

Social Justice in the Countries of Central and Eastern Europe

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Abstract

The article aims to compare the level of social justice in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) in terms of the individual indicators that constitute the Social Justice Index and to determine their level of convergence with the European Union average. The paper also describes changes in this area of social justice in recent years and examines the relationship between social justice and industrial democracy. The analysis was based on statistical data from Eurostat and the results of a study conducted by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, the European Institute for Gender Equality, and the Legatum Institute. The findings show that Romania achieves the worst results in most indicators in the Social Justice Index, but many of them have improved significantly in recent years. Slovenia, Czechia and Slovakia are the most successful in preventing poverty and equalising income. The degree of gender equality in all CEE countries was lower than the EU27 average. Finally, CEE countries that promote social dialogue and employee participation rights also have higher levels of social justice.

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Introduction

Justice is one of the most important ethical and moral values. Sociologists, economists, psychologists, lawyers, and politicians have participated in discussions around this concept (Rosner 2022). While justice and social justice are areas of academic research and subjects of theoretical work, they are ambiguous and vague concepts (Wilkin 2023). Some studies have focused on general aspects, such as equality and freedom (Sen 2000; Rawls 2009); others have dealt with specific aspects, such as happiness (Di Martino and Prilleltensky 2019), while still others have discussed the relationship between efficiency and justice (Okun 1975; Stiglitz 2004). As Rosner (2022, pp. 17–20) points out, apart from social justice, the typology based on the distinction of the sphere of reality that justice concerns also points to historical justice, international justice, and territorial justice.

Research in the area of social justice has also been conducted by Bertelsmann Stiftung, which developed the Social Justice Index (SJI) and has been publishing rankings of EU countries since 2009. In the latest report (Hellmann, Schmidt, and Heller 2019), the index includes not only the EU but also OECD member states. The index groups 46 indicators into six subdimensions: poverty prevention, access to education, labour market inclusion, social cohesion and non-discrimination, health, and intergenerational justice. In this paper, another SJI is analysed, which is a component of the Industrial Relations Index (IRI) developed by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound). The other components (dimensions) of the IRI are industrial democracy, industrial competitiveness, and quality of work and employment.

Eurofound's 2023 report presents only aggregate results of the SJI and its three subdimensions in EU countries for 2018–2021¹. Therefore, the main aim of this paper is to compare the level of social justice in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) in terms of the individual indicators that constitute the SJI and to determine their level of convergence with the EU average. The paper also details changes in this area in recent years and examines the relationship between social justice and industrial democracy, which is the author's main research area. The CEE countries share a common past, including post-communist transformation and accession to the European Union (EU). After joining the EU, these countries recorded dynamic economic growth and significant improvement in labour standards, supported by institutional reforms and the development of forms of employee participation. However, differences between the CEE countries in terms of industrial relations and the level of social justice – including poverty rates and income inequality – remain significant. This is mainly due to differences in the pace of economic development, the effectiveness of implementing social policies and institutional reforms, and political factors (Kohl 2015; Skorupińska-Cieślak 2018; Görkey 2022; Nae, Florescu, and Bălăsoiu 2024).

To achieve the research purpose, the paper analyses the subject literature, data collected by the European Statistical Office (Eurostat), and results of studies conducted by the European Institute for Gender Equality and Legatum Institute. The paper is divided into five sections.

1 The Eurofound report (2023) also shows four clusters of EU Member States based on an updated typology of industrial democracy and presents analyses of trends and patterns of change in industrial democracy.

Following the introduction, Section 2 presents a short review of the literature on the subject of justice and social justice. Section 3 analyses the scores for the IRI and its four dimensions in CEE countries. Section 4 compares the countries in individual indicators in the areas of poverty and income inequality, social cohesion and non-discrimination, as well as equality of opportunities in education. Finally, Section 5 provides the conclusions.

Social justice – literature review

The idea of justice occupies a key place in both ethics and legal philosophy, with people applying it to their individual actions, public policies, and the law (Miller 2017). In Christianity, justice is considered to be one of the four fundamental moral virtues (the “cardinal virtues”), alongside prudence, moderation, and fortitude. Smith (2004, pp. 93, 351) argued that justice, defined as discreet and prudent behaviour towards others, is the most important of all virtues, and a violation of justice is an injury. Moreover, he pointed out that “beneficence, therefore, is less essential to the existence of society than justice. Society may subsist, though not in the most comfortable state, without beneficence; but the prevalence of injustice must utterly destroy it” (Smith 2004, p. 101).

According to Sztumski (2010, p. 67), social justice is an attempt to concretise the idea of justice. It focuses on three important issues for individuals and for collective life, i.e. 1) equal opportunities in socio-economic and political life, 2) the fair distribution of goods, and 3) equality before the law. Social justice is often presented as a justification for changes in social policy, pointing to the need to reduce excessive social and economic inequalities (Rosner 2022, p. 18). The term *social justice* is related to other values such as equality, freedom, social welfare, and collective values (Goleński 2013).

In *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls (2009, p. 34) claims that “the fundamental subject of social justice is the basic structure of society, and more precisely the way in which the main social institutions distribute basic rights and duties and determine the distribution of benefits arising from social cooperation”. The main social institutions include a political constitution, basic economic arrangements, a competitive market, freedom of conscience, and a monogamous family. Rawls’s theory of justice is based on two basic principles. The first principle concerns the primacy of fundamental freedoms, while the second formulates the conditions under which socio-economic inequalities are permissible and fair (Przybyła 2006, p. 17).

The concept of justice developed by Sen and Nussbaum, by promoting the capability approach, challenges Rawls’ theory for failing to consider the needs of individuals and social groups, as well as the influences of social mentality (Miklaszewska 2014). This new vision of social justice is closely related to the promotion of happiness and well-being, proclaiming that capabilities are a means to an end. Capabilities represent a form of freedom that allows individuals to achieve valuable states of being and doing (Di Martino and Prilleltensky 2020, p. 1999).

Wilkin (2023, p. 28) considers social justice to be the most important type of justice, explaining that “what is fair and what is not is most often decided by the society or social group concerned...”. Meanwhile, Sztumski (2010, p. 66) points out the ambiguity and indeterminacy of both components of the term *social justice*. In contrast, Friedrich von Hayek, a prominent figure of the Austrian

school of economics, completely rejected this concept. He argued that the term *social justice* does not introduce any new values beyond those included in the traditional understanding of the concept of justice, and adding the term *social* undermines the values encapsulated in the conventional understanding of justice (Kaczmarczyk 2010).

The concept of social justice is also a key value on which social economics is based. Other important values in this field include the common good, solidarity, participation, social responsibility, dignity, social cohesion, and subsidiarity. Social economics and social entrepreneurship are terms for business activities that combine both social and economic goals. To operate in the market, social enterprises conduct basic economic activities and must have at least a few paid employees. Their social dimension is characterised by prioritising individual and social goals over profit. Profits should be used to maximise social benefits, such as community development or creating jobs for people at risk of social exclusion (Kielesińska 2015). Social economics entities often include entities that operate in the area of public benefit, such as associations and foundations, cooperatives that pursue social goals, and reintegration units whose main goal is the social and professional reintegration of people at risk of social exclusion.

Social justice as a key dimension of industrial relations

The Eurofound report entitled *Industrial relations' influence on convergence: A literature review* defines industrial relations as “the joint (tri/bi)-partite governance of the collective and individual employment relationship” (Eurofound 2022, p. 2). According to Salamon (1987), the term *industrial relations* can be interpreted in two ways. In a very narrow sense, it comprises only the formal collective relations between management and workers, implemented through trade unions. However, in a broader sense, it includes all relationships associated with employment, both informal agreements between the employee and the employer and formal institutional arrangements.

Based on the conceptual framework of the Eurofound report (2016), the Industrial Relations Index (IRI) was developed. The IRI assesses the quality of industrial relations systems in EU countries, identifying key features, as well as strengths and weaknesses. It comprises four main dimension indices² (industrial democracy, industrial competitiveness, quality of work and employment, and social justice), eleven sub-dimension indices and 53 indicators, each scored from 0 to 100, with higher scores indicating better performance³.

Industrial democracy is based on the autonomy of social partners and employees' rights to participate in and be represented in the management of employment relations. This dimension

2 These four dimensions have been weighted equally (0.25 for each). In terms of aggregation, the indicators were grouped, and the arithmetic mean created an index for each sub-dimension.

3 Compared to Eurofound's report *Measuring varieties of industrial relations in Europe: A quantitative analysis* (2018), the IRI has been updated with new indicators that aim to better capture key aspects of industrial relations and industrial democracy. The dimension that has changed the most in terms of indicators is quality of work and employment. In two dimensions, i.e. industrial competitiveness and social justice, changes in structure are insignificant.

comprises three subdimensions: (1) associational governance measured, among others, by the level of trade union density, employer organisation density, and collective bargaining coverage; (2) representation and participation rights at the company level; and (3) social dialogue at the company level.

The second dimension, i.e. industrial competitiveness, is associated with an economy characterised by sustained productivity growth. This dimension comprises four subdimensions: (1) productivity and growth, (2) market stability and efficiency, (3) sophistication of resources, (4) innovation and entrepreneurship.

The third dimension (job quality and employment) defines a set of employment and working conditions, which consists of four subdimensions: (1) career prospects and well-being, (2) employment security and skills development, and (3) work-life balance (Eurofound 2023).

Finally, social justice is a key dimension of industrial relations and a clear goal of industrial relations policy. It comprises three subdimensions: (1) poverty and income inequality, (2) social cohesion and non-discrimination, and (3) equality of opportunities in education. Social justice serves as a crucial ingredient for effective cooperation between capital and labour, thereby helping to prevent industrial conflict and social unrest.

A well-functioning and effective industrial relations system provides a balance between social justice (equality), industrial democracy (voice) and industrial competitiveness (efficiency). Social justice is also a central theme of many international organisations and research institutes that deal with industrial relations and social dialogue (Eurofound 2016).

Table 1. Industrial Relations Index scores in CEE countries, 2018–2021

	Industrial relations	Industrial democracy	Industrial competitiveness	Social justice	Quality of work and employment
Slovenia	56.6	61.4	48.2	62.3	55.6
Czechia	51.9	58.0	48.2	59.4	43.7
EU27	49.9	53.6	49.9	50.5	48.1
Estonia	48.9	33.4	49.4	54.9	63.1
Lithuania	43.8	41.0	39.2	46.8	48.9
Croatia	40.0	54.9	33.6	45.6	30.5
Latvia	39.1	33.1	33.2	44.6	47.8
Poland	38.8	36.0	34.5	53.5	33.9
Slovakia	38.6	48.2	34.6	48.3	27.5
Hungary	36.7	29.9	35.3	37.0	46.5
Bulgaria	29.5	35.6	18.7	30.0	37.5
Romania	29.2	39.3	20.8	28.4	31.2

Source: Eurofound 2023, p. 42.

Table 1 presents the scores for the IRI and its four dimensions for CEE countries between 2018 and 2021. It shows that only two CEE countries, Slovenia and Czechia, scored above

the EU27 average. Bulgaria and Romania ranked lowest (with scores below 30). Slovenia's top position may be partly due to the neocorporatist industrial relations regime there. According to Bohle and Greskovits⁴ typology of industrial relations for CEE countries, only Slovenia belongs to the neocorporatist regime, characterised by generous forms of the welfare state, very high rates of union density and high bargaining coverage, and limited dependence on foreign direct investment. Bulgaria and Romania, in turn, are countries that have been included (together with Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) in the neoliberal industrial relations regime with a limited role of the state, fragmented forms of the welfare state, and a strong dependence on foreign direct investment. There are also internal differences within the cluster of countries, and the reforms and austerity measures carried out throughout Europe during the financial crisis caused the differences between the three regimes of industrial relations to decrease (Glassner 2013). Analysing the individual IRI dimensions reveals that in the industrial competitiveness dimension, no CEE country scored above the EU27 average. Estonia was ranked highest, with a score of just over 49. However, in the social justice dimension, four countries – Slovenia, Czechia, Estonia, and Poland – outperformed the EU27.

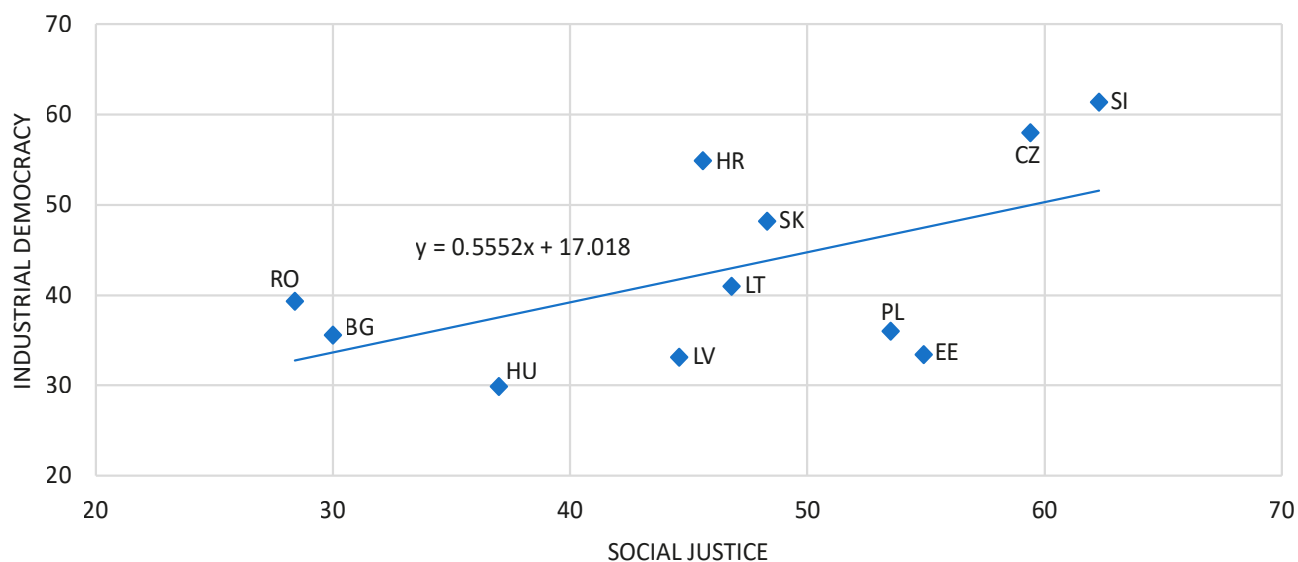


Figure 1. The relationship between social justice and industrial democracy in CEE countries

Source: own elaboration based on Table 1.

Figure 1 shows a positive relationship between the SJI and the industrial democracy index ($r = 0.56$). It indicates that higher levels of social justice are associated with higher levels of industrial democracy, which is achieved through social dialogue, workers' rights, and the organisational strength of workers and employers. Slovenia has the strongest workers' rights among CEE countries in the areas of board-level representation, works councils, strikes, and ratification of ILO core labour standards. This country also has the highest coverage of collective bargaining and the highest employer organisation density, as well as almost the highest trade union

4 Bohle and Greskovits emphasize two main elements in their typology, i.e. the key role of the state in creating welfare and industrial relations institutions, and the international influence of both the markets of other countries, the EU, and multinational corporations. They distinguished three industrial relations regimes: neoliberal, embedded neoliberal, and neocorporatist (Bohle and Greskovits 2012).

density. Simultaneously, Slovenia is a leader among CEE countries in the area of social justice, in particular achieving the best results in the subdimension of poverty and income inequality. Czechia also has a very high industrial democracy index, achieved primarily thanks to a high level of social dialogue at the company level. This corresponds to a very high level of social justice, achieved mainly thanks to educational opportunities.

At the other end of the spectrum, we have Romania and Bulgaria, with the lowest standards of industrial relations in the area of social justice and where industrial democracy is significantly low. In both countries, there is no employee representation at the board level, and there is no universal structure for employee representation in the workplace. Employees' rights to consultation and information are ensured either through a representative trade union organisation or through elected employee representatives. Moreover, Bulgaria has one of the lowest levels of trade union participation (see more: Skorupińska-Cieślak 2021). This may indicate that a lower level of workplace democracy and lower labour standards contribute to a lower level of social justice. Lissowska (2017) noted the relationship between a higher employment protection legislation (EPL) index, more frequent collective bargaining practices, and lower income inequality (and thus higher social justice) in post-transition countries. Meanwhile, Skorupińska-Cieślak (2018) pointed to the relationship between the greater strength of 'employee voice' expressed by the employee participation index and lower income inequality expressed by the Gini coefficient in CEE countries.

Subdimensions of the social justice index

The SJI comprises three subdimensions: poverty and income inequality, social cohesion and non-discrimination, and equality of opportunities in education. As Figure 2 shows, Slovenia and Czechia show balanced results in all subdimensions, ranking first in poverty and income inequality, with Czechia also excelling in equality in opportunities in education. In contrast, Estonia and Lithuania exhibit imbalances, performing well in equality in opportunities in education but significantly lower in poverty and income inequality. Slovakia scored high in poverty and income inequality but has room for improvement in social cohesion and non-discrimination. Bulgaria and Romania lag behind in all dimensions, highlighting significant challenges in achieving social justice. Poland has very high performance in equality of opportunities in education but relatively low scores in social cohesion and non-discrimination.

These results reflect the diverse outcomes in social justice policies among CEE countries, with some achieving notable successes while others face significant challenges. Below, we take a closer look at these three sub-dimensions of social justice, analysing their individual indicators in detail.

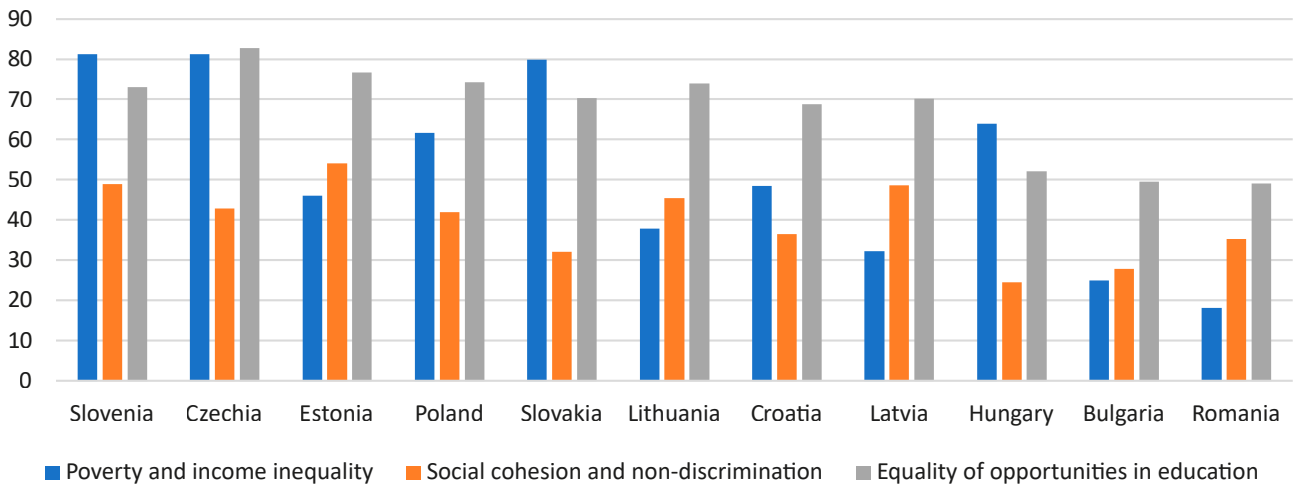


Figure 2. Subdimensions of the Social Justice Index in CEE countries, 2018–2021

Source: own elaboration based on Eurofound 2023, p. 45.

Poverty and income inequality

According to Eurofound’s initial concept, the sub-dimension *poverty and income inequality* comprised the following indicators (Eurofound 2018, p. 24):

- The at-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion rate.
- The in-work poverty rate.
- The impact of social transfers (other than pensions) on poverty reduction.
- The income inequality (quintile share ratio S80/S20).

Each definition of poverty or social exclusion highlights different aspects of these two phenomena, emphasising their multifaceted nature, complexity, and the various dimensions they encompass. Initially, poverty was defined as the inability to meet basic human needs, which meant the inability to survive (Panek and Zwierzchowski 2016, p. 182). Over time, poverty was no longer identified only with income poverty, and the definition was significantly expanded. In *Poverty in the United Kingdom* from 1979, Townsend underlined the relative nature of poverty, defining it as the lack of resources necessary to participate in ordinary activities that constitute a normal life at an average level in a given community (Miłaszewicz et al. 2018, p. 138). Meanwhile, Sen’s definition shifts the focus from low incomes to a broader view of the individual’s capabilities to fully function in society. According to Sen, poverty is synonymous with a lack of freedom, where lack of income leads to the inability to achieve the same fundamental functions as others (Beyer 2014).

Poverty researchers agree that narrowly defining poverty only as the inability to meet needs due to financial problems does not encompass the concept of social exclusion, which is much broader (Kruszka 2008). According to Golinowska (2012, p. 99), the category of social exclusion shows the problems of human life in several dimensions, indicating both material deprivation and non-participation. It is the inability to participate in important aspects of social and economic life, political and cultural of a given society.

At the EU level, poverty is measured using indicators such as the rate of persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion. This indicator corresponds to the sum of individuals who are either at risk of poverty after social transfers, severely materially and socially deprived, or living in households with very low work intensity. People are counted only once, even if they fall into multiple categories (Eurostat 2024a).

As Table 2 shows, from 2015 to 2023, there was a general downward trend in the rates of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion. However, in Czechia, Slovenia, Estonia, and Slovakia, this rate increased slightly between 2021 and 2023. Despite clear improvement in this area (about 13 p.p. in eight years), this indicator remains very high in Bulgaria and Romania (30 and 32%, respectively, in 2023), about ten percentage points above the EU27 average. As Stanchev, Popova, and Brusis (2022) note, social policy in Bulgaria did not sufficiently take into account and integrate minorities, people with less than secondary education, and foreigners (especially refugees).

Regarding people at risk of poverty and social exclusion, in Romania, it is mainly children, youth (16 to 24 years old), the elderly (aged 65 plus), people with disabilities, and Roma who are at a heightened risk. The Romanian government has tried to mitigate the effects of social exclusion through social transfers, but as Figure 4 shows, the impact has been slight (Wagner, Stan, and Brusis 2022). Conversely, Czechia (12%) and Slovenia (13.7%) recorded the lowest rates. In Czechia, social exclusion is particularly common among the Roma population, who often fall into a spiral of debt (Guasti et al. 2021; Krašovec et al. 2024). Meanwhile, in Slovenia, although the overall risk of poverty is among the lowest in the EU, some groups, such as children from less educated backgrounds and single-person households, are exposed to a higher than EU average risk. Poland ranked third, at 16.3%; compared to 2015, it had decreased by 6.2. p.p.

Table 2. Persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion in CEE countries (% of population)

	2015	2017	2019	2021	2023
UE27	24.0	22.4	21.1	21.7	21.4
Slovenia	17.7	16.6	13.7	13.2	13.7 (2*)
Czechia	13.0	12.1	12.1	10.7	12.0 (1)
Estonia	23.6	23.3	23.7	22.2	24.2 (7)
Lithuania	29.4	29.8	25.5	23.5	24.3 (8)
Croatia	24.4	23.7	22.1	20.9	20.7 (6)
Latvia	30.0	28.5	26.7	26.1	25.6 (9)
Poland	22.5	18.7	17.9	16.8	16.3 (3)
Slovakia	17.3	15.8	14.8	15.6	17.6 (4)
Hungary	30.6	25.9	20.0	19.4	19.7 (5)
Bulgaria	43.3	38.0	33.2	31.7	30.0 (10)
Romania	44.5	42.5	36.1	34.4	32.0 (11)

* Position in the ranking

Source: Eurostat 2024b.

Considering the in-work poverty rate, the highest risk of poverty among employed people in 2023 was again recorded in Romania (15.3%). This country clearly stands out from the other countries in the region, where the differences are less pronounced (see Figure 3). In Romania, the at-risk rate was 7 p.p. higher than the EU27 average. Conversely, in Czechia, Slovenia, Croatia and Hungary, fewer than 7% of employed people were at risk of poverty. Across the entire group of CEE countries, there is a clear difference in the risk of poverty among employed people, amounting to 12.2 percentage points. According to Eurostat data, this indicator unfortunately increased in four out of the eleven CEE countries compared to 2015. The largest increases were recorded in Bulgaria and Slovakia, with rises of 3.7 and 3.1 p.p., respectively.

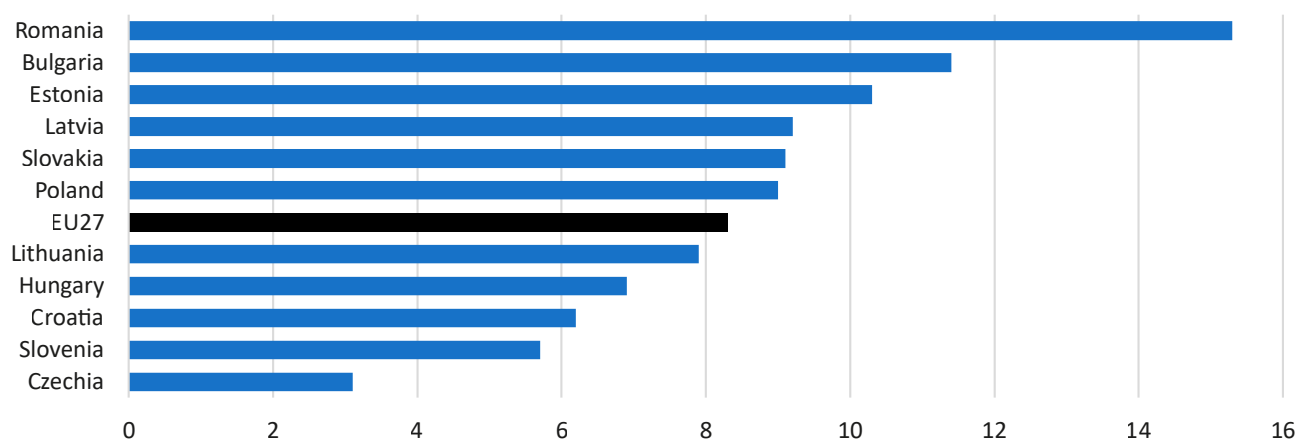


Figure 3. In-work poverty rate in CEE countries, 2023, (%)

Source: Eurostat 2024c.

Another indicator evaluates the effectiveness of social transfers in reducing poverty. In 2023, social transfers (excluding pensions) resulted in a reduction of just over one-third (34.7%) in the number of people classified as “at risk of poverty or social exclusion” within the EU. As Figure 4 shows, the extent to which social transfers reduce poverty among people varies slightly across the CEE countries. In four countries, the percentage reduction of people at risk of poverty was not much higher than the EU27 average. Notably, in several old EU countries, this reduction was approximately half or even more, such as 57.75% in Ireland. The smallest reduction took place in Romania, at only 15.6%, which is the lowest rate for the whole EU.

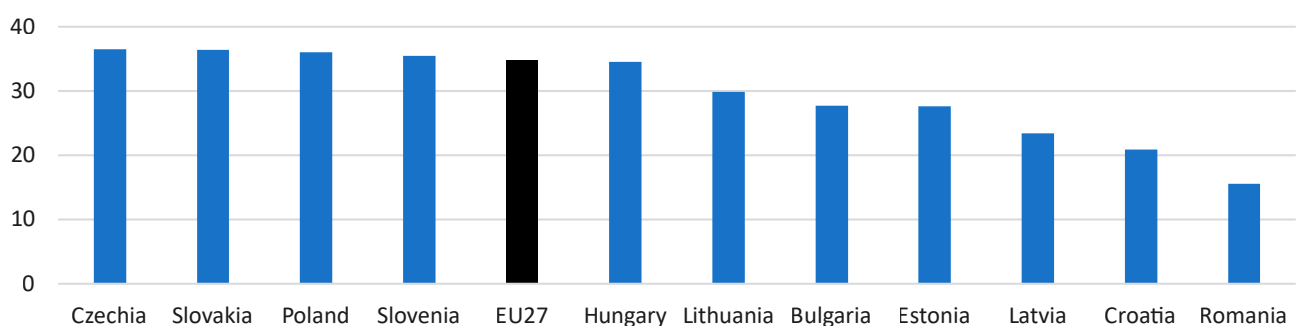


Figure 4. Impact of social transfers (excluding pensions) on poverty reduction in CEE countries, 2023 (%)

Source: Eurostat 2024d.

The last indicator in the sub-dimension of *poverty and income inequality* is the income quintile share ratio (S80/S20 ratio), which is one of the basic indicators of social inclusion. It is calculated as the ratio of disposable income received by the 20% of the population with the highest income to that received by the 20% with the lowest income. As Table 3 shows, between 2015 and 2023, the inequality of income distribution decreased both in relation to the EU27 average and within CEE countries (apart from a slight increase in Slovakia and Hungary). The largest drop was recorded in Romania, which had the highest inequality in 2015 in the entire EU, with the ratio dropping from 8.32 to 5.83.

Meanwhile, in 2023, in Slovenia and Czechia, the disposable income of the top 20% of the population was less than 3.5 times higher than that of the bottom 20%. These two countries had the lowest income inequality indicators among all EU countries. In Slovenia, this achievement is mainly attributed to low wage inequality, solid redistribution through social transfers, and progressive income taxation. Meanwhile, Czechia's good result partly reflects the country's economic structure, which is characterised by high levels of employment, a relatively small number of wealthy entrepreneurs, and the fact that high-wage sectors such as finance and banking do not account for a large share of economic activity (Guasti et al. 2021; Krašovec et al. 2024).

The largest income inequalities occur in Bulgaria. Dobrova (2023) indicates that the main factors determining this increase in inequality in the last 30 years include an ineffective education system, an unemployed and ageing population, high dependence on social transfers, uneven distribution of investments, and a low-skilled labour force. Additionally, the effect is reinforced by the unstable macroeconomic environment shaped by the global economic crisis from 2008 and the COVID-19 crisis and its aftermath.

Table 3. Income quintile share ratio S80/S20 for disposable income in CEE countries

	2015	2017	2019	2021	2023
EU27	5.22	5.03	4.99	4.99	4.72
Slovenia	3.60	3.42	3.39	3.24	3.34 (1*)
Czechia	3.51	3.40	3.34	3.43	3.42 (2)
Estonia	6.21	5.42	5.08	5.03	5.37 (7)
Lithuania	7.46	7.28	6.44	6.14	6.32 (10)
Croatia	5.16	5.03	4.76	4.78	4.91 (6)
Latvia	6.51	6.30	6.54	6.63	6.20 (9)
Poland	4.92	4.56	4.37	4.03	4.06 (4)
Slovakia	3.54	3.49	3.34	3.20	3.63 (3)
Hungary	4.30	4.27	4.23	4.15	4.47 (5)
Bulgaria	7.11	8.23	8.10	7.45	6.61 (11)
Romania	8.32	6.45	7.08	7.10	5.83 (8)

* Position in the ranking

Source: Eurostat 2024e.

Social cohesion and non-discrimination

According to Eurofound's initial concept, the sub-dimension of *social cohesion and non-discrimination* comprised the following indicators (Eurofound 2018, p. 24):

- The social exclusion index.
- The ratio of young people to non-young people employment rate.
- The gender equality index.
- The long-term unemployment rate.
- The share of young people who are NEET (not in employment, education or training).

The newest Eurofound report (2023) incorporates new indicators into the SJI to address conceptual gaps or improve the measurement of certain aspects. The exclusion index was rejected for not meeting the quality criterion, and two indicators were chosen in its place: social capital and overall life satisfaction. Social capital is the sum of interpersonal and social networks that facilitate collaboration between people (Günay and Sülün 2021). It is one of 12 pillars⁵ of the Legatum Prosperity Index (LPI), and it is calculated based on the following five components: personal and family relationships, social networks, interpersonal trust, corporate trust and citizenship and social participation (Legatum Prosperity Index 2024). Table 4 presents the ranking of CEE countries based on social capital according to the LPI, as well as changes in social capital over the past ten years. Among CEE countries, Poland ranked highest at 27 in the social capital index in 2023 and has improved its position the most during the analysed period. The top ten rankings include four old EU countries, with Denmark as the leader with a score of 82.56 scores. Conversely, Lithuania and Romania had the lowest score.

Table 4. Social Capital Rank and Score of CEE Countries by Legatum Prosperity Index

Country	2013	2023	Rank (1 to 167) 2023	10-year rank change
Slovenia	61.2	62.7	30	6↓
Czechia	48.7	61.6	36	57↑
Estonia	53.0	61.9	34	33↑
Lithuania	36.0	47.3	129	30↑
Croatia	38.7	52.2	103	48↑
Latvia	48.9	55.1	79	12↑
Poland	47.7	63.3	27	76↑
Slovakia	46.0	61.2	39	73↑
Hungary	50.8	59.5	47	31↑
Bulgaria	43.8	54.6	81	42↑
Romania	39.6	50.0	116	31↑

Source: elaboration based on Legatum Prosperity Index 2024.

⁵ The remaining pillars of the Legatum Prosperity Index are: safety & security, personal freedom, governance, investment environment, the enterprise conditions, market access & infrastructure, economic quality, living condition, health, education, natural environment. The LPI covers 167 countries and the scale of the index ranges from 0 (low) to 100 (high).

Another indicator in the sub-dimension of *social cohesion and non-discrimination* is overall life satisfaction. It is a subjective well-being indicator provided by Eurostat⁶. Di Martino and Prilleltensky (2020) confirmed the hypothesis that social justice is highly related to life satisfaction. Meanwhile, Jia, Zhou, and Huang (2020) show there is also a great deal of evidence showing that inequality decreases life satisfaction, happiness, or subjective well-being. The term “life satisfaction” refers to the degree to which individuals positively evaluate the overall quality of their lives (Martikainen 2009). Many factors influence life satisfaction, including sociodemographic factors such as health, work, financial and family situations, age, and gender, as well as psychological factors, lifestyle, and involvement in leisure activities (Malvaso and Kang 2022). In 2023, people in the EU27 assessed their overall life satisfaction at an average of 7.3 points (see Table 5). Among CEE countries, the most satisfied with life were Slovenians and Romanians, with scores of 7.7 points. Poland, with a score of 7.6, was in 3rd place. Across the entire EU, with the exception of Bulgaria, this indicator of well-being was above 6 points, indicating that people generally reported being satisfied rather than dissatisfied. The average rating of overall life satisfaction in the CEE countries increased between 2013 and 2023, with the highest rise recorded in Hungary and Bulgaria.

Table 5. Overall life satisfaction in CEE countries

	2013	2018	2021	2022	2023
EU27	7.0	7.3	–	7.1	7.3
Slovenia	7.0	7.2	7.6	7.6	7.7
Czechia	6.9	7.4	7.3	7.4	7.4
Estonia	6.5	7.0	7.2	7.2	7.2
Lithuania	6.7	6.4	7.0	7.1	7.2
Croatia	6.4	6.3	6.8	6.8	7.1
Latvia	6.5	6.7	6.7	6.8	6.9
Poland	7.3	7.7	7.5	7.7	7.6
Slovakia	7.0	7.1	7.1	7.0	7.3
Hungary	6.1	6.5	6.5	6.9	7.2
Bulgaria	4.8	5.4	5.7	5.6	5.9
Romania	7.2	7.4	7.7	7.7	7.7

Source: Eurostat 2024f.

Other factors that influence the level of social justice are employment rates among young and older people. According to Eurostat data, youth employment (aged 15–29) in the EU27 fell from an average of 48.2% in 2019 to 46.1% in 2020, largely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Among CEE countries, the largest declines were recorded in Bulgaria, Latvia, Romania and Czechia. Eurostat data for 2022 showed a recovery in almost all CEE countries compared to 2021, with the exceptions of Romania and Czechia. Nonetheless, youth employment rates in Croatia and Hungary still exceeded 2019 levels. In 2023, Estonia had the highest rate, at 53.2%, while Romania

⁶ The research is conducted among people aged 16 and over living in private households. Respondents assess their level of life satisfaction rating on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 is “not satisfied at all” and 10 is “fully satisfied”.

had the lowest, at only 35.3%. Interestingly, for those aged 55–64, the COVID-19 pandemic did not appear to cause any major employment losses. Among CEE countries, a slight decline in employment between 2019 and 2020 was recorded only in Lithuania and Bulgaria. Looking at Eurostat data, there has been a steady increase over the past two decades. In 2023, the highest employment rates of older people in CEE were recorded in Estonia (76%) and Czechia (74%), while the EU27 average was 63.9%. As was the case with youth employment, Romania also had the lowest employment rate for older people (51%).

Combating gender inequality is an important factor in increasing social justice by promoting an equal and inclusive society, investing in education and health as well as reducing income inequality. A recent study by the European Institute for Gender Equality shows progress in gender equality among the European Union countries. In 2023, the average score for the 27 EU Member States was 70.2 points, representing an increase of 7.1 points since the first edition of the index in 2013⁷. The area of power recorded the lowest score, at only 59.1 points, although it has the most significant progress (by 17.2 points) of all areas due, in part, to improvements in women's participation in economic decision-making. Health received a score of 88.5 points, maintaining its position as the highest-scoring area within the index (EIGE 2023).

As Figure 5 shows, all CEE countries scored below the EU27 average in the Gender Equality Index. Four countries had scores below 60 points, with Romania facing the greatest difficulties in supporting gender equality. This country has the largest gender gap in labour force participation among all EU countries, accompanied by substantial disparities in entrepreneurship opportunities. In Romania, only about 17% of companies have a woman as a senior manager, and only one-third have at least one woman as an owner. In addition, female entrepreneurs report lower incomes than their male counterparts. The country has one of the highest rates of teenage pregnancy in the EU, which puts women at risk of health problems related to early childbirth and causes them to end their education early. Due to the country's still rigid social norms, more than 80% of Romanians still believe that a woman's primary role is to care for the home and family. Gender inequality in Romania is influenced by many factors, mainly unequal care burden and limited access to child and elderly care services, unequal access to assets, gender-related social norms, gaps in financial inclusion, flaws in parental leave policies, and limited skills being a constraint among older women and Roma (Robayo-Abril et al. 2023). While Slovenia currently has the highest level of gender equality among CEE countries, Bulgaria, Croatia, and Lithuania have recorded the fastest progress in reducing the gender equality gap over the last 10 years.

⁷ The Gender Equality Index (GEI) gives a score from 1 (full inequality) to 100 (full equality between women and men). It synthesises six basic areas (work, money, knowledge, time, power, health) that comprehensively reflect the challenges women face in their professional, social, and family lives.

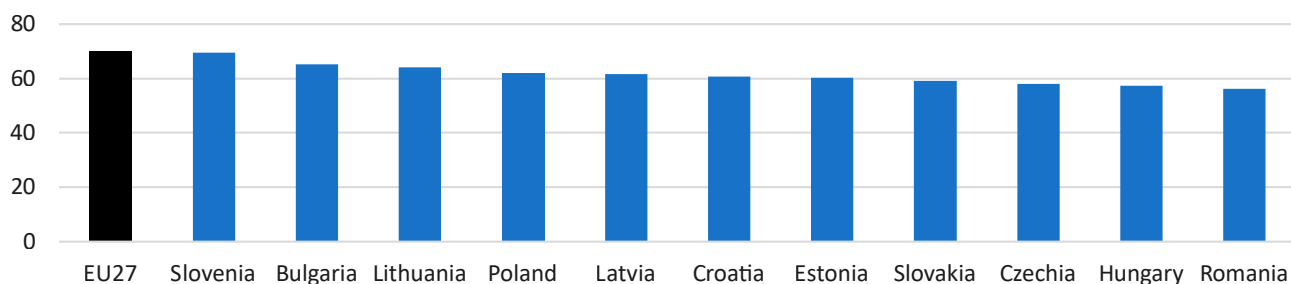


Figure 5. Gender Equality Index in CEE countries, 2023

Source: elaboration based on EIGE 2024.

The penultimate indicator in the sub-dimension of *social cohesion and non-discrimination* is the long-term unemployment rate, which is defined as the percentage of people unemployed for 12 months or more within the labour force. As Table 6 shows, long-term unemployment has consistently fallen over the last eight years. In 2023, the EU27 rate was 2.1%, less than half the 4.9% it was in 2015. The largest drop among CEE countries during this period was observed in Croatia, where it fell from 10.2% to 2%. According to Eurostat, in 2023, Poland and Czechia had the lowest long-term unemployment rates in the CEE region. By contrast, the highest rate was recorded in Slovakia at 3.8%, although this was still relatively low compared to Greece's rate of 6.2%.

Table 6. Long-term unemployment rate in CEE countries (%) (people aged 15–74)

	2015	2017	2019	2021	2023
EU27	4.9	3.7	2.7	2.8	2.1
Slovenia	4.7	3.1	1.9	1.9	1.4
Czechia	2.4	1.0	0.6	0.8	0.8
Estonia	2.4	2.0	0.9	1.6	1.3
Lithuania	3.9	2.7	1.9	2.6	2.3
Croatia	10.2	4.6	2.4	2.8	2.0
Latvia	4.9	3.6	2.7	2.3	1.8
Poland	3.0	1.5	0.7	0.9	0.8
Slovakia	8.8	5.9	3.9	3.9	3.8
Hungary	3.0	1.6	1.1	1.3	1.4
Bulgaria	6.1	3.9	2.9	2.6	2.3
Romania	3.6	2.4	2.0	2.0	2.2

Source: Eurostat 2024g.

As with gender equality, youth employment and the employment rate for older people, Romania has the worst situation regarding the share of young people classified as NEET (19.3%). This rate was the highest among all EU countries (see Figure 6). These individuals are at risk of social exclusion and disconnection from the labour market. The EU has set a target to reduce the youth NEET rate to below 9% by 2030. Among the CEE countries, Slovenia already achieved this goal in 2023, with a rate of 7.8%. In Poland, this indicator was 9.1% in 2023, while the EU27 average was 11.2%.

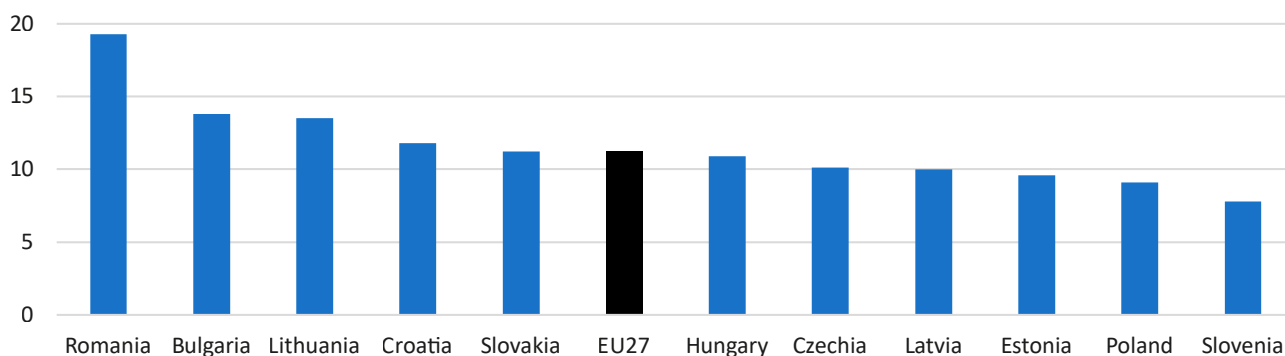


Figure 6. Young people (15–29 years) in CEE countries neither in employment nor in education and training (in %), 2023

Source: Eurostat 2024h.

Equality of opportunities in education

According to Eurofound’s initial concept, the sub-dimension *equality of opportunities* comprised two indicators (Eurofound 2018, p. 24):

- Early leavers from education and training.
- The percentage of individuals with less than upper secondary educational attainment.

Early leavers are defined as people aged 18–24 who have completed at most lower secondary school and were not in further education or training in the four weeks preceding the Labour Force Survey (Eurostat 2024i). As Figure 7 illustrates, Romania recorded the largest proportion of early leavers among CEE countries in 2023, at 16.6%. It was also the highest rate across the whole EU. In contrast, Croatia had the best situation, with only 2% of people aged 18–24 in this category. According to Wagner, Stan, and Brusis (2022), the education system in Romania has long been struggling. Since the fall of the communist system, public education has never received adequate funding, and the COVID-19 pandemic further compounded this difficult situation. A large proportion of children in Romania do not attend school, over 40% of 15-year-olds cannot read and write properly, and rural areas have very high dropout rates, exacerbated by the lack of IT-based infrastructure.

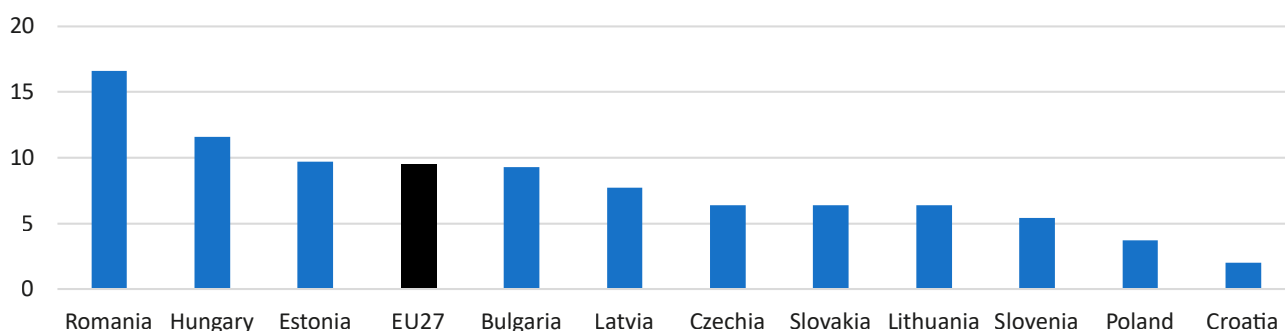


Figure 7. Early leavers from education and training in CEE countries (% of the population aged 18–24), 2023

Source: Eurostat 2024j.

Romania also scored worst among CEE countries in terms of the second indicator in the sub-dimension equality of opportunities in education. In 2023, almost 20% of people

aged 25–64 in this country did not have a secondary education (see Figure 8). However, it is noteworthy that this figure is still lower than the EU27 average. Meanwhile, Lithuania, Poland, Czechia and Slovakia reported the lowest shares of individuals in this category, indicating a highly educated adult population in these four countries. The highest share of the adult population without a secondary education was recorded in Portugal (40.6%).

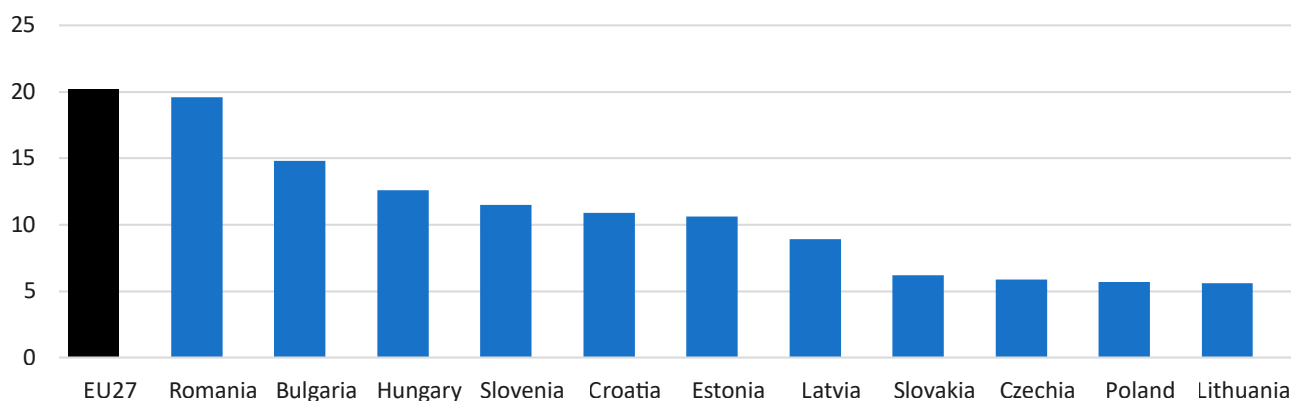


Figure 8. Share of individuals with less than upper secondary educational attainment in CEE countries (% of the population aged 25–64)

Source: own calculation based on Eurostat 2024k.

Discussion and conclusion

Comparing the components of the social justice index shows that Romania achieves the worst results in almost all indicators in the *poverty and income inequality* sub-dimension. However, it also recorded the greatest improvement among CEE countries in three of the four indicators over the last few years. It also had the worst employment rates for both young and older people. Moreover, it clearly lags behind the other CEE countries and the EU as a whole on the NEET indicator. In 2023, Romania ranked at the bottom of the gender equality ranking, although the rates were also lower than the EU-27 average for the rest of Central and Eastern Europe. Furthermore, educational opportunities are the least evenly distributed in Romania. In 2023, it had the highest rate of early leavers from education and training, as well as the highest share of the adult population without upper secondary education. According to national experts in Romania, it is precisely the country's political instability in recent years that has caused the neglect of such important social issues as poverty, education and healthcare. In addition, the country continues to struggle with high levels of corruption, a lack of independence and integrity of the judiciary, and economic stagnation. This reduces public trust in state institutions (Wagner, Stan, Bönker 2020; Wagner, Stan, and Brusis 2022) and may partially explain the country's very low position in the social capital ranking.

A similarly difficult situation can be found in Bulgaria. The country has the highest income inequality rate among all EU countries: in 2023, the disposable income of the richest 20% of Bulgarians was 6.6 times higher than that of the poorest 20%. Bulgaria is also struggling with very high levels of poverty and low living standards, as well as the instability of successive governments

and waves of social protests. The life satisfaction indicator is 5.9 points out of 10, which places the country at the lowest level in the EU. This low level may result not only from high levels of poverty but also from a deep demographic crisis, which, as Kobeszko (2024) points out, includes the ageing of society, high mortality, the constantly decreasing number of working-age population, and mass emigration, especially educated and qualified people. This leads to an imbalance between the number of young and old people, which weakens the labour market, additionally increasing the sense of uncertainty in society and causing widespread passivity and pessimism among Bulgarians. In addition, the persistent political crisis causes social dissatisfaction and hinders the implementation of effective social and economic reforms, which in turn affects the low level of trust in institutions.

According to Stoilova and Haralampiev (2022, p. 34), these countries' low positions on the social justice index – including high poverty and high income inequality – indicate that satisfactory conditions for the perception of justice in key areas of transformation have not been achieved there. The economic transformation has forced people to make numerous changes in their everyday lives, leading to the loss of importance of previous qualifications and the need to adapt to a new labour market dominated by the service sector. It is expected that the cost will be shared, if not equally, then at least proportional to individuals' motivations and contributions to the country's economic development. Only in this case could the social transformation be assessed as just. During the centrally planned economy, income distribution in the CEE region was more equal than in other European countries. However, with the development of the private sector and institutional transformation, income inequality began to grow, becoming a significant challenge in these economies (Görkey 2022). Nae, Florescu, and Bălăsoiu (2024) list the following key factors influencing the dynamics of income distribution, especially in post-communist countries: weakened labour market institutions, unequal access to education, diversified rates of economic growth, globalisation, and institutional factors related to governance inefficiency or corruption. Stoilova and Haralampiev (2022), referring to Rawls' theory of justice, point to surveys indicating that in CEE, there is a higher perception of the legitimacy of inequality than in Western Europe, which results from the change of the political regime.

Countries with the lowest levels of social justice are nonetheless undertaking various actions and reforms to improve their rankings, improve social conditions and strengthen the rule of law. In Romania, in response to the large number of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion, in 2020, the government increased pensions by 40% and adopted a minimum package of basic health care, education and social protection services, guaranteeing free access to all children in rural areas. According to experts, these actions are only a small step, although in the right direction (Wagner, Stan, and Brusis 2022). However, the country still requires major reforms in the education system and the health sector, improvements in the efficiency of social transfers, as well as greater efforts to fight corruption and strengthen democracy.

In Bulgaria, the most important recommendations aimed at reducing inequality include fostering economic growth, establishing a minimum wage rate that reflects the standard of living, implementing progressive taxation, and improving education at all levels – particularly by expanding curricula to increase students' skills and make them relevant to market requirements.

Other measures include ensuring equal access for men and women to well-paid jobs and opportunities for professional development (Dobrevá 2024).

The analysis shows that Slovenia and Czechia have a more even income distribution – not only among CEE countries but also across the EU – while leading in social justice in Central and Eastern Europe. These countries have the lowest poverty levels in the region, which is due to high employment and stable economic growth. Moreover, citizens of these countries enjoy a better quality of life, which can help build social trust, one of the key elements of social justice (see more: OECD 2024; *Wniosek...* 2024).

Among CEE countries, Slovenia has the lowest percentage of young people classified as NEET (not in employment, education or training). The country also has the highest gender equality rate in this group. Women in Slovenia have a relatively high employment rate compared to other EU countries, and the share of women working part-time is lower than the EU average, supporting their economic independence. In 2022, there was significant progress in women's representation in politics – 40% of deputies were women (Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities 2024).

Czechia, meanwhile, has a strong social protection system, including well-developed health care and family policies, which helps prevent poverty and provide pregnant women and families with a sense of security (Dębiec 2025). The country ranks first among CEE countries in terms of the influence of social transfers on poverty reduction. It also had the lowest long-term unemployment rate in the CEE region.

Both Slovenia and Czechia achieved the highest positions among CEE countries in the industrial democracy index. The positive correlation between industrial democracy and social justice, shown in Figure 1, indicates that countries that promote social dialogue and employee participation rights also have better social protection, lower income inequality, and more equitable access to opportunities such as education and the labour market.

The analysis carried out in this paper is not without its limitations. The first is that the comparison of the level of social justice in CEE countries concerned only the components of the social justice index developed by Eurofound. Bertelsmann Stiftung's Social Justice Index covers a much wider range of indicators, including the subdimensions of health and intergenerational justice. It is important to note that social justice also concerns other aspects, such as civil rights and social mobility. The second limitation concerns the comparability of social justice indicators in relation to the subjective indicator of overall life satisfaction. Further research could provide a deeper analysis of the relationship between social justice and industrial democracy by examining which indicators of social justice contribute most to increases in the industrial democracy index. Additionally, future research could extend the analysis to include the old EU member states.

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Sprawiedliwość społeczna w krajach Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej

Celem artykułu jest porównanie poziomu sprawiedliwości społecznej w krajach Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej (EŚW) w obszarze poszczególnych wskaźników tworzących Indeks Sprawiedliwości Społecznej oraz określenie poziomu ich konwergencji w stosunku do średniej unijnej. W opracowaniu przedstawiono również zmiany wskaźników sprawiedliwości społecznej w ostatnich latach i zbadano związek między sprawiedliwością społeczną a demokracją przemysłową. Analiza została oparta na danych statystycznych Eurostatu oraz wynikach badania przeprowadzonego przez Europejską Fundację na rzecz Poprawy Warunków Życia i Pracy, Europejski Instytut ds. Równości Kobiet i Mężczyzn oraz Instytut Legatum. Wyniki wskazują, że choć Rumunia osiągnęła najgorsze wyniki w większości wskaźników tworzących Indeks Sprawiedliwości Społecznej, wiele z nich w ostatnich latach istotnie się poprawiło. Słowenia, Czechy i Słowacja odnoszą zaś największe sukcesy w obszarze zapobiegania ubóstwu i wyrównywania dochodów. Wskaźnik równości płci we wszystkich krajach EŚW był niższy niż średnia UE-27. Ponadto kraje Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej promujące dialog społeczny i prawa pracownicze mają również wyższy poziom sprawiedliwości społecznej.

Słowa kluczowe: sprawiedliwość społeczna, ubóstwo, stosunki przemysłowe, Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia

