

ASSESSMENT OF PUBLIC SPENDING ON SOCIAL PROTECTION FOR FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN IN THE EU MEMBER STATES

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Abstract

The enhancement of fertility rates and reduction of poverty among families with children are closely linked to the allocation of financial resources to social protection, particularly through social benefits and tax incentives. This allocation is an essential prerequisite for achieving sustainable national and rural development. The research aim is to assess public spending on social protection for families with children in the context of poverty reduction and fertility rates increase across the EU Member States. To achieve this, the research employs a comprehensive set of methodologies, including monographic and descriptive methods as well as analysis and synthesis, along with the graphic and statistical approaches (chain increase and correlation). The research concluded that the EU Member States invested 2.3% of GDP on average on child and family support in 2022, with Latvia spending below the EU average. None of the EU Member States achieved the 2.1 total fertility rate in 2015 and 2022 required for generational replacement. In Latvia, rural areas exhibit a slightly higher fertility rate than urban regions. The research findings show that countries with higher social protection expenditure as a percentage of GDP demonstrate lower incidence of children living in poverty. Throughout the period analysed, rural populations in the EU, particularly in Romania and Bulgaria, consistently face a higher risk of poverty. Moreover, spending on social protection for families with children does not directly impact fertility rates or poverty risk for single-adult households but significantly affect poverty risk for households with two adults and three or more children.

Keywords: social protection, fertility, poverty reduction, EU member states.

Introduction

The promotion of higher fertility rates and reduction of poverty among families with children are significantly influenced by the amount of financial resources allocated to social protection in the form of social benefits and tax incentives, which serve as a critical prerequisite for achieving sustainable national and rural development.

Latvia's strategic planning documents for several planning periods consistently underscore the importance of enhancing social security and increasing financial support for the social sector to reduce poverty among residents and foster fertility rates within the country (Latvijas ilgtspējīgas attīstības ..., 2010; Par Sociālās aizsardzības ..., 2021).

Reducing the risk of poverty and social exclusion is one of the EU's main objectives for 2019-2030 (Nabadzības risks un ..., 2025). Similarly, the National Development Plan of Latvia (2020) sets a target for 2027 aiming to reduce the poverty risk index for households with a single adult raising children to 24.5% and for households with two adults and three or more dependent children to 12%.

Support for social protection varies across the EU Member States, with a predominant reliance on the 'transfer-based' strategy mainly used by the Continental and Mediterranean countries. The main forms of support in these regions are benefits, service provision and tax incentives (Nygard et al., 2019).

Reducing social exclusion and poverty and promoting social justice in rural areas is one of the key challenges the world is facing today, as almost a quarter of the EU's population reside in rural areas (Kalinowski & Rosa, 2021).

As highlighted in the analytical report of the Cross-Sectoral Coordination Centre 'Latvian Families in Generations' (2018), social policy planners in Latvia,

compared to other European countries, have the advantage of selecting various instruments to support fertility. This is particularly significant as Latvia is one of the countries where the population expresses a desire to have more children than they currently have. Research hypothesis – the level of social protection spending for families with children varies across the EU Member States, affecting fertility rates in the country and contributing to the reduction of poverty. The research aim is to assess public spending on social protection for families with children in the context of poverty reduction and fertility rates increase across the EU Member States.

The following research tasks are advanced to achieve the set aim:

- 1) to analyse social protection expenditure for families with children in the context of fertility promotion;
- 2) to study social protection expenditure for families with children in the context of poverty reduction.

Materials and Methods

Research methods: the monographic and descriptive methods, analysis and synthesis, the graphic method, statistical method (analysis of the chain increase, correlation).

The present research is based on a range of scientific publications, publicly available documents, information from databases and other sources.

The research period spans from 2015 to the most recent data available.

Results and Discussion

Assessing social protection in the context of fertility

Pezer indicates that social security systems of different countries are generally based on their economic situation and social policies. Social policies targeted

for families with children vary across countries but they are generally focused on improving child well-being, promoting fertility and reducing poverty (Pezer, 2022).

Social protection spending reduces the risk of poverty across all countries; though, to different degrees. Studies find that social protection expenditure has the greatest impact on poverty reduction, particularly in areas related to family, children and social exclusion (Halaskova et al., 2025).

The informative report ‘On Demographic Policy Development’ (2024) emphasises that an effective fertility strategy requires well-considered support for families with children ensuring long-term socio-economic security.

The EC departments have specified that Latvia’s spending on social protection is insufficient to reduce poverty and income inequality (Par Sociālās aizsardzības..., 2021). The authors’ analysis shows that the social policy target outlined in the previously mentioned guidelines to increase the share of total spending on social protection to at least 18% between 2021 and 2027 has been very modest and significantly below the EU average.

The analysis of the social protection spending across the EU Member States as a percentage of GDP shows that France, Denmark, Finland and Austria ranked as Top 5 countries from 2015 to 2019. Italy ranked in the Top 5 between 2020 and 2022. Despite Denmark’s spending remaining above the EU average, it dropped out the Top 5 ranking from 2020.

Romania, Ireland, Malta, Bulgaria and the Baltic States consistently recorded the lowest levels of social protection expenditure as a percentage of GDP throughout the entire period. The EU average indicator

for social protection spending stood at 28% from 2015 to 2019, slightly rising to 31.5% in 2020 before falling in the following years. In 2022, the figure returned to 28% again, suggesting that the overall social protection level in the EU Member States has not experienced a significant improvement (Expenditure on social ..., 2025).

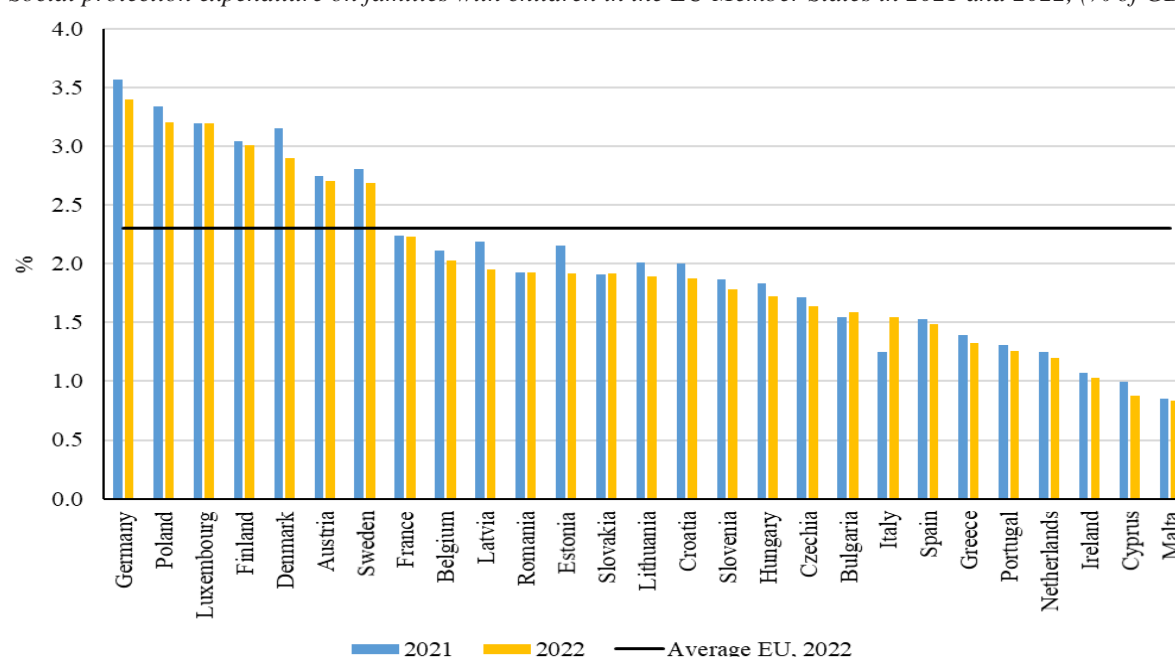
Social protection expenditure as a percentage of GDP tends to be higher in welfare countries and lower in Eastern European countries. However, Ireland serves as an exception due to its very high GDP ratio resulting from the activities of large multinational corporations in the country.

The analysis of the data on the share of public spending on support for families with children across the EU Member States allows concluding that, in both 2021 and 2022, the highest shares of support for families with children were observed in Germany, Poland, Luxembourg, Finland, Denmark, Austria and Sweden, ranging from 2.7% to 3.6% of GDP, while Latvia allocated 2.0% of its GDP to this support ‘Figure 1’. A similar situation was observed also in 2020 (Mistre et al., 2023).

In 2022, the EU Member States allocated 2.3% of GDP on average in measures of policies to support families with children. Comparing the data across the Baltic States, Latvia dedicated a slightly higher share of GDP to social protection for families with children than Estonia and Lithuania in both 2021 and 2022. In Latvia, the share of expenditure as a percentage of GDP in 2022 decreased by 10.7% compared to 2021, yet it increased by 14.8% compared to 2020. Despite this increase, Latvia’s spending still remains below the EU average (Mistre et al., 2023).

Figure 1

Social protection expenditure on families with children in the EU Member States in 2021 and 2022, (% of GDP)



Source: authors' construction based on Eurostat data - Expenditure on family ..., 2025, GDP and main ..., 2025.

Malta, Cyprus, Ireland, the Netherlands and Portugal recorded the lowest shares of social support for families with children as a percentage of GDP in both 2021 and 2022. It is widely acknowledged that national expenditure figures serve as general indicators of public policies in the area of social support for families with children (Pabalstu par bērnu ..., 2022).

The research authors align with the findings of Daglioglu and Bektas that family benefits may boost fertility rates, reduce family poverty, prevent children poverty and enhance national welfare (Daglioglu & Bektas, 2023).

Several studies indicate that there is no single determinant that may leave a significant impact on fertility rates. However, survey data show that financial security is also important for families with children (Informatīvais ziņojums 'Par...', 2024).

The correlation coefficient calculated by the authors for the period 2015-2022 reveals a strong negative correlation ($r = -0.67$) between fertility rates and the share of social protection expenditure on families with children as a percentage of GDP in Latvia. Despite a slight increase in the expenditure as a percentage of GDP on families with children between 2015 and

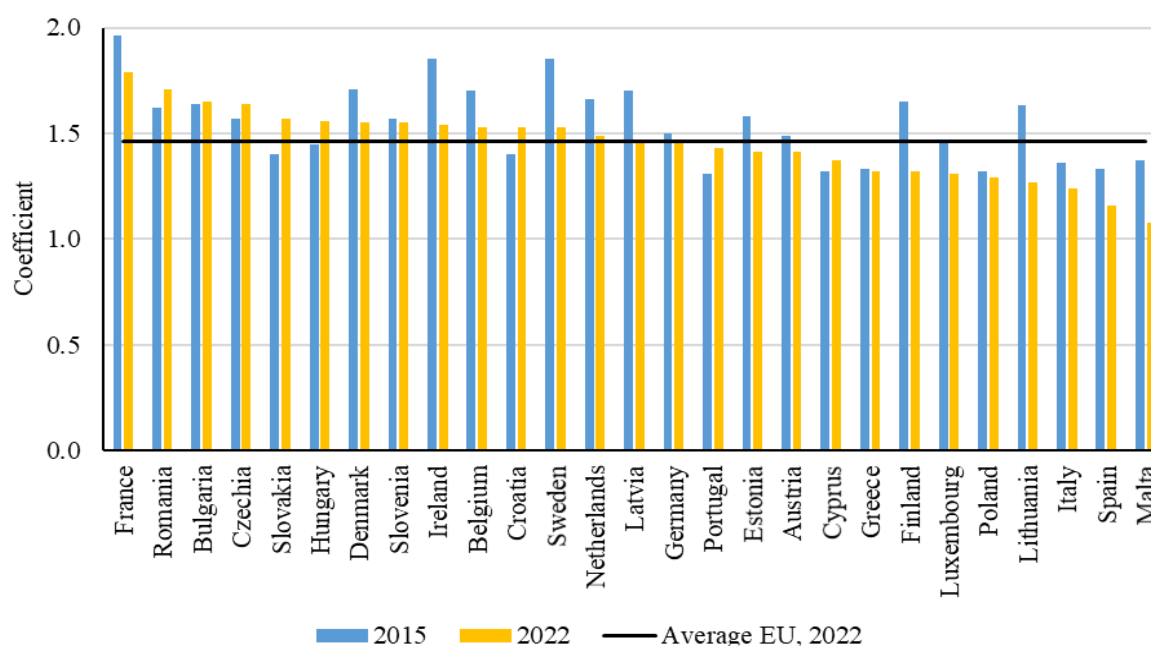
2021, fertility rates continued to decline. This suggests that fertility is influenced also by other factors, including the decreasing number of women of reproductive age (Iedzīvotāji pēc dzimuma ..., 2025).

The research authors believe that further increases in spending on support for families with children are necessary to reduce the negative fertility trend, as studies for the period 2011-2020 identified a moderately strong positive correlation between fertility rates and the share of social protection spending on families with children as a percentage of GDP (Mistre et al., 2023). Similarly Mežs (2013), analysing differences in population policies across the EU Member States, also indicates a correlation: the more financial resources invested in supporting families with children, the higher the fertility rate, and conversely.

The analysis of the total fertility rates across the EU Member States shows that in 2015, the highest rates were observed in France (2.0), followed by Ireland and Sweden (1.9), and Denmark, Belgium, the Netherlands, Finland and Latvia (1.7). The lowest fertility rates were recorded in Portugal and Poland, Cyprus, Spain, Greece, all with a rate of 1.3 'Figure 2'.

Figure 2

Total fertility rates in the EU Member States in 2015 and 2022



Source: authors' construction based on Eurostat data - Total fertility rate, 2025.

In 2022, France maintained the highest total fertility rate among the EU Member States equalling to 1.8. Romania and Bulgaria (1.7) also ranked among the Top 5 in 2022, indicating that fertility rates in these countries have improved slightly compared to 2015. The lowest total fertility rates in 2022 were observed in Malta (1.1), Spain and Italy (1.2), and Lithuania, Poland, Luxembourg,

Finland and Greece (1.3), with many of these countries experiencing a downward trend in fertility rates.

However, despite Finland's social support being among the highest in the EU in both 2015 and 2022, the total fertility rate has fallen by 20% over these years. This signals on the necessity to provide in-depth research to better investigate this trend. Lindberg et al. suggest that Finnish family policy is primarily focused

towards high parental employment and low poverty (Lindberg et al., 2018). Similarly, Lithuania experienced a significant decline of 22% in its fertility rate. Vyšniauskienė & Brazienė (2017) argue that Lithuanian family policy is not supportive enough to families with children and there is a need to improve the legal framework for maternity, paternity and childcare as well as to increase support for young families.

Bokuna (2024), studying the situation in Poland, revealed that an increase in benefits for families with children has led to a modest increase in fertility in the short term.

However, Bariola & Collins (2021) point out that Denmark is known for its high levels of well-being thanks to its social democratic welfare model that reduces risk and insecurity. Though, in Denmark both the expenditure on social protection for families with children as a percentage of GDP and the total fertility rate have decreased in 2022 compared to 2015.

In Latvia, social protection spending for families with children as a percentage of GDP also decreased in 2022 compared to 2021, and the total fertility rate decreased by 6.4%, reflecting a negative trend.

It should be noted that none of the EU Member States has reached the total fertility rate of at least 2.1 in both 2015 and 2022 which is necessary for generational replacement.

Furthermore, a comparison of the total fertility rates in rural and urban areas of Latvia demonstrates a more favourable situation in rural areas than in urban ones (Table 1).

Table 1

Total fertility rates in urban and rural areas of Latvia in 2015-2023

Year	Urban areas	Rural areas	Chain increase rate, %	
			urban	rural
2015	1.70	1.70	-	-
2016	1.72	1.76	1.2	3.5
2017	1.69	1.70	-1.7	-3.4
2018	1.57	1.71	-7.1	0.6
2019	1.56	1.74	-0.6	1.8
2020	1.50	1.65	-3.8	-5.2
2021	1.53	1.68	2.0	1.8
2022	1.41	1.61	-7.8	-4.2
2023	1.29	1.53	-8.5	-5.0
2023/2015	-0.41	-0.17	-24.1	-1.0

Source: authors' calculations based on unpublished data CSB Latvia, 2025.

The decline in the total fertility rate is most pronounced in 2022 and 2023 with a particularly expressed decline in urban areas.

Assessment of social protection in terms of poverty reduction

The study 'Determination of Child-Raising Benefits in the Baltic Sea Region' (2022) emphasises that poverty remains one of the most discussed issues in social policy. The study results show that state support for social protection in the form of universal benefits can be an effective tool for reducing child poverty.

Benefits for families with children are typically implemented to mitigate child poverty, offset the financial burdens associated with child-raising and encourage higher fertility rates. Increased benefit levels are particularly effective in alleviating poverty, leading many countries to direct greater resources toward families with children who are most vulnerable to the risk of poverty. The research indicates that a one percent increase in public spending on social services per capita is associated with a reduction in the proportion of children at risk of poverty by approximately one percent (Pabalstu par bērnu ..., 2022).

The latest available data on the proportion of children at risk of poverty out of the total number of children under 18 in the EU Member States between 2015 and 2023 demonstrate the lowest proportion in Slovenia, Czechia, Denmark, Finland and the Netherlands (Table 2).

In turn, the highest proportion of children at risk of poverty during the period analysed was in Romania, Bulgaria, Spain, Greece and Italy.

In Latvia, this indicator has been below the EU average since 2016, and in 2023, the proportion of children at risk of poverty has decreased by 10.4 percentage points compared to 2015.

In general, the proportion of children at risk of poverty in the EU has fluctuated during the period analysed, with a tendency to decrease - by 2.6 percentage points or 9.5%, which can be assessed as a positive trend.

Therefore, the general conclusion suggests that countries with higher social protection spending as a percentage of GDP have fewer children at risk of poverty, and vice versa. However, this trend is not always straightforward to interpret, as shown, for example, in Slovenia, the Netherlands and Czechia.

Slovenia's social protection expenditure as a percentage of GDP was 1.8% in 2022, falling below the EU average indicator. Meantime, Slovenia reported the lowest percentage of children at risk of poverty within the EU Member States, with only 10.5% of children affected.

Progress related to the mitigation of child poverty in Slovenia can be attributed to a series of targeted measures that specifically address families with children. Slovenia's success in this area is largely due to well-directed social transfers designed to enhance social protection for families. These transfers include various forms of support aimed at assisting parents in multiple ways. For example, cash assistance is provided for every newborn to help cover essential costs, while a parental allowance is offered to mothers or fathers who do not have parental protection insurance. In addition, child benefits serve as supplementary income to assist with the maintenance,

upbringing and education of children. Parents of children requiring special care and protection in Slovenia are provided with an additional allowance, and some may be eligible for partial compensation for lost income, along with further relief measures. The importance of subsidised nursery places cannot be overstated, with free nursery places offered for a second child. Furthermore, subsidised school meals

are available, contributing to the overall support system for children. Various allowances and relief measures are also extended to large families with at least three children (First Progress Report ..., 2024). Social transfers play a major role in preventing the risk of poverty; though, their impact on population income has slightly decreased compared to previous years (2023. gadā nabadzības ..., 2024).

Table 2

Proportion of children at risk of poverty up to the age of 18 in the EU Member States in 2015-2023, %

Country	2015	2017	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2023/2015, pp
Romania	53.4	48.7	39.1	40.7	41.5	41.5	39.0	-14.4
Spain	34	31.9	31	31.6	33.4	32.2	34.5	0.5
Bulgaria	47.5	42.4	35.8	35.5	33	33.9	33.9	-13.6
Greece	37.7	36.5	31.2	30.8	32	28.1	28.1	-9.6
Italy	34.1	30.8	27.1	28.9	29.7	28.5	27.1	-7.0
France	22.4	23.5	24.1	23.6	22.5	27.1	26.6	4.2
Luxembourg	23.3	21.5	25.4	24.2	29.4	24	26.1	2.8
Slovakia	24.7	22.7	21	18.4	19.7	24.7	25.3	0.6
Malta	27.8	23.6	23.7	22.3	23.2	23.1	25.2	-2.6
EU	27.4	25.1	22.8	24	24.4	24.7	24.8	-2.6
Hungary	40.3	33.5	24.1	21.7	23.3	18.1	24.4	-15.9
Ireland	29.2	26	25.1	22.4	23.5	22.3	24.3	-4.9
Germany	19.3	18.6	15.4	22.3	23.7	24.4	23.9	4.6
Austria	22.2	22.7	20.1	21.9	22.8	21.6	22.7	0.5
Portugal	31.2	24.6	21.9	21.9	22.9	20.7	22.6	-8.6
Lithuania	34.8	31.3	25.8	23.1	21.6	22.4	21.7	-13.1
Sweden	19.7	19.4	23	20.2	19.7	19.9	21.6	1.9
Latvia	30.7	25	18.7	19.7	20.1	19.8	20.3	-10.4
Belgium	24.1	24.2	23	22	20.5	19.6	19	-5.1
Estonia	22.2	18.8	19.7	17.4	17.4	16.6	18.3	-3.9
Croatia	25.2	24.5	19.1	18.4	18.6	18.1	17.3	-7.9
Poland	26.8	17.8	16.2	16.1	16.5	16.7	16.9	-9.9
Cyprus	22.9	21.7	20.3	19.0	19.2	18.1	16.7	-6.2
Netherlands	17.1	16.4	15.4	15.8	14.9	13.9	15.9	-1.2
Denmark	16.2	15.1	13.8	13.4	14	13.8	15.3	-0.9
Czechia	17.8	14.3	13.0	12.9	13.3	13.4	15.0	-2.8
Finland	14.5	15.0	13.8	14.5	13.2	14.9	13.8	-0.7
Slovenia	16.6	15.6	11.6	12.1	11	10.3	10.7	-5.9

Source: authors' construction based on Eurostat data – Persons at risk of poverty ..., 2025.

The analysis of maternal and social deprivation across the EU Member States shows that people in rural areas are slightly more exposed to poverty than those in urban areas within the entire period analysed, especially rural population in Romania and Bulgaria. Yet, the trend is downward. For example, in Romania, approximately 46% of the rural population were at risk of poverty in 2022, with this figure decreasing to 38.4% in 2023 (Material and social ..., 2025).

Finland and Slovenia among the EU Member States had the lowest poverty risk index for single-adult households with children in 2020 and 2021; while in Slovenia, the poverty risk index increased by 10.1 percentage points or 61.2% in 2022 compared to 2021. Romania, Poland, Hungary and Germany also report a low poverty risk index for single-adult households in 2022 'Figure 3'. Malta, Spain and Luxembourg have the highest poverty risk indices over the entire period analysed. Similarly, in Latvia, the poverty risk index was above

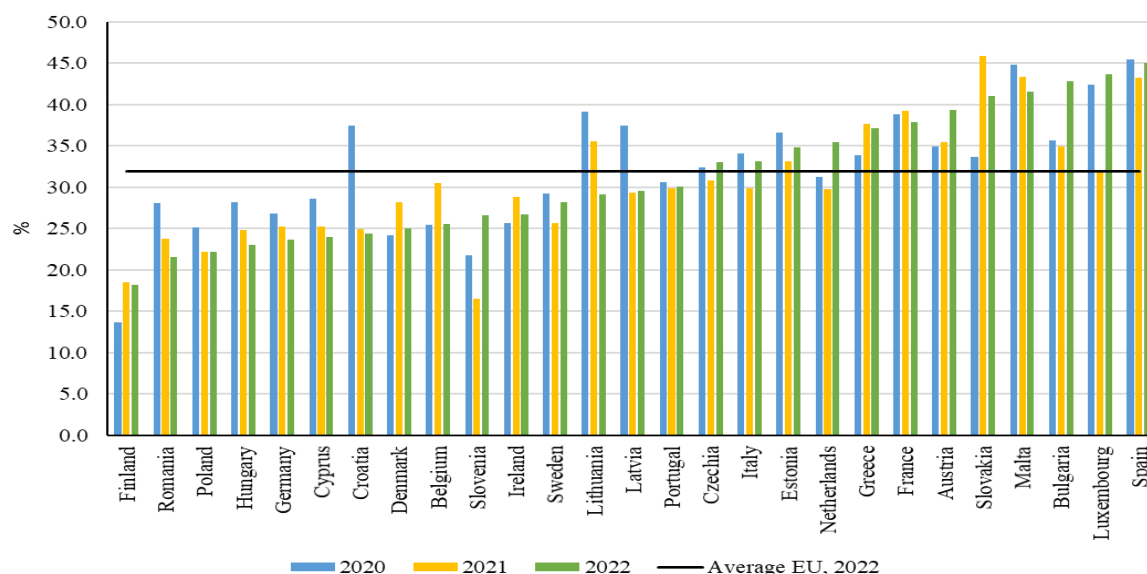
the EU average (37.5%) in 2020, reflecting a negative trend due to the increased risk of a single-adult households to provide for the family. The situation improved significantly in 2021 (29.4%) and 2022 (29.6%), however, the index slightly rose to 30.4% in

2023 (Nabadzības risks un ..., 2025).

It should be noted that Latvia may face difficulties achieving the target of 24.5% set in the National Development Plan of Latvia for 2021-2027 (2020). The situation in the EU has not changed essentially on average (2020 - 32.9%, 2021 - 31.8% and 2022 - 31.9%).

Figure 3

Poverty risk index for households with one adult with dependent children in the EU Member States in 2020-2022, %



Source: authors' construction based on Eurostat data - At-risk-of ..., 2025.

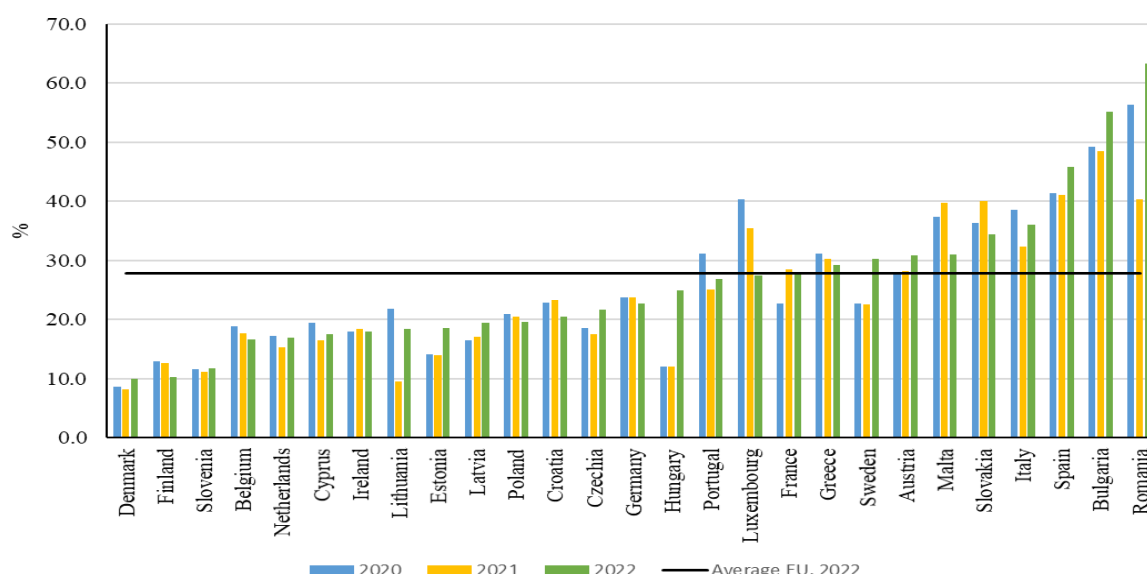
The situation in some EU Member States is particularly critical, since the highest poverty risk index exceeds 40%, suggesting that special support is needed for single-adult families.

An analysis of the poverty risk index for households with two adults and three or more dependent children

shows that most EU Member States (17 countries) are below the EU average between 2020 and 2022, suggesting that this type of households is at lower risk of poverty than households with one adult raising children 'Figure 4'.

Figure 4

Poverty risk index for households with two adults with three or more dependent children in the EU Member States in 2020-2022, %



Source: authors' construction based on Eurostat data - At-risk-of ..., 2025.

The poverty risk index for such households across the EU ranged between 26.2% and 27.8% on average from 2020 to 2022, with an increasing trend observed. Denmark, Finland and Slovenia consistently reported the lowest risk of poverty for these households over the entire period analysed. In 2022, the Baltic States demonstrated a similar poverty risk index for this type of households, ranging from 18.4% to 19.5% and ranking among the Top 10 EU Member States with the lowest poverty risks for such households. Throughout the period analysed, the highest poverty risk index for this type of household was in Bulgaria, Romania and Spain.

In Latvia, despite the increase in income from wage employment, the risk of poverty for households with two adults and three or more dependent children has increased over the period analysed, and it continued to increase also in 2023, reaching 20.8% (Nabadzības risks un ..., 2025). It should be noted that Latvia may face difficulties to reach the target of 12% set in the National Development Plan of Latvia for 2021-2027 (2020) if this trend continues.

Family benefits are recognised to reduce overall poverty, especially in families with two, three or more children and single mothers with children (Lew et al., 2021). In most countries, children benefits and social assistance are the most effective tools in reducing poverty (Leventi et al., 2019). Family allowances are indispensable for lone parents, even if they are employed (Nieuwenhuis, 2021).

According to the Bank of Latvia expert forecast, even small, direct interventions to financially support families have direct benefits and reduce the risk of poverty. Moreover, the data from the Central

Statistical Bureau of Latvia show that the number of third and subsequent children in the families of Latvia has been increasing in recent years (Tautas ataudzes stratēģija ..., 2022). This shows that Latvia needs to continue its targeted family support policy to achieve the desired results.

Conclusions

1. In 2022, the EU Member States invested 2.3% of GDP on average in policies to support children and families. In Latvia, this figure is below the EU average; yet, it is slightly higher than in Estonia and Lithuania.
2. The total fertility rate in 2015 and 2022 in none of the EU Member States has reached at least 2.1, which would ensure generational replacement. The total fertility rate in rural areas of Latvia is slightly higher than in urban areas.
3. In countries where social protection spending as a percentage of GDP is higher, the number of children at risk of poverty is lower and vice versa.
4. In the EU, on average, households with two adults and three or more dependent children have a lower risk of poverty than households with one adult and dependent children; although it demonstrates a tendency to increase.
5. Spending on social protection for families with children in the EU Member States has no direct impact on the fertility rate or the risk of poverty in households with one adult raising children. However, it does have an impact on the risk of poverty in households with two adults with three or more dependent children.

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