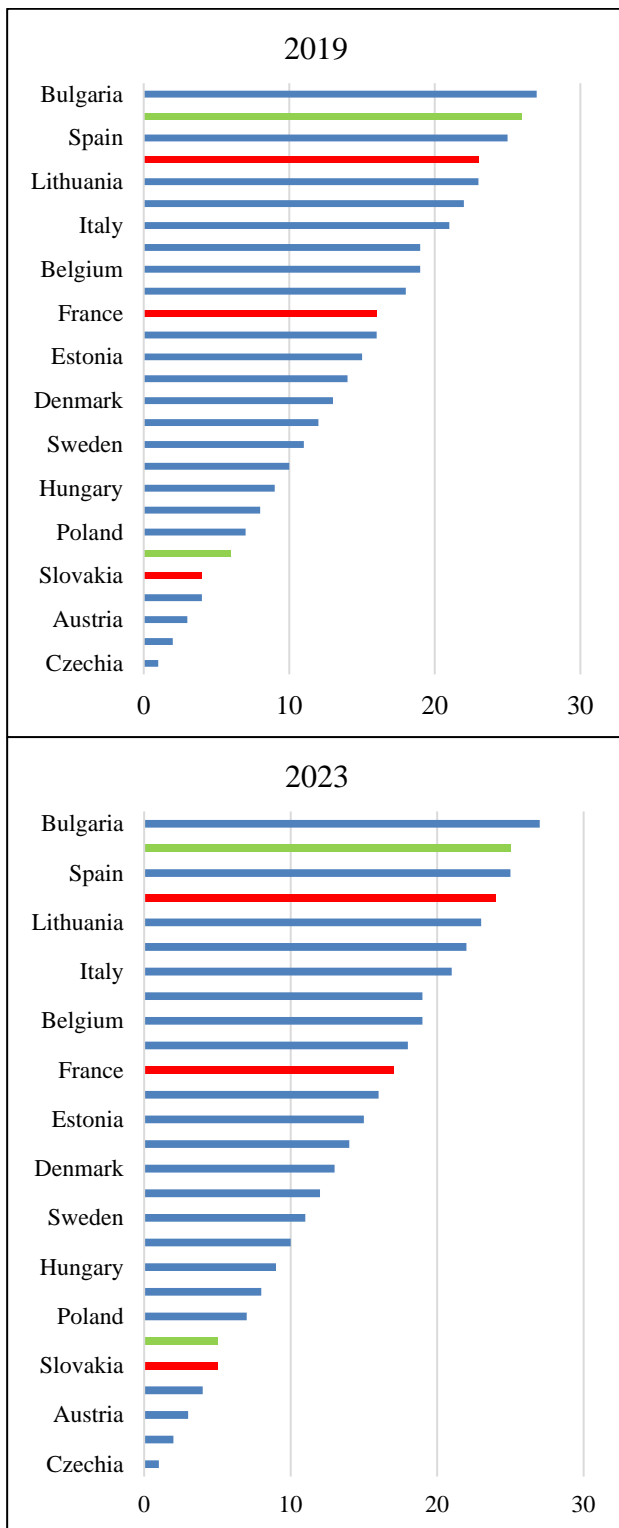


Figure 8. Average order of European Union countries in 2019 and 2023  
Source: Own processing

Figure 8 shows the ranking of EU countries based on their average position. In both analyzed years, the Czech Republic ranked the highest, followed by Slovenia in second place and Austria in third. The ranking of the lowest positions also remained unchanged in both 2019 and 2023 - Bulgaria ranked last, followed by Greece and Spain.

The results show that in nearly all countries, there was no change in ranking between 2019 and 2023. Only in a few highlighted countries did the ranking shift, but it was only by one position. Countries where the ranking worsened are marked in red (Slovakia, France, and Romania), while those that improved by one position are marked in green (Finland and Greece).

#### 4. Conclusion

Based on the conducted analyses, the following conclusions are drawn:

The at-risk-of-poverty rate was the lowest in 2023 in the Czech Republic, at 9.8%, while the highest percentage of people at risk of poverty was in Lithuania (22.5%). In the EU 27, this rate was 16.2%. When comparing 2019 and 2023, the highest decrease in the at-risk-of-poverty rate was observed in Belgium by 16.89%. The most significant increase in the percentage of people at risk of poverty was recorded in Slovakia, rising by 20.17%. In the EU 27, this indicator decreased by 1.82%.

The severe material and social deprivation rate in 2023 were also the lowest in the Czech Republic (4.3%), while the highest was in Romania (28.4%). In the EU 27, 11% of the population was affected by this phenomenon. When comparing 2023 to 2019, the most significant decrease in this indicator was recorded in Lithuania by 37.57%. The highest increase was observed in Sweden by 103.03%. In the EU 27, the percentage of people experiencing severe material and social deprivation declined by 4.35%.

The very low work intensity rate was the lowest in 2023 in Malta (3.6%) and the highest in Belgium (10.5%). In the EU 27, this rate was 8%. This indicator decreased the most in Luxembourg in 2023 compared to 2019, with a decline of 43.48%, while it increased the most in Germany by 30.26%. In the EU 27, its value remained unchanged.

The first objective was to rank the EU countries from best to worst based on the three previously mentioned indicators of poverty and social exclusion in 2019 and 2023 using simple multidimensional comparison methods. In both analyzed years, the Czech Republic ranked the highest, followed by Slovenia in second place and Austria in third. There was also no change in the last-ranked countries in 2019 and 2023. Bulgaria ranked last, followed by Greece and Spain.

Since the ranking of almost all analyzed countries remained unchanged between 2019 and 2023, it concluded that our formulated hypothesis that the level of poverty and social exclusion in EU countries was worse in 2023 compared to 2019 – was not confirmed. This indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic did not substantially influence poverty and social exclusion in EU member states.

## Acknowledgments

This research was supported by the Grant Agency of Slovak Republic [VEGA grant number 1/0285/24 The Impact of Inflation on Poverty and Social Exclusion in Slovakia and the EU, VEGA grant number 1/0047/23 The importance of spatial spillover effects in the context of the EU's greener and carbon-free Europe priority].

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