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# РЕВИЈА ЗА СОЦИЈАЛНА ПОЛИТИКА

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# (UN)DISCOVERY OF OLD PEOPLE IN SOCIALIST YUGOSLAVIA: THE KNOWLEDGE POLITICS OF INEQUALITY

## Abstract

This article results from an exploration in the production of knowledge about old age in socialist Yugoslavia. It particularly discusses the relationship between research and policy making, highlighting to contradictory tendencies: on the one hand, government bodies in Yugoslavia commissioned and funded substantial research in the social problems of old people, starting in the mid-1960s. On the other hand, policy responses remained deficient. I argue that one reason was the geographic concentration of problems of old age in villages, which were generally neglected by the government; this was manifest in the lack of pension coverage for private farmers and often miserable living conditions. My article is based on a close reading of Yugoslav social-science research on old people and on the analysis of archival documents about social policies in this arena. There is a particular focus on the Socialist Republic of Macedonia, where large-scale surveys of the situation of old people were carried out in the 1970s and 1980s, but where the government response remained insufficient. By the late 1980s, experts seemed to have given up the hope that their research might help to improve alleviating the lot of old people. My contribution is also understood as a rediscovery of a rich research tradition that fell into oblivion during the wars of the 1990s. Yet if we want to understand the dynamics of social inequality in Yugoslavia – as one of the reasons of its dissolution – we should listen to those contemporaneous voices.

**Keywords:** Yugoslavia, Sociology, Old people, Pensions, Poverty

## Introduction

Socialist Yugoslavia was growing old before it became rich—this is how *The Economist* might have framed the issue, had it reported on the topic. (I am paraphrasing a 2023 *Economist* article titled "Large parts of Asia are getting old before they get rich"; The Economist, 2023.) Prominent Yugoslav experts would likely

have agreed. This is evident in an article by Berislav Šefer, one of Yugoslavia's leading scholars on living standards and a professor of social policy and social work. He also served as vice-president of the federal government from 1974 to 1978. Šefer, who earned a PhD in economics in 1966, was part of a distinguished group of Yugoslav social scientists who combined rigorous research with a sincere commitment to improving social policy (Naučno Društvo Srbije, n.d.). Leading Yugoslav sociologists called upon sociology to produce knowledge that would be useful to improve planning, fasten development, and reduce inequality–and in the 1980s, to help solving the deep economic and pollical crisis of the country (e.g. Bolčić, 1977; 1983; 1987: 91–97). A notable feature of this group of scholars was their engagement in international debates and activities, at a time when social scientists in both "developed" and "developing" countries believed they could help governments to improve policymaking. Šefer himself received postgraduate training in Chicago and Berkeley and worked with organizations such as the OECD (Yugoslavia was an associate country), UNESCO, and the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), among others.

In 1989, he summarized the findings of a major study on the "Economic and Social Consequences of the Ageing of the Yugoslav Population" in an article published in the Belgrade-based journal *Socijalna Politika* (Šefer, 1989). The survey had been commissioned by the Yugoslav Conference for Social Activities, a nationwide initiative involving social work and social policy institutions. Šefer emphasized that population aging had long-term social, economic, and political implications. While he stressed that aging should be seen as a "normal process" rather than a problem in itself, he identified specific challenges facing Yugoslavia. The country's age structure resembled that of OECD nations, and its pension spending—around 9% of GDP—was similarly high. Yet monthly pensions remained meager, ranging from 70 to 100 USD. Šefer pointed out that although the aging process was entirely predictable, Yugoslavia had failed to address its economic consequences in a systematic way. This stood in sharp contrast to OECD countries, where the sustainability of pension systems was a subject of intense scrutiny. Šefer criticized Yugoslav policymakers for neglecting the issue, despite the inevitable rise in pension and healthcare costs. The statutory retirement age—60 for men and 55 for women—remained low, and early retirement was relatively easy to obtain. The situation in rural areas was especially dire: the countryside was aging faster than urban areas, yet agriculture remained neglected by the state, "all that out of fear from the restoration of capitalism" (ibid., 31).

Šefer's analysis was sharp, and his warnings were prescient. But policymakers did not heed his call to address the pension system and the needs of the elderly. Instead, they became increasingly preoccupied with dismantling the country. With Yugoslavia's dissolution, a rich line of inquiry came to an end. Since the mid-1960s,

various levels of government had sponsored extensive research into the condition of older people. Reconstructing and contextualizing this body of knowledge is the main objective of this paper. The central research question is: How did sociological research on aging relate to policymaking? In other words, did the knowledge produced by experts—often at the behest of the state—lead to policy responses aimed at addressing the identified problems? This focus also implies that the rich ethnographic research touching upon the livelihoods of old people remains outside of the purview of this article, as it was very distant from the policymaking field. My exploration is situated within the broader social transformations that marked the period from the late 1960s to the breakup of Yugoslavia. In the early 1970s, when scholarly interest in aging peaked, Yugoslavia still had a relatively young population. By the late 1980s, however, the country faced pronounced demographic aging just as it was on the verge of collapse. In the meantime, the problems of the elderly remained unresolved.

Among socialist countries, Yugoslavia likely produced the most in-depth and critical studies of its own social issues, including those related to aging. This was made possible in part by fewer restrictions on academic freedom compared to other communist regimes—even though Yugoslav authorities at times purged universities, most notably in the early 1970s. Furthermore, Yugoslavia was home to a robust sociological tradition that combined empirical rigor with policy-oriented research. The institutional foundations of sociology and the social sciences were strong: sociology, banned under Stalinism, was rehabilitated much earlier than in more orthodox state-socialist countries (Brunnbauer, Kraft, Schulze Wessel, 2011: 16–17). The Yugoslav Sociology Association was established in 1954; the Institute of Social Sciences (Institut društvenih nauka) in Belgrade was founded by the federal government in 1957; the Institute for Social Research in Zagreb followed in 1964; and the journal *Sociologija* was launched in 1959, with other journals like *Sociologija sela* (1963) soon appearing. Yugoslav sociologists were well-connected internationally, employed state-of-the-art methodologies, and benefited from international funding for applied research (Lazić, 2016: 6–11). Yugoslav social scientists—such as those elsewhere in that time—hoped to contribute to concrete technical solutions as well as to "enlighten" policymakers about the social problems they identified in their research (see Mesny, 1998: 162).

The strength of applied sociology in Yugoslavia was further demonstrated by the existence of university departments for social work—Šefer himself founded one at the University of Belgrade—and specialized institutions that combined research with policy advocacy. These included the Institute of Social Policy in Belgrade, which had its own journal (*Socijalna politika*), the Institutes for the Advancement of Social Activities in Skopje and Sarajevo, and the Provincial Institute for Social Research in Novi Sad, and so on. Researchers participated in numerous consultative

bodies—a reflection of Yugoslavia's expansive system of self-management. They did not shy away from addressing issues such as poverty, inequality, and social differentiation (Lazić, 2011: 93–99), including the difficulties faced by the elderly. The press frequently reported on these issues, indicating a broad public interest in social matters. There was a shared belief that, while Yugoslav socialism had its flaws, it could be improved through evidence-based social policy. Policymakers and administrators at various levels of government often sought scholarly input, and the state—primarily the republics and autonomous provinces—provided substantial funding for social research.

However, as I will argue, this did not mean that the government was especially responsive to the recommendations of social scientists. As I have already shown in the case of migration expertise, the gap between scholars and the government widened significantly during the 1980s (Brunnbauer, 2025). Šefer's article exemplifies this dynamic: leading researchers concluded that resolving social problems would require structural reforms, including economic liberalization. But this was a message that the League of Communists, in its various regional branches, remained reluctant to embrace. As a result, the problems mounted while expert knowledge was often ignored. This was also the fate of the knowledge produced on old age.

**Inequality in Yugoslavia: Where is Old Age?**

Recent historical scholarship on Yugoslavia started to become interested in questions of inequality. Rory Archer, Igor Duda, and Paul Stubbs for example noted that

> *Inequality and its public perception increased over the course of the state's existence after an initial post-World War II burst of social mobility. By the 1980s Yugoslavia was increasingly divided on a socio-economic as well as national basis, with the two becoming ever more closely linked* (Archer, Duda, Stubbs, 2016: 3).

The authors of this instructive volume highlight the wealth of contemporaneous research on inequality in socialist Yugoslavia. They reference a broad array of themes and factors identified by Yugoslav scholars as key dimensions of inequality—including housing, education, healthcare, gender, unemployment, and income. However, they overlook age as a crucial predictor of poverty, particularly when combined with rural residence. None of the empirical contributions to the volume examine the situation of older people, and only one explicitly mentions rurality as a significant factor of marginalization (Ströhle, 2016).

This omission reflects a broader pattern found in seminal Yugoslav works on inequality from the 1980s. For instance, Eva Berković's 1986 book analyzed a wide range of factors—such as personal income, informal earnings, employment, housing policy, education, child welfare, healthcare, privileges, social security, and regional disparities—and identified "the differences between the employed and unemployed" as the main axis of social inequality. Yet, she did not mention age at

all (Berković, 1986). Another large-scale sociological survey from the same decade was similarly silent on the issue of aging, despite its clear intersections with many of the inequality factors discussed (Popović et al., 1987). Even the excellent research on social stratification led by Mladen Lazić during this period did not explore the relationship between aging and inequality (Lazić, 1987).

A common feature of both earlier and more recent research on social inequality in socialist Yugoslavia is its dominant class-based perspective. Most Yugoslav sociologists focused on identifying various social classes or strata, primarily defined by income and educational attainment, and measuring disparities between them (cf. Lazić, 2016). Although some engaged with the concept of intergenerational mobility, they rarely employed a life-course perspective that would allow for analysis of changes in "class status" over the lifespan, particularly in old age. Moreover, they showed little interest in the living conditions of the rural population, even though it made up nearly half of Yugoslavia's total population—and it was in rural areas where the social hardships of old age were most concentrated.[1]

My exploration of the archaeology of knowledge production about old age as a social problem in Yugoslavia is therefore also an effort to shed light on a doubly marginalized group: those who were both elderly and rural. These individuals were largely forgotten—not only by the governments of their time but also by contemporary historians. Small-scale, aging private farmers may not have seemed "sexy" enough to attract scholarly attention, despite representing a demographically significant segment of society (Allcock, 2000).

## Studying Old People and their Problems

If one were to pinpoint the historical moment when systematic interest in the situation of older people began in Yugoslavia, 1968 would be a compelling candidate. That year, the federal government turned its attention—perhaps for the first time—to the social problems of the elderly in rural areas.[2] This newfound concern sparked a series of research initiatives. By 1970, the Institute for Social Policy in Belgrade had compiled a comprehensive set of statistical tables on the condition of elderly citizens in Yugoslavia, plus a separate volume with international comparisons. Based on a survey of approximately 3,000 individuals across the country and analysis of census data, the project was led by Yves Nedeljković, a leading social policy researcher at the time, and funded by the U.S. Department of Health, Education and

[1] According to Yugoslavia's last full census of 1981, the urban population made up 46.5% of the country's total population. The share of the farming population was recorded at 19.9% of the total population but this is a notoriously fuzzy category because many rural households combined income from wage labour and farming (Savezni zavod za statistiku, 1990: 130).

[2] Arhiv Jugoslavije (AJ), f. 587: Savezni savet za zdravstvo i socijalnu politiku, f. 4, 7. sednica, 7 June 1968.

Welfare (Institut za socijalnu politiku, 1970a). Once again, significant sociological research in Yugoslavia owed its realization to foreign funding. This also illustrates the broad support of governments in the United States and Europe for the development of social sciences after the Second World War hoping that such research might help policy planning (Mesny, 1998: 162). The most important domestic reason for growing research on the social situation of old people was the establishment of specialized institutions charged to conduct social work but also to provide expertise to the government, which often employed also sociologists. The Institute for Social Questions in Skopje, for example, was established by a decision of the government in September 1961. Social Work became also a study programme at universities. These organizations turned into institutionalized producers of knowledge about the social.

The mentioned survey by the Belgrade-based Institute for Social Policy explored general issues but also the minutiae of personal (dis)comfort, asking questions such as whether respondents could still trim their nails and, if not, who performed this task. In rural areas, the most frequent answer was "daughter-in-law" (Institut za socijalnu politiku, 1970a, table 2/17). The survey made clear that conditions for the elderly were significantly worse in the countryside than in urban centers. For instance, only a minority of adult children who had left their parents' village households provided financial support (ibid., table 2/66). 34% percent of rural respondents reported feeling lonely often, and 37% sometimes (ibid., table 4/15). Just 14% of rural households had indoor plumbing, and 58% stated that their outhouses were more than ten meters from their homes (ibid., table 4/54). Half of the elderly in villages did not own a radio, compared to only 19% in urban areas (ibid., table 4/65). While a systematic comparison between the situation of old people in Yugoslavia and in other European countries goes beyond the scope of this article—and is not warranted, as my focus is the production of knowledge—this early effort included also a compilation of international comparative tables (Institut za socijalnu politiku, 1970b). These showed, for example, that old Yugoslavs felt much more often lonely then their peers in Denmark, Great Britain and the United States, but also in Poland (ibid., table IX-9). The income differentials among old people in Yugoslavia were also astonishing: for instance, the average income of a (former) female white collar worker aged 65 years or more was only 28% more than that of a female farmer in Denmark but in Yugoslavia, the ratio was 3.7 to 1 (ibid., table XIII-12).

Similar studies emerged across Yugoslavia's various republics. For example, an extensive investigation into the socioeconomic hardships faced by elderly households in the villages of Vojvodina was published by the Provincial Institute for Social Research (Pribić, 1970). In Macedonia, a large interdisciplinary government-sponsored project in 1971 led to a comprehensive book (Sinadovski, Nedelkovikj, 1975). A 1972 special issue of the journal *Sociologija sela* ("Sociology

of the Village") featured six articles on different aspects of life for the rural elderly (vol. 10, no. 37–38). In 1973, Miroslav Živković published a dissertation on elderly life in Yugoslavia based on a survey of 3,000 people across six cities: Belgrade, Zagreb, Sarajevo, Niš, Bitola, and Celje. His inquiry began with the question: "Why does society not pay the same attention to the elderly as to children, given that both are unable to be self-sufficient?" (Živković, 1973: 8). While society may have fallen short, scholars increasingly took up the challenge throughout the 1970s (Manojlović, 1991: 7–9). In Yugoslavia, as elsewhere, the social survey became the dominant method for producing knowledge about old age. As Stephen Katz noted in his study of gerontological research, the social survey "combined political advocacy with statistical methodology" (Katz, 1996: 73). By applying such methods to old age, researchers could "translate data on the ages, behaviors, and propensities of representative sample groups into set characterizations of the elderly population as a knowable object of study" (ibid.).

A milestone in the institutionalization of interdisciplinary research on aging in Yugoslavia was the launch of the *Gorontološki zbornik* (today *Gerontologija*) in 1973. Initiated by the Institute for Social Policy in Belgrade with support from the Ministry of Health and Social Policy of the Socialist Republic of Serbia, among others, the journal reflected a commitment to multi-faceted and comprehensive social policies toward the elderly. Closely linked to the newly established Gerontological Society of Serbia, the journal addressed the social, economic, and medical dimensions of aging. Its inaugural preface declared: "The aging of our population, which becomes more evident and whose further trajectory is clear, demands corresponding social policies and actions across multiple domains of public engagement" (*Predgovor*, 1973). The first Yugoslav Congress of Gerontology—a major interdisciplinary event with over 400 contributions—was held in Belgrade in 1977, followed by similar congresses in Ljubljana (1982) and Zagreb (1986). These research efforts garnered international attention; the European Social Research Committee of the International Association of Gerontology held its 1976 symposium in Dubrovnik (Dooghe, Helander, 1979).[3]

From the outset, researchers focused particularly on the rural elderly – which reminds a remark by William Freudenburg and Kenneth Keating (1985: 578) that "Ever since the founding of the field, rural sociologists have shown a commitment to policy-relevant research." In Yugoslavia, demographic changes in the countryside—referred to as *senilizacija* (senilization) by one leading scholar (Livada, 1972: 7)—coupled with the ongoing crisis of agriculture, sharpened academic concern for the aging rural population. One of the first major research projects in this area was

[3] The lone Yugoslav scholar participating in the symposium was Nada Smolić-Krković, author of a handbook on gerontology for social workers (1974) and one of the authors of the longitudinal study on old people in villages in Croatia (Smolić-Krković, Milinković, Visin, 1977).

a longitudinal study in the Socialist Republic of Croatia, conducted by the Institute for Social Work and funded by the U.S. government through its technical cooperation with Yugoslavia (Smolić-Krković, Milinković, Visinski, 1977: 85–91). It was Yugoslavia's first longitudinal household survey, following the same group of people across three waves (1969, 1973, and 1974). It began with 1,583 individuals, of whom 956 were re-interviewed five years later. The questionnaire was adapted from similar studies conducted in the United States and Western Europe.

This project exemplified both the international collaboration underpinning Yugoslav social science and the robustness of rural sociology within the country. Yet, despite broad recognition that socioeconomic issues were most acute in the countryside, there was little sustained effort to improve rural living conditions. Communist authorities harbored deep reservations about private farming, the largest private sector in Yugoslavia's socialist economy. In many rural areas, the presence of the state was minimal, and welfare services were sparse.

Elderly individuals—especially so-called households of the elderly (*staračka domaćinstva*)—were seen as the primary casualties of Yugoslavia's modernization and urbanization. As early as 1968, a federal government report based on earlier research by Petar Manojlović (1965) described the situation in villages as "very complex and urgent."[4] The report lamented that the issue had received "neither complex attention nor social pathology," and recommended wide-ranging socio-economic and legal reforms, including pensions for peasants.[5] In line with Yugoslavia's social policy ethos, the problem was seen not as a familial obligation but as a societal responsibility. The same report noted that while Yugoslavia's overall population remained relatively young, the number of people aged 65 and older was rising—from 1.14 million in 1961 to an expected 1.6 million in 1971. In rural areas, aging was more severe and accompanied by deeper social challenges. Many older people were unable to farm their land, had no alternative income, and lacked access to public services.[6] A study in Serbia revealed that in 1971, only 22% of individuals over 65 received any pension or financial support; most of the remaining 78% were peasants with no income other than subsistence farming (Paunović, 1973: 189). The question of extending pensions to private farmers would remain unresolved for decades.

Among the most ambitious projects responding to this research gap was a 1975 study in the Socialist Republic of Macedonia, led again by Yves Nedeljković. Funded by the Self-Managed Community of Interest for Social Protection, it surveyed 1,034 individuals aged 65 and older. At the time, only 5.8% of Macedonia's popu-

[4] Savezni savet za zdravstvo i socijalnu politiku: *Socijalni problemi ostarelih lica na selu*. Beograd, april 1968. In: Arhiv Jugolavije, f. 587, f. 4.

[5] Savezni savet za zdravstvo i socijalnu politiku, 7. sednica, 7 June 1968, točka 2: „Socijalni problemi ostarelih lica na selu". in: AJ, f. 587, fasc. 4, page 3.

[6] Iidem.

lation was over 65, but rural outmigration was increasing this share rapidly in the villages. The authors highlighted how state neglect and the breakdown of extended family structures left the elderly increasingly vulnerable (Sinadovski, Nedeljković, 1975: 7–25). Only 20% of the surveyed elderly had an income, 30% still worked their land, and 50% were dependent on others. The average landholding was one hectare—insufficient for self-sufficiency. Nearly 38% reported being worse off than in the past. Social benefits were inadequate and unevenly distributed, and the republic had just four care homes with 473 spots. Only 25% of respondents were covered by pension and health insurance; 62% had health insurance only (ibid., 111).[7] Although three-quarters lived in multigenerational households, financial support from children was rare when they lived separately (ibid., 113–42). In 1971, only 53,163 individuals received old-age pensions in Macedonia, and private farmers—still a significant demographic—were ineligible (ibid., 182–83; cf. Maksimović, 1974). The study concluded that the problems faced by the elderly exceeded the capacity of existing institutions to respond (ibid., 242).

The most extensive research on old age in Yugoslavia focused on the countryside, where both experts and policymakers identified the most pressing issues. The concept of the "old-age household"—consisting solely of individuals aged 60 or older—gained prominence. An early article in *Sociologija sela* (1963) described these households as a natural byproduct of economic development but highlighted their implications for agricultural productivity (Marković, 1963: 22). Rural sociologist Svetozar Livada was a pioneer in this area. In a 1966 article he concluded that "The ageing of the population happens especially in rural, village areas (…)" (Livada, 1966: 9). Livada highlighted also the psychological costs of ageing. In such villages "optimism dies and more and more often, so-called 'complex minorization' appears" (ibid., 10). The lack of an institutional responses to this development reinforced the pervasive pessimism in the countryside which intensified the wish of young people to leave the village. These insights were drawn from a survey of 726 elderly rural households, which found that 57% of them had been left behind by their children (Livada, 1966: 9–10; see Erlich, 1966, on the dissolution of the so-called *zadruga*).

Livada, a founding editor of *Sociologija sela*, is another impressive figure. He combined rigorous scholarship with a deep commitment to Yugoslavia and antifascism. Born in 1928 in Slunj, Croatia, he joined the Partisans as a youth and was seriously wounded, delaying his academic career for many years. He eventually earned his PhD in rural sociology from the University of Zagreb and served on the FAO's rural sociology advisory group from 1963 to 1972 (Arbutina, 2022). Livada was a

[7] Health care coverage for peasants had been introduced in Yugoslavia already in 1960 but its full implementation in all parts of the country took a decade.

passionate advocate for the rural elderly. In a 1972 special issue of *Sociologija sela*, he lamented the lack of attention to their plight, arguing that the dramatic condition of rural elders stemmed not only from the rural exodus but also from a societal failure of empathy. Three-quarters of Yugoslavia's 2.5 million elderly people lived in villages, without pensions, healthcare, or adequate housing. Many died as they had lived—overworked and neglected. In one survey, 50% of "old households" had only clay floors, a third had no electricity, and just a quarter had running water. Even familial support was often lacking. Livada blamed a broader societal erosion of solidarity, writing that "old people not only lived in a barbarian way but died in an even more barbarian one" (Livada, 1972: 11). For Livada and others, the key conclusion was that institutional responses were essential. Just as children's rights had been codified earlier in the 20th century, it was now time to articulate the rights of the elderly. In the same special issue, Ruža Petrović observed:

> *While the rural exodus is widely praised, its consequences—decreased birth rates and rural aging—are seen as problematic. But what is truly socially negative? That old people survive after long years of work? That they have not died before becoming dependent? The real social negative lies not in their survival, but in society's attitude toward them* (Petrović, 1972: 23).

The situation of elderly people in cities was apparently better, in large part because a greater share of them received old-age pensions and had access to better social services. Nevertheless, their circumstances were often marked by significant difficulties, as evidenced by Živković's extensive survey (Živković, 1973). One major issue was inflation, which steadily eroded the purchasing power of pensions—a problem that would become even more acute in the 1980s as inflation surged. Many urban elderly lived in poor housing conditions. In Živković's sample of 3,000 individuals from six mid-sized and large Yugoslav cities, 40% of apartments lacked a bath, 30% had no toilet, 27% were not connected to a sewage system, and 23% lacked running water. "To be old in such living conditions must be harder and sicker—and shorter," the author concluded.

Živković also highlighted striking inequalities: living conditions in old age were largely shaped by professional and educational background. Former white-collar workers generally lived in "much better conditions" than blue-collar workers, and within both groups, those with higher qualifications fared considerably better (ibid., 132–134). Although housing shortages were a general problem in Yugoslavia, elderly people appeared to face particular challenges, including a shortage of places in care homes. Social isolation was another critical issue. Elderly urban residents often experienced loneliness and exclusion from social and cultural life, similar to their rural counterparts. Many reported that their children did not care for them. Živković summed up this reality with grim conciseness: "they wait to die" (ibid., 244). Interestingly, those with higher educational attainment were more likely to

live with their children, suggesting that class differences may have been further exacerbated in old age by the combined effects of social inequality and the physiological consequences of aging.

As an intermediate conclusion, this substantial body of 1970s research on the social problems of the elderly in Yugoslavia constructed old people as a distinct population with specific needs, though internally differentiated by class and place of residence. Defined by the arbitrary boundaries of chronological age, the elderly became a measurable group. Paraphrasing Stephen Katz, they were constituted as a social problem—one that demanded targeted policies and specialized forms of knowledge (Katz, 2002: 49).

## A Social Question between Attention and Negligence

Research into the social problems of elderly people, combined with the advocacy efforts of pensioners' organizations, was not entirely in vain. In a range of policy statements and normative documents from the early 1970s, the rights of pensioners and the need for social protection of the elderly were explicitly acknowledged. For example, the Tenth Congress of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia in 1974 called on self-managed communities of interest "to strive to achieve a maximum degree of satisfaction of the elementary needs of the aged" and advocated for the construction of more care homes (Manojlović, 1977: 129). Similarly, the parliament of the Socialist Republic of Serbia adopted a resolution on public care for the elderly in 1972, while the National Assembly of Macedonia passed a comparable document in 1979 (Association of Gerontological Societies, 1982: 48).

Nevertheless, the implementation of a coherent and effective policy to improve the situation of older people—particularly in rural areas—was impeded by the far-reaching decentralization of the Yugoslav state during the mid-1970s and, in the 1980s, by the growing financial problems of public institutions. This decentralization led to a fragmented welfare system, with different laws and regulations across republics and autonomous provinces, and inconsistent implementation by municipalities and self-managed "communities of interest". Another significant constraint stemmed from the close linkage between welfare entitlements and employment. Despite Yugoslavia's distinctive model of self-managed socialism, the workplace remained the core institution through which social benefits were accessed. The 1976 Law on Associated Labor, which fragmented enterprises into numerous Basic Organizations of Associated Labor, stipulated that "workers and other working-people shall set up self-managed communities of interest for pension and disability insurance and other forms of social insurance" (quoted in Association of Gerontological Societies, 1982: 48). As a result, welfare entitlements—including those for the elderly—were closely tied to the bargaining and financial power of individual self-managed units.

One major consequence of this employment-based welfare system was the exclusion of private ("individual") farmers from pension coverage. Despite the existence of more than 2.5 million private farms and over 3.8 million persons employed in private agriculture in the mid-1970s (OECD, 1980: 15), these individuals remained outside the pension system. Even the *Yugoslav Survey*, a publication aimed at showcasing the country's achievements to an international audience, conceded:

> *It should, however, be borne in mind that this system of social security does not encompass all persons aged 65 years and over because farmers are not covered by it. In all republics and autonomous provinces, possibilities are being studied for a gradual introduction of pension insurance for farmers* (Manojlović, 1977: 130).

Fears that the lack of pension coverage would further accelerate rural depopulation by incentivizing migration to urban areas prompted republican governments to introduce pension schemes for farmers during the 1970s. These began as voluntary programs and later became mandatory in some republics (Avzec, 1985: 57–66). Slovenia led the way by mandating compulsory pension insurance for farmers in 1972, followed by Vojvodina in 1977 and Macedonia in 1978. In contrast, Montenegro, Serbia, and Bosnia-Hercegovina introduced only voluntary schemes during this period. Croatia implemented obligatory old-age and invalidity pension insurance for farmers in 1980. Serbia mandated coverage for cooperative farmers in 1983 and extended it to all farmers only in 1986. A federal reform of the old-age and invalidity pension system in 1982 aimed to ease access to pension rights for "associated" peasants and other categories of farmers (Association of Gerontological Societies, 1982: 57). However, how this reform was implemented at the republic and provincial levels remains unclear. The benefits provided to rural populations under these schemes were typically inadequate. An English-language report prepared for the 1982 World Congress on Ageing in Vienna acknowledged this shortfall:

> *In view of the fact that the existing retirement system is not keeping sufficiently the changes in the social status and the actual needs of the aged, it shall be indispensable in the forthcoming period to bring the retirement scheme much more into line with the actual social needs, possibilities, and the social status of people of advanced age* (Association of Gerontological Societies, 1982: 40).

Behind such vague official statements were serious deficiencies. Kosovo and Bosnia-Hercegovina—two of Yugoslavia's most rural regions—never introduced mandatory pension insurance for private farmers. Only Slovenia, by far the country's most prosperous republic, succeeded in establishing a relatively comprehensive and functional old-age pension system for private farmers. In Serbia proper, the situation was dire: by 1982, only 3% of farmers—those in cooperatives—were covered by the pension system. Just 215 out of approximately 690,000 farmers were enrolled in the voluntary pension insurance program, and no old-age peasant

households were yet receiving pensions (Manojlović, 1982: 9). Some of the Yugoslav authors noted that Western countries had already introduced pension coverage for farmers by that time. Austria might serve as a good point of comparison, as it shared the same starting point of having no pension system for farmers immediately after World War Two: here, a mandatory pension transfer program for farmers was established in 1958 and in 1971, the farmers' pension insurance system was largely equalized with that of employees (Urbanetz, 1971).

The case of Macedonia illustrates the difficulties of providing adequate old-age pensions for private farmers. A 1978 law (in force from 1979) made pension contributions obligatory for private farmers (Sinadinoski et al., 1985: 183). However, pensions under this scheme were significantly inferior to those for wage earners. Farmers faced a higher retirement age (65 for men, 60 for women), and a minimum of ten years of contributions was required for eligibility—disqualifying many middle-aged and older farmers at the time of the law's introduction. The flat-rate pension was a mere 500 dinars per month in 1979—around one-tenth of the average wage. At that time the average monthly salary in Yugoslavia was 6,113 dinars, and 5,035 dinars in Macedonia (Statistički godišnjak SFRJ, 1989: 77). Only one pension per peasant household was granted, meaning that the wives of private farmers were classified as dependents. They were not entitled to individual pensions and could only "inherit" their husband's pension upon his death. Given that a majority of the agricultural workforce was female – 4.1 million out of 7.5 million in 1971 (Veselinov, 1987: 128; see also Penev & Kostić, 1984/1985) – this provision starkly contradicted Yugoslavia's professed commitment to gender equality. Moreover, a study conducted in the early 1980s among elderly villagers in Macedonia found that nearly three-quarters of respondents were unaware of the new pension law's provisions (Sinadinoski et al., 1985: 91). Many who were theoretically covered by the law were excluded in practice for various reasons.

While rural populations continued to wait for the benefits of socialist welfare in the form of old-age pensions, the number of pensioners—most of them urban—was rapidly increasing. By 1968, about 390,000 people in Yugoslavia received old-age pensions, 400,000 received disability pensions, and nearly 260,000 received family (survivor) pensions. Pension expenditures already accounted for 9% of national income, yet the value of individual pensions declined in relation to wages. In 1968, the average pension equalled only 51.7% of the average salary, a drop of more than six percentage points since 1963. Experts warned of the growing financial strain on the pension fund, predicting that it would need to expand by more than 10% annually to remain solvent. They also criticized the trend of early retirement, which exacerbated the system's burdens, when even the statutory retirement age was only 55 for men and 50 for women (Vaughan, 1965: 387–90).

## A Fracturing Research-Policy Nexus

While the proliferation of self-management communities of interest and the decentralization of social policy complicated the delivery of systematic solutions to the social problems of the elderly, it also facilitated sustained research efforts into these issues, sponsored by various social policy institutions (Manojlović, 1981). The yearbook *Gerontološki zbornik* regularly published articles summarizing large-scale research projects and reporting on the conditions of older people across different regions and republics of Yugoslavia. This also indicates that political interest in social problems in general and the situation of old people in particular translated into action – for example by establishing a decentralized system of organizations for social work and, as already mentioned, creating flagship institutes for social policy practice and research in the main cities of the individual republics.

The productivity of this infrastructure for knowledge production can be illustrated by the Socialist Republic of Macedonia, which became a particularly active site for socio-gerontological research, evident in frequent reports in the Gerontological yearbook. For instance, in 1978, the Republic Self-Managed Community of Interest for Pension and Disability Insurance initiated a study on residents of an old-age home in Skopje (Darkovski et al., 1982), funded by the Republic Institute for the Advancement of Social Activities (Republički zavod za unapreduvanje na socijalnite dejnosti). This survey, one of the first comprehensive assessments of institutionalized elderly in Yugoslavia, questioned 144 residents about their needs, focusing on personal independence, autonomy, social and cultural engagement, housing conditions, and nutrition. At that time, around three-quarters of older Macedonians (aged 60 and above) lived with their children, a living arrangement widely considered socially preferable. However, the authors noted a gradual erosion of the traditional three-generational family, predicting a decline in co-residence and a corresponding increase in demand for institutional care (ibid., 35). One way, how the anticipated need of specialized housing for old people could be met, was the creation of earmarked apartments for pensioners in regular apartment blocs, combined with communal facilities. Such housing prevented the stigma of retirement homes and helped to maintain the autonomy of old people. In the early 1970s, there were 28 such "*stanbeni punktovi*" in Macedonia, providing accommodation for about 450 pensioners. The pension insurance funds co-funded these apartments (Sinadovski and Nedelkovikj, 1975: 203–5).

Another large-scale project in Macedonia exemplifies the heightened attention given to the rural elderly. Between 1980 and 1983, researchers affiliated with the Republic Institute for the Advancement of Social Activities conducted a representative survey of rural "old-age households" (*starečki domaćinstva*) (Sinadinovski et al., 1983; summarized in Sinadinovski, 1984). Interviewing 794 individuals with statistical support from local social work centres, the findings were sobering.

Villages were rapidly aging as urbanization and deagrarianization advanced. With fewer able-bodied labourers remaining in the countryside, much arable land lay fallow—on average, 56% of farmland in elderly households was unused. Leasing was seldom an option due to a lack of interested tenants, and many heirs showed little interest in farming. The study warned that significant tracts of arable land were at risk of being lost to agriculture entirely. Due to the geographic dispersion of families, many elderly parents received minimal support from their children; the study found that 60% of offspring and grandchildren failed to provide adequate care. Instead, neighbours emerged as the main support network, their assistance described as "more ethical" than that of relatives. A staggering 91% of surveyed elders reported feelings of loneliness. Living conditions were poor, with most homes primitive and lacking basic hygiene—few had indoor plumbing or running water. For the 65% of respondents with impaired mobility, meeting even basic needs was a daily struggle. Social and medical services offered scant relief; only 30 of 112 surveyed settlements had any form of medical service, and merely twelve had a permanent doctor. The researchers poignantly described the plight of the rural elderly:

> *They spent their youth and adolescence in a different moral and social system, one in which old people were respected and their safety guaranteed; now, as they age, that system no longer functions. The old production system and patriarchal norms have dissolved, but the new socialist society has yet to establish a holistic care system for elderly farmers* (Sinadinoski et al., 1983: 183).

A similar survey by the Belgrade-based Institute for Social Policy in the late 1970s, led by Petar Manojlović (1980)—a prolific author and advocate for elderly needs—highlighted comparable challenges in Serbian villages. Case studies across diverse geographic areas revealed that mountainous villages suffered most from rural out-migration, while larger lowland and peri-urban villages showed somewhat improved living conditions. Most surveyed elders (96%) owned arable land and continued farming. However, a majority found their children either unable or unwilling to support them sufficiently. Interestingly, while 20% of elderly respondents rated their living conditions as "very concerning," only 2.7% of social workers and 9% of village functionaries saw the situation as that dire, though most still regarded it as unsatisfactory (Manojlović, 1980: 39).

The late 1970s and early 1980s surge in gerontological research was also motivated by international developments. Yugoslavia participated in the 1982 World Congress on Ageing in Vienna, preparing a national report synthesizing findings from across its republics (Association of Gerontological Societies, 1982: 49–61). Yet despite a clearer picture of the hardships faced by the elderly and of the policy shortcomings, aging remained a marginal concern for policymakers. One reason may have been ideological: the issue of old age conflicted with communist ideology's focus on class struggle and the unilinear narrative of modernization and

development dominant in Yugoslavia. Socialism was built on hopes for youth, not concerns for the aged. Furthermore, public discourse was shaped by urban interests, and the rural population—where elderly problems were most acute—was often overlooked or dismissed by elites.

Vida Tomšić, member of the presidency of SR Slovenia and a prominent former partisan and leader of the Women's Antifascist Front of Yugoslavia, offered a revealing example of these ideological blinders in her lengthy address to the Second Gerontological Congress in Ljubljana in 1982 (Tomšić, 1982). Her speech framed the elderly's problems within broad global concerns, lamenting the growing gap between rich and poor nations and emphasizing the non-aligned movement's achievements. While acknowledging that elderly issues transcended health, social, and humanitarian dimensions, Tomšić avoided concrete solutions, instead framing aging as a class issue resolvable only within the "inalienable right of every working person and citizen to self-government," a right retained into old age. She asserted: "One of the fundamental truths of gerontology is the fact that it cannot be socially neutral. Its content is mostly determined by the aims and values of a certain society, the relations toward other people in general, and particularly toward elderly people" (ibid., 15–16). Rather than addressing the stark problems uncovered by Yugoslav research, Tomšić praised older generations for their wartime and revolutionary contributions, envisioning old and young working together to safeguard the "continuation of the revolution." She argued against early retirement, emphasizing that work provides both livelihood and self-realization enabled by socialist revolution. Her standard message advocated socializing household and care duties to transform local communities into "natural life communities of self-managers." However, she skirted the practical questions of how this would alleviate elderly problems, especially in depopulated rural areas where few people had been left to form such communities, and who would finance such services—despite the speech's considerable length.

This ideological framing also shaped Yugoslavia's delegation position at the 1982 World Assembly on Ageing. Their statement insisted that aging could not be addressed partially or without "substantial changes to the existing unequal economic and political relations in today's world." They called for global cooperation and mechanisms to implement the New Economic Order, aligning with Yugoslavia's role as a leader among developing countries. Domestically, the delegation emphasized self-management, advocating for the elderly's agency in decision-making and opposing paternalistic approaches. They proudly highlighted Yugoslavia's achievements in providing comprehensive social guarantees and human living conditions for the elderly as expressions of "socialist humanism." While such progressive rhetoric might have impressed international audiences, it contrasted sharply with the lived realities of rural elders grappling with neglect and hardship documented by

Yugoslav researchers. This reality became more difficult towards the end of 1980s, when Yugoslavia faced a severe economic crisis, amplified by the austerity measures introduced upon the urging by the International Monetary Fund in response to the worsening debt position of the Yugoslav government, which had borrowed massively from Western financial institutions (Yarashevich and Karneyeva, 2013; Bojic, 1996). The worsening financial position of the different layers of government affected research as funds dried up, notably towards the end of the decade when hyperinflation kicked in. This was one reason why the time of large-scale, comprehensive surveys came to an end (cf. Manojlović 1991).

## Conclusion

In 1991, Petar Manojlović, the tireless advocate for the interests of old people and secretary of the Gerontological Society of Serbia, expressed his frustration with the development of social gerontology in Yugoslavia. According to his account, there had been fifteen major social surveys on the situation of old people—seven conducted by institutions in Serbia and eight by those in other republics. Most of these were carried out in the 1970s, while the 1980s saw little large-scale research on ageing. The studies from that later period tended to focus narrowly on individual municipalities or cities and had, in Manojlović's words, only "modest research ambitions" (1991: 8). This research increasingly concentrated on narrower issues, whereas the surveys from the 1970s had been far more comprehensive. One consequence of this research gap was that public programs and policies aimed at improving the lives of older people often relied on studies conducted two decades earlier, despite profound social changes in the meantime. Given the ongoing demographic ageing and the rise in average life expectancy, Manojlović called for renewed efforts to strengthen research on ageing and old age (ibid.).

Andrew Achenbaum's broader observation about gerontology seems thus applicable to Yugoslavia as well: the country created "islands of knowledge" with little influence on the "development of community-based knowledge" (Achenbaum, 1995: 251–252). The institutional foundations and networks of social gerontology remained fragile, and few researchers outside the social-policy-oriented fields engaged with questions of old age. Notably, demographic scholars rarely addressed ageing: the flagship Yugoslav demography journal, *Stanovništvo*, featured the topic only twice in the 1980s (Penev, Kostić, 1989; Matković, 1989/1990). Meanwhile, in *Gerontološki zbornik*, medical research (geriatrics) gained greater prominence. The decline in research interest during the 1980s mirrored a similar downturn in policy initiatives. For instance, in Macedonia, the issue of old age appeared on the

National Assembly's agenda only three times during the entire decade, despite ongoing demographic ageing.[8]

A second notable trend was a shift in the framing of old age. While the 1970s social surveys tended to define older people as a distinct population (pace Katz) to highlight their needs and criticize state neglect, the 1980s discourse increasingly debated the problems created by the increasing number of old poeple. Berislav Šefer lamented that "when we today speak about old age, we usually speak about it as a problem," even though ageing is a normal biological process (Šefer, 1989: 26). Ageing came to be equated with declining productivity, which negatively impacted economic growth and contributed to increased uncultivated land in rural areas (Avzec, 1981: 68–69; Matković, 1989/1990). The rural population's age pyramid was described as inverted and increasingly unsustainable (e.g., Penev, Kostić, 1984/1985). Authors emphasized the rising dependency ratio—the number of older people relative to those of working age—and questioned the long-term stability of the pension system. Organizations responsible for old-age pensions indeed faced growing liquidity problems and resorted to short-term bank loans and increased contribution rates to meet their obligations (Posrkača, 1989: 129). Posrkača also noted that the "adverse relationship between the number of pensioners and the number of active insurance holders is continuing to worsen" (ibid., 131). He raised serious doubts about the structural sustainability of the Yugoslav pension system, pointing out that on average, people retired three years before the official retirement age and pension entitlements had become quite generous—by 1987, the average old-age pension amounted to 90% of the average personal income (ibid., 135; see also Ruzica, 1992), even though its worth in U.S. dollars was minimal.

Yugoslavia was a country full of contradictions—one of which was the persistence of social problems among older people despite the impressive expansion of public welfare. Our detailed knowledge of these issues is itself paradoxical: while Yugoslavia remained a communist one-party state with restrictions on academic freedom, the government actively commissioned and funded research into social problems—even when these studies exposed the gap between official promises and lived realities. The government hoped this research would help address and resolve underlying social issues. Yet this hope was ultimately futile, as Yugoslavia's economy plunged into a deep and prolonged crisis during the 1980s, drastically limiting the capacity of public institutions to improve welfare and reducing funding for research. Widespread decentralization and the proliferation of self-managed organizations further complicated matters by diffusing responsibility and rendering systemic solutions nearly impossible.

[8] Arhiv na Makedonija, f. 158 (Narodno sobranie).

The precarious situation of older people in rural areas exemplified the general neglect of villages and agriculture by the communist regime. The Yugoslav model of social protection was clearly linked with paid work in the social sector and therefore favoured urban places. It neglected the fact that large parts of the country, and especially its so-called underdeveloped south, remained rural in nature. The growing regional disparities were clearly connected with this fundamental feature of the Yugoslav welfare system—for example, in 1988 the average pension in more industrialized and urbanized Slovenia was more than twice than in more rural Kosovo and Macedonia (Posrkača, 1989: 137). The decline of comprehensive sociological research on old age during the 1980s can also be interpreted as reflecting a diminishing governmental interest in fully understanding these issue – and as a result of a lack of research funds. Public policy making and scientific knowledge proved incommensurable, and the hopes of prominent sociologists that their work might have a direct policy impact turned out to be too optimistic.

Soon, the social question was overshadowed by the national one. While there is no evidence that any of the socio-gerontological researchers themselves adopted nationalist positions, many prominent social scientists did (Lazić, 1982: 92–93). This had profound effects on Yugoslav social sciences: they became increasingly disconnected from international trends, lost interest in social problems, or reframed those issues purely through ethnic and nationalist lenses. In such an environment, research focused 'only' on how various groups actually lived had little chance of receiving public attention or state funding (see Brunnbauer, 2024). The marginalization of social issues has had lasting consequences—explanations for the break-up of Yugoslavia have tended to emphasize ethnic conflict, while social inequality remained largely neglected until recently. Only in the last decade have historians begun to reengage with questions of social inequality in Yugoslavia (Archer, Duda, Stubbs, 2016).

This also means that historians—including the author of this article—have started to rediscover the rich contemporaneous literature on social inequality, including on older people, which had fallen into oblivion for almost thirty years. Institutions that once sponsored large-scale surveys often no longer exist, and their archives are lost or neglected. Even where these institutions still function, they are often unaware of their own history of exploring social problems. The author personally encountered this when visiting such institutions in Skopje in 2024. Similarly, during research in Belgrade in 2023, the author was unable to locate one of the earliest major works on the situation of old people in Yugoslavia (Institut za socijalnu politiku, 1970a) in any of the Belgrade libraries; it was only thanks to an interlibrary loan from the Royal Danish Library that the publication was obtained. This is the perverse effect of nationalism: it first transformed social dissatisfaction into ethnic resentment, then fostered historical narratives oblivious to social marginalization—

further reinforced by the destruction of archives and the marginalization of knowledge caused by the wars ignited by nationalist conflicts.

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# RETHINKING RETIREMENT IN GREECE: FLEXIBLE PATHWAYS, GAPS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

## Abstract

Population ageing, evolving labour markets, and concerns over financial sustainability have placed increasing pressure on pension systems across Europe. In response, many countries have introduced flexible retirement pathways that allow individuals greater choice in how and when to retire. This paper examines the design and implications of flexible retirement pathways in Greece. It maps the available options, outlines the corresponding financial incentives and disincentives, and analyses their expected impacts. To deal with demographic pressures and fiscal challenges, Greece has implemented extensive pension reforms, with the primary aim of raising effective retirement ages and encouraging longer working lives to enhance the long-term financial sustainability of the pension system. These reforms have shaped the currently available flexible retirement pathways, such as deferred retirement, early retirement with benefit reductions, and the possibility of combining pensions with income from work.

Evidence indicates a gradual increase in the effective retirement age, higher employment rates among older groups, and a rise in employed pensioners, highlighting a shift toward extending labour market participation. Flexible retirement options have likely contributed to this development, although broader reforms have also played a substantial role in increasing the effective labour market exit age. However, little is known about the distributional effects of flexible retirement in Greece or the motivations behind individual choices. Barriers remain, including limited awareness, administrative complexity, and weak financial literacy, highlighting the importance of transparency and accessible information to support informed decision-making.

**Keywords:** flexible retirement, Greece, pensions

## Introduction

In recent years, many EU pension systems have undergone reforms aimed at introducing more flexible retirement pathways and strengthening incentives to defer retirement, as part of broader efforts to extend working lives and ensure the financial sustainability of pension schemes (European Commission, 2021; 2024a). At the same time, population ageing is placing pressure on pension systems, intensifying concerns about both their long-term sustainability and the adequacy of retirement incomes. In this context, policymakers at the EU level have increasingly emphasised the need to assess the impact of pension reforms that expand opportunities for flexible retirement and allow individuals to combine pension income with wages.

This article examines these issues in the case of Greece. Greece combines rapid demographic ageing with a history of fragmented pension arrangements and a labour market characterised by relatively low employment rates of older workers, high unemployment rates among young people, and persistent gender gaps. In the aftermath of the 2008/9 financial crisis, extensive pension reforms were introduced to restore the fiscal balance of the pension system, including increasing statutory retirement ages, eliminating early retirement options and restructuring entitlements. While these reforms have been widely analysed from a fiscal and institutional perspective, little attention has been given on how flexible retirement pathways operate in practice in the Greek context, what incentives they create for individuals, and the extent to which they are actually utilised.

The originality of this research lies in providing a comprehensive mapping and critical analysis of flexible retirement in Greece, drawing on the statutory rules of the pension system and examined within the broader policy context. Unlike previous work that has examined pension reforms primarily from a fiscal perspective, this study focuses on the interaction between pension design, individual behaviour, and policy objectives related to employment and ageing. By identifying the pathways currently available, analysing their take-up, and exploring their expected impacts, the study contributes new insights into the dynamics of flexible retirement in Greece and highlights the policy gaps and their implications.

The objectives are threefold: first, to map the different flexible retirement pathways and corresponding incentives currently embedded in Greece's statutory pension schemes; second, to analyse the take-up of these pathways and their expected impacts; and third, to highlight policy gaps and their implications. In doing so, the article seeks to contribute both to the Greek policy debate and to the wider European discussion on the future of retirement and the evolving design of pension systems.

It should be underlined that the analysis focuses primarily on the statutory pension schemes, which include all social security and similar programmes administered by the general government (i.e. central and local government, plus other public sector bodies such as social security institutions), access to which is based on

legislation. While supplementary (occupational and personal) pension schemes are not the main focus, they are considered where relevant in relation to flexible retirement pathways. Special rules for specific groups such as civil servants or workers in arduous jobs are mentioned where they influence the broader picture, but the analysis remains focused on the general statutory system.

The structure of the article is as follows. It begins by outlining the theoretical framework and then provides a brief overview of the evolution of the Greek pension system. It proceeds with a mapping of the flexible retirement pathways available in Greece, followed by an analysis of their impact based on available data. The discussion then turns to the identification of policy gaps and their broader implications. Finally, the article concludes with a section that summarises the main findings of the research.

## Understanding flexible retirement

In recent years, flexible retirement policies have moved to the forefront of European policy debates, reflecting their central role in strategies to extend working lives, adapt pension systems to demographic ageing, and balance fiscal sustainability with adequate social protection. The European Commission's 2024 action plan highlights this priority, underlining the need to evaluate "the impact of pension reforms introducing more opportunities for flexible retirement and for combining pension income with a salary" (European Commission, 2024b, p.6). International organisations such as the OECD (2017) have similarly stressed that the design of pension systems plays a decisive role in shaping retirement behaviour and the uptake of flexible options. However, alongside the design of the pension system, labour market structures and workplace arrangements also play a crucial role in shaping retirement behaviour, influencing not only the feasibility of flexible exit pathways but also the capacity of older workers to remain employed. In its *Demography Toolbox* (October 2023), the Commission underscores this interaction, highlighting that "more flexible working time arrangements support the retention of older workers, for instance with flexible or reduced working hours, and enable people to remain longer in employment if they choose to" (European Commission, 2023, p.13). Therefore, it might be argued that retirement decisions, including those involving flexible retirement pathways, are not only the outcome of individual choice about labour market exit; they are embedded in a multidimensional process shaped by institutional arrangements, labour structures, and social norms. Consequently, the concept of flexible retirement cannot be understood simply as a technical adjustment of pension rules. Rather, it is embedded in life-course transitions, shaped by economic incentives and personal circumstances, linked to welfare state restructuring, and engaged with broader debates on inequality and agency.

Historically, retirement has been a socially constructed institution, used by governments to manage labour markets and industrial restructuring (Atchley, 1982). As Ebbinghaus and Hofäcker (2013) note, during the 1970s and 1980s, governments in advanced welfare states promoted early retirement as a means of addressing industrial decline and high unemployment. However, since the 1990s, demographic ageing, rising longevity, and fiscal constraints have reversed this logic, highlighting a profound shift in retirement policy paradigms, with governments now promoting active ageing and later retirement (Ebbinghaus and Hofäcker, 2013). Within this context, flexible retirement has emerged as an institutional innovation of the 21st century, reshaping the sequencing of the life course by offering multiple trajectories into retirement. Flexible retirement refers to policies and practices that allow individuals to combine employment and pension receipt, to reduce working hours gradually, or to adjust the timing of labour market exit. Examples include partial retirement schemes, combining pension benefits with income from work, deferred retirement bonuses and early-exit penalties and flexible or reduced working hours for older people (Spasova et al., 2025). Nowadays, as Holman and Walker (2021) argue, synthesising intersectionality with a life course perspective reveals how individuals enter later life with unequal resources, health conditions, and employment histories, shaping diverse experiences of health inequalities in ageing. Contrary to a rigid statutory retirement age, flexible retirement is designed precisely to address such heterogeneity by offering more tailored exit pathways.

Retirement flexibility is often examined through the lens of labour economics, where retirement is analysed as a decision shaped not only by personal preferences or health status but also by institutional structures. Gruber and Wise (2007) demonstrate how social security systems function as powerful drivers of retirement timing by creating implicit taxes or subsidies on continued work. Their comparative analysis across multiple countries revealed substantial cross-national variations in retirement behaviour, linked to the design of pension rules for statutory pensionable ages, differences in pension accrual rules, eligibility conditions, and benefit formulas. Retirement decisions are therefore not purely individual choices but strongly conditioned by the incentive structures embedded in pension systems. Comparative evidence further illustrates the diversity of strategies associated with flexible retirement. Eurofound (2016) demonstrates cross-country variation in partial retirement schemes, while its more recent review Eurofound (2024) highlights the broader range of practices used to keep older workers engaged, from phased retirement to targeted workplace adjustments.

While institutional incentives and policy frameworks play a central role in shaping exit pathways, retirement behaviour also reflects the interaction of individual characteristics and broader socio-economic contexts. This is evident in Axelrad's (2018) comparative analysis, which highlights significant differences in patterns of

retirement timing, showing that retirement decisions are shaped both by individual characteristics (e.g., gender, education, health, occupation) and country-level indicators (e.g., GDP, annual unemployment rate, level of pension spending, and national policies and cultural norms). In a similar vein, Baumann and Madero-Cabib (2021) explore retirement trajectories in countries with flexible retirement policies but differing welfare regimes, finding that outcomes diverge substantially depending more on welfare systems than on flexible retirement policies themselves. Kuitto and Helmdag (2021) examine how policies shape older workers' labour market participation, concluding that pension system rules and incentives are significant determinants of retirement decisions and prolonged labour market exits. Consequently, evidence suggest that retirement outcomes cannot be explained by individual preferences or flexible retirement policies alone but must be understood within the broader institutional and policy contexts that structure opportunities and constraints.

Building on this, current debates increasingly situate flexible retirement within a broader policy paradigm shift. Flexible retirement should not be viewed as an isolated reform but as part of an integrated approach that links pension design, incentives, and labour market conditions. Rather than treating retirement as a one-time, fixed event, policymakers increasingly design pension systems to influence the timing and form of labour market exit. Rewards and penalties are structured to guide behaviour, as postponing retirement typically results in bonus accruals, while early exits generate deductions proportional to expected longer benefit duration (Eurofound, 2016). By offering partial pensions, deferred retirement bonuses, or flexible working arrangements, states attempt to reconcile fiscal sustainability with individual choice.

However, it should be noted that a growing body of research critically examines the distributional consequences of flexible retirement. While the policy discourse often frames flexibility as a means of enhancing individual choice, scholars caution against an overly optimistic view. Vickerstaff and Loretto (2017), for example, characterise flexible work and retirement as ambivalent phenomena; while they may empower older workers by allowing a gradual reduction in working hours and smoother transitions out of employment, they may also reinforce social inequalities, including through the unequal distribution of care responsibilities. Those in good health with stable careers and sufficient financial resources are best placed to take advantage of flexible options. Conversely, those with precarious employment histories, lower incomes, or physically demanding jobs may be forced into early retirement on reduced benefits or compelled to work longer despite declining health (Spasova et al., 2025). This perspective underscores that flexible retirement must be understood not only as an institutional mechanism but as a differentiated experience shaped by inequality.

In addition, studies examining post-retirement employment and life satisfaction offer further insights. Dingemans and Henkens (2019) demonstrate that the relationship between life satisfaction and working after retirement depends on individual pension income and the resources available in the broader context. According to their findings, working after retirement can improve life satisfaction for financially vulnerable retirees, especially in poorer countries or when no partner is present, but it is not a universal solution, since many retirees cannot access jobs, and for some, working out of necessity may harm well-being. Additionally, their cross-national comparative findings reveal that working after retirement varies a lot across countries, underscoring that working after retirement may be more empowering in some systems than in others.

Moreover, research indicates that older adults with inadequate pensions are more likely to remain in employment to sustain their standard of living (Anxo et al., 2019). While working after retirement can enhance life satisfaction, its outcomes depend on factors such as education, occupational background, and working conditions (AGE Platform Europe, 2023; Anxo et al., 2019). Beyond financial necessity, many retirees continue working to maintain social connections, preserve a sense of identity, and seek mental stimulation or fulfilment (Anxo et al., 2019). Importantly, jobs that are less physically demanding and offer greater autonomy are linked to a higher likelihood of continued employment in later life (Anxo et al., 2019). This is further supported by qualitative studies, such as Sewdas et al. (2017) in the Netherlands, and Tur-Sinai et al. (2022) in Israel, that provide evidence that older adults' decisions to work longer are influenced by a mix of financial necessity, psychological factors, job satisfaction, and health considerations. The EuroAgeism report by Varlamova et al. (2021) adds another layer, identifying both obstacles and opportunities for employment in old age, including discrimination, workplace practices, and lack of training.

In general, these findings underscore that retirement is structured not only by individual choice but also by contextual factors. Gender, class, education, and occupation are key determinants of who has access to flexible retirement arrangements and who benefits from these policies (Anxo et al., 2019). Flexibility, therefore, cannot be assumed to be universally positive. Rather, it must be understood in relation to broader patterns of social stratification and labour market inequality. Institutional arrangements that appear empowering for some groups may simultaneously constrain others, reinforcing existing inequalities. This perspective highlights that flexible retirement pathways cannot be treated as a uniform solution but they must be understood in to the context of social stratification and labour market inequalities, recognising that the same institutional arrangements can be enabling for certain groups and restrictive for others.

Overall, flexible retirement has become a defining feature of contemporary pension and labour market policies, often framed as a way to reconcile fiscal sustainability with individual choice, while supporting smoother transitions into retirement, extending working lives, and in some cases enhancing well-being and social participation. However, evidence shows that flexibility is not a neutral tool. Its impact is shaped by pension rules, labour market structures, welfare regimes, and social norms, and its benefits are unevenly distributed across social groups. For some older workers, flexible retirement offers tailored exit pathways, phased employment, or opportunities for continued employment, though for others (particularly those in precarious jobs, with poor health, or limited financial resources) it results in constrained choices and greater risks of inequality. Understanding flexible retirement therefore requires moving beyond a narrow economic or technical perspective to a multidimensional perspective that recognises its role in shaping life courses, both reflecting and shaping social inequalities, while balancing fiscal imperatives with social adequacy.

**The evolution of the Greek pension system: a brief overview**

The Greek pension system has been shaped by a long history of fragmented social insurance, strong state intervention, and reliance on family solidarity. Early legislation in the 20th century produced multiple occupational funds, each with its own rules, contribution rates, and benefit formulas. This legacy of fragmentation generated profound inequalities between socio-professional groups (Petmesidou, 1991). Pensions often served as the backbone of household survival, with older people's incomes supporting unemployed or underemployed family members (Petmesidou, 2013). This reliance on intergenerational solidarity has been a defining feature of Greek social protection, compensating for the limited development of non-contributory social safety nets (Ferrera, 1996; Petmesidou, 2013). By the early 2000s, deep structural weaknesses in the Greek pension system had become evident. The country was experiencing one of the fastest rates of demographic ageing in the EU, combined with persistently low employment, widespread contribution evasion, and a narrow revenue base; together, these pressures created a fundamental imbalance: pension expenditure was rising rapidly while contribution revenues failed to keep pace (Nektarios and Tinios, 2019).

After 2009, the crisis years marked a radical rupture. Under the conditionality of the EU and IMF adjustment programs, successive governments implemented sweeping pension reforms. These included raising the statutory retirement age to 67 (with early retirement at 62 for those with 40 years of contributions) for almost all employees, merging dozens of insurance funds into the single e-EFKA, and harmonising benefit formulas under a unified national and contributory pension scheme (European Commission, 2024c). Replacement rates were drastically reduced, in-

dexation to wages and prices was suspended for a decade, and benefits were cut repeatedly (European Commission, 2018). The reforms also introduced automatic adjustment of retirement ages in line with life expectancy, aligning Greece with broader European trends (European Commission, 2021).[1]

While these measures achieved fiscal savings and enhanced administrative uniformity, they also led to significant income losses for older people, who were disproportionately affected by austerity measures (Kaltsouni and Kosma, 2015). Post-crisis reforms have sought to balance fiscal sustainability with adequacy. The 2016 reform (Law 4387/2016) introduced a two-tier system combining a national non-contributory pension with an earnings-related contributory pension under uniform rules (European Commission, 2018). In 2020, Law 4670/2020 slightly improved accrual rates for longer careers, while in 2022 a new defined-contribution auxiliary scheme provided by the Hellenic Auxiliary Pensions Defined Contributions Fund (TEKA) was launched, shifting part of the system toward funded individual accounts (European Commission, 2024c).

Despite consolidation, challenges remain. Inequalities persist, particularly affecting women and workers with fragmented contribution histories (European Commission, 2024c). The predominance of contributory logic leaves those with interrupted or informal careers at risk of inadequate pensions, while non-contributory safety nets remain modest by European standards (European Commission, 2024c). At the same time, according to the National Actuarial Authority (2023), the latest pension projections demonstrate that demographic pressures will intensify fiscal strain, even after recent reforms, unless employment rates increase significantly.

In sum, the Greek pension system illustrates the tension between fiscal consolidation and social adequacy. Crisis-driven reforms rationalised institutional structures and enhanced financial stability of the pension system, but largely through retrenchment. As a result, pensions have assumed a more residual character, shifting their emphasis from comprehensive income security toward providing only minimum guarantees.

## Mapping of flexible retirement pathways

The design of flexible retirement pathways in Greece is shaped by statutory provisions governing the timing of pension claims, the possibility of combining work with retirement income, and the incentives or disincentives embedded in contribution and benefit rules. Unlike some EU countries where phased or partial retirement options are well developed (Spasova et al., 2025), flexibility in Greece is more narrowly defined. It mainly concerns the possibility of deferring retirement beyond the statutory pensionable age, retiring earlier under differentiated conditions, or

[1] For more details on the current pension system, see European Commission (2024c), pp. 120-131.

continuing to work while receiving a pension. These arrangements reflect the policy objectives of extending working lives and ensuring pension system sustainability.

More specifically, as far as deferred retirement is concerned, individuals who meet the qualifying conditions for old-age pensions have the option to continue working beyond the statutory pensionable age of 67. An important exception applies to civil servants, who are required to retire upon reaching this age. This means that, except for civil servants, those eligible for old-age benefits can choose when to retire based on their personal circumstances and preferences. It should be noted, however, that, unlike some other EU countries, in Greece there is no provision for a general flexible pensionable age.

Moreover, the pension system foresees differentiated pensionable ages for specific categories of insured people. This concerns workers with at least 40 years of contributions who are entitled to retire without benefit reductions at 62, rather than the statutory pensionable age of 67. Special provisions also apply to parents of children with disabilities, military personnel, and workers in arduous occupations, who may retire earlier provided they meet the relevant contribution thresholds. These differentiated rules continue to play an important role in shaping retirement behaviour.

A further element of flexibility concerns the possibility of combining pension benefits with income from work. Retirees who claim a full pension at pensionable age may continue to work as employees, self-employed, or farmers while receiving their full pension. They are required to notify the Digital National Social Security Fund (e-EFKA) through a dedicated platform before resuming employment, and financial penalties apply in cases of non-compliance. In addition, working pensioners must pay social insurance contributions and an additional non-contributory fee to e-EFKA, the level of which depends on employment status. Several exemptions apply, including for pensioners with disabilities, parents with large families, and low-income farmers. By contrast, pensioners employed in general government entities before the age of 62 have their pension payments suspended until they reach that age. Importantly, the same rules apply to individuals combining work with an early pension; no special provisions exist in this case. At the same time, Greece does not offer the option of partial retirement or phased withdrawal from the labour market. As a result, flexibility is largely limited to the decision to defer retirement, to retire early under certain conditions, or to combine pension benefits with continued employment.

When examining the rules that affect pension benefits and incentives to work longer, it becomes evident that the Greek pension system shapes retirement decisions primarily by encouraging the deferral of retirement and by regulating the conditions under which pension receipt can be combined with continued employment. A defining feature is the close link between pension entitlements and an individual's

employment and earnings history. Longer contribution periods translate directly into higher benefits, thereby creating a strong structural incentive to remain in employment and prolong working life. Although contributions are subject to a ceiling (set at EUR 7,373.53 per month for private-sector employees), this level is far above both the average salary (EUR 1,342 per month in 2024) (Ministry of Labour and Social Security, 2025), let alone to the statutory minimum wage (EUR 880 per month since April 2025). As a result, for the vast majority of workers, the financial incentive arising from the link between continued employment and improved pension outcomes remains strong.

Non-standard workers, however, often face challenges in meeting the qualifying conditions, thereby struggling to benefit from these incentives. Shorter or fragmented careers and lower earnings make it difficult for them to build adequate contribution records. The system further penalises workers with fewer than 20 years of contributions through reductions in the national pension, while early retirees also face financial penalties. Annual accrual rates for contributory pensions reinforce these patterns: low rates apply during the first 15 years of contributions, but increase steadily, peaking at 2.55% between 36 and 40 years. Beyond 40 years, however, the accrual rate drops sharply to 0.5%, significantly reducing returns to additional employment. As a result, the system strongly encourages participation up to 40 years of contributions but offers weak incentives thereafter.

Additional financial incentives arise from the rules governing the national pension. The standard amount of the national pension (i.e., EUR 436.39 per month in 2025) is reduced both for individuals with fewer than 20 years of contributions and for those retiring before the statutory age of 67. For workers with fewer than 40 years of residence in Greece, further reductions apply, with the benefit cut by 2.5% for each missing year of residence.

Recent reforms to the rules on combining pensions with employment have also altered retirement incentives. Since 2024, pensioners may work while receiving their full benefits, with their additional contributions used to increase the contributory component of their pension. Under the earlier system, in place until the end of 2023, pensioners faced significant disincentives to work, as employment often triggered reductions in pension benefits and additional contribution periods were not used to recalculate entitlements. The new framework therefore encourages older individuals to claim their pension and continue working, rather than deferring retirement altogether. Pensioners who remain in employment are required to pay statutory social security contributions as well as an additional non-contributory fee to e-EFKA, though exemptions exist for certain groups, including low-income farmers and pensioners with disabilities. Importantly, the system does not provide for partial or phased retirement.

In addition, it should be noted that there are no distinct taxation policies applicable to flexible retirement pathways, nor are there specific tax incentives for employees to defer retirement or for employers to encourage the hiring of pensioners. Therefore, taxation does not play a role in shaping retirement choices. Similarly, eligibility for other forms of social protection is not affected by deferring retirement or by the combination of pension with work. As long as individuals meet the minimum qualifying conditions for specific benefits, they retain access irrespective of their employment or retirement status.

Taken together, these rules create a mixed set of incentives. While the design of accrual rates and benefit reductions strongly encourages individuals to work up to 40 years, the sharp decline in returns thereafter, coupled with the ability to combine full pensions with earnings, makes continued employment after pension claiming more attractive than deferring retirement. This interplay of incentives shapes not only individual choices but also broader patterns of labour market participation among older workers in Greece.

**Impact of flexible retirement pathways**

A crucial question for policymakers seeking to extend working lives is how flexible retirement pathways affect the labour market participation of older workers. Greater flexibility in pension systems can have several potential consequences depending on individual circumstances, institutional design, and labour market conditions. Some individuals may choose to remain in employment while receiving retirement benefits, thereby postponing full exit from the labour force. This may appeal to individuals who value the additional income, wish to maintain social and professional engagement, or seek to gradually transition out of work rather than face a sudden retirement. At the same time, however, flexible retirement pathways carry the risk of widening inequalities. Workers in desk-based or less physically demanding occupations are generally better placed to extend their working lives, while those employed in manual, arduous, or physically strenuous jobs may find it difficult or impossible to continue working, regardless of the incentives on offer. Without compensatory measures, flexibility may therefore privilege those already advantaged in the labour market.

This section therefore examines the available evidence on how flexible retirement pathways operate in Greece and their implications for labour market participation and for the pension system. It considers the extent of take-up, the effects on effective retirement age, labour market dynamics, fiscal sustainability, distributional outcomes, and quality of life, as well as the motivations driving individual choices.

As analysed earlier, the main flexible retirement pathways in Greece include deferring retirement, combining pension benefits with income from work, and retiring at the age of 62 (instead of 67) for those with at least 40 years of contributions.

However, there are currently no aggregated data or surveys available on the take-up rates of these pathways or on the number of people who defer retirement. This lack of systematic monitoring is itself a limitation, as it prevents policymakers from assessing whether policies are meeting their objectives.

As a result, insights into the use of flexible retirement options must rely on more limited and fragmented sources, such as administrative data and specialised survey data. Specifically, an indication can be provided from data on pensioners who remain in employment. According to administrative data provided by e-EFKA, out of approximately 2.11 million pensioners[2] (IDIKA, 2024), 3.4% or 84,239 pensioners declared their employment (81,179 old-age and military pensioners) as of 21 May 2024. Out of the total number of pensioners who declare employment (84,239 people), 66.8% or 56,264 are men and 33.2% or 27,970 women, with 5 not specifying their gender. Among working pensioners, the majority are self-employed or freelancers (37.6% or 31,665 people), followed by employees (33.9% or 28,560 people) and farmers (27.8% or 23,413 people).

It is worth noting that administrative data provided by e-EFKA for December 2023 – the last month under the previous regulations – show that 37,529 old-age pensioners (or 1.98% of total old-age pensioners) declared employment. Of these, 72.99% or 27,393 people are men and 27.01% or 10,136 people are women. This number is considerably lower than the 80,905 old-age pensioners who declared employment in May 2024, representing an increase of 43,376 people (115.6%). Although there is no hard evidence to explain this significant increase, it can likely be attributed to the new regulations effective from January 2024, which allow pensioners to continue working without a reduction in their pension benefits. Previously, pensioners faced a 30% reduction in their pension if they continued to work, which might have discouraged many from taking-up or declaring employment. This provides evidence that regulatory design matters: incentives and penalties embedded in pension rules directly shape whether pensioners declare and formalise their employment.

Additional insights are provided by the Ad hoc Survey on Pensions and Labour Market Participation (ELSTAT, 2024). According to the findings of this survey, individuals receiving an old-age pension and still working represent 1.8% of all employed persons in 2023. Among statutory pensioners aged 50-74 who remain in or return to the labour market, financial reasons were the predominant motivation: 32.9% report that continued employment is necessary for financial reasons, while a further 14% because it as financially attractive. Notably, 25.8% of respondents stated that they continued working because they enjoyed being productive and engaged in the labour market. This highlights the importance of individual characteristics

[2] This number does not include survivors' pensioners.

and behaviours in shaping retirement decisions. It is also worth noting that, according to the same survey, 11.6% of persons 50-74 years old stated that they received a reduced statutory pension in 2023. Significant gender differences are observed: 84.7% women and 40.7% men reported receiving a reduced pension as a result of early retirement. Although there is no hard evidence, this might suggest that flexibility interacts with existing labour market inequalities, with women more likely to use early-exit options, often linked to shorter and more fragmented careers and/or family care responsibilities.

As to the impact on retirement age, OECD data on the effective labour market exit age show that between 2014 and 2022 this increased by 2.7 percentage points for men (from 60.5 in 2014 to 63.2 in 2022) and 0.5 percentage points for women (from 59.2 to 59.7) (OECD, 2023). However, this reflects not only flexible retirement but also reforms aligning pensionable ages, restricting early exits, and linking the statutory age to life expectancy (European Commission, 2018). Despite the observed increases, the average effective labour market exit age in Greece remains lower than the pensionable age of 67 years for both men and women. Yet, the fact that the national pension system allows those with at least 40 years of contributions to retire with a full pension at 62 years, suggests that men's average effective labour market exit age is closer to the pensionable age, possibly due to longer contributory periods compared to women or other reasons such as exiting the labour market for care responsibilities (Eurofound, 2024).

Although no comprehensive administrative data exist on the age at which pensions are first claimed, survey evidence provides some indicative insights. According to recent findings (ELSTAT, 2024), the average age of first receipt of a statutory pension among persons aged 50-74 is 58.6 years, slightly higher for men (58.9) than for women (58.2). Importantly, retirement age varies across occupational groups, ranging from 59 years for technicians and associate professionals to 65.6 years for skilled agricultural, forestry, and fishery workers. Legislators, senior officials, and managers retire later than most other groups (63.8 years), reflecting the less physically demanding nature of their work and the stronger alignment between experience and employability in these occupations. Along with these individual characteristics that shape retirement behaviour, the main feature of the pension system expected to have an impact on effective retirement age is the link of the statutory pensionable age to life expectancy, according to which the statutory pensionable age is projected to rise from 67 today to 72.5 years in 2070 (National Actuarial Authority, 2023, p. 36).

Moreover, the possibility for pensioners to continue working while receiving a pension benefit provides a clear incentive to extend participation in the labour market, thereby affecting the age of final withdrawal from the labour market. This is reflected in the rising employment rates among individuals aged 65-74. Accord-

ing to EU Labour Force Survey (LFS) data, only 4.5% (6.4% for men and 2.7% for women) of individuals in this age group were employed in 2014, reaching 9% in 2023 (12% for men and 6.6% for women).[3] Further to this, projections suggest that this trend will continue, with the employment rate among those aged 65-74 expected to rise further, reaching 23.3% by 2070 (National Actuarial Authority, 2023, p. 22). These projections also indicate a significant increase in average labour market exit age, from 63.8 years in 2023 to 67.5 years in 2070 (National Actuarial Authority, 2023, p. 23), which is probably attributed to the projected increase in the statutory pensionable age.

With regard to the impact of flexible retirement on labour market dynamics in Greece, while this is difficult to be estimated, certain indicators provide a useful illustration. For instance, available LFS data for Greece show that employment rates increased across all age groups from 2014 to 2023.[4] However, the increases among those aged 60-64 and 65-69 (from 24.1% in 2014 to 42.5% in 2023 and from 6.5% in 2014 to 14.9% in 2023 respectively) suggest a trend towards prolonged labour market participation among older workers. During this period, both men and women in older age groups have experienced increases in employment rates, but men generally have higher employment rates across all age groups. The most significant increases in employment rates are observed among those with medium and high education levels, particularly in older age groups. This suggests that individuals with higher educational levels are more likely to work longer or to benefit from flexible retirement options.

Additionally, LFS data on the average number of usual weekly hours of work reveal a decline in average working hours over the period 2014-2023.[5] In particular, the average weekly working hours for the 55-64 age group decreased from 43.6 hours in 2014 to 41.5 hours in 2023, a reduction of 2.1 hours. For the 25-54 age group, the average weekly working hours slightly decreased from 41.9 hours in 2014 to 41 hours in 2023, a decline of 0.9 hours. This overall decrease in working hours is more pronounced among those aged 55-64, possibly suggesting that flexible retirement pathways might be allowing older workers to reduce their working hours.

In a similar vein, an indication of the impact of flexible retirement pathways on labour market dynamics is also provided by the number of years a person aged 15 is expected to be active in the labour market throughout their life.[6] According to this indicator, the total number of active years in the labour market for a person aged 15

[3] Source: Eurostat, LFS, Code = lfsa_ergaed, downloaded on 28 May 2024.

[4] Source: Eurostat, LFS, Code = lfsa_ergaed, downloaded on 28 May 2024.

[5] Source: Eurostat, LFS, Code = lfsa_ewhuis, downloaded on 29 May 2024.

[6] Source: Eurostat, LFS, Code: lfsi_dwl_a, downloaded on 28 May 2024.

has shown a steady annual increase from 32.1 years in 2014 to 34.2 years in 2023. The expected active years for men in the labour market increased from 35.7 years in 2014 to 37.5 years in 2023, while for women it increased from 28.3 years in 2014 to 30.6 years in 2023, showing a more significant increase of 2.3 years compared to 1.8 years for men. This increase suggests a potential impact of the changes in retirement policies, including flexible retirement pathways, on extending labour market participation.

Distributional effects of flexible retirement pathways in Greece are largely unexplored. While the system does not include mechanisms explicitly designed to mitigate potential inequalities created by incentives to defer retirement, the possibility of taking into account "notional years of insurance" for non-contributory periods such as maternity leave, unemployment or military service serves as an indirect mechanism to mitigate potential regressive distributional effects by helping workers with interrupted careers to qualify for pensions. Similarly, the fiscal and societal impacts of flexible retirement remain under-researched, though it is noted that actuarial projections suggest that the overall sustainability of the Greek pension system is ensured in the long term, with public pension expenditure projected to decline by 2.5 percentage points of GDP by 2070 (National Actuarial Authority, 2023).

Finally, little is known about the motivations behind individual choices to use – or to avoid – flexible retirement options. While recent trends point to increasing employment among pensioners and rising exit ages, further research is needed to understand whether these outcomes are driven by financial necessity, personal preference, workplace practices, or policy incentives. Without such evidence, it is difficult to assess the broader implications of flexible retirement for quality of life, equity, and social outcomes.

To sum up, the available evidence suggests that flexible retirement pathways have begun to shape retirement behaviour in Greece, particularly through reforms that make combining pensions with employment more attractive. They have contributed to rising employment rates among older age groups and to modest increases in effective labour market exit ages. However, their impact remains uneven. Gender, education level and occupation strongly influence the ability to take advantage of flexibility, raising concerns about inequality. Moreover, key drivers of retirement behaviour appear to lie less in the flexible options themselves than in broader structural reforms – most notably the statutory link between pension age and life expectancy. Overall, flexibility has potential as a policy tool, but without complementary measures to address disparities, its benefits risk being unevenly distributed across the workforce.

## Policy gaps and implications

Flexible retirement pathways are increasingly recognised as a means of managing the transition from work to retirement, motivated by the need to reconcile system sustainability with individual preferences and extending working lives (Spasova et al., 2025). Although in EU countries such pathways take multiple forms (Spasova et al., 2025), in Greece, they are only partially developed and lack a coherent overall design, leaving the available options relatively limited. While provisions such as deferral of retirement and differentiated pensionable ages exist, these only apply to certain categories of workers, resulting in uneven access to flexible retirement options across groups of workers in the country. In addition, there is no provision for a general flexible pensionable age or for partial retirement schemes that would allow a gradual transition from work to retirement. Instead, the main pathway for flexible retirement in Greece is the option to combine employment with a full pension. This shows that flexibility in the pension system remains limited and primarily promotes post-retirement work rather than enabling gradual or phased exits from the labour market. However, access is uneven in practice, benefiting certain occupations and career patterns, while disproportionately disadvantaging those with fragmented employment histories.

In this way, the pension system risks deepening inequalities between occupational groups, men and women, and standard versus non-standard workers, thereby reinforcing existing labour market segmentation. Workers in physically demanding jobs, people with fragmented careers (mostly women), and those in non-standard employment face particularly constrained choices, while the system lacks targeted measures to effectively address these disparities in access to flexible retirement pathways and ensure adequate retirement income for vulnerable groups, resulting in gaps in adequacy. As the preceding analysis shows, current policies focus almost exclusively on pension rules, while neglecting active labour market policies, and the role of employers. Yet employers' practices (e.g., age discrimination, lack of flexible work arrangements, limited reskilling opportunities) strongly influence whether older workers can or choose to remain in employment. At the same time, public support for active labour market measures tailored to older workers, including reskilling, training, and workplace adaptations, remains almost inexistent. Without such measures, many older workers are unable to take advantage of extended working lives or benefit from flexible retirement options.

Policy should distinguish between "desirable" flexibility (voluntary phased retirement, part-time work, or meaningful employment) and "constrained" flexibility where older people continue working out of financial necessity due to inadequate pensions. While extending working lives can be beneficial, the way the system encourages people to retire later or discourages them from retiring early needs to be handled carefully. If the balance is weak, the system risks disproportionately penal-

ising individuals who are unable to remain in employment. Existing evidence warns that flexible retirement can reinforce or even deepen inequalities when labour-market access and job-quality gaps remain unaddressed (OECD, 2017). In Greece, as analysed in the previous section, evidence shows that opportunities for benefitting from flexible retirement concentrate among men with continuous employment histories and higher qualifications, while older wage-earners (especially women and those with interrupted or low-wage careers) face barriers to retention and re-entry (Eurofound, 2025; ELSTAT, 2024).

Moreover, monitoring of flexible retirement pathways remains weak, with no systematic reporting on take-up of flexible retirement pathways, nor are there simulation studies on their labour market or distributional impacts. This lack of evidence impedes informed policymaking and prevents a thorough assessment of whether flexibility contributes to system sustainability, equity, or quality of life in old age. In fact, the dimension of well-being and quality of life among older people is almost entirely absent from the policy debate, despite growing evidence that retirement transitions affect not only financial outcomes but also social participation, health, and life satisfaction, as analysed earlier. In general, policy design in Greece continues to focus on fiscal sustainability, with little attention to the quality of life, preferences, and needs of older workers (e.g., desire for gradual retirement, reduced hours), thereby limiting the legitimacy and effectiveness of flexible retirement reforms.

Information provision constitutes an additional policy challenge. People require clear and reliable information on the benefits they can expect under different retirement scenarios to support informed planning. In Greece, the e-EFKA website is the primary source of information on social insurance, offering general descriptions of schemes, rights, entitlements, and obligations. Additional channels exist (i.e., the "Unified Citizen Contact Number 1555," the myEFKAlive digital service, and the "Digital Communication Room") as well as the government's digital portal which centralises procedural information (Konstantinidou and Theodoroulakis, 2022). Additionally, personal online accounts provide access to individual insurance histories and some rights information, but they do not offer precise entitlements or benefit amounts. Critically, there is a lack of personalised information on individual entitlements, and of tools that would allow users to model alternative retirement timings or combinations of pension and earnings. As a result, although people can access information about the rules affecting pension benefits and eligibility for old-age benefits, they lack the necessary tools to calculate or simulate various scenarios and make informed decisions.

Overall, these gaps and implications suggest the need for a more coordinated approach. Greater emphasis should be placed on monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess how flexible retirement pathways operate in practice and what

effects they generate across different groups. Policy coordination between pension design and labour market measures is also essential, ensuring that flexibility is not simply about prolonging working lives but about supporting fair, sustainable, and adequate transitions. Finally, Greece could benefit from exploring the adoption of additional flexible retirement options, such as partial pensions or phased retirement schemes, introduced in a transparent manner and supported by clear information to workers and employers alike. In short, while flexible retirement holds potential as a policy tool, its current limited and uneven application risks reproducing inequalities. Addressing these shortcomings requires stronger monitoring, better coordination with labour market measures, and a more comprehensive set of flexible options that balance sustainability with fairness and quality of life.

## Conclusion

This article has examined the design, use, and implications of flexible retirement pathways in Greece. The analysis shows that, while recent reforms have introduced certain forms of flexibility (i.e., deferred retirement, differentiated pensionable ages, and the option to combine employment with a full pension), the overall policy framework remains limited, unevenly distributed, and lacking in coherence. Flexibility in Greece largely promotes post-retirement employment rather than gradual or phased withdrawal from the labour market, with access concentrated among workers in standard, continuous careers and significantly more limited for women, low-income earners, and those with fragmented employment histories. As a result, instead of reducing inequalities, current arrangements risk reinforcing them.

The findings also underscore the importance of labour market structures and employer practices in shaping the feasibility of flexible retirement. Yet active labour market policies targeted at older workers, such as reskilling, workplace adaptation, or measures to combat age discrimination, remain underdeveloped. Monitoring and evaluation are similarly weak: there is little systematic reporting on take-up, no simulation studies of labour market or distributional effects, and limited attention to how retirement transitions affect quality of life. Information provision also remains inadequate. While citizens have access to general pension rules, they lack personalised tools and simulations to assess the impact of different retirement scenarios, which undermines informed decision-making.

These gaps have clear policy implications. Flexible retirement cannot be treated as a purely fiscal or technical mechanism; it must be embedded in a broader strategy that balances sustainability with adequacy and fairness. This requires better coordination between pension policy and labour market measures, greater investment in monitoring and evaluation, and the development of user-friendly tools that make entitlements transparent. Moreover, the introduction of additional pathways, such

as partial pensions or phased retirement, could provide older workers with more meaningful and equitable choices.

At the same time, this study highlights important limitations. Data on take-up and outcomes remain fragmented, making it difficult to assess the full impact of flexible retirement in practice. Further research is needed to examine the interaction between pension rules, labour market structures, and individual behaviour, with particular attention to gendered and occupational inequalities, job quality, and the well-being of older workers. Comparative studies would also shed light on alternative models and their transferability to the Greek context.

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# DO FLEXIBLE RETIREMENT POLICIES CONTRIBUTE TO EXTENDING WORKING LIVES IN HUNGARY?

## Abstract

The increase in the old-age dependency ratio is putting pressure on public finances in ageing societies. Among the possible policy reform approaches postponing retirement can be particularly beneficial from the perspective of financial sustainability of pensions systems. In this article the aim is to present how opportunities for flexible retirement have changed in the past decade in Hungary and whether these policies have contributed to extending working lives. Our analysis shows that retirement flexibility is limited in the Hungarian pension system. Most possibilities for early retirement have been eliminated from the system during the reforms that followed the Great Financial Crisis. Opportunities for early retirement with full pension benefits are limited to women with at least 40 service years. On the other hand, retirement is flexible upwards, that is people can defer retirement and might also choose to work while receiving pensions. Flexible retirement policies promoting later withdrawal from the labour force, such as deferred retirement and the possibilities to combine work with pensions contributed to extending working lives in Hungary. It is also certain that the possibility for women to retire before the pensionable age (Women-40 scheme) lowered the overall effective retirement age, as women retiring under this option retired earlier than other women. Allowing more flexibility in retirement decision might improve well-being, on the other hand the costs of transitioning to a system allowing more flexibility for early retirement can be substantial.

## Introduction

Demographic ageing is one of the most important challenges European welfare states have to face, Hungary being no exception to this general tendency. The share of those above 65 years of age in the Hungarian population has increased by 3.2 p.p. during the 2014-2024 period (Eurostat 2025b). This was roughly similar to the increase recorded in the EU as a whole (+2.9 p.p.). In terms of the median age of the population Hungary ranks just below the EU average (44.5 years), thus overall the ageing of the Hungarian society is similar to other countries of the EU (Eurostat 2025a). The main reason for the change in population age structure was below

replacement level fertility, which characterised the country for decades, and also increased life expectancy had an important contribution (Boros & Gál 2023).

The increase in old-age dependency ratio is putting pressure on public finances, forcing political elites to change the mechanisms of welfare redistribution between age groups that had previously been adopted. Among welfare reforms, pension reforms are particularly significant as pension redistribution is by far the largest area of welfare policy in EU countries. Among the possible policy reform approaches postponing retirement can be particularly beneficial from the perspective of financial sustainability (Kuitto & Lee 2025). Policies extending the working life increase fiscal revenues by keeping older workers in the labour force and in the same time decrease pension expenditures by reducing the number of beneficiaries. Therefore, recent pension reforms in many countries have adopted measures to promote postponing retirement (Kuitto & Lee 2025). These include increasing the retirement age, closing possibilities for early retirement or flexible retirement policies that encourage a later withdrawal from the labour force.

In this article our focus is on flexible retirement policies (eg. differentiated pensionable age, flexible pensionable age, deferred retirement or combining pension with work), which allow individuals to choose when and how to retire or claim a pension benefit. Some of these policies allow and support later retirement thus have the potential to help mitigating the adverse effect of population ageing on the financial sustainability of the pension system.

Policies for extending working lives fit well with the general social policy agenda of the right-wing government of prime minister Viktor Orbán. This agenda has been described as one promoting transition from a welfare state to a workfare state (Scharle & Szikra 2015, Lakner & Tausz 2016), with the main aim to increase the employment rate. As a part of this transition the government adopted various policies which reduced benefits for those who have fallen out from the labour market (eg. unemployed, disabled). The unemployment benefit has been reduced from 9 to a maximum of 3 months, which is currently the shortest period within the European Union. The amount of minimum income benefits was reduced (in real terms) and the government applied strict conditionality of the benefit through requirement of participation in public works programs. The government also made access to disability benefits more difficult. Similar policies have been adopted in the field of pensions as possibilities for early retirement have been discontinued.

In this article the aim is to present how opportunities for flexible retirement have changed in the past decade in Hungary and what are the impacts of these policies on the retirement age and labour market dynamics. Flexible retirement pathways do not always have the effect of extending working lives, as they might also lead to early withdrawal from the labour market or reduction of hours worked. Therefore, it is crucial to look at results of the policies on labour market participation to evalu-

ate the likely effects on fiscal sustainability of the pensions system. In addition, we also evaluate likely impacts of such policies on inequality[1] among pensioners and well-being in Hungary.

The first section provides some broad contextual information about the pension system in Hungary and describes the actual situation of pension adequacy. The second section presents flexible retirement pathways available. In the subsequent section impacts of flexible retirement policies are described in the various domains and the last section concludes.

## General aspects of the Hungarian pension system and recent reforms

### *General description of the pension system and recent reforms*[2]

Hungary's pension system operates primarily as a national pay-as-you-go scheme, supplemented by a modest funded voluntary pension pillar and several long-term savings plans offered by financial institutions. The statutory retirement age is 65 for both men and women, with a minimum of 20 years of service required to qualify for a full old-age pension. Service years are calculated mainly on the basis of contribution periods, but also include intervals during which the state contributed on behalf of the insured (such as maternity leave, childcare allowance periods, and time spent in lower vocational schools). In addition, certain non-contributory periods—such as university studies completed before 1998 and compulsory military service—are also recognized in the service record.

Pension benefits are determined through a formula that takes into account both the length of service and the average indexed net monthly wage earned from 1988 onwards. The replacement rate—the proportion of the calculated average lifetime net wage provided by the initial pension—follows a non-linear relationship with recognized years of service. After 40 years of service, the entry pension amounts to 80% of the average lifetime net monthly wage, while the maximum rate of 100% is achieved with 50 years of service. Although pensions are exempt from income tax, they are implicitly taxed because their calculation is based on net rather than gross wages.

The minimum old-age pension in Hungary is set at HUF 28,500 (approximately EUR 74), with no maximum limit, as the cap on the pension contribution base was abolished in 2012. As of January 2025, the average monthly pension amounted to HUF 214,215 (about EUR 530). Pensioners also receive a full 13th-month payment. Benefits in payment are indexed to consumer prices, and in years when GDP

[1] For an overview on the issue of inequality in the European context see Carmo et al. (2018).

[2] "This section draws heavily on Gábos et al. (2024)."

growth exceeds 3.5% and the government budget remains within the limits established by parliament, an additional premium is granted to pensioners.

Employees contribute 18.5% of their gross wages in social security contributions (SSC), with 10 percentage points allocated to the Pension Insurance Fund (PIF). Employers pay a social security tax of 13% of gross wages, of which 9.3 percentage points were directed to the PIF in 2023. This resulted in a combined pension contribution rate of 19.3% of gross wages in that year. While the employee contribution rate has remained virtually unchanged over time, the employer's rate has been subject to annual, non-automatic adjustments during the past decade, both through modifications in the overall rate and through changes in the yearly allocation across different funds.

The 2008–2009 Great Recession created short-term sustainability challenges for the Hungarian pension system, prompting a series of reforms between 2008 and 2011. Key measures included the abolition of the statutory funded pension scheme introduced in 1998, a gradual increase in the retirement age from 62 to 65 between 2014 and 2022, and the shift to inflation-based pension indexation. The reforms also significantly curtailed opportunities for early retirement. From 2014 onward, early retirement for individuals with long service in arduous or hazardous occupations was discontinued, with the exception of miners and ballet dancers, who may still retire with at least 25 years of service while receiving full benefits. Another early retirement route—whereby companies could finance missing pension contributions to enable employees to retire before reaching the statutory age—was likewise abolished.

Since 2014 only smaller changes have been made to the Hungarian pension system, in some cases implementing previously decided reform measures. The most important changes in this period concerned the pension contribution rate and the reintroduction of the 13$^{th}$ month pension. The pension contribution rate was gradually reduced. More precisely, the part of employers' social contribution tax going to the PIF was decreased from 20.8% in 2016 to 9.3% in 2023. The 13$^{th}$ month pension has been reintroduced in 2021, after that the government abolished this after the financial crisis of 2009.

*Adequacy of pensions in Hungary*

Adequacy of pensions has been declining over that past decade in Hungary. Pension adequacy can be measured by the capacity of benefits to replace the income that was earned before retirement. The aggregate replacement ratio for pensions, which measures the gross median individual pension income of the 65-74 age group as a percentage of the gross median individual earnings of the 55-64 age group (excluding other social benefits) was 59% in 2010 and increased to 69% in 2016, then dropped to 51% by 2023 (Eurostat 2025c).

Although there have been concerns raised regarding the quality of Hungarian data on relative poverty calculated from EU Study on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) for the recent years (see Tátrai et al. 2025), the trends show consistently that the age profile of income poverty has changed. Between 2005 and 2019, relative income poverty among older persons was (sometimes well) below that of the entire population, but the continuous increase in the at-risk-of-poverty rate of older persons (and of a considerable decrease in the child poverty rate) since 2015 has changed the age profile of poverty risks in the past few years (Medgyesi et al. 2021). Older persons in Hungary have above average at-risk-of-poverty rates in recent years. Despite an increasing trend, the at-risk-of poverty rate among older persons in Hungary remained below the EU average in 2022.

To capture trends in absolute rather than relative poverty, the severe material and social deprivation rate can be used, which shows that 8.2% of older persons were affected in 2022 among older persons, compared to 9.2% in 2019 (Eurostat, 2025d). This rate still exceeds the EU average (5.5%), but is much closer to it compared to 2015, due to falling deprivation rates between 2015 and 2019. The decline of deprivation rates among those above 65 years – which was more modest compared to the total population – was due to general economic upswing and to policy measures such as the price subsidy on utility costs.

**Flexible retirement policies in the Hungarian pension system**

Three main types of policies have been adopted by countries related to the flexibility about the timing of retirement. One approach is to allow and encourage people to postpone retirement and claim pensions later than the pensionable age (deferred retirement). Another approach is to define an age range within which people may choose when to retire without benefit reductions instead of specifying a single pensionable age (flexible pensionable age). A third possibility is to differentiate pensionable ages depending on criteria such as career length (differentiated pensionable age). These approaches allow flexibility of retirement with full pensions, possibilities for early retirement with reduced pensions are not available in Hungary anymore. In addition to these policies we also consider possibilities for combining pension with paid work on the labour market.

In Hungary deferred employment is allowed, thus people may remain in employment beyond the pensionable age and postpone taking out their pension, without an age limit. Flexible pensionable age is not applied, there is a single pensionable age which is 65 for both women and men. The differentiation of the pensionable age is applied in only one instance: the Women-40 scheme introduced in 2011 offers full old-age benefits regardless of age for women with 40 years of service (contributory years in paid work and periods receiving parental leave benefits, nursing fees or

child homecare fees). At least 32 years of paid work is needed in addition to periods of child-raising. The number of years in paid work required is reduced after every child over four children (but a minimum of 25 years in paid work is still required). The number of years in paid work required is 30 years in the case of recipients of nursing or child homecare fees.

Other possibilities for claiming full pension before the pensionable age were largely eliminated by regulations introduced in 2012. The only two groups who may be entitled to early pension- like benefits are miners and dance artists with at least 25 service years.

*Combining a pension with income from work*

In the private sector people are allowed to combine work with full pension benefits without restrictions. However, this is not allowed in the public sector, so workers taking up a job in the public sector after retirement must suspend their benefits. As an exception to this rule, suspension of benefits is not required for public employees and civil servants in social services, child protection and child welfare services, public education institutions or vocational training institutions. Claiming an early pension and continuing to work is only possible for women under the Women-40 scheme and employees in specific sectors/occupations (miners and dance artists). Pensioners in these categories working in the private sector are also allowed to work full time while receiving pensions.

Recent reforms have introduced minor modifications in flexible retirement pathways. In case of the Women-40 scheme the number of years in paid work required was reduced in 2015 to 30 years (from 32) for recipients of nursing fees or child homecare fees. Since 2020 those pensioners who work while receiving a pension have not been subject to social insurance contributions and have had to pay only personal income tax. However, they do not earn pension rights and no pension bonus is earned (unlike those who defer retirement, who earn a pension bonus for working beyond the pensionable age).

*Incentives to defer retirement*

People with at least 20 service years who defer retirement after pensionable age (without taking a pension) are entitled to a pension bonus of 0.5% per month: delaying retirement by one year after the pensionable age thus increases pensions by 6%. People deferring retirement continue to pay social insurance contributions and so their eligibility for other social insurance benefits is maintained.

No additional pension rights are earned by people who combine pensions with work. Working pensioners are not required to pay social insurance contributions. Working pensioners do not pay social insurance contributions; only personal income tax is deducted from their gross wages. Employers of pensioners are also

exempt from paying employer social insurance contributions. As pensioners combining benefits with work do not pay social insurance contributions, they are not entitled to social insurance benefits.

**Impact of flexible retirement pathways**

Regarding the impact of flexible retirement pathways the main issue of interest is how these will affect older workers' labour market participation. Offering greater flexibility through the pension system might lead some workers to continue in employment (thus postponing full retirement) while receiving retirement benefits. Others might retire earlier, although possibilities for early retirement are limited in Hungary as we have seen. In addition, the likely redistributive impacts of flexible retirement pathways and the impacts on fiscal sustainability and well-being will also be summarized.

*Take-up of flexible retirement pathways*

Under the Women-40 scheme 28,960 women entered the pension system in 2022 before the pensionable age (Szabó-Morvai & Pető, 2023)[3]. This was 53% of all women who claimed pension benefits that year. The annual number of those retiring under the Women-40 option had varied between 27,000 and 29,000 in every year since 2012 (except in 2013, when it was slightly lower at 24,285). This meant that in most years during 2012-2022 50-60% of women retired under this scheme. The share of those retiring under the Women-40 scheme was even higher in 2014 and 2015, when it was 68-70%. In only one year was the percentage of women retiring under the scheme below 50% – 2019, when 45% of women used this option.

Data on take-up show that a high percentage of women retired under the Women-40 scheme even in years of rapid real wage growth, when retiring before the standard pensionable age may reduce lifetime pension benefits (see: Simonovits, 2019). Retiring early might be motivated in such cases by a willingness to reduce work hours for health reasons or caring responsibilities. The high popularity of the Women-40 scheme might also be related to low awareness of the potential losses.

In the case of the other two flexible retirement pathways (deferring retirement and combining a pension with work) it is difficult to find precise figures on take-up. What is certain is that the employment rate of those beyond pensionable age has increased significantly in the past decade (see later in more detail). The employment rate among those aged 65-74 increased from 3% to 10.5% during 2014-2023[4]. Within this age group the increase was slightly stronger for those aged 65-69 (from

[3] Data were taken from Table 11.5 of the Statistical Annex of Szabó-Morvai & Pető (2023). Downloadable from: https://www.bpdata.eu/mpt/2022hut11_05.

[4] Source: Eurostat, Labour Force Survey (LFS), Code = lfsa_ergaed, downloaded on 28 May 2024.

4.3% to 13.5%): for the 70-74 age group it increased from 1.8% to 6.7%[5]. Of course it is not possible to know from these figures the share of those who worked beyond retirement age by deferring retirement or by combining pensions with work.

The main motivation for working past the standard pensionable age is presumably financial. In a period of rapidly rising income poverty rates among older people, high inflation rates and an increasing gap between wages and pensions (due to pensions being indexed to inflation), it is not surprising to see more willingness to work among older workers and retired people.

*Impact on retirement age*

During 2012-2022 the average effective labour market exit age rose in Hungary by three years for both women and men – from 59.3 to 62.4 for women and from 62.2 to 65 for men[6]. The number of years people aged 15 were expected to be active in the labour market rose from 31.8 years in 2014 to 37 in 2024[7]. It is of course difficult to establish the role of different policy changes in this increase. It is certain that the rise in the retirement age and the discontinuation of early-retirement options in 2012 greatly contributed to the trend (see: Gál and Radó, 2020). It is also certain that the possibility for women to retire before the pensionable age (Women-40) lowered the overall effective retirement age, as women retiring with this option retired earlier than other women: the average retirement age among all women who retired in 2022 was 62.4, whereas it was 2.5 years lower among women retiring under the Women-40 scheme (Szabó-Morvai and Pető 2023: see footnote 2).

Gál and Radó (2020) demonstrated that, whereas the exit age rose rapidly during 1992-2017, life expectancy at labour market exit remained broadly unchanged at around 20.5 years. Rising exit ages offset rising life expectancies (during 1992-2017 life expectancy at 60 increased by 2.9 years and at age 65 by 2.7 years). Overall the improvement in mortality therefore did not increase the number of years spent in retirement, due to the rise in the exit age, and the additional years spent in the labour market were not accompanied by a significantly higher risk of unemployment.

*Labour market dynamics and the impact of flexible retirement*

As a result of the increasing retirement age and of eliminating most early retirement options, the employment rate in the 50-64 age group showed a remarkable increase during the period between 2014 and 2023. From a value of 52.4% for this age group in 2014, by 2023 the employment rate had increased by 24 p.p. This

[5] Ibid.

[6] See Table 11.5 of the Statistical Annex of Szabó-Morvai & Pető (2023). Downloadable from: https://www.bpdata.eu/mpt/2022hut11_05.

[7] Source: Eurostat, LFS, code = lfsi_dwl_a, downloaded on 28 May 2024.

means that the 50-64 age group recorded a rise in the employment rate that was significantly greater than the increase in the 25-49 age group (8.4 p.p.)[8]. The rate of increase was similar among women and men. Within the 50-64 age group the largest increase was seen among those aged 60-64, for whom the employment rate increased from 19% in 2014 to 55% in 2023. In this age group a higher increase was observed for men (45 p.p.) than women (27 p.p.)[9]. The Women-40 scheme also probably contributed to the difference in the employment rate between women and men among those aged 60-64.

Another key issue is whether the employment rate increased for part-time of full-time workers. In Hungary the share of part-time workers is generally low. It is slightly higher in the 50-64 age group than in the 25-49 age group, but in 2023 only 4.7% of those aged 50-64 worked part time. The share of part-time workers was much higher among those aged 65 or over (37.6%). However, the share of part-time workers has been on a downward trend, both among those aged 50-64 (it was 8.5% in 2014) and among those aged 65 or over (down from 53.7% to 37.6%). This fall was observed for both women and men during 2014-2023.The moderate role of part-time work was also shown by the fact that the average length of time worked in the main job was 39.7 hours for those aged 25-54 and slightly lower (39.2 hours) for those aged 55-64[10].

The share of self-employment was slightly higher for the 50-64 age group (13.7%) than for the 25-49 age group (10.8%). Self-employment was more important for the 65-74 age group, among whom 35% were self-employed in 2023; but this was a significant fall from 51% in 2014. The share of self-employment was typically higher for men than for women[11]. The declining share of part-time work and self-employment among the 65-74 age group meant that the share of full-time employment increased among the older people remaining in the labour market.

*Expected impact on fiscal policies and sustainability*

Müller, Berki and Reiff (2016) examined the impact of the pensions reforms around 2010 on the long-term sustainability of the pension system. They quantified the impact of four elements of the reforms: raising the retirement age; dismantling mandatory private pension funds; making early retirement more difficult; and allowing women to retire before the pensionable age after 40 years of service. The results of this study are summarised below.

[8] Source: Eurostat, LFS, Code = lfsa_ergaed, downloaded on 28 May 2024.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Source: Eurostat, LFS, Code = lfsa_ftpt, downloaded on 28 May 2024.

[11] Source: Eurostat, LFS, Code = lfsa_egaps, downloaded on 28 May 2024.

Their model was used to calculate the impact of these reforms on the long-term sustainability of the pension system, measured by the implicit pension system debt. Raising the retirement age significantly reduced the debt, from 203% to 135% of the 2010 GDP level. Part of this improvement was due to people contributing for longer period, thus increasing pension fund revenues (by 36 p.p.), and part of it was due to people receiving pensions for a shorter period, thus reducing pension expenditure (by 33 p.p.).

Abolishing the second pillar of the pension system had a two-fold effect on the long-term sustainability of the system. On the one hand contribution receipts increased by 74 p.p., as all contributions paid were now channelled into the pay-as-you-go system. On the other hand, pension rights acquired in the pay-as-you-go system increased, which increased future pension expenditure by 88 p.p. Overall the increase in assets could not keep pace with the increase in liabilities, so the implicit debt in the system increased by 13 p.p. as a result of the abolition of the second pillar.

Abolishing early-retirement options improved the long-term sustainability of the pension system, reducing implicit pension debt by 24 p.p. This is because the early-retirement scheme did not sufficiently penalize early retirement. The possibility for women with 40 years of service to retire before the pensionable age significantly affected the long-term sustainability of the system, increasing the implicit debt by 29 p.p. This is because the measure increased the future liabilities of the pension scheme by 16 p.p. and reduced future contribution receipts by 13 p.p.

Among the flexible retirement pathways deferring retirement is expected to improve the sustainability of the pension system in the short term as people continue to pay contributions to the system, while their benefits are delayed. But in the long run the effect is ambiguous as deferring retirement increases later pension benefits. Combining work with pensions does not influence the balance of the pension system in Hungary, as working pensioners do not pay social insurance contributions.

*Expected redistributive impact*

In addition to the effects on fiscal sustainability, flexible retirement pathways might also have redistributive effects both between and within cohorts. Simonovits (2019) and Simonovits & Tir (2019) argued forcefully that allowing women to retire with full benefits after 40 years of service might have a negative effect on those retiring under this scheme in a period of rapid real wage growth. In their example a women aged 60 with 40 years of service and a pension of 100 units per year, which she was expected to receive for another 20 years, could decide whether to retire under the Women-40 scheme or stay in the labour market for three additional years (to reach pensionable age). If this decision had been made in 2012 (in a period of moderate wage growth) it would have been advantageous to retire under the Women-40

scheme. If on the other hand the decision had been made in 2016 this would not have been the case anymore. During 2016-2019 net average real wages increased by 7-10% annually. In such a period it is advantageous to postpone retirement: if the woman in the example had postponed retirement until 2019 her lifetime pension would have been 16% higher (Simonovits & Tir, 2019).

Other flexible retirement pathways, such as deferred retirement and combining a pension with work, may also have redistributive effects. It is difficult to separate the contribution of the two pathways, but it is clear that the level and trend of the employment rate in the 65-74 age group shows a very strong gradient by education level. Among the low-educated the employment rate in this group was only 4% in 2022, whereas for those with higher education it was 20.9%. For those with low education the employment rate increased by 3 p.p. (from 1% to 4%) whereas for those with high education it increased by 12.5 p.p. (from 8.4% to 20.9%)[12]. It seems that those with higher education were more able to profit from the opportunities in the labour market, perhaps because of their better health situation.

*Expected impact on quality of life and society*

Radó & Boissonneault (2020) studied the effect of retirement on subjective well-being in Hungary, comparing the effect of voluntary and involuntary retirement[13] and considering both the short-term effect (0-3 years after retirement) and the long-term effect (8-11 years after). The study found that voluntary retirement (compared to involuntary retirement) increased the level of subjective well-being by 0.66 units in the short run. This result was in line with the hypothesis of the authors as involuntary retirement, being unexpected and not prepared for, was expected to induce frustration and reduce well-being. On the other hand, the results showed that the advantage of those retiring voluntarily persisted even after eight years or more of retirement. This result was more surprising as the authors expected that 8-11 years were sufficient for people to adapt to the retirement event, and that voluntary and involuntary retirees would have similar levels of well-being.

These results suggested that involuntary retirement may have long-lasting negative consequences for subjective well-being in old age. Policies aimed at improving subjective well-being among older people should therefore address the determinants of involuntary retirement. One possible policy in this case would be to provide more flexibility in terms of when people choose to retire, which could diminish

[12] Source: Eurostat, LFS, Code = lfsa_ergaed, downloaded on 28 May 2024.

[13] The authors defined voluntary retirees as those who made the decision over their own retirement, who did not want to retire later and who did not make this decision due to fear of unemployment. All the other respondents were considered as involuntary retirees (Radó & Boissonneault, 2020).

the proportion of involuntary retirements (Radó & Boissonneault, 2020). Such policy proposals have indeed been made in recent policy debate. Simonovits (2021), for example, argued that flexibility over early retirement should be reintroduced with a reduction in pension benefits.

## Conclusion

Retirement flexibility is limited in the Hungarian pension system. Most possibilities for early retirement have been eliminated from the system during the reforms that followed the Great Financial Crisis. Opportunities for early retirement with full pension benefits are limited to women with at least 40 service years. In addition, options for early retirement with reduced benefits have also been removed from the system. On the other hand, retirement is flexible upwards, that is people can defer retirement and might also choose to work while receiving pensions.

Policies for postponing retirement adopted after the great financial crisis, such as the rise in the retirement age and the discontinuation of early-retirement options resulted in an increase of the effective labour market exit age in Hungary. Later withdrawal from the labour force is also manifested in the increased employment rate of those between 50 and 64 years of age. Flexible retirement policies promoting later withdrawal from the labour force, such as deferred retirement and the possibilities to combine work with pensions also contributed to extending working lives in Hungary. This is clear from the increased employment rate among those between 65 and 74 years of age. On the other hand, it is also certain that the possibility for women to retire before the pensionable age (Women-40 scheme) lowered the overall effective retirement age, as women retiring under this option retired earlier than other women.

As we have seen impacts of flexible retirement policies on financial sustainability of the pension system can be ambiguous. Too generous early retirement options (which do not penalize early retirement sufficiently) have a negative effect on long-term sustainability of the system, while deferring retirement (with a moderate bonus) can improve sustainability.

Allowing more flexibility in retirement decision might improve well-being as if people can choose when to retire this could diminish the proportion of involuntary retirements. On the other hand, as demonstrated by Simonovits (2021) the costs of transitioning to a system allowing more flexibility for early retirement can be substantial, as more intensive early retirement reduces receipts of the pension system immediately, while the payment of reduced life-time pensions is recorded only later. Such policies that require planning on long-term time horizon are only viable in a context of high level of institutional trust, which is not necessarily given in Hungary (see Medgyesi and Boda 2019).

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# FLEXIBLE ENOUGH? RETIREMENT PATHWAYS AND THEIR OUTCOMES IN LITHUANIA

## Abstract

This paper examines institutionally defined flexible retirement pathways and their outcomes in Lithuania - an EU member state with one of the highest employment rates among older adults. The focus is on the main statutory old-age pension scheme. In Lithuania, the most widely used flexibility mechanism is the full combination of work and pension benefits beyond the pensionable age. Combined with relatively low life expectancy, it leaves the pathway of pension deferral as largely irrelevant despite relatively generous conditions. Early retirement is rare due to restrictive rules and financial disincentives, except for periods of economic downturn. The high employment rates among older adults and the increasing duration of working life appear to be driven less by pension flexibility and more by structural factors such as low pension replacement rates, elevated old-age poverty, evolving labour market dynamics, and increases in the statutory pensionable age. As demographic pressures intensify, particularly in the context of a rapidly ageing Lithuanian population, additional forms of pension flexibility - such as differentiated or flexible pensionable age, or partial pensions - may gain political relevance. A key policy challenge for Lithuania lies in fostering later-life employment by mitigating negative financial, health- and care-related, as well as age-discrimination barriers, while promoting positive drivers including favourable working conditions, labour market adaptability and possibilities for choosing a variety of flexible retirement pathways.

**Keywords:** flexible, retirement, pensionable age, pensions, Lithuania

## Introduction

In ageing societies, flexible retirement pathways, which enable individuals to decide when and how they retire, are increasingly relevant and are being developed as practical policy options to ease the transition from work to retirement. These may include, among others, options for early, deferred or partial retirement, as well as

financial incentives or disincentives to combine pensions with work. Such design features of the pension systems play an important role in shaping retirement choices (OECD, 2017). On one hand, offering greater flexibility through the pension system might lead some workers to prolong their employment while receiving retirement benefits. This is especially important for those with health problems, disabilities, care responsibilities and physically or mentally demanding jobs, who would otherwise have to exit the labour market through early retirement or other schemes, such as those for disability or long-term sickness. On the other hand, the availability of early- or partial-retirement options might reduce work intensity and labour market participation. Availability of the flexible retirement pathways might also be used as a political tool to increase acceptability of otherwise unpopular reforms, such as an increase in the statutory pensionable age.

However, flexible retirement pathways do not always translate into the intended results. It is important to get the incentives right, as well as financial literacy and knowledge of the benefits that people can expect to receive under different scenarios concerning when and how they retire. Structural factors, such as the functioning of the local labour market, healthcare and other systems, might also play an important role. The analysis of the institutional retirement pathways, i.e. social policies that regulate retirement, and their relation to the individual retirement trajectories, which aggregate into general retirement patterns in the population is a long-standing field of research (see e.g. Kohli et al. 1991). Distributional and labour market implications, outcomes with respect to pensions system sustainability and personal wellbeing are also of the utmost importance.

The aim of this paper is to map the different flexible retirement pathways, ways they transform into the general retirement patters and their outcomes in Lithuania.

Lithuania's case study is of interest as it ranks among the countries with the highest employment rates for people aged 65-74, i.e. 21.3% in Lithuania compared with 10.7% in the EU in 2023 (Eurostat, 2024a). Understanding the role flexible retirement pathways play in this process provide important lessons and tools for the policy makers for improving old-age pension design.

Lithuania's old-age pension system has five components. These include three types of public unfunded defined-benefit pension schemes (statutory pay-as-you-go (PAYG) pensions, state pensions and social assistance pensions) and two types of privately funded defined-contribution pension schemes (the statutory funded pension scheme and the personal pension scheme). Their relative importance and modes of financing vary greatly. The focus of this paper is on the main statutory PAYG pension scheme. Other components of the pension system play a relatively minor role in Lithuania and are outside of the scope of this paper.

We start with discussing the institutionally defined pathways for flexible retirement in Lithuania, as well as the rules affecting pension benefits and retirement

incentives. These are interpreted within a broader EU context. We then analyse how these rules translate into the general retirement patterns in the Lithuanian population. Finally, we consider implications of flexible retirement for income inequality, fiscal sustainability and quality of life in old age. We conclude with the discussion of the main lessons and challenges the Lithuanian case offers for improving the pension design with regards to its flexibility.

## Statutory old-age pension scheme and flexible retirement pathways in Lithuania

The statutory PAYG old-age pension scheme is the most important in terms of coverage and provision of income in old age in Lithuania. Participation is mandatory for all employees and self-employed people without exception. Around 602 thousand people, or 98% of the retirement-age population, received statutory pension benefits in 2025 (Statistics Lithuania, 2025).

The old-age pension benefit consists of two components. The amount of the first, general (basic) component is flat rate for all beneficiaries having a minimum contribution period (15 years in 2025) and is financed from general revenue (state budget). The "individual" (supplementary) component is earnings-related and financed by social insurance contributions. The earnings-related component of the statutory pension is a points-based system. Pension points are calculated as the ratio of individual contributions to the average social insurance pension contributions in the country over the entire career. The formula for calculation of both the general and the individual pension components provides incentives for longer careers, as the amount of the former depends on the length of the contribution period beyond the compulsory contribution period (see below), while the latter – on the total contributions paid.

In 2025, the pensionable age for the statutory pension is 64 years and ten months for men and 64 years and eight months for women. It will increase by two months for men and by four months per year for women to reach 65 for both men and women in 2026. It is currently not foreseen to increase it further neither on an ad-hoc basis, nor though indexing with the life expectancy. Pensionable age is not differentiated in Lithuania based on the previous contribution records or career length. However, longer contributory periods are incentivised within the pension formula and beneficiaries with long contribution records are treated on a favourable basis, e.g. if applying for a statutory early-retirement pension. Differentiation of the pensionable age is common in the EU, with more than half of the member states having such practice (Spasova et al., 2025). Furthermore, some of the EU countries, such as Finland, Sweden or Norway, have moved towards a flexible pensionable age, i.e. an age range within which individuals may choose when to claim a pension or to retire (ibid.). This reflects an effort to address heterogeneity in health, job conditions

and preferences, as well as to incentivise later retirement and more personalised decisions than the "normal" pensionable age may entail. While the pensionable age remains fixed in Lithuania, moving towards a flexible or differentiated option may be considered, especially if there are decisions for its further increase beyond the age of 65.

The minimum contribution period for entitlement to statutory pension benefits is 15 years for men and women. Persons who do not have a minimum contribution period are not eligible to receive a statutory pension and must rely only on the social assistance pension. Apart from the minimum contribution period, there is also a compulsory contribution period. The compulsory contribution period is used to determine eligibility for a small pension bonus (i.e. a payment up to an established minimal amount), as well as for increases in the basic component of the statutory pension (by 3.75% for each additional year of contributions beyond the compulsory contribution period). In 2025, the compulsory contribution period is 34 years for both men and women and will increase by six months per year to reach 35 years in 2027.

The statutory early-retirement pension is available to people who have completed the compulsory contribution period and have less than five years to attain the pensionable age. The rate of payment is the statutory old-age pension, minus 0.32% for each month of the early-retirement pension received before the full pensionable age. For those who opt to receive the early-retirement pension, the reduced statutory old-age pension amount is paid for the whole period of retirement. However, the statutory old-age pension is not reduced if the contribution period of the recipient is above 41 years in 2025 (this period is increased annually by three months until it reaches 42 years and six months in 2031) and the early-retirement pension is received for no more than three years. Claiming early-retirement pension in Lithuania cannot be combined with employment or self-employment. This is the case in 6 other EU member-states, while the rest allow for combining early retirement with work, alas subject to certain conditions, such as age, income or number of hours worked, etc. (Spasova et al. 2025). It is possible to defer the statutory old-age pension after the statutory pensionable age, with no limit on age or duration. However, the amount of the deferred pension is increased by 8% for each full year of deferment beyond the statutory pensionable age, but for a maximum of five years. This is a relatively high rate compared to other EU countries, where postponing retirement is incentivised though increased accrual rates (Spasova et al. 2025). When deferring retirement, a person has the right to apply for a pension benefit at any time.

There is no partial pension in Lithuania. However, full statutory pensions are paid to working pensioners with no cap on work-related income in pensionable age and no limits on duration or intensity of employment or self-employment.

Pensioners working as employees must pay social insurance contributions on their earnings, and pensions are recalculated annually based on the contributions paid. No further applications are required for the recalculation of pensions, which are recalculated automatically. Pension points acquired upon reaching the pensionable age are calculated in a standard way, i.e. there are no penalties or higher accrual rates foreseen. Self-employed persons of pensionable age do not pay social insurance contributions, and their pension benefits are not recalculated. A possibility to pay social insurance contributions on a voluntary basis could contribute towards higher old-age pensions among the self-employed who work beyond the pensionable age.

Working pensioners in Lithuania are entitled to all social insurance benefits since they continue paying their social insurance contributions. An exception is unemployment benefits, as old-age pensioners are not considered unemployed when out of job. The latter practice is also common for other EU countries (Spasova et al., 2025).

All pensions are not taxable, thus there is no net income reduction when combining pension and income from employment or self-employment. Worth noting that tax reductions – either on pensions, or on wages – are used as an additional work incentive in old age in a number of countries in the EU (Spasova et al., 2025). In Lithuania income tax reductions are applied to old-age pensioners only with regard to one form of self-employment, i.e. business certificates.

It is important that citizens have access to information about the flexible retirement pathways available in the country, including the rules affecting pension benefits and retirement incentives. In Lithuania, the main sources of information on pensions, including the opportunity to defer old-age pension or to apply for early-retirement pension are the websites of the Ministry of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania (MoSSL) and the Social Security Insurance Fund (SSIF). A simplified version of information on all social benefits, including statutory pensions, is also available on a dedicated MoSSL website. These websites offer pension calculators and simulators; individual calculations of the acquired pension rights are also available for each employee by logging into the SSIF system. However, these calculators do not contain estimations for the early-retirement or deferred pensions.

Finally, it should be noted that during the last decade the only reform related to the flexibility of statutory PAYG old-age pensions in Lithuania was related to the conditions of early retirement. Until 2018, early-retirement pensions were granted only to those persons who were registered as unemployed at the Employment Service for the last 12 months before applying. Since 2018, the requirement to be registered as unemployed has been abolished. Furthermore, the early-retirement pension reduction rate has been lowered from 0.4% to 0.32%. Moreover, after reaching

pensionable age, the statutory pension benefit became not subject to any reduction if the contribution period of the recipient is above 40 years and nine months (in 2024) and the early-retirement pension is received for no more than three years. The reform was implemented in the context of ongoing increase of the pensionable age from 62 years for men and 60 for women to 65 for both sexes between 2012-2026. This indicates that the need for increased pension flexibility comes to the political agenda as a tool to mitigate increases in the pensionable age and might do so again in the future.

## From institutional retirement pathways to the general retirement patterns in the population

A crucial question for policymakers aiming to extend working lives is how institutional flexible retirement pathways translate into individual retirement trajectories and their general patterns in the population. In Lithuania, the two main flexible retirement pathways extending working lives can be distinguished as following: (i) combining statutory pension and work, and (ii) deferring statutory pensions beyond the statutory pensionable age.

Based on SSIF data[1], there were around 78 thousand working pensioners in 2023, which constituted around 12.5% of all people receiving statutory old-age pensions; this share was at 11.8% in 2021. Among the working pensioners, around 57% were women, around 92% had compulsory contribution records and around 77% were up to 70 years of age; in 2024, the average statutory pension of the working pensioners was 16.8% higher compared with non-working pensioners.

However, the deferment of statutory pensions is not common, with only around one thousand workers receiving deferred old-age pensions in 2020 (Zitikytė, 2021). The average period of deferment was 2.3 years; the average increased percentage of the statutory pension after its determent was 17.27% (ibid.). Given that about 616 thousand people received statutory old-age pensions in 2020, one thousand individuals represented a very small part. The share of people deferring their retirement in Lithuania is also one of the lowest reported for other EU countries (Spasova et al., 2025). The unpopularity of deferred pensions can be attributed to the opportunity to simultaneously receive both a full pension and employment income. Deferring the pension is associated with longevity risk, as it remains uncertain for how long the increased pension benefits will be utilised. In contrast, by not deferring, individuals secure a guaranteed income stream comprising both pension payments and wage, without incurring additional risk.

Regarding the early retirement pathway, there were around 8.2 thousand recipients of the early-retirement pensions in 2025 (SSIF, 2025). The number of early re-

[1] Based on SSIF information (provided on request).

tirees was around 6.3 thousand in 2021. The relatively low number of people using early retirement shows that this option is not attractive.

The relatively low pension levels in Lithuania may explain low take-up of early retirement where older workers prefer working longer to make ends meet (OECD, 2023). Furthermore, the conditions for early retirement are not favourable or attractive, except for the periods of economic recession, when the number of these recipients tends to grow (Zitikyte, 2020b). The early retirement pathway is disincentivised through the restrictions on combining it with work, as well as reductions in both early-retirement pensions and statutory old-age pensions for those retiring early, except for reduction of the latter for those with long contribution periods. Hence, people may choose to continue working or pursue other pathways such as disability pensions, unemployment benefits or inactivity in pre-retirement. Research also shows that people who choose to receive early retirement benefits are more likely to have faced unemployment before or earned a relatively low income (Zitikyte, 2020b).

As the most popular flexible retirement pathway - combining statutory old-age pensions and work – is possible without restrictions upon reaching the statutory pensionable age, it has little effect on the age of the first pension claim. The first pension claim, in most cases, coincides with the statutory retirement age and does not necessarily indicate withdrawal from the labour market. In fact, based on the available data, Lithuania ranks among the countries with the highest employment rates for people aged 65-74, i.e. 21.3% in Lithuania compared with 10.7% in the EU in 2023 (Eurostat, 2024a). The rate of employment in this group has more than doubled since 2013, when it was at 8.8% in Lithuania (7.6% in the EU). The employment rate in the 55-64 age group was also above the EU average, at 69.1% in Lithuania (63.9% in the EU) in 2023. The employment rates were higher for those with higher education levels. Employment of pre-retirement and retirement age groups has been growing rapidly in Lithuania since 2000 (Zitikytė, 2021).

The possibility to fully combine statutory pensions and work is one of the factors contributing to high employment levels in old age in Lithuania. However, high employment rates in old age stand in sharp contrast with the surveys, that show that the share of Lithuanians aged 50 and over who wish to retire early is the highest in the EU (Spasova et al., 2025). Hence, financial factors, such as low pension net replacement rate may play an important role. In 2022, it stood at only 28.9%, the lowest among OECD countries (OECD, 2025). Even after including the income of working pensioners, the median disposable income of people aged 65 and over in Lithuania is only 63% of the mean disposable income of all population, while in the EU this ratio is 90% on average (Eurostat, 2025).

Talking about the labour market exit, based on the survey conducted in 2023, 38.1% of all pensioners stopped working within the period of six months after re-

ceiving the first statutory old-age pension (VDA, 2024). This, however, does not necessarily indicates their final withdrawal from the labour market. Statistical data also show that the share of working pensioners drops sharply with age: in 2023, the share of working pensioners was at 41.5% in the 60-65 age group; 25% in the 65-70 age group; 9.5% in the 70-75 age group; 3.6% in the 75-80 age group; and 1.1% in the 80-85 age group[2].

The average effective age of the labour market exit in Lithuania, as estimated by the OECD, was similar for men compared with the EU average in 2022 (63.4 years and 63.6 years, respectively) and above the EU average for women (63.8 years and 62.4 years, respectively). The average effective age for women increased by 1.7 years between 2014 and 2022, which may be due to a number of factors, including the increase in the statutory retirement age. The absence of any improvement for men in the same period can be explained by lower pace of increase in the statutory retirement age (see Section 1.1), as well as by poorer health outcomes and low life expectancy among men in Lithuania (e.g. Zitikyte, 2021). In 2019-2020, a very high proportion, around one third of male respondents aged over 60 indicated they were afraid that health would limit their ability to work even until the statutory pensionable age; this share was almost 50% in this group in 2021-2022.[3]

As already mentioned, there are no limitations for combining work-related income and statutory pension benefits with regard to either work intensity or forms of employment. Still, standard forms of employment dominate in Lithuania in old age. The absolute majority of working people aged 65-74 were employees (87.5% in Lithuania, 62.7% in the EU in 2023), with a relatively small remaining share being self-employed (Eurostat, 2024b). The share of employees among the working people in this age group was relatively stable between 2013 and 2023. Moreover, 70.3% of employees aged 65+ worked full time in 2023 (49.2% in the EU), with a slightly higher share of part-time workers among women in this age group (33.8% in Lithuania, 58.5% in the EU) (Eurostat, 2024c). The share of full-time work among workers aged 65+ in Lithuania increased by around 7 p.p. between 2013 and 2023 (ibid). Statistics reveal that the flexibility of the labour market itself is relatively low in Lithuania, with limited opportunities for part-time work upon reaching pensionable age. Labour Force Survey data indicate that employees in Lithuania have less flexibility to decide about their working time compared to the EU average, i.e. 78% of respondents in Lithuania indicate that the employer mainly decides on the working time organisations (59% EU average), with no big difference between younger and older workers (OECD, 2023). Only around 11% of pensioners aged up to 74

[2] Based on SSIF information (provided on request).

[3] SHARE Survey, waves 8 and 9. Afraid that health limits ability to work before retirement.

years indicated that they reduced their working hours or changed their jobs within the first six months after receiving their statutory pensions (VDA, 2024).

The duration of working life was at 37.7 years in Lithuania in 2023, an increase from 34.1 years in Lithuania in 2013 and above the EU average of 36.9 years (Eurostat, 2024d). However, the increase can be attributed to the gradual extension of the statutory pensionable age since 2012 (Zitikyte, 2021; OECD, 2023) and the improved labour market situation, rather than changes in the flexibility of the pension design.

Factors which are positively associated with working upon reaching pensionable age in Lithuania include being a male, younger age, good health, higher qualification, higher acquired social contribution record, higher average wage before retirement, living in an urban area with higher employment opportunities and reaching pensionable age in better economic times (Zitikyte, 2020 & 2021). Moreover, being a professional or manager and working in the public sector increases the likelihood of employment in old age (ibid.). The negative factors are the opposite and include higher statutory old-age pension and a previous receipt of an unemployment benefit; the lowest employment rates in old age are among skilled agricultural, forestry and fisheries workers and unskilled workers (ibid.). Research also shows that retirees in Lithuania mostly earn lower wages (Aidukaite & Blaziene, 2021; Zitikyte, 2021). Furthermore, care-related responsibilities are an important factor, which have a greater negative impact on employment in older age in Lithuania within the general context of EU countries (Navicke & Straseviciute, 2023).

Based on a survey conducted in 2023 (VDA, 2024), 30.5% of people continued to work when they started receiving old-age pensions because it was financially necessary to work, 28.2% - because it was financially attractive to work, and around 29.2% of people of this age continued to work because they enjoyed working and being productive. Other reasons for continuing to work upon reaching pensionable age included social participation (5.4%), partners' employment status (0.8%) and other (5.9%). The survey shows that the main challenges for employment in old age are related to the reduction of negative financial factors and the promotion of positive voluntary motives to stay in the labour market (Navicke & Straseviciute, 2023).

### Implications of flexible retirement for income inequality, fiscal sustainability and quality of life

The possibility to fully combine statutory pension and work has important distributional implications. As shown by Navicke & Straševičiūtė (2023), the probability of working in old age is U-shaped in Lithuania, i.e. it is higher among those with the lowest income, but also among those with the highest income, and is lower in the middle of the income distribution. At the lower part of the income distribution, the financial incentive to continue working in old age is strong due to low pension

benefits (Zitikytė, 2021; Navicke & Straševičiūtė, 2023; VDA, 2024). The at-risk-of-poverty (AROP) rate for older people (aged 65 and over) in Lithuania was 18.6 p.p. higher than the national average in 2022 (i.e. 39.5% for older people and 20.9% for the total population). It was higher than the EU average for older people by 22.2 p.p. As for the high-income group, work incentives are both financial and non-financial (ibid.), while there is no cap in the rules on combining statutory pensions with work-related income in Lithuania.

Another distributive impact of pension flexibility may be due to pension increases or decreases caused by pension deferment or early retirement. However, as already discussed, these two flexibility pathways are relatively rare in Lithuania. Based on a survey conducted in 2023, the majority (90.4%) of the population received their first state social insurance old-age pension without any reduction or increase; 8.4% of pensioners under the age of 74 received a reduced pension due to early retirement and only 1.2% of pensioners under the age of 74 received an increased pension due to their pension deferral (VDA, 2024).

Considering the features of retirement deferral, as well as early-retirement, pensions, their overall effect can be assumed to be fiscally neutral. In the first case, the increase in deferred pensions should be covered by the social insurance contributions paid during the period of deferment. In the second case, the cost of early-retirement pensions received before the pensionable age should be covered by reductions in the amount of statutory pension paid for the entire period after reaching pensionable age. Furthermore, as already mentioned, only a small fraction of pensioners receives increased statutory pensions due to deferment of pension benefits, and a somewhat higher share receive reduced pensions due to early retirement. There are no statistics available on the number of early retirees who paid high contributions in the past and whose statutory pension was not reduced as a result of the latest reform.

Additionally, there is a fiscal cost of recalculating pension benefits on an annual basis for the working pensioners. Although there are no estimates on the total fiscal costs associated with this type of pension flexibility known to the authors of this paper, the fiscal costs should be covered by the social insurance contributions paid by working pensioners, as well as by a reduction in the cost of the pension bonuses that have to be paid to working pensioners receiving low pensions.

With regards to the quality of life, analysis conducted by Aidukaite & Blaziene (2021) reveals that older employees in the Baltic countries, although actively participating in the labour market, face unfavourable material, physical and psychological situation in the labour market more frequently than their younger colleagues. There are more low-wage earners among older employees, they are more likely to face poor working conditions and their negative health effects, more often feel discriminated against at work, fear that they may lose their job in the near future

and have fewer opportunities and prospects at work (ibid.). All this has a negative impact on the overall wellbeing of older employees.

Moreover, according to a Eurobarometer survey in 2019, Lithuanians are more likely than the EU average to perceive age and disability as a discriminatory factor in recruitment; anecdotal evidence also points to persistent negative perception of employers regarding older workers (OECD, 2023). Consequently, older people in Lithuania are more likely to report experiencing age discrimination compared with the EU average (ibid.). One might question how Lithuania's relatively high employment rate among older individuals can coexist with employers' negative attitudes towards, and discrimination against, this demographic. These two phenomena are not mutually exclusive: while a significant proportion of individuals remain in employment beyond the statutory retirement age, those who lose their jobs at an older age often face considerable challenges in re-entering the labour market due to age-related discrimination.

Analysis by Kairys et al. (2021) suggests that the Lithuanian population has relatively low overall wellbeing compared with other EU countries in old age. People who remain in quality jobs in old age do not experience a decline in wellbeing, while poor working conditions are associated with lower wellbeing. Furthermore, analysis also shows how income and wellbeing in old age are inter-related: in the highest income group, only 2.1% of respondents fell into the low wellbeing group, while in the lowest income group, as many as 30.4% were in the low well-being group. This indicates that the possibility to increase one's income through work in old age may potentially increase wellbeing, especially in the low-income group.

Finally, analysis by Zitikyte (2020) shows that older workers are sick longer and have more severe, chronic, and age-related illnesses, which often becomes a major barrier to staying in the labour market longer. Health problems remain one of the main factors limiting the activity of older people in the labour market. As the population ages, it will be difficult to achieve higher employment rates for older people without improving their health.

## Discussion

Flexible retirement pathways that allow people to choose when and how to retire – taking into account their health, working conditions, and personal preferences – are not just a nice idea. They are a vital tool for encouraging longer careers and can serve as an alternative or complement such politically sensitive reforms as raising the pensionable age. This is especially important for Lithuania, one of the fastest-ageing societies in the EU.

In Lithuania, the main institutional flexible retirement pathway extending working lives is the opportunity to fully combine work-related income and statutory pension benefits upon reaching pensionable age. Full statutory pensions are paid

to working pensioners with no cap on work-related income in pensionable age and no limits on duration or intensity of employment or self-employment. All pensions are not taxable, thus there is no net income reduction when combining pension and income from employment or self-employment. Additional contribution record exceeding the compulsory period is rewarded through an increase in the basic pension component, as well as by automatic recalculation of the earnings-related pension component on an annual basis.

At the same time, the option to defer statutory pension is unpopular. The share of deferred pensions in Lithuania is one of the lowest in the EU, despite a relatively generous increase in the amount of pension for each deferred year. By not deferring, individual secure a guaranteed income stream from old-age pension and can combine it with wage without restrictions and without incurring additional longevity risk.

The pathway for early retirement is also relatively little used in Lithuania, except for the periods of economic downturn. This is due to rather strict rules for early retirement, with no possibility to combine it with work neither in full, nor in part, as well as the reduction of the old-age pension upon reaching the pensionable age.

The possibility to combine old-age pension with work is among the factors for Lithuania to rank among the countries with the highest employment rates among people aged 65-74 years in the EU, but does not explain it. The employment rate of the 55-64 age group is also above the EU average, despite the share of Lithuanians aged 50 and over who wish to retire early being the highest in the EU. This points towards a strong financial incentive to continue working in old age due to low pension replacement rates and very high at-risk-of-poverty rates in old-age.

The observed gradual increase in the duration of the working life in Lithuania can be attributed to the increase in the statutory pensionable age, as well as the improved labour market situation, rather than changes in the flexibility of the pension design. In fact, the only reform during the last decade related to the flexibility of statutory pensions in Lithuania concerned the conditions of early retirement, which removed the reduction of the old-age pension for those who use early retirement pathway and have long contribution records. The latter was implemented in the context of ongoing increase of the pensionable age to 65 for both men and women. This indicates that other forms of pension flexibility may come to the political agenda as the pressure for raising the pensionable age beyond the 65-year mark or indexing it with life expectancy grows in the rapidly ageing Lithuanian society. These forms of flexibility include differentiated or flexible pensionable age, or partial pensions.

Despite the high employment rates in old age and longer working lives, many of the challenges remain. These include such structural factors as low labour market flexibility, age-related discrimination and unfavourable working conditions. Furthermore, health problems and care-related responsibilities remain among the main

barriers limiting participation of older people in the labour market. An important policy challenge for Lithuania lies in fostering later-life employment by mitigating negative financial, health- and care-related, as well as age-discrimination barriers, while promoting positive drivers including favourable working conditions, labour market adaptability and possibilities for choosing a variety of flexible retirement pathways. It is also important to enhance the awareness of the benefits that people can expect to receive under different scenarios concerning when and how they retire.

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# FLEXIBLE RETIREMENT PATHWAYS IN ROMANIA: RULES, MOTIVATIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PROLONGING WORKING LIVE

## Abstract

This article examines flexible retirement pathways in Romania, focusing on the interaction between statutory regulations, labour market participation, and social and fiscal outcomes. Drawing on legislation and data from the National House of Public Pensions, Eurostat, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, and European Commission, the study investigates the rules regarding the timing of retirement (i.e. deferred retirement, early retirement), pension cumulation with work income, and differentiated pensionable ages. Recent reforms aimed to equalize retirement ages for men and women, link statutory retirement age to life expectancy, and incentivize longer work careers. Findings indicate that while legislative measures have increased formal flexibility, the actual take-up of flexible retirement pathways remains low, with a limited impact on labor market participation, particularly among women and low-educated workers. Employment rates among people aged 65+ have declined along with the decrease of employment in agriculture, while the employment rate of those approaching the pensionable age has only moderately increased over the last decade. The lower levels of employment among older people compared to the EU average suggest that structural barriers and social factors limit the impact of the flexible retirement pathways on prolonging the working life. Policy implications highlight the need for integrated labour and social policies to maximize the effectiveness of flexible retirement pathways.

**Keywords:** flexible retirement, pension reforms, labour market participation, Romania,

## Introduction

The debate on flexible retirement policies (FRPs) has gained momentum as governments confront the dual challenge of fiscal sustainability and aging populations. Romania represents a particularly relevant case: its pension system has been the subject of multiple reforms over the last decade, aimed at promoting

longer careers, improving sustainability, and correcting inequalities between occupational groups (Economic Policy Committee, 2023). Yet the effectiveness of such reforms remains uncertain in light of structural labour market barriers, low employment among older cohorts, and relatively high levels of informal and agricultural work.

FRPs are institutional arrangements that allow individuals to retire before or after the statutory retirement age, combine work and pension income, or gradually reduce working hours instead of withdrawing abruptly from the labor force (OECD, 2017). Advocates argue that such flexibility can extend working lives and increase pension adequacy. Yet empirical evidence suggests a more complex picture, as outcomes often depend on institutional design, labour market conditions, and worker characteristics.

The literature highlights a shift from standardized retirement transitions toward more heterogeneous patterns, with individuals retiring at different ages and often combining work with pensions (Baumann & Madero-Cabib, 2019). While economic theory suggests that retirement timing reflects the life-cycle trade-off between leisure and work, comparative research demonstrates that pension design strongly shapes behavior. Key determinants include actuarial neutrality, taxation, and cumulation rules for pension and work income (OECD, 2022).

For example, reforms in Germany and Sweden that introduced actuarial adjustments and partial retirement schemes succeeded in extending effective retirement ages, whereas in countries with weak labour market demand for older workers, such measures had limited impact (Börsch-Supan, 2000). Nevertheless, empirical evidence points to significant limitations. Börsch-Supan et al. (2018), analyzing nine OECD countries, found that while FRPs slightly raised participation rates among older workers, they often reduced working hours, leaving total labour supply unchanged or even diminished. Comparative studies further emphasize distributive inequities: high-income and highly educated workers are more likely to take advantage of flexible options due to longer life expectancy and less physically demanding occupations, whereas low-skilled workers in strenuous jobs are often unable to benefit, reinforcing social inequalities (OECD, 2017).

Likewise, women tend to retire earlier than men, often due to lower statutory ages, caregiving responsibilities, and fragmented employment histories (Baumann & Madero-Cabib, 2019). While reforms in Romania and other countries have sought to equalize pensionable ages and compensate for child-rearing, persistent gendered labour market patterns limit the reach of such measures.

Health status and caregiving responsibilities also play a decisive role in shaping retirement behaviour. Poor health and high care obligations often drive early exits, reducing the effectiveness of FRPs unless complemented by supportive health, care, and employment policies (Eurofound, 2024). Evidence from Cen-

tral and Eastern Europe illustrates this point: in Hungary, raising the female retirement age failed to increase effective retirement ages, as weak incentives and transitional unemployment pressures encouraged early withdrawal (Simonovits, 2021). Similarly, in Estonia, pension reforms extended employment only for some groups, with health and socio-economic conditions strongly mediating outcomes (Soosaar, Puur & Leppik, 2020).

Romania's pension system has been subject to frequent adjustments, including the 2023 reforms, which introduced higher progressivity, increased benefits, and changes to retirement ages in arduous and hazardous occupations (GEO 96/2018; L 360/2023). The effectiveness of these measures is likely constrained by national the labour market situation. Older worker employment rates remain among the lowest in the EU, part-time and flexible employment is rare, and agricultural and physically demanding jobs account for a disproportionately high share of employment, possibly limiting the capacity of FRPs to prolong working lives (OECD, 2022, Eurofound, 2024). Moreover, inequalities in life expectancy and education mean that reforms risk privileging healthier, more advantaged groups while excluding those most in need of protection.

Against this background, this article investigates Romania's pension reforms, with a focus on the interaction between institutional design and structural labour market conditions, and showing how these constrain the effectiveness of FRPs in prolonging working lives. It also assesses the distributional implications of flexibility, with particular attention to gender, occupation, and education. The article concludes that FRPs, while valuable in accommodating diversity among older workers, are unlikely to serve as standalone solutions for extending working lives in Romania. Instead, they must be embedded in a broader strategy that includes active labour market policies for older workers, and safeguards against health and gender inequalities.

The article is structured as follows: the first section presents the main features of the Romanian pension system, including retirement age, eligibility rules, and early-retirement options, complemented by a discussion of the pension reforms introduced between 2014 and 2024. The second section provides a description of the available flexible retirement pathways and the regulations influencing benefits and incentives, while the third section analyses the motivations and constraints for taking up the flexible retirement pathways. The fourth section assesses the uptake of flexible retirement schemes and discusses their implications for retirement age, labor market dynamics, as well as redistributive, fiscal, and social effects. The final section concludes and provides a discussion of the findings.

**Romanian pension system and recent reforms**

The Romanian pension system is organized around three complementary components. The main pillar is the public pay-as-you-go (PAYG) earnings-related scheme, which provides statutory pensions based on lifetime contributions. Pension entitlements under this scheme are calculated using a points system, translating contributions into benefits, and a social indemnity is granted to insure a minimum standard of income for all retirees. In addition, a statutory funded component, introduced in 2008, allows individuals to accumulate complementary pension benefits in capitalized funds. Finally, a voluntary personal pension scheme is in place, for further supplementation of retirement income. Alongside these three pillars, several special pension schemes exist for specific occupational groups, such as magistrates and civil aeronautics workers, showcasing tailored retirement ages and benefit rules.

Since January 2015, the statutory pensionable age in Romania has been 65 for men, while for women it was set at 62 years and two months as of May 2024, scheduled to gradually increase to 65 by 2035 (L 360/2023). The pensionable age has been incrementally raised over the past two decades; in 2001, it was 62 for men and 57 for women. Starting from 2035, statutory retirement ages will be linked to life expectancy, with adjustments of half the increase every three years (L 360/2023). Certain cohorts benefit from lower pensionable ages, for example, persons who have lived for at least 30 years in areas affected by residual pollution may retire two years earlier under provisions in force between 2010 and September 2024. Reaching the pensionable age is a prerequisite to access old-age pension benefits and to withdraw funds from the statutory funded component.

Early retirement is possible up to five years before the statutory age, provided the individual has completed the standard contributory period, currently 35 years for men and 32 years and seven months for women, rising to 35 years for women by 2030. Penalties apply for partial early retirement (PER) if contributions are lower than 43 years, whereas individuals with longer contribution histories may access full benefits under the early-retirement regime (ER). Partial early retirees automatically transition to full old-age benefits upon reaching the statutory pensionable age. Starting from September 2024, the contributory period required for early retirement without penalties will be reduced to 40 years for men and 37 years for women, increasing to 40 years for women by 2030.

Over the last decade, the Romanian pension system has undergone a series of reforms that have significantly reshaped flexible retirement pathways. The most important changes were enacted through the new pension law (L 360/2023), which took effect between January and September 2024 as part of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP, 2021). This legislation equalizes statutory retirement ages for men and women by 2035, links future pensionable ages to increases in life expectancy, and introduces greater flexibility for individuals with long careers and

women with children. Simultaneously, it reduces pensionable-age bonuses previously granted for arduous or hazardous work, while regulating lower reductions of the pensionable age for these groups. Incentives to extend working lives have been reinforced through additional bonuses for long contributory careers.

Rules governing the cumulation of pensions with employment income have also been revised repeatedly. Legislative attempts to prohibit cumulation in the public sector, particularly for beneficiaries of special pensions, were rejected by the Constitutional Court (Decision No 521/2023). In contrast, reforms in 2017 allowed early, disability, and survivor pensioners to combine benefits with self-employment income (L 217/2017). Reforms targeting self-employed workers included increasing contributions to 25% of gross income (GEO 79/2017) and raising the minimum insurable income to the level of the minimum wage (L 227/2015, as amended). More recently, legislation on domestic workers (L 211/2022), together with L 360/2023, extended access to old-age insurance for domestic workers and allowed pensioners to combine pensions with income from remunerated domestic services. These measures have improved coverage for self-employed workers and enhanced their ability to plan their working careers under conditions more comparable to those of employees.

To summarize, the combination of statutory ages, differentiated provisions, and early-retirement options creates a complex incentive structure that influences individual decisions on labor-market exit, with opportunities for early retirement partially balanced by penalties or restrictions.

### Flexible retirement pathways and rules affecting pension benefits and retirement incentives

Romanian legislation allows for several forms of flexibility regarding the timing of retirement, comprising mainly provisions related to deferred retirement, differentiated pensionable ages, and specific rules for long-career workers.

Deferring retirement is permitted without a formal upper age limit. Nevertheless, labour legislation mandates the termination of employment contracts once individuals meet retirement eligibility criteria. Employees may request to extend their employment beyond the statutory pensionable age, subject to employer consent. Prior to January 2024, the period of deferral was limited to three years (L 263/2010; L 93/2019). From January 2024, this period may be extended up to age 70 (L 360/2023). Continuing employment beyond the legislated deferral period requires the conclusion of a new employment contract. Some occupational groups, covering in particular doctors, pharmacists, stomatologists, teaching and research staff from higher education, face stricter limits on deferral, reflecting concerns about work capacity.

Differentiated pensionable ages account for gender, career length, occupational hazards, and environmental exposure. Currently, women benefit from a lower statutory pensionable age and may retire flexibly within a range that extends from their own statutory age to that of men. Legislative amendments (i.e. GEO No 96/2018), were designed to eliminate discrimination in the labour market, but in practice have enabled women to choose their retirement timing unilaterally, effectively creating a de facto flexible retirement option. From September 2024, the pensionable age of women with children will be reduced by up to three years and six months, depending on the number of children raised, thereby providing additional recognition of unpaid care responsibilities.

Long-career provisions allow individuals with at least 43 years of contributions (until August 2024) or 40 years of contributions (from September 2024) to claim early benefits without incurring penalties. However, the rules for credited periods have changed: from September 2024, most assimilated inactive periods are excluded from the calculation, except parental leave. While intended to reward long careers, these provisions may favour individuals who enter the labour market earlier and with lower levels of education, due to the exclusion of university studies from credited periods.

Occupational differentiation further influences retirement age. Workers in arduous or hazardous jobs experienced reductions of up to 13 years prior to September 2024 and up to 10 years thereafter (L 263/2010; L 360/2023). Reductions also apply in specific sectors such as mining and radiation-exposed workplaces, as well as for individuals residing in pollution-affected zones. Special pension schemes maintain lower retirement ages, ranging from 50 years for magistrates and civil aeronautics workers to 60 years for other professional groups. These ages are scheduled to rise incrementally over the coming decades, gradually closing the gap between occupational categories.

Between 2010 and September 2024, residing for at least 30 years in zones with high residual pollution entitled insured people to a lowering of two years in the pensionable age. The number of pensioners concerned is significant, given that the list of eligible areas has been expanded continually over recent years, reaching almost 100 localities in 2024 (Economic Policy Committee, 2023).

Combining a pension with income from work

Individuals who have reached statutory retirement age may combine a full old-age pension with income from employment, regardless of employment type or earnings level. However, labour legislation requires a new employment contract for continued work, which may result in reduced income in sectors where pay scales are seniority-based. Magistrates are an exception to this rule, as they may be reinstated in the position held before retirement if the reinstatement is done during the

first three years after retirement. Consequently, an 85% reduction of the pension benefit is applied (L 303/2022).

Certain professional groups face specific conditions: research and academic staff must renew contracts annually (L 199/2023), and teachers are employed on hourly contracts corresponding to hours worked (L 198/2023).

Unlike the old age pension benefits, the early-retirement benefits generally cannot be combined with income from standard employment contracts or elected positions. They may, however, be combined with self-employment or income from intellectual property rights. These limitations stay in place until the individual reaches the pensionable age and becomes eligible for an old-age pension. From September 2024, the introduction of lower-age eligibility for full benefits for workers with long contribution periods (≥40 years) removes previous restrictions on combining pensions with employment income, further expanding flexibility.

**Rules affecting pension benefits and incentives to work longer**

The design of pension rules not only determines the level of retirement income but also influences individual decisions regarding when to exit the labour market and whether to continue working while receiving a pension. In Romania, a combination of incentives and constraints shapes these choices, ranging from financial rewards for deferring retirement to fiscal advantages associated with claiming pension benefits. This section addresses the *incentives to defer retirement*, *the impact of combining pensions with work on benefit levels*, *the role of taxation policies*, and *the eligibility for other social protection benefits*.

*The deferred retirement* in the PAYG system was rewarded with a monthly 0.5% increase in pension points for individuals meeting the minimum contributory period. From September 2024, this bonus was replaced with "stability points" ranging from 0.5 to 1 pension point per year, depending on the length of contribution (L 360/2023). Unlike the previous system, the new incentive is not tied to current income levels, aiming to promote longer careers in general rather than specific deferral behaviour. Low-income individuals with long careers are likely to experience a more pronounced impact from these changes, highlighting distributional implications of pension incentives. In the statutory funded component, there are no additional incentives to defer retirement beyond the actuarial increases that result from continued contributions and shorter anticipated retirement duration.

Likewise, the pension benefits are positively impacted when combining a pension with work, as the *accrual of pension rights after retirement is permitted,* depending on the category of pension benefit and the type of employment undertaken. Part-time employment typically yields lower accruals. Stability points and deferred retirement bonuses (in place until September 2024) do not apply to post-retirement earnings. Early retirees are generally excluded from additional accrual, as only in-

comes for self-employment are permitted, which are not subject to social insurance contributions. Pension recalculation under the PAYG scheme is possible annually upon request, whereas the statutory funded scheme lacks established recalculation procedures.

*Fiscal policy* provides incentives for claiming pension benefits. The fiscal framework in Romania favours pensions over wages, thereby creating incentives to claim retirement benefits once eligibility conditions are met. Within the statutory PAYG scheme, both wages and pensions are subject to a general income tax of 10%.[1] However, pension benefits enjoy several exemptions: pensions below RON 2,000 (around EUR 400) are not taxed, and all pensioners are exempt from contributions to old-age insurance and healthcare, which remain mandatory for work incomes. No specific fiscal advantages exist for deferring retirement, as income from employment is taxed under the same rules regardless of age.

*Combining a pension with employment income* is subject to more advantageous rules than continuing to work without drawing a pension. Pensioners who combine a full old-age benefit with part-time work are taxed according to their actual hours worked, while other employees are subject to a minimum insurable income set at the level of the minimum wage. [2] This arrangement, although designed to secure pension rights for working-age employees, reduces labour costs for employers and may encourage the retention of pensioners in the workforce. In addition, pensioners' earnings from self-employment and intellectual property rights are exempt from old-age insurance contributions (with the exception of domestic service income, L 111/2022).[3]

Despite these advantages for pensioners, employers receive limited incentives to hire older workers. Aside from the favourable rules on part-time contracts, employing pensioners may even generate higher costs, as employers must continue to pay unemployment contributions even though pensioners are not eligible for unemployment benefits. [4] To offset this, employers can access subsidies for hiring older workers, amounting to RON 2,250 (around EUR 450) per month (L 76/2002 with amendments). These subsidies target unemployed persons aged 45 and over, as well as those within five years of statutory retirement age. While not restricted

[1] A different, progressive taxation rate is applied to the non-contributory component of the special pension benefits (L 282/2023).

[2] With the exception of pensioners, students and people with disabilities (GEO 16/2022).

[3] The taxation rate is nevertheless lower, being set at 17.53% compared with the general level of 25%, given that the insurable income is set at half of the actual earned income.

[4] The contribution for work insurance (i.e. 2.25% of gross wages), which covers unemployment among other risks, is paid by all employees, despite the fact that the older people fulfilling the conditions for retirement are not eligible for unemployment insurance.

to pensioners, such measures may support the reintegration and retention of older workers, contributing to the extension of working lives beyond pensionable age.

*When postponing retirement*, the old age employed persons generally retain access to most working-age social protection benefits, provided their income remains above the minimum insurable threshold. The main exception is unemployment insurance, from which neither employees nor the self-employed can benefit once they have fulfilled the conditions for retirement. Although employees continue to contribute to this scheme—and self-employed workers may opt in voluntarily—they are no longer eligible for coverage, as they cannot legally be classified as unemployed. For the self-employed, the level of social protection available when deferring retirement may be lower than that of pensioners. Healthcare insurance, for instance, is only mandatory once annual earnings exceed six times the minimum wage, meaning those with low incomes may be left without coverage. By contrast, claiming a pension ensures automatic access to healthcare and provides a guaranteed minimum pension benefit, creating strong incentives to take up pension rights rather than remain in employment without drawing a pension. It is also important to note that certain benefits are available only to older people above pensionable age. Long-term care is a case in point: it is granted regardless of employment or pensioner status, though eligibility criteria and associated costs are income-dependent (L 17/2000 with amendments).

*Combining pension benefits with employment* allows individuals to access benefits linked to both statuses. Pensioners in employment remain insured for healthcare, sickness benefits, and work accident coverage, though not for unemployment. At the same time, by virtue of their pensioner status, they automatically qualify for healthcare, subsidised medicines, a minimum guaranteed pension benefit, and reduced fares on public transport, irrespective of income earned from work. However, receiving income from both pensions and employment can reduce access to means-tested assistance. Pensioners with higher combined earnings are less likely to qualify for targeted benefits aimed at low-income groups, such as heating aid, temporary social assistance (e.g. food vouchers), or compensation for high energy prices. Thus, while combining pensions with work expands access to contributory protections, it may limit eligibility for income-tested forms of support.

**Motivation and constraints for using flexible retirement pathways**

The decision to prolong working life beyond the statutory pensionable age is shaped by both the incentives embedded in the design of the pension system and individual constraints.

Deferring retirement without claiming a pension appears most attractive in sectors where wages are strongly linked to seniority. In these cases, employees may anticipate a significant decline in income once they retire and shift to hourly-based

contracts. The teaching profession illustrates this dynamic: the growing number of teachers opting to extend employment until the age of 70 can be interpreted as a financial strategy, since combining a pension with post-retirement work often results in lower total earnings compared to maintaining a seniority-based salary. By contrast, the option to cumulate pension benefits with labour income is generally more appealing for those who can secure relatively high post-retirement earnings, either through new employment contracts or self-employment. In such cases, the dual income stream offers an advantageous financial trade-off.

However, these strategies are not equally accessible to all workers. Health constraints remain a dominant factor influencing premature labour market exit in Romania (Eurofound, 2024). Deferring retirement or combining pension benefits with continued employment becomes unfeasible for individuals with chronic illness or reduced work capacity. Care responsibilities represent an additional barrier. Approximately one-third of adults aged 65 or older living outside institutional care settings had at least minimal, significant, or severe care needs in 2022 (Eurofound, 2024). In the absence of comprehensive public provision of long-term care, which continues to cover only part of the demand (Pop, 2018), these responsibilities are largely borne by families. In practice, this translates into high levels of unpaid care provision: in 2022, 25% of men and 31% of women in Romania provided care to family members with long-term needs, compared with EU averages of 21% and 22% respectively.[5] Women are disproportionately affected, reflecting their greater involvement in informal care (UNECE/European Commission, 2019) and their higher representation among the working-age inactive population, where they accounted for around 64% in 2023.[6]

**Impact of flexible retirement pathways**

This part examines the take-up of the flexible retirement options, considering their broader implications, including impacts on retirement age, labour market dynamics, redistributive outcomes, fiscal sustainability, and quality of life and societal effects.

Take-up of flexible retirement pathways

Estimating how many individuals defer pension receipt or continue working after reaching pensionable age is difficult, since such data are not systematically included among regularly published pension indicators. Still, administrative data cited in the statement of reasons for a 2020 draft bill on the cumulation of pensions with work income reported that approximately 102,375 people aged 65 and over

[5] European Institute for Gender Equality, EIGE surveys, 2022: https://eige.europa.eu/gender-statistics/dgs/indicator/eige_gap_care_resp__ggs_care_ltc.

[6] Eurostat, Code = lfsa_igan, downloaded on 5 June 2024.

were employed under a labour contract or in other forms of remunerated work, with nearly 30% aged 70 or older (Romanian Government, 2020).

In the same year, the total number of employed individuals aged 65+ stood at 248,900—around 7% of this age group. Combining administrative data with Eurostat sources suggests that roughly 40% of those aged 65+ in employment held a formal employment contract, while the remainder were likely self-employed with irregular and low income flows. Between 2020 and 2023, however, this proportion dropped significantly: only about 82,900 people aged 65+ (2% of the age group) remained in employment, pointing to a decreasing interest in working beyond retirement age.

Within the group of people aged 65+ engaged in a remunerated employment activity, very few individuals were purely deferring retirement. In 2020, just 14,241 people aged 65+ were employed under a labour contract without drawing a pension. By contrast, the majority—88,134 people[7], or 86% of those aged 65+ with a labour contract—combined a pension with work income. Yet this group represented less than 2.5% of all old-age pensioners.[8]

Gender differences are also pronounced. Few women remain in the labour market until reaching men's statutory retirement age, and among those deferring retirement beyond age 70, men predominate. In 2019, only about 4% (3,396 people) of women retiring were 65 or older, and the number postponing retirement until after age 70 was less than half the figure recorded among men. [9]

Looking ahead, the number of individuals deferring retirement is expected to rise, supported by the recently introduced option to remain in work until age 70. For example, Ministry of Education data for Bucharest show a 40% increase in the number of teachers applying to defer retirement in the 2024/2025 school year compared with the previous year.[10]

By contrast, the most widespread use of flexible retirement in Romania has traditionally stemmed from provisions enabling early retirement, either to compensate for arduous and hazardous working conditions or to recognise longer careers. Yet

[7] It is noteworthy that the indicator covers people aged 65+. The number of people combining a pension with work income is higher, as it is estimated that an important segment of the beneficiaries of special pensions are cumulating work and pension at lower ages.

[8] Administrative data retrieved from the statement of reasons for the law regarding some measures for the continuation of the activity by people who meet the retirement conditions, corroborated by NHPP data.

[9] Data calculated based on information provided in the Romania Country fiche on pension projections prepared for the 2021 Ageing Report: https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-05/ro_-_ar_2021_final_pension_fiche.pdf.

[10] https://www.edupedu.ro/lista-crestere-cu-aproape-40-a-numarului-de-profesori-trecuti-de-varsta-de-pensionare-care-au-primit-aprobare-sa-ramana-titulari-si-anul-scolar-viitor-in-scolile-bucuresti/

take-up has declined steadily: by 2023, there were about 96,000 early retirees (ER and PER combined), representing only 2% of all pensioners. [11] Of these, a small fraction (7%, or 6,323 people) benefitted from early retirement without penalties. For comparison, National House of Public Pensions (NHPP) data indicate that in 2019 roughly 25,000 individuals in arduous or hazardous occupations retired before reaching the statutory age with a full old age pension, accounting for 18% of all new pensioners that year.[12] The modest participation in the early-retirement programme suggests that eligibility rules remain difficult to satisfy without the higher accrual rates granted under such conditions. Men were strongly over-represented among pensioners who worked in arduous and hazardous jobs retiring in 2019 (75%)[13], while women comprised the majority of ER beneficiaries overall (around 60%).[14]

*Impact on retirement age*

The age at which people effectively withdraw from the labour market is higher than the age at which they start claiming an old-age pension, suggesting the continuation of work after retirement. OECD data for 2022 indicated an effective labour market exit age of 63.4 years for women and 64.1 years for men.[15] Between 2014 and 2022, this indicator rose by more than two years for both genders. However, both ages were on a downward trend after 2019-2020: the age for women was 64.6 in 2020, whereas that of men was 66 in 2019. The subsequent decline mirrored the fall in employment rates among people aged 65+ (Figure 1). Importantly, particularly driven by a lower statutory pensionable age, women tend to withdraw from the labour market later than their statutory pensionable age, while men generally exit earlier.

By contrast, the age at which people begin to receive a pension is lower than both the effective retirement age (defined as the age of labour market withdrawal) and the statutory pensionable age. Data from the 2012 LFS module on the transition from work to retirement showed that men first received a pension at an average age of 58, and women at 56.1—1.6 years and 2.7 years below the EU averages, re-

[11] Given that the early retirement benefit is automatically converted into old age benefit when reaching the retirement age, the number is relevant for the pensioners retired early during a 5-year period of time, the maximum number of years likely to be spent in early retirement.

[12] Alexandru, M, The real retirement age in Romania is five years lower than the statutory retirement age/ Almost two thirds of those who retired last year were under 65, respectively 61, G4Media, 20 Augusts 2020, EXCLUSIV Vârsta reală de pensionare în România este cu cinci ani mai mică decât cea prevăzută de lege / Aproape două treimi dintre cei care s-au pensionat anul trecut aveau sub 65, respectiv 61 de ani (g4media.ro)

[13] Idem

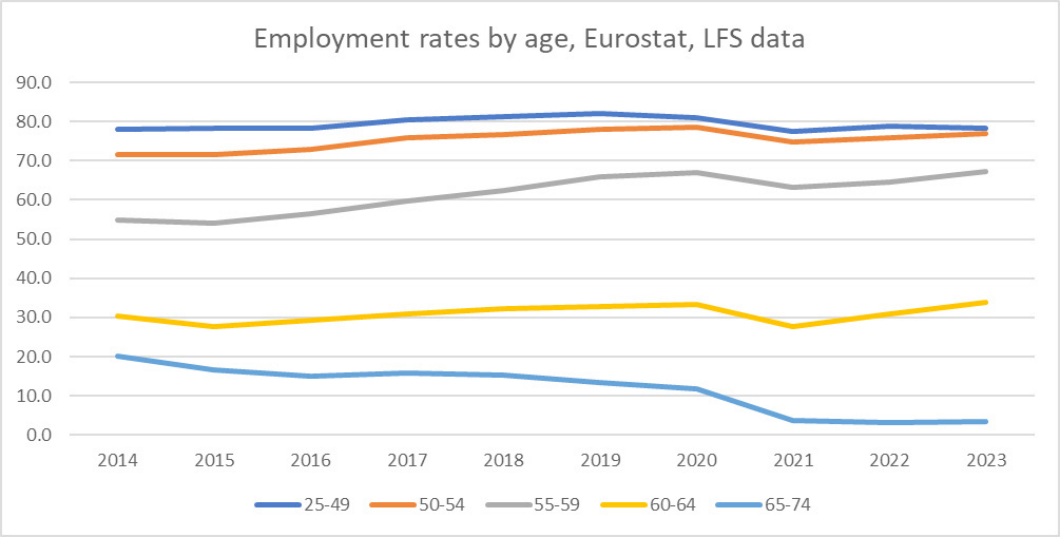
[14] Calculated based on NHPP data, www.cnpp.ro

[15] OECD, Pensions at a Glance, oecdstat, downloaded on 29 May 2024

spectively. [16] Administrative records from the National House for Public Pensions indicate a one-year increase in the average retirement age between 2015 and 2019 (Ghetău, 2020).

The gap between pensionable age and actual pension uptake is observed not only among early retirees but also among old-age pension beneficiaries. According to the 2024 Ageing Working Group country fiche for Romania, in 2022 men started to receive pension benefits at an average age of 61.6, and women at 61.5.

**Figure 1:** Employment rates by age, Romania 2014-2023




*Source: Eurostat, 2024.*
*Employment rate shows the proportion of the employed population in total population within the respective age group.*

This was below the statutory retirement ages of 65 for men and 61 years and 11 months for women. While the gender gap in pension take-up age was narrower than that in statutory retirement ages, trends diverged between men and women. Between 2019 and 2022, women's pension take-up age increased by 1.4 years (from 60.1), largely reflecting the gradual rise in the statutory retirement age. Conversely, men's average pension take-up age decreased by 1.1 years over the same period (from 62.7) (Economic Policy Committee, 2020; 2023).

Finally, differences are also visible in the ratio of early to statutory-age retirees. In 2022, the ratio of pensioners exiting the labour market below the statutory retirement age compared to those retiring at or above it was 2.2 for men and 0.7 for

[16] Eurostat, lfso_12agepens, downloaded on 5 June 2024

women (Economic Policy Committee, 2023[17]). This confirms that men were more likely to retire before reaching the pensionable age.

*Labour market dynamics and the impact of flexible retirement*[18]

Although the average age of labour market exit increased over the last decade, it still remained below the statutory pensionable age for men. Employment disruptions linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, combined with uneven increases in employment rates, shortened the duration of working lives after 2019. By 2023, average working life in Romania was 32.2 years, compared with 36.9 years at EU level.

Between 2014 and 2023, employment rates rose moderately among working-age people, more strongly among older cohorts, but declined for those aged 65+. The increase among older working-age people was likely driven by rising statutory retirement ages—particularly for women—and by measures restricting early retirement pathways. Nonetheless, the persistent decline in employment among people aged 65+ indicates that extending working lives after the pensionable age remains a challenge.

The strongest positive trend was observed among those aged 55–59. Their employment rate grew by 12.4 percentage points, reaching 67.3% in 2023 (Figure 1). The increase was sharper for women (14 p.p.) than for men (10.2 p.p.), consistent with the rise in women's effective retirement age. As a result, Romania's gender employment gap narrowed slightly relative to EU averages, from 13.1 p.p. in 2014 to 11.7 p.p. in 2023. Among those aged 60–64, the employment rate rose only moderately, from 30.3% in 2014 to 33.9% in 2023. Within this group, women and individuals with low education fared worst. The gender gap in employment stood at 26.5 p.p., while only 21.6% of low-educated people were employed, compared with 33.9% overall. High female inactivity translated into a shorter duration of working lives, 6.2 years below the EU average in 2023, suggesting that women and the low-educated are more likely to retire before age 65. [19]

By contrast, labour market engagement among people aged 65+ declined sharply over the decade, making work after reaching the pensionable age a less popular strategy in Romania. Whereas in 2014 the employment rate among people aged 65-74 was 2.6 times higher than the EU value (20.2% compared with 7.8%), the value dropped below it in 2021, when it reached 3.6% compared with 9.3% at EU level. Fewer than 5% of people aged 65-69 and fewer than 1.5% aged 70-74 were

[17] The early/late exit ratio is defined as the ratio between those who retire and are below the statutory retirement age and those who retire at the statutory retirement age or above (Economic Policy Committee, 2020, p. 24).

[18] The analysis in this section is based on LFS Eurostat data.

[19] Eurostat, LFS, Code = lfsa_ergaed, downloaded on 28 May 2024.

employed in 2023 – significantly lower than the EU values of 15.2% and 5.5%, respectively.[20] The decline reflected, in part, a steep fall in agricultural employment among older people: in 2014, agriculture accounted for 96% of employment in this age group, but only 54% in 2023.[21] In this regard, older-age employment often reflected unmet financial needs, while falling participation may be linked to steady increases in pension benefits over recent decades (UNECE/European Commission, 2019).

Self-employment and other flexible work arrangements have not significantly contributed to prolonging working lives. Although self-employment rises with age (Figure 2), it is predominantly concentrated among the low-educated: 47% of the self-employed aged 55-64 and 67% of those aged 65-74 have a low level of education,[22] mostly working in jobs with incomes below the minimum insurable threshold that would entitle them to additional pension rights. Nor does working time diminish substantially with age: in 2023, average hours worked per week were 40.2 for those aged 25–54 and 39.9 for those aged 55–64.[23] Part-time work remains rare among older workers[24], despite the financial incentives granted for the employment of pensioners. Working long hours in full-time jobs therefore seems to be the dominant model of employment among older workers in Romania, while resorting to retirement at earlier ages might work as a compensatory strategy for the prevalence of jobs in labour-intensive sectors such as manufacturing and agriculture (Eurofound, 2024, p. 16).

*Expected redistributive, social and fiscal impact*

The flexible retirement provisions endorsed through the recent reform of the Romanian pension system (L 360/2023) are expected to generate significant redistributive, fiscal, and social consequences. By linking the statutory retirement age to half the increase in life expectancy and by equalising the retirement ages of men and women, the reform introduces measures that will reshape both the distribution of pension wealth and the dynamics of retirement decisions in the coming decades.

[20] Eurostat, LFS, Code = lfsa_ergaed, downloaded on 28 May 2024.

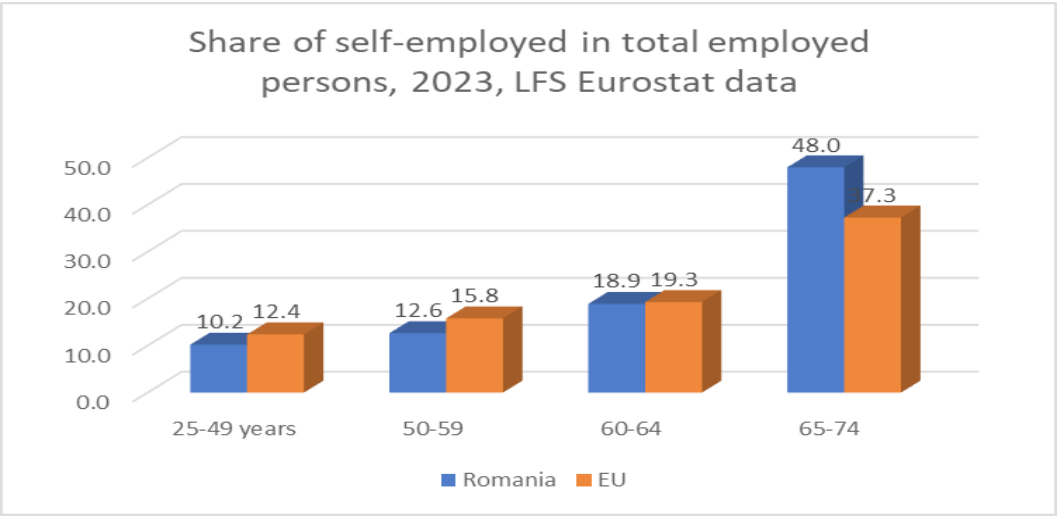
[21] Eurostat, LFS, Code = lfsa_egan2, downloaded on 4 June 2024.

[22] Eurostat, LFS, Code = lfsa_esgaed, downloaded on 4 June 2024.

[23] Eurostat, LFS, Code = lfsa_ewhuis, downloaded on 28 May 2024.

[24] 4.5% of those aged 50-64 and 28.1% of those over 65 were engaged in part-time employment in 2023, compared with 18.2% and 50.8% respectively at EU level (Eurostat, LFS, Code = lfsa_eftpt, downloaded on 28 May 2024).

**Figure 2:** Share of self-employed in total employed people in 2023 (%), Romania and EU




*Source: Eurostat, 2024.*

From a redistributive perspective, the implications are particularly important. Women currently enjoy a life expectancy at age 65 that is 4.1 years higher than that of men.[25] Nevertheless, between 2023 and 2040 the growth in the expected duration of women's retirement will be slower, largely due to the progressive alignment of the statutory retirement ages by 2035 (Economic Policy Committee, 2023).

At the same time, linking the pensionable age, the statutory contribution period, and the minimum contribution period to life expectancy is likely to disadvantage low-income and low-educated workers, whose remaining lifespans are shorter than those of high earners. In 2017, for instance, tertiary-educated men (ISCED level 5-8) at age 65 were expected to live 2.5 years longer than men with secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary education (ISCED levels 3–4), while highly educated people overall lived on average 3.6 years longer than those with low education.[26] Such gaps are likely to translate into reduced pension wealth for the less educated (OECD, 2017). However, the new provisions granting earlier retirement ages and additional entitlements to those with longer work careers may offset, at least partially, the impact of these inequalities.

The recent provisions will have important social and quality-of-life effects. On one hand, greater flexibility—such as lower pensionable ages for women with children or additional incentives for individuals with long careers—offers opportunities

[25] Eurostat, Code = demo_mlexpec, downloaded on 4 June 2024.

[26] Eurostat, Code = demo_mlexpecedu, retrieved on 4 June 2024.

to better accommodate different retirement preferences. On the other hand, these choices come at a cost. Early retirement may result in inadequate benefits, especially since pension levels are projected to decline relative to wages, falling from 33.9% of the average gross wage in 2022 to 28.9% in 2070 (European Commission, 2024a). Furthermore, claiming pensions before the statutory age halts accumulation under the funded component, thereby reducing future benefits despite the compensatory points awarded under the PAYG component.

Another challenge relates to health. Increasing the statutory retirement age in line with life expectancy does not guarantee that individuals will spend more years of retirement in good health. In 2022, healthy life expectancy at age 65 in Romania was only 3.9 years—5.2 years below the EU average—and had fallen by two years since 2014, [27] despite modest gains in overall life expectancy (+0.8 years between 2014 and 2023[28]). This divergence suggests that longer working lives may be accompanied by shorter periods of healthy retirement, raising concerns about well-being in old age.

The recent reforms also carry significant fiscal implications. Pension expenditure is projected to rise from 8.5% of GDP in 2022 to 10.6% in 2046, before falling to 7.6% by 2070 (Economic Policy Committee, 2023). While demographic ageing is the main driver of this increase, new measures—such as the allocation of stability points for longer careers—will further contribute to expenditure growth from 2024 onwards (Economic Policy Committee, 2023, p. 32). At the same time, provisions designed to extend working lives are expected to ease pressure on public finances over the long run. Projections included in the 2024 Ageing Report show that contributory periods will increase from 35.4 years in 2023 to 38.8 years in 2040, while employment rates among older workers, including those aged 65–74, are also expected to rise, thereby reversing current declining trends (Economic Policy Committee, 2023, p. 21).

## Conclusions and Discussion

This study examined the role and effectiveness of flexible retirement pathways (FRPs) in Romania, focusing on the interaction between statutory regulations, labour market participation, and social and fiscal outcomes. The findings highlight both the opportunities and the limitations of FRPs in prolonging working lives, enhancing pension adequacy, and addressing distributional inequalities.

The analysis confirms that Romania has diversified its retirement options in recent years, extending access to deferral bonuses, introducing differentiated retirement ages for women with children and long-career workers, and permitting the

[27] Eurostat, Code = hlth_hlye, downloaded on 4 June 2024.

[28] Eurostat, Code = demo_mlexpec, downloaded on 4 June 2024.

combination of pensions with labour income. These measures are likely to increase financial incentives to remain in employment, particularly for individuals with higher earnings or stable occupational trajectories. However, their actual uptake remains modest, with pension–work combinations preferred over retirement deferral. Closely tied to advantageous fiscal rules and the possibility of accruing additional entitlements while drawing a pension, this path is also costly for the pension system, hindering its overall sustainability.

At the same time, the study underlines several structural constraints that limit the effectiveness of FRPs. Employment rates among older cohorts remain low, particularly after age 65, reflecting both declining agricultural employment and improved benefit adequacy. Health limitations, caregiving responsibilities, and the scarcity of part-time or less demanding jobs further restrict the feasibility of prolonged employment. Gender and socio-economic disparities are critical in this regard: women, low-educated workers, and those in physically demanding occupations are least able to benefit from flexible options, despite being among the groups most in need of income security in old age. In this sense, FRPs risk reproducing existing inequalities if not carefully balanced with compensatory measures.

These findings resonate with comparative evidence from other European countries, which shows that FRPs tend to be most effective when supported by actuarially neutral pension rules, strong labour market demand for older workers, and accessible part-time or gradual retirement schemes. In Romania, by contrast, the predominance of full time jobs along with limited active labour market policies for older workers significantly constrain their redistributive and sustainability potential.

A series of policy gaps hamper the likelihood of people continuing to work and remain active after reaching the pensionable age. As access to unemployment insurance is restricted to people who are not eligible for the old-age pension, the prospect of unemployment is likely to encourage older workers to take up the pension benefit. From the policy perspective, several implications emerge. First, FRPs cannot serve as standalone instruments for extending working lives in Romania. Their success depends on complementary interventions that address the structural barriers facing older workers, including reforms to promote part-time and flexible employment, as well as investments in long-term care services to ease the burden of informal caregiving. Second, the distributive consequences of FRPs need to be considered. Without safeguards, reforms linking retirement age to life expectancy or privileging longer contribution careers may disproportionately benefit healthier and more advantaged groups, while excluding those in poorer health or precarious jobs. Finally, the interaction between rising pension benefits and declining agricultural employment suggests that financial necessity may no longer be the dominant driver of late-life employment. In this regard, strategies to promote longer working lives

must increasingly align with individuals' preferences, health status, and capacity to remain active in the labour market.

In conclusion, Romania's experience illustrates that while providing valuable opportunities for choice and adaptation in later life, the flexible retirement policies remain constrained by structural labour market realities and persistent social inequalities. Their capacity to significantly extend working lives is thus limited. In order to improve access to the labour market for older people, flexible retirement provisions need to be complemented by flexible labour market policies, which would allow older workers to easily migrate to less demanding jobs or to move smoothly between work and unemployment. Embedding FRPs within a broader framework of labour market policies and social protection will be essential if they are to contribute effectively to both fiscal sustainability and older people's well-being.

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# FROM POLICY TO PRACTICE: A RESOURCE-BASED ASSESSMENT OF ACCESS TO HUMAN RIGHTS

## Abstract

This study focuses on rudimentary disparities in access to human rights in Serbia, concerned with the severe divide between policy frameworks and their locative implementation. The purpose is to apply a resource-based approach to assess how public resources influence access to basic rights. Within a human rights-based approach framework, we identified and explored the presence or absence of resources that enable the realization of the right to work and the right to health. Field surveys and statistical sources served as the principal means of data collection while the investigation was conducted in 69 local communities within the City of Niš, where the indicators were evaluated and normalized by using the comparative scale. In the unbalanced distribution of public resources necessary for the actualization of rights lie the imperatives for travel, kindergartens, schools, health establishments, and pharmacies, with vulnerable groups such as children, women, the elderly, and persons with disabilities suffering most due to the absence of these resources. Without the infrastructure support at community levels or with its little presence, realization of even the most basic human rights is heavily restricted, despite comprehensive legal and policy commitments. The resource-based approach can serve as a feasible measure to pinpoint local disparities in access to human rights.

**Keywords:** HRBA, accessibility to human rights, local community, resource-based analysis, GIS

## Introduction

Most definitions of social work emphasize the commitment of this profession to the "promotion and realization of Human Rights"(IFSW, 2010, Hermans & Roets, 2020; Stamm, 2023; Razon & Feldman, 2024). Namely, this practice-based profession, guided by the principles of social justice, non-discrimination, human rights, and collective responsibility, strives to provide support to individuals, groups, and communities to meet a need or exercise a right (IFSW, 2014, Acha-Anyi, 2024). In the context of this definition, it is important to note that unlike human needs, which can be subjective and objective, and can be ranked according to different criteria, human rights are indivisible, equally important, and the fulfilment of one right usually depends on the realization of other rights (Ife, 2010; Gabel, 2016). The complexity of the requirements for fulfilling human rights, along with their interrelated nature, prompts some writers to contend that human rights are frequently overlooked in social work. To prevent this from happening, Human Rights-based approaches can be a good way for social work to pay deserved attention to human rights (McPherson, Jebert, & Siebert, 2017; Androff, 2018; Mapp, McPherson, Androff, & Gabel, 2019). Some authors argue that precisely "human rights provide the mandate to fulfil human needs with social policy acting as the means for attaining them. Consequently, social workers can play major roles in ensuring that with policy and practice, needs are reframed and treated as basic human rights to which each individual is entitled" (Cox & Pardasani, 2017: 99). Lorenz (2016) highlights that social workers have the responsibility to reframe personal challenges as public matters.

Human rights have been a major pillar of the United Nations' activity since its inception in 1945. By ratifying the UN Charter, they established a new normative age in which the international community, inspired by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, defined a significant set of international standards critical to the dignified living of all people. The human rights-based approach (HRBA) is a conceptual framework based on international norms for promoting and protecting human rights. For everyone to enjoy these rights and for development progress to be realized, this method helps to assess inequities and remove discriminatory behavior that entail the risk that certain social groups are excluded from the allocation of power and that their rights are neglected (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2006; Banik, 2010).

In other words, HRBA principles enable the most vulnerable individuals and groups in society to participate in decision-making processes and hold those in power accountable (UN Sustainable Development Group, 2003; Gabel, 2016; Broberg & Sano, 2017). In social work, this approach is one "that places the principles and standards of human rights as central to all aspects of service planning, policy, and practice" (European Network of National Human Rights Institutions, 2017: 14).

The HRBA principle is founded on five essential values of human rights (PANEL): participation, responsibility, non-discrimination and equality, empowerment, and legality. Social work aims to fulfil everyone's rights by advocating for human rights, empowering individuals, developing practices, and mobilizing resources in the community (Hermans & Roets 2020; Hessle 2016). According to Broberg and Sano (2017), implementing principles or values in practice might be challenging due to their abstract nature.

*Accessibility to human rights and challenges in measurement in the context of Republic of Serbia*

Access to human rights refers to the extent to which everyone, regardless of personal traits, can successfully exercise and enjoy their fundamental rights and liberties. The most important prerequisite for enjoying and maintaining rights is the removal of barriers (political, legal, administrative, physical, etc.). Accessibility of human rights also refers to the notion that certain human rights, particularly economic, social, and cultural rights, frequently necessitate the availability of material resources in order for individuals to realize and enjoy those rights. These resources encompass both material and infrastructural factors required for individuals to exercise their rights (Balakrishnan & Elson, 2008).

The availability and equitable distribution of these resources are critical in ensuring that human rights are more than just theoretical ideas, but also tangible realities for all members of society. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights' 2012 publication, "Indicators of Human Rights: Guide to Measurement and Implementation," emphasizes the importance of measuring human rights because "if something is not calculated, it tends to go unnoticed" or "what gets measured gets done" (OHCHR, 2012:4). This book focuses on increasing the number of interested parties in human rights measurement and developing methods to demonstrate the implementation of human rights in a "tangible" form in a specific location. These strategies use a diverse collection of statistical data to define indicators or indices of human rights (Landman & Carvalho, 2010). Analysing existing human rights metrics reveals that regional and national perspectives on these statistics are mostly prevalent. There are several examples of measuring human rights achievement or violation based on a comparative model of different countries, with international accords in this field serving as instructions.

The previous guide acknowledges the necessity of creating methodologies and specialized tools designed to effectively communicate the accessibility of human rights to a broad audience. By doing so, often theoretical notions (like freedom, equality, and justice) can turn into more tangible ones, thereby becoming more approachable for different parties who can support the advancement of human rights through requests for data. While there are several suggestions for tailoring human

rights measurements to particular national situations, these adaptations are primarily compared at the national level despite the contextual specifics. For example, since 2006, the Human Rights Council has been auditing human rights in all member states of the United Nations every four and a half years. Besides this method of overseeing the establishment and safeguarding of human rights, it is suggested that the enforcement of human rights also be monitored at the subnational level. Some of the suggestions for achieving this are emphasized in the guide referenced earlier. First, identify the so-called vulnerable groups in the observed territory; next, prioritize the right to equality and non-discrimination. In this context, the writers underline the distinction between accessibility and availability. More specifically, it is not enough to make some resources available (to exist in a community); they must be accessible to everyone, regardless of their specific characteristics. To effectively oversee access to a right, it is essential to recognize that this concept encompasses physical, economic, and non-discriminatory aspects (OHCHR, 2012).

All of this highlights the possible flaws in current approaches to human rights implementation. One of the most significant drawbacks of the presented measuring methods is the territorial representation of these data. Specifically, past observations of human rights almost do not allow for a more fine-grained analysis than the state. Regardless of the state's territorial size, the picture of human rights realization could be viewed through more compact units (such as local self-government units or even settlements), allowing for a finer overview of human rights realization rather than just information on whether the state is meeting predefined benchmarks (Landman 2004; Mohorović, 2006).

Table 2 lists the rights and the public resources that promote their realization. Naturally, this is not an authoritative list, and it can be customized to a specific circumstance.

Republic of Serbia uses a different technique for evaluating the situation of human rights. One of the most important frameworks for measuring progress is the United Nations Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review (UPR). Serbia's human rights situation will be examined for the fourth time in 2023 (previously in 2008, 2013, and 2018). This assessment's data sources are: the state's national report; reports from independent experts and human rights groups (such as Special Procedures, human rights treaty bodies, and other UN bodies); and information provided by other interested parties, including national human rights institutions, regional organizations, and civil society.

One of the recommendations for Serbia based on this assessment underlines the lack of valid and verified data indicating potential development in this area. From report to report, this body's recommendation is repeated: Serbia should begin desegregating data on the implementation of various public policies, as well as the effects of regulatory application on the realization of the rights of the most discrim-

inated social groups (UNHRC, 2023). Serbia has had uneven regional development since the beginning of the twenty-first century. This trend has created a significant gap between the country's south and north.

Article 94 of the Republic of Serbia's 2006 Constitution requires the state to achieve balanced regional development, with a focus on developing underdeveloped areas. The degree of development of the region is calculated using the national average of GDP per capita, whereas the degree of development of local self-government units (LGUs) is determined using basic and corrective indicators of LGU economic development (Regulation on establishing the uniform list Regional developments and local units of self-government for the year 2014). These and comparable metrics are limited to the LGU level, making it difficult to gain a realistic understanding of uneven growth at territorial levels below the LGU level. As a result of the lack of instruments for measuring the key elements of communities, in addition to the trend of uneven regional growth, a tendency of unequal development can be noticed at the level of local governments throughout Serbia.

Certainly, systemic multi-criteria monitoring is required to understand a territorial unit, both in terms of its growth and human rights. In Serbia, there is no established approach for systematic monitoring and analysis of territorial units smaller than LGUs. By the foregoing, the goal of this work is to provide deeper insights into the accessibility of human rights at the lowest geographical level, i.e. local communities. The objective is to provide a less abstract picture of the implementation of human rights, specifically to better understand if and how certain oppressed groups might obtain normatively guaranteed rights through the lens of physical resources within communities.

The City of Niš, in southeastern Serbia, is the administrative center of the Nišava administrative district and the country's third largest city, after Belgrade and Novi Sad. In 2004, it was separated into five municipalities: Mediana, Palilula, Pantelei, Crveni Krst, and Niška Banja. These municipalities differ in size and population. Mediana, with its 16 km², is geographically the smallest municipality, but has the highest population, 82,360. Niška Banja, the largest municipality in Niš, has the smallest population.

These municipalities also differ in terms of population distribution. Mediana has a high urban population, while Niška Banja is predominantly rural. Other municipalities show similar variances, with particular such as the age structure of the population in Rautovo and Bancarevo, as well as the absence of residents in Koritnjak. The Roma are the most represented national minority in the City of Niš, primarily residing in the municipalities of Palilula and Crveni Krst. However, accurate data from local communities is not available. These and other municipal specificities highlight the need to consider the development, potential, and realization of human rights at the level of a territorial unit smaller than a municipality, emphasizing the

importance of taking into account the needs of the population in their local communities in order to conduct adequate analysis, develop policies, and resources to meet those needs. In Mediana, only 4,642 people live in non-urban settlements, while in Niška Banja, the majority (10,300) dwell in such settlements. Within these five municipalities, there are 69 rural settlements (Figure 1). Local communities, like municipalities, are not uniform, and their unique characteristics can be studied. For instance, Rautovo and Bancarevo have the highest average age of 69 years, whereas Pasi Poljana, Donja Vrežina, and Donji Komren have an average age of 38 years.

Such municipal specificities suggest that assessing the implementation of human rights, for example, is best done at a spatial level smaller than a local self-government unit. Specifically, focusing solely on regional factors, including LGUs, can lead to a pattern of neglecting uneven development and failing to address the needs of the population where they are most easily expressed—in their community.

It is vital to note that in the Republic of Serbia, local governments do not maintain registries of specific categories of inhabitants, monitor their requirements, and manage their budgets appropriately. Furthermore, there is no accurate data on people with impairments at the republic level, therefore two censuses of citizens yielded an odd outcome. According to the 2011 census, the share of this population was little less than 8%, and by 2022, it was only 5.46%. Aside from any flaws in data gathering methodology, this variance in statistics is not adequately explained. This raises the possibility that, based on this evidence, allocations for this social group will be cut off. At the LGU level, this leads to additional issues, such as in 2022, when the officials of the City of Nis were astonished by the stated number of children who had recommendation to use the service of a personal companion (Personal Assistant). Furthermore, centers for social work (established by LGUs) collect data on services delivered based solely on the type of service and age category, therefore more comprehensive analytics or spatial distribution of those services are unknown. In this regard, it appears that important data are frequently missing or are not collected methodologically in order to lead to advocacy or policy planning that responds to citizens' expressed needs, all with the ultimate goal of prohibiting discrimination and ensuring equal access to rights for all citizens. Using this research as an example, we shall demonstrate that data on national minorities at the observed level are not available, hence it is impossible to assess their access to rights in terms of physical resources.

## Methodology

As previously stated, the purpose of this study is to assess the accessibility of human rights at the local community level using an examination of public resources. The purpose of this methodology is to develop indicators in order to acquire a better understanding of human rights accessibility at the lowest territorial and local

government levels. Accessibility of human rights refers to the reality that certain human rights (hereafter Rights), particularly economic, social, and cultural rights, frequently necessitate the availability of material resources that persons can realize and enjoy. These resources encompass both material and infrastructural factors required for individuals to exercise their rights. As LGUs are responsible for supplying all communities with physical resources, which are often a necessity for the implementation of multiple rights, we may evaluate those resources, and thus how much a specific LGU is dedicated to the problem of human rights and their protection.

In this step, it is necessary to select relevant rights in accordance with the local context that will be the subject matter of research. The list can also be expanded if there are objective needs.

In this methodology, indicators of accessibility of Rights are viewed through the availability of public resources for their realization, the focus being on empirical indicators. Empirical indicators play a vital role in policy research and analysis by providing concrete and verifiable data that can inform decision-making and contribute to a deeper understanding of various phenomena. Without the idea of denying the importance of normative indicators, it seems just as important at the level of smaller communities to see to what extent the bearers of the duties of providing and protecting human rights fulfil their obligations, as well as to what extent the holders of rights have the preconditions for access to these rights. This tendency favours the need to develop not only universal indicators in this area, but also those that are specific to individual countries or individual communities. Table 2 presents the examples of the list of rights and corresponding public resources contributing to their realization, while the following text provides an explanation of how the listed resources contribute to the realization of rights. This is surely not a definitive list and can be adapted to a specific context. In this step, it is necessary to identify local public resources for the corresponding rights.

This step, in accordance with the approach, defines indicators of public resources for measuring the accessibility of rights. For instance, the existence of a preschool for children under the age of seven represents access to the right to education, whereas for mothers it represents access to the right to work, because the possibility of children staying in a preschool for several hours allows mothers to enter the labour market.

After defining the territorial level for analysis, the target social groups for which access to the Right will be measured are determined in this step. The methodology can be implemented to assess the accessibility of the Right for all members of the observed community, or for specific social groups. The list of target groups may include the following categories: women, children, elderly population, disabled people, national minorities, stateless persons, migrants, sexual minorities (LGBT +

community), members of certain religious communities, etc. This list is not exhaustive and may be modified according to local needs.

To measure the accessibility to rights, it is necessary to adopt a system of evaluating indicators of public resources. Examples of assessment for the previously mentioned indicators are presented in this chapter. They are certainly not unambiguous and can be adapted.

The existence of a resource does not necessarily mean the full exercise of a certain right. Resources can support partial or complete access to a right, so ratings for each of the resources have been formed accordingly. Also, their rating can be adapted to the given context. A three-level scale is used to assess the achievement of resource indicators: a) indicator not applicable (NA), b) indicator not achieved (0), c) indicator partially achieved (1), d) indicator fully achieved (2) (Table 1).

Example of indicator assessment:

**Table 1** Drinking water

| | Achievement of resource indicators | Rationale |
|---|---|---|
| NA | indicator not applicable | |
| 0 | indicator not achieved | There is no piped drinking water in the community. Residents get water from wells |
| 1 | indicator partially achieved | A part of the population has a piped drinking water in the community (in %) |
| 2 | indicator fully achieved | There is piped drinking water in all households in the community (in %) |

We evaluate the degree of manifestation of public resources and calculate accessibility indicators for individual rights based on the predetermined values.

For each observed right, the graded of achieving individual indicators of public resources was assessed. Normalizing the indicator values makes it easy to compare the sum of separate indicators. This methodology makes use of the Min-Max normalization method (OECD, 2008). This approach normalizes indications to a range of 0–1, as indicated in the equation below:

$$IP_{x,0-1} = \frac{I_{P\,x} - I_{P\,min}}{I_{P\,max} - I_{P\,min}}$$

$IP_x$ represents the individual value of the indicator, $IP_{min}$ represents the minimum value in the observed set of values, $IP_{max}$ represents the maximum value in the observed set of values, and $IP_x$ is the normalized value of the indicator in the range of 0-1. The technique was repeated for each individual right, culminating in the ultimate accessibility metric. All rights are listed bellow, together with descriptions of the appropriate public resources and a visualization of the findings.

## Limitations

Human rights, as evaluated at the community level, cannot be compared to higher management entities. Furthermore, such a rigorous assessment of human rights accessibility, which would finally be implemented at the national level, would necessitate a significant investment of both material and human resources. Since the process for collecting statistical data on the population is changing, legitimate data may not always reflect the representation of specific target groups, which must be validated by cross-examination.

## Results

This section presents the findings for both rights under study—the right to work and the right to health—integrating all analytical steps: the selection of rights and corresponding public resources (Table 2), the definition of target groups and study area (Fig. 1; Table 3), the scoring of resource indicators (Tables 4–5), and the calculation and comparison of accessibility indices across 69 local communities. To improve readability, results are reported as a single narrative. In addition to the spatial distributions already shown (Fig. 2 and Fig. 3), Fig. 4 serves as an illustrative example of how the availability and quality of concrete resources shape differences in accessibility.

### *The Right to Work*

The right to work is a fundamental human right that allows an individual to freely choose employment, workplace, or occupation without discrimination; to work under fair and favourable conditions; to receive fair compensation for work performed; and to access other aspects of employment such as rest, health care, and unemployment protection, in accordance with applicable laws and international conventions.

**Table 2**

| Rights | Resources | Data Source |
|---|---|---|
| The Right to Work | Organized Public Transport (OPT) | Public Transport Directorate Niš |
| | Frequency of Organized Public | Public Transport Directorate Niš |
| | Educational institutions | Field Survey |
| | Signal from mobile operators (SMO) | Regulatory Authority for Electronic Communications and Postal Services |
| | Post office | Field Survey |
| The Right to Health | Healthcare facility | Field Survey |
| | Pharmacy | Field Survey |
| | Sports fields | Field Survey |

*Organized Public Transport (OPT) and Frequency of Organized Public Transportation (FOPT).* Adequate public transportation can be crucial in allowing people to access job opportunities. Many people rely on it as their primary mode of transportation to get to work. Increased frequency makes it easier for workers to go to and from work, boosting the availability of job and company opportunities. It also makes it easier for firms to recruit qualified workers from the city's outskirts, so helping to economic development and lowering unemployment in the identified local towns.

*Kindergarten and School.* Kindergartens for preschool-aged children allow mothers to enter the labour market while local institutions care for the children. Schools also act as possible workplaces for several of the observed categories.

*Post office.* Access to mail can be a valuable resource during the hiring process, including the ability to submit applications, employment contracts, and other work-related messages. Furthermore, the post office allows you to send and receive business offers, invoices, items, and other business materials, which boosts commercial activity in areas far from the city center.

*Signal from mobile operators (SMO).* Internet access is becoming increasingly vital for locating and applying for jobs. It provides people of remote settlements with access to online job search platforms and the ability to participate in virtual interviews, as well as the option to work from home, which simplifies the employment and work process by eliminating the need for physical presence in city. Individuals without dependable Internet access may be at a disadvantage in the employment process, thus denying them the right to work. Define vulnerable groups. To present the instance of the City of Niš, we specified the target categories for whom the accessibility of rights was monitored. Initially, five target categories (vulnerable groups) were identified: women, children, the impoverished, the disabled, and national minorities. To determine the relevance of the selected categories, i.e., whether members of the selected categories exist in the observed communities, a demographic study was performed using Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (SORS) data, i.e., the census book (census table) for the year 2022 (Table 3). The study revealed that there is no data regarding national minorities at this spatial level, hence the category was eliminated from further consideration. For the adopted target groups, access to the right is assessed if the criterion that there is at least one member of the observed target group in the local community is met, i.e., the indication of the need for a given resource is met.

*The Right to Health*

The right to health is a fundamental human right that ensures that everyone has equal access to the best possible physical and mental health, including the right to health care, medical services, prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation in accordance with national and international human rights standards.

*Healthcare facility.* The presence of health centers in the community reflects a commitment to attaining this right by ensuring that citizens may access basic medical services, preventive care, and therapy.

*Pharmacy.* The pharmacy operation gives people of rural communities' access to medicines and medical items without having to drive to the city center, making basic medical care and therapy more accessible. Furthermore, the existence of pharmacies can aid in disease prevention by giving people of remote settlements with health information and guidance, so improving overall health conditions in those places.

*Sports fields.* Sports fields and playgrounds give the local population with an accessible and active way to spend their leisure time, encouraging physical activity and maintaining a healthy lifestyle. sporting grounds provide the opportunity to organize sporting events and tournaments in the local community, which promotes social connection and mental health. Sports grounds can also be used to organize health programs and workshops, as well as instructional activities about the value of regular physical activity in maintaining good health.

To analyze these rights, a complete field survey of available public resources was done, as well as an examination of resource availability in 69 local communities (Figure 1), to ensure an even distribution of public resources for a fair comparison of Rights (Table 1). The analysis revealed that all settlements (local communities) under consideration in this study fit the criteria listed above.


**Fig. 1** Study area

In the case of the City of Niš, the target groups for which the accessibility of rights was observed were defined. Initially, we identified five vulnerable groups: women, children, the poor, people with disabilities, and national minorities. In order to check the relevance of the selected categories, i.e., whether there are members of the selected categories in the observed communities, a demographic analysis was conducted based on Statistical Office of The Republic of Serbia data, the census book for 2022 (Table 3). After the analysis, it was determined that there are no data for national minorities at this spatial level, and accordingly, the category of national minorities was excluded from further consideration. For the adopted target groups, access to the right is analyzed if the condition that there is at least one member of the observed target group in the local community is met, i.e., the indicator of the need for a certain resource is met (if there is one child, there is also a need to exercise the right to education).

**Table 3** The demographic profile of the observed communities

| Community | Children | Women 20-65 | Women 65+ | elderly people | Persons with disability | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Bancarevo | 0 | 7 | 23 | 47 | 0 | 66 |
| Berbatovo | 39 | 87 | 48 | 83 | 9 | 327 |
| Bercinac | 13 | 26 | 17 | 31 | 0 | 105 |
| Brenica | 101 | 163 | 45 | 83 | 3 | 522 |
| Brzi brod | 895 | 1525 | 363 | 505 | 50 | 4842 |
| Bubanj | 125 | 170 | 43 | 90 | 0 | 548 |
| Čamurlija | 105 | 183 | 52 | 91 | 16 | 554 |
| Cerje | 28 | 40 | 45 | 82 | 6 | 212 |
| Čokot | 307 | 423 | 114 | 231 | 17 | 1412 |
| Čukljenik | 37 | 62 | 42 | 76 | 3 | 247 |
| Deveti Maj | 1058 | 1525 | 352 | 670 | 62 | 4795 |
| Donja Studena | 54 | 74 | 40 | 73 | 0 | 290 |
| Donja Toponica | 49 | 97 | 41 | 76 | 6 | 324 |
| Donja Trnava | 109 | 184 | 93 | 165 | 18 | 647 |
| Donja Vrezina | 1451 | 2337 | 367 | 733 | 101 | 6758 |
| Donje Međurovo | 356 | 519 | 152 | 286 | 25 | 1722 |
| Donje Vlase | 31 | 80 | 45 | 83 | 2 | 254 |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Donji Komren | 408 | 594 | 125 | 253 | 0 | 1838 |
| Donji Matejevac | 140 | 235 | 104 | 184 | 18 | 831 |
| Gabrovac | 220 | 387 | 133 | 250 | 29 | 1238 |
| Gornja Studena | 55 | 78 | 49 | 93 | 7 | 322 |
| Gornja Toponica | 131 | 316 | 124 | 211 | 8 | 1127 |
| Gornja Trnava | 42 | 72 | 38 | 82 | 4 | 286 |
| Gornja Vrežina | 222 | 330 | 118 | 232 | 0 | 1147 |
| Gornje Međurovo | 187 | 305 | 96 | 181 | 18 | 1011 |
| Gornji Komren | 178 | 284 | 71 | 146 | 8 | 917 |
| Gornji Matejevac | 453 | 760 | 262 | 503 | 45 | 2513 |
| Hum | 262 | 427 | 129 | 234 | 13 | 1370 |
| Jasenovik | 78 | 114 | 40 | 79 | 5 | 396 |
| Jelašnica | 321 | 463 | 182 | 323 | 20 | 1590 |
| Kamenica | 831 | 1167 | 288 | 551 | 16 | 3745 |
| Knez Selo | 133 | 247 | 127 | 238 | 12 | 865 |
| Koritnjak | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Kravlje | 31 | 54 | 95 | 169 | 3 | 327 |
| Krušce | 166 | 236 | 82 | 30 | 13 | 831 |
| Kunovica | 2 | 10 | 18 | 30 | 0 | 49 |
| Lalinac | 376 | 506 | 195 | 356 | 23 | 1806 |
| Lazarevo Selo | 31 | 39 | 10 | 33 | 1 | 149 |
| Leskovik | 36 | 55 | 41 | 67 | 9 | 248 |
| Malča | 167 | 291 | 130 | 249 | 17 | 1030 |
| Manastir | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 6 |
| Medoševac | 561 | 808 | 282 | 494 | 46 | 2674 |
| Mezgraja | 93 | 165 | 58 | 91 | 12 | 541 |
| Miljkovac | 25 | 58 | 23 | 48 | 3 | 182 |
| Mramor | 112 | 200 | 71 | 115 | 9 | 635 |
| Mramorski Potok | 66 | 95 | 38 | 76 | 9 | 337 |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Nikola Tesla | 950 | 1460 | 371 | 701 | 59 | 4651 |
| Niška Banja | 2710 | 4368 | 1575 | 885 | 82 | 14680 |
| Oreovac | 31 | 72 | 48 | 98 | 2 | 299 |
| Ostrovica | 77 | 116 | 76 | 144 | 15 | 475 |
| Paligrace | 40 | 58 | 56 | 111 | 7 | 269 |
| Paljina | 45 | 68 | 31 | 57 | 3 | 234 |
| Pasi Poljana | 672 | 979 | 174 | 339 | 50 | 2938 |
| Pasjača | 21 | 51 | 52 | 91 | 2 | 219 |
| Popovac | 618 | 842 | 268 | 463 | 55 | 2847 |
| Prosek | 90 | 169 | 77 | 147 | 6 | 599 |
| Prva Kutina | 172 | 272 | 107 | 202 | 15 | 956 |
| Radikina Bara | 12 | 17 | 6 | 11 | 0 | 60 |
| Rautovo | 0 | 2 | 5 | 8 | 0 | 12 |
| Ravni Do | 4 | 7 | 18 | 31 | 4 | 56 |
| Rujnik | 89 | 137 | 63 | 123 | 11 | 490 |
| Sečanica | 103 | 215 | 99 | 183 | 16 | 768 |
| Sićevo | 123 | 240 | 92 | 175 | 17 | 772 |
| Supovac | 37 | 103 | 56 | 93 | 11 | 344 |
| Suvi Do | 189 | 333 | 91 | 171 | 12 | 1010 |
| Trupale | 440 | 614 | 226 | 425 | 40 | 2127 |
| Vele Polje | 60 | 108 | 85 | 155 | 10 | 454 |
| Vrelo | 33 | 64 | 35 | 56 | 7 | 225 |
| Vrtište | 213 | 336 | 101 | 196 | 15 | 1112 |
| Vukmanovo | 49 | 86 | 51 | 93 | 6 | 340 |

This step, in accordance with the Methodology, defines indicators of public resources for measuring the accessibility of Rights (Table 4 and Table 5). For different target groups, the same public resource can mean access to different rights (for example, the existence of a preschool institution for children represents access to the right to education, while for mothers it represents access to the right to work).

**Table 4** Achievement of resource indicators for Right to work

| | Achievement of resource indicators | Rationale |
|---|---|---|
| | Organized public transport (OPT) | |
| 0 | indicator not achieved | There is no OPT in the community |
| 1 | indicator partially achieved | There is OPT in the community, but it is not adapted (there is no a reserved space for pregnant women and women with children, a low platform for entering the bus, access for wheelchairs and the elderly is provided) |
| 2 | indicator fully achieved | There is a fully adapted OPT in the community (there is a reserved space for pregnant women and women with children, a low platform for entering the bus, access for wheelchairs and the elderly is provided) |
| | Frequency* of the organized public transport (OPT) | |
| 0 | indicator not achieved | There is no OPT in the community |
| 1 | indicator partially achieved | There is a low-frequency OPT in the community |
| 2 | indicator fully achieved | There is a satisfactory frequency OPT in the community |
| | Educational institutions – kindergartens and preschool institutions | |
| 0 | indicator not achieved | There is no kindergarten in the community |
| 1 | indicator partially achieved | There is a kindergarten in the community, but it does not have an access for pedestrians and wheelchair users |
| 2 | indicator fully achieved | There is a kindergarten in the community with an access for pedestrians and wheelchair users |
| | Post office | |
| 0 | indicator not achieved | There is no post office in the community |
| 1 | indicator partially achieved | There is a post office in the community, but it does not have an ramp for pedestrian and wheelchair users |
| 2 | indicator fully achieved | There is a post office in the community, with an ramp for pedestrian and wheelchair users |
| | Signal of mobile operators (SMO) | |
| 0 | indicator not achieved | There is an unsatisfactory SMO in the community |
| 1 | indicator partially achieved | There is a satisfactory SMO in the community |
| 2 | indicator fully achieved | There is a good or excellent SMO in the community |

*frequency is based on departures per number of inhabitants (per 1000 inhabitants)
**the signal of the mobile operators is seen as an average of the signal quality taking into account all present mobile operators in the community

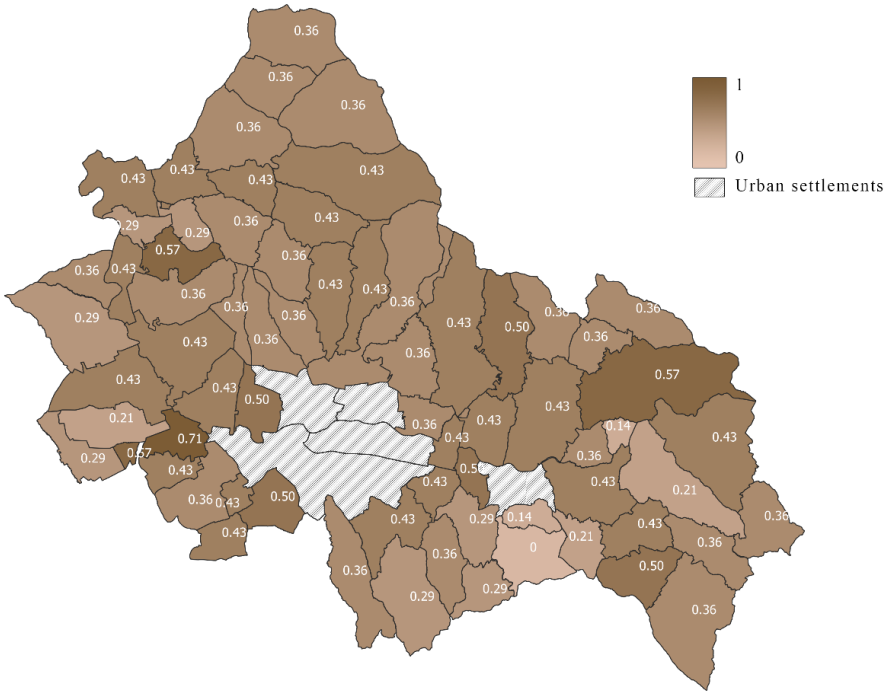


**Fig. 2** Spatial distribution: Right to Work accessibility

The majority of communities, up to 60 (87%), had Right to Work accessibility indicator values below 0.5 and were classified into the following groups (Fig. 2):

1) Communities with an indicator value of 0-0.21 (8.69%);
2) Communities with an indicator value of 0.29 (10.1%);
3)Communities with an indicator value of 0.36 (34.78%); and
4) Communities with an indicator value of 0.43% (33.33%).

Only 9 localities (13.04%) had indicator values between 0.50-0.71.

When examining the specific indicators, it is crucial to note that virtually all (only one) municipalities have well-organized public transportation, and all vehicles are adapted and accessible to those with disabilities and the elderly. Only 12 communities have a post office, and only four of them are accessible for people with disabilities.

The signal of mobile operators is a necessary condition for exercising the right to work. Certain jobs are frequently applied for and advertised online. You can also use the Internet to offer items and services, attend skill-building courses, and so on.

In the observed villages, cell operator signals are completely absent in five, while this indication is ranked highest in only two.

The lack of kindergartens in numerous communities hinders moms with preschool-aged children from entering the labour market, resulting in low indicator scores. There are no preschool-aged children in six settlements, while the other five, with the exception of Koritnjak, have a population of women aged 20 to 65. Because there is no information on whether pregnant mothers exist in this population, the presence of kindergartens was considered in all localities during the needs assessment for safety.

**Table 5** Achievement of resource indicators for Right to health

| | Achievement of resource indicators | Rationale |
|---|---|---|
| | Healthcare institutions – outpatient facilities | |
| 0 | indicator not achieved | There is no outpatient facility in the community |
| 1 | indicator partially achieved | There is an outpatient facility in the community, but it does not have an ramp for pedestrian and wheelchair users |
| 2 | indicator fully achieved | There is an outpatient facility in the community with an ramp for pedestrian and wheelchair users |
| | Pharmacies | |
| 0 | indicator not achieved | There is no pharmacy in the community |
| 1 | indicator partially achieved | There is a pharmacy in the community, but it does not have an ramp for pedestrian and wheelchair users |
| 2 | indicator fully achieved | There is a pharmacy in the community with an ramp for pedestrian and wheelchair users |
| | Sports fields | |
| 0 | indicator not achieved | There is no sports field in the community |
| 1 | indicator partially achieved | There is a sports field in the community, but it is equipped for one sport only |
| 2 | indicator fully achieved | There is a sports field in the community equipped for several sports (basketball, handball and football, volleyball, etc.) |

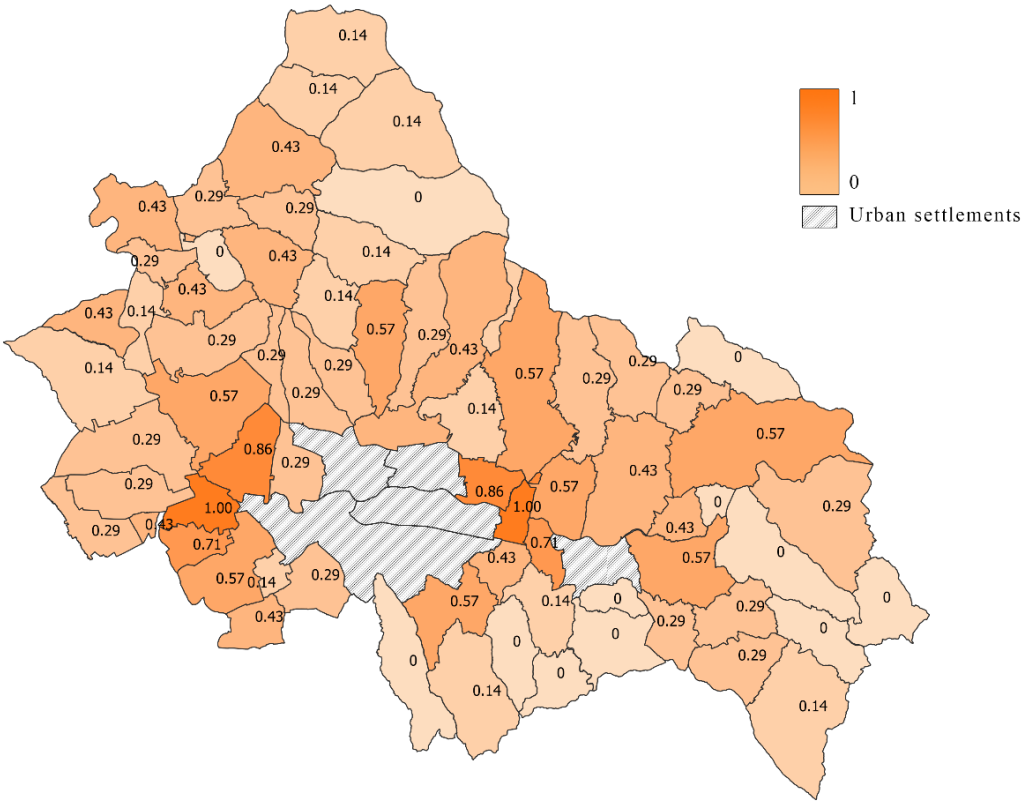


**Fig. 3** Spatial distribution: Right to Health accessibility

In the analysis of the accessibility of the Right to Health, six types of communities were identified based on the indicator value (Fig. 3). Four categories, accounting for 79.7% of the observed communities, have indicator values less than 0.50. In the first group, 12 communities (17.39%) have indicator values of zero. In these communities, health institutions and pharmacies have not been identified as primary public resources that enable the realization of the Right to Health, nor have organized public outdoor sports facilities that provide spatial capacity for recreational and sporting activities in order to promote and maintain a healthy lifestyle. In the second group, which also includes 12 communities (17.39%), the indicator value is 0.14. In this category of localities, there is usually one sports field, resulting in a partial increase in the indicator value. Communities with indicator values of 0.29 (28.98%) and 0.43 (15.94%) have multiple sports fields and an outpatient clinic, respectively. The remaining groups of communities have an indicator value of 0.57 (11.59%), or 0.71-8.6 (5.7%). Brzi Brod and Deveti Maj communities stand out, with maximum indicator values of one. This group of communities is geograph-

ically closest to the urban areas of Pantelej, Medijana, Paliulua, Crveni Krst, and Niška Banja.

Figure 4 also illustrates substantial disparities in physical resources among specific communities.


**Fig. 4** Photos of physical resources in communities

## Discussion

The research findings suggest that there are a number of reasons why it is relevant to think about alternative methods of measuring access to human rights. The approach given in this work, as well as the findings obtained from its application, demonstrate that while reporting on national normative regulation is important, it

cannot be the primary method of reporting on this topic. For example, the Republic of Serbia has signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, and many other treaties. The government also established the National Youth Strategy, the Strategy for Active and Healthy Aging, and the Strategy for Improving the Position of Persons with Disabilities, all of which are key frameworks for reducing discrimination and disparities. Furthermore, various indicators tracked by the UN (UN, 2023) demonstrate Serbia's progress toward achieving the Global Goals and improving human rights implementation. These statistics do not correspond to the recommendations that the Republic of Serbia received before the Human Rights Council, when 94 representatives of UN member states submitted 256 suggestions for the improvement of human rights. Some of the recommendations pertained to the betterment of the economic situation of women, the rights of children, and the rights of people with disabilities (Pokuševski & Petrović, 2024). Using the HRBA approach on a smaller form of local self-government than LGUs (Law on Local Self-Government, 2007), we attempted to show a more thorough picture than the one at the national or regional level, or to offer one of the perspectives in a different display of indicators and got recommendations. For example, the statement that indicators show that the right to work has improved for women at the Republic of Serbia level may be a good move for our country and a sign of improved conditions compared to the previous reporting period, but it is certainly not important for women who lack the basic infrastructure in their communities to make use of this right. When viewed from a smaller territorial entity, such as a city, the situation is not significantly different. The City of Niš falls under the first level of development for local self-governments (20 units above the national average) (Regulation on establishing the uniform list Regional developments and local units Of self-government for the year 2014). However, this research suggests that the picture may not be consistent across all local communities. As a result, regardless of level of development, some demographic groups may have limited or no access to essential rights such as the right to labour, health, and education. Despite the fact that physical resources for the fulfilment of certain rights may exist in a neighbouring community or an urban area of the city, access for certain marginalized groups may be difficult, so observing these prerequisites at the local community level appears to be essential.

All citizens of the Republic of Serbia have the right to work, which is guaranteed by law. However, the findings of this study indicate that, in terms of physical resources, exercising this right is not equally available to everyone. In the context of the observed physical resources, we can see that no community has the highest

value for the indicator. More particular, the local infrastructure that should provide access to this right is either non-existent or inadequately tailored to the target populations. The lack of physical resources, such as schools and kindergartens, has a substantial impact on access to the right to work.

These institutions may offer employment opportunities for people of the community, as well as serve as an essential requirement for moms of preschool and school-age children to enter the labour force. Thus, in numerous communities (Popovac, Gornji Matejevac, Kamenica), if the population is predominantly female, the indicator of accessibility to the right to work is 0.5 or below. Medoševac and Pasi Poljana have similar low indicators and a high proportion of individuals with disabilities. For people with disabilities, this entails the lack of adaptability or the full absence of physical resources that would allow them to exercise their right to work.

The right to health, like the right to work, when seen at the community level provides an improved understanding of its accessibility. More specifically, we can detect different challenges that we would not have noticed in a larger image. While some communities have strong access to this entitlement, the research shows that in the City of Niš, roughly 35% of the localities do not have a single health institution listed. Residents of the Deveti Maj and Brzi Brod communities have all of the physical resources required to realize their right to health. Because these towns are closest to urban areas settlements, physical resources such as public transit frequency are significantly more readily available than in other areas. Such physical resources allow all individuals, including particularly vulnerable groups, to provide primary health care in their community, and if necessary, they can use public transportation to access secondary-level health services. All of this is quite difficult for residents of communities such as Cerje and Ravni Dol. Specifically, because physical resources such as health facilities do not exist, their access to basic health care is limited. This is especially true for vulnerable populations including the elderly and those with disabilities. Kamenica, Gornji Matejevac, and Medoševac have a large elderly population with a health accessibility rating of roughly 0.5. The condition in these communities is comparable to the percentage of people with disabilities. If we consider that transport in cities is less accessible to these populations, this suggests even less physical resources as essential precondition for realizing one of the rights that are declared to be available to everyone. Returning to the normative arrangement, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities signing a specific norm that prescribes that States Parties shall take appropriate measures to ensure to persons with disabilities access, on an equal basis with others, to the physical environment, to transportation, to information and communications, including information and communications technologies and systems, and to other facilities and services open or provided to the public, both in urban and in rural areas (Reyes, 2019). All of this refers to a large disparity between legal guarantees

and real provision of health services at the local level, as demonstrated by various research (Broberg & Sano, 2017; Gabel, 2024).

## Conclusions

This study emphasizes the essential function of resource-based assessment in determining the actual accessibility of human rights at the local level. The findings indicate that, despite established norms and clearly specified policies, the execution of implementation, or direct access to rights, may be absent or problematic. We have shown that access to fundamental rights, i.e. the right to employment and healthcare, varies based on the geographical and socioeconomic framework of communities.

The research findings reveal significant inequalities in the accessibility of public resources, disproportionately impacting children, women, those with impairments, and the elderly. Despite the legislative framework safeguarding these rights, the absence of essential infrastructure—such as kindergartens, schools, and healthcare facilities—constitutes a substantial impediment to their realization. Physical resources are limited in the Niš communities of Kamenica, Gornji Matejevac, and Medoševac, restricting access to employment and healthcare services. Perceiving human rights in this manner can substantially aid social work professionals in effectively identifying inequities and advocating for those unable to enjoy their rights. Social workers, in collaboration with disadvantaged groups, can significantly contribute to increasing awareness and encouraging policymakers to allocate essential resources for improved care and protection (Ife, 2012). Landman and Carvalho assert, "Measurement is not an end in itself, but a tool to assist individuals" (Landman & Carvalho, 2010:131).

This study warrants additional development as preliminary research. Future research should enhance and broaden the array of public resource indicators, assess the quality of services rendered, and incorporate supplementary aspects such as ICT accessibility and community-level statistics regarding postal or communication services. It is essential to engage citizens more directly in the assessment of access to rights via surveys and participatory processes, thereby empowering local populations to impact the formulation of human rights–based policies. Enhancing data collecting and creating tools like WebGIS portals or specialized field-survey software would improve the precision and applicability of outcomes. Ultimately, juxtaposing the human rights accessibility indicator with other indices may provide significant insights into the correlations between sectoral policies and the actualization of rights.

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# CONSTRUCTIONS OF BELONGING FROM A REFUGEE PERSPECTIVE IN THE CONTEXT OF NEIGHBOURHOOD IN EAST GERMANY

## Abstract

Belonging, neighbourhood, and RefugeeMigration[1] are directly connected. Who belongs or is allowed to belong, or whose belonging is granted, enabled (in solidarity), or denied (violently), manifests itself in the context of neighbourhood. Belonging is a central element in the topic of RefugeeMigration. To date, no empirical study has examined the generation of belonging from the perspective of refugees in the context of neighbourhoods in East Germany.

This article addresses this research gap. The data were collected using walking interviews and analysed using grounded theory. I explore how belonging from a refugee perspective is constructed in and through neighbourhoods. This article aims to present both the conditions under which refugees develop their own understandings of belonging and the concepts of belonging held by refugees.

**Keywords**: Belonging, Refugee, Neighbourhood, East Germany

## Introduction

Belonging, neighbourhood, and RefugeeMigration are directly connected. RefugeeMigration describes flight as a special form of migration based on coercion (Fischer *et al.,* 2018). In the context of critical migration and border regime research, research into RefugeeMigration emerged, "which deliberately subsumes refugee migration under migration in order to question state attributions and emphasise the legitimacy of border crossings regardless of categorisation" (Thränhardt, 2023, p. 48). Who belongs or is allowed to belong, or whose belonging is granted, enabled (in solidarity), or denied (violently), manifests itself in the context of neighbourhood. Between 1990 and 2008, the rejection of Muslim neighbours increased (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, 2023). The neighbourhood of

[1] The spelling "RefugeeMigration" is intended to focus on a specific form of migration.

asylum seekers is rejected more frequently than that of immigrants from other EU countries (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, 2023). This attitude is rooted in the perception of refugees as Muslim (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, 2023). Racism serves as the perceptual pattern. Hostile climates against those perceived as other and those treated as strangers are reinforced, among other things, by neighbourhood protests when it comes to the opening of shared accommodations for refugees (Lechner, Huber, 2017, p. 105). Belongings become regimes of belonging when they are linked to racist and nationalist ideology (Scharathow, 2014, p. 45). The essentialist and hegemonic concepts of belonging refer to a homogenous, white German "we" and to deviantly constructed ethnic risk groups (Demirović, 2008, p. 243), which are stylised as deficient and questionable "others" (Bücken, 2021). In "belonging management", some are identified as belonging and others as outsiders. In doing so, those in the majority secure the privilege of living within the norm and defining their normality as binding for others" (Rommelspacher, 2011, p. 32). Culturalised identities are not fixed but rather hover in transition between different positions (Hall, 1994, p. 218). The topic of belonging from a refugee perspective addresses one of the central questions of diversity-affirming and democratic societies: "Who is granted the right to live in *community* with others?" (Hark, 2021, 37, emphasis in original).

Regarding developments in the context of RefugeeMigration, post-socialist countries differ from Western European countries, and these developments cannot be understood without considering the hegemonic relationship between East and West (Glorius, 2020). Against this background, the study of East Germany as a post-socialist society is of research interest in order to highlight the specific nature of constructions of belonging. To date, no empirical study has examined the generation of belonging from the perspective of refugees in the context of neighbourhoods in East Germany. This article addresses this research gap. In my article, I explore *how* belonging from a refugee perspective is constructed in and through neighbourhoods. This research question leads to further questions: What constitutes a neighbourhood for refugees? How do they establish relationships with their local social environment? Who or which practices are the gatekeepers who enable them to enter into and develop relationships with their neighbours? To what extent are their experiences shaped by racism, exclusion, or solidarity? However, the concept of experience does not demonstrate a focus on the inner world of the individual and the dimension of personal experience, but rather addresses the seemingly subjective in its relationship to processes of knowledge and power that define experience (Lemke, 1997, p. 261).[2] This article aims to present both the conditions under which refugees develop their own understandings of belonging and the concepts of belonging held by refugees.

[2] In his discussion of experience, Thomas Lemke refers to Michel Foucault (1989).

The refugees are becoming co-constructors of the new order of belonging, which makes it all the more interesting to work out their perspective on belonging.

First, I introduce Bieblach-Ost as an example of a neighbourhood context in Eastern Germany. Next, I discuss belonging and neighbourhood as theoretical concepts. I then present the methodological framework of the qualitative empirical study. In the next step, I identify three conditions for refugees' understandings of belonging and their concepts of belonging. Finally, I discuss the question of the extent to which refugees can enter into a neighbourly community.

## Bieblach-Ost as a neighbourhood context in East Germany

Bieblach-Ost, a district in Gera, was built in the mid-1980s as a prefabricated housing estate (Pilz, Lehmann, 2006). The prefabricated housing estate was created to provide housing for workers of Wismut AG/SDAG Wismut. However, the population structure in Bieblach-Ost has changed significantly over the past ten years (Stadt Gera, 2021, p. 12). Nowadays, it is primarily refugees who are moving into the district. According to Steffen Mau (2019), who studied East German transformation society, in addition to established and long-resident older people, the majority of residents living in a prefabricated housing estate are socially disadvantaged, average East German households, and migrants (Mau, 2019, p. 242). These milieus also characterise the population structure in Bieblach-Ost (Stadt Gera, 2021, pp. 27–37). A characteristic of Bieblach-Ost is that it now exhibits the characteristics of a so-called "transitory quarter" (Stadt Gera, 2021, p. 37). This implies that the development of a sense of belonging is only possible to a limited extent due to the high fluctuation of residents. Only the established and long-standing older residents have been able to develop a traditional sense of belonging. Since its creation, the district has evolved over time into a disadvantaged neighbourhood with little to no socio-structural services such as medical care or shops for daily needs. Against this background, Bieblach-Ost serves as an exemplary example to discuss a new order of belonging in East Germany.

## Theoretical perspectives: Belonging and Neighbourhood

Belonging is a central element in the topic of RefugeeMigration (Mijić, 2022; Pries, 2022; Kleinschmidt, 2021; Geisen, 2019; Tietze, 2012; Skrbia, Baldassar, Poynting, 2007), and therefore, "a precise understanding of the conditions under which those feelings that determine belonging are generated is essential in order to make a positive contribution to a liberal and open society" (Kubelka, 2021, p. 236). These approaches emphasise belonging as a construction and a process that is initiated through discourses, practices, and decision-making processes. Belonging is not a neutral concept (Thomas-Olalde, 2013, p. 238), but is linked to social values

(Fuchs, von Scheve, 2022) and entangled in the negotiation processes surrounding these values.

Belonging encompasses both the subject level (questions of identity and well-being) (Chiapparini, Abraham, 2023; Mecheril, (2003, 2023); Appiah, 2019) and the structural level (questions of framework conditions, social inequality, and structural discrimination) (Meißner, 2019; Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2012). Belonging is a fundamental need of human existence (Scheff, 2018; Maslow, 1970). The fulfilment of this specific basic need is tied to social structures (Kubelka 2021: 3). Kerstin Meißner (2019, p. 97) identifies five central relationships of belonging: biographical, spatial, emotional, temporal, and political. "These relations refer to both intimate and hegemonic world relations that significantly determine negotiations about participation, recognition, the distribution of resources and conditions for mobility" (Meißner, 2019, pp. 97–98). For Rubia Salgado (2010), questioning orders of belonging constitutes the conception and implementation of radically democratic political education. For the neighbourhood workers, this questioning means entering into "a confrontation with their privileges and their own hegemonically structured listening [...], as well as the ability [to promote] [...] dissidence and antagonism" (Salgado, 2010, p. 11-5). Joanna McIntyre (2024, p. 254) works out the following key characteristics of belonging: temporal, placemaking, powerful, connecting, not integrating, and painful. The question of belonging is discussed in conjunction with the question of identity (Anthias, 2003; Loader, 2006; Mecheril, (2003, 2023); Yuval-Davis 2006, 2011). Belonging is "a process that is fuelled by yearning rather than the positing of identity as a stable state" (Probyn, 1996, p. 19). Paul Mecheril (2003, 2023) speaks of multiple belonging in this context. Nira Yuval-Davis (2006, p. 197) emphasises that the concept of political belonging, in contrast to the concept of belonging, allows for the decoding of nationalisms and racisms within the order of belonging.

Neighbourhood can be understood as a special form of relationship that makes "the reciprocal connection between the social and spatial organisation of society so concrete, so elementary, and so directly tangible" (Hamm, 1998, p. 172). Ferdinand Tönnies (1903, 1912), p. 17) conceived of neighbourhood, alongside kinship and friendship, as one of the three original forms of community. In urban development, however, neighbourhood is also exposed as a "sentimental concept" (Jacobs, 2011 (1961), p. 146), with which the imagination of controlling social life creeps in. Since its beginnings, neighbourhood research has dealt with the social differentiation and segregation of population groups (Althaus, 2018, p. 52). Segregation can be understood as "the concentration of certain social groups in certain sub-areas of a city or urban region" (Häußermann, Siebel, 2004, p. 140). Age structure, ethnicity, income, education, and unemployment are characteristics that affect various categories of segregation (Häußermann, Siebel, 2004, p. 144).

Neighbourhoods are attributed a special role in the development of a sense of belonging and social integration (Riegel, Geisen, 2007) when migrants cannot achieve belonging at the nation-state level (Visser, 2017). A good neighbourhood is an important dimension in developing a sense of belonging and familiarity with the local/new environment (Reuber, 1993, p. 116). Social relationships contribute to the development of this sense of belonging (Lechner, Huber, 2017, p. 105). Neighbourhood links the spatial and communal aspects. The Amadeu Antonio Foundation and PRO ASYL (2015) have published a brochure with initiatives and recommendations for action on how refugees can become long-term neighbours. One goal is to reduce prejudices and fears, as these threaten safety and order in the neighbourhood (Amadeu Antonio Stiftung, PRO ASYL e.V., 2015, p. 13). Length of residence and use of neighbourhood infrastructure have a varying and relatively small influence on the sense of belonging depending on the location (Blokland, 2019). Neighbourhood provides a framework for developing relationships with the world in which belonging is negotiated.

From the theoretical perspectives this paper draws therefore on three core elements: (1) the role of racism in creating a sense of belonging in the neighbourhood context, (2) the access to neighbourhood infrastructure for refugees, (3) the interactions between neighbours as moments of negotiation of belonging. For the qualitative study, these three elements serve as a theoretical framework for interpretation.

**Methodological framework of the qualitative empirical study**

The empirical study is a qualitative investigation. Qualitative methods enable the understanding of latent structures of meaning and patterns of interpretation (Helfferich, 2011, p. 21). The ‘individual statements’ that occur, for example, in interviews are expressions of the underlying pattern (Helfferich, 2011, p. 22). Research designs that include qualitative elements have more circular elements than quantitative designs and are reconstructive in nature (Przyborski, Wohlrab-Sahr, 2014, p. 118).

The methodological approach consists of three steps, some of which overlap and build on one another. One of the key challenges in research practice is field access. For this reason, the first step involved establishing contact with an organisation based in Bieblach-Ost. Sampling was conducted using three sampling techniques: gatekeeper sampling, self-activation sampling, and snowball sampling (Reinders, 2005, pp. 139–142; Merkens, 1997, pp. 101–102). Two social workers from this organization, who had been working in Bieblach-Ost for four years, acted as gatekeepers. To expand the circle of individuals to be surveyed and avoid selective selection by the gatekeepers, additional notices and information were published in the neighbourhood magazine, and the participants in the study were asked for further possible interview partners. However, no one responded to the notices or through

the interview partners for an interview. During the data collection phase, I spent time in the neighbourhood and approached people on the street to ask if they were willing to be interviewed. Interviews resulted also this way.

In the second step, interviews were conducted with the residents of Bieblach-Ost. The walking interview method (Stals, Smyth, Ijsselsteijn, 2014; Clark, Emmel, 2009) was used as the data collection method. This research method is used to understand the meaning of spaces and neighbourhoods (Clark, Emmel, 2009). The neighbourhood becomes a walkable area with life stories (Odzakovic *et al.,* 2018, p. 28). The research project focuses on stories of belonging. This research method is well suited for gathering comprehensive, contextualised, and familiar data in an urban environment (Stals, Smyth, Ijsselsteijn, 2014, p. 745) and for exploring subjective experiences of the world (Barlett *et al.,* 2023, p. 12). A characteristic feature of the walking interview is the participation of groups of people who have difficulty expressing themselves in interviews, such as individuals with autism spectrum disorders (Marcotte *et al.,* 2022, p. 3) or, in the case of my study, individuals with refugee experiences or with mental disabilities. The interviewees' narratives about belonging and neighbourhood can be specified through the spatial reference and illustrated with concrete examples. The walking interview method is particularly well suited to practice-theoretical research approaches in order to understand "the different implicit self-conceptions according to which people practically appropriate 'their' spaces and internalise them as given" (Kühl, 2015, p. 46). A total of 25 walking interviews were conducted with the residents of Bieblach-Ost. The shortest interview lasted 15 minutes, and the longest almost three hours. Since the weather during the interviews was predominantly sunny and dry, breaks were taken during the walking sessions. The locations for the breaks were chosen by the interviewees and given meaning. The interviews were conducted in German and English. Google Translate was sometimes used to ensure that the question or answer was understood correctly or to provide their answers in their first language. The interviews were conducted between April and June 2024.

A guideline was developed for the walking interview. A list of questions was compiled that served as a framework for me as the interviewer, but neither the wording nor the order of the questions was binding (Gläser, Laudel, 2004, p. 39). The guided interview is preferable among the group of semi-standardised interviews because it ensures, through a list of questions, that the interviewee provides information on all relevant aspects (Gläser, Laudel, 2004, p. 140).

Research ethics principles were established for conducting the interviews. The principles of May East (2024; 2022) and Barlett et al. (2023, pp. 2–3) served as a guideline for these determinations. The research ethics principles were:

- The interviewers choose the route and determine the time and duration of the walking interview.

- I chose the entrance to a counselling centre as the meeting point.
- The walking interviews exclude people who are not mobile. To still reach these people, interviews were also conducted while sitting in the counselling centre's premises. For this purpose, photos of Bieblach-Ost were taken in advance and then used as visual material for the "seated walking interview". In this way, an attempt was made to recreate a "walk" through the neighbourhood using photographs.
- Emotions are given space during the interview.
- Empathy is a fundamental attitude in the interview.
- Degrading statements are not left unanswered but addressed in the interview.
- The interview can be terminated by either party at any time.

The principles of research ethics were repeatedly reflected upon. Racist remarks were made during the interviews, which I addressed in follow-up questions.

In the third step, the walking interviews were analysed using grounded theory according to Kathy Charmaz (2006). Grounded theory is particularly well suited to identifying the mechanisms and processes of belonging construction. The methodological steps of the data analysis are based on the suggestions of Kathy Charmaz (2006, pp. 42–70). In the first phase of "initial coding" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 47), the codes were developed. In the second coding phase of "focused coding" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 57), the data were selected and compared with the categories. The guiding analytical question was: What do people do or refrain from doing when they refer to belonging in the context of their neighbourhood? The categories were then further conceptualised in the form of memos, and the relationships between the categories were elaborated. The following discussion provides insight into the theorisation of belonging in and through neighbourhood in East Germany and does not represent a theory of belonging. The qualitative data analysis is supported by the use of the software MAXQDA (Rädiker, Kuckartz, 2019).

## The conditionality of belonging from the perspective of refugees

The concepts of belonging from the refugees' perspective are determined by their experiences. From the walking interviews with the refugees, I was able to reconstruct three patterns of experience: the experience of war, the experience of a completely new beginning, and the experience of racism. The experience of war relates to the country from which the individuals fled. The experience of a completely new beginning and racism stems from the experiences in Germany.

### *The war experience*

The war experience is a pattern of experiences that can be reconstructed from the data. The refugees speak of terrorism (WI 14) and torture in prison (WI 3). They address the associated feelings of fear, insecurity, loss, but also mistrust of others. Life

in Germany is overshadowed by this war experience. Although the experiences lie in the past, it is expressed that they continue to shape everyday life and emotional state. Mahdi[3], a refugee from Iran, speaks about it as follows:

> *"People are coming from the war. These people can't just live with other people. […] Everything that has happened to us weighs on our minds. People can go to school and learn that there is no war here. That means you have to be friendly here, that you can live with other people here. I am Arab. That means I don't just have to live with Arab people. I also have to live with other people. Over time, I've managed that. Now I live with other people. […] Here you have to live and work and simply live without problems. You have to try to live with new people. In my house, I, an Arab, live with a woman from Ukraine and Germans. And that's good." (WI 1, 46-50)*

Mahdi talks about how, due to his experience of war, he "can't just live with other people." He sees attending school (more of an integration course, the author assumes) as an opportunity to learn that there is no war here and to gain new experiences. This experience also includes living with "other people". From his perspective, those who are not Arab like him are among the Others. By saying "I've managed that," he expresses that while it is an achievement to learn to live "friendly" with others—as Mahdi describes it—it is also doable in the sense that it can be learnt. Living with others without problems represents a value for him. At the end of his statement, he emphasises that this is a good thing, as he now has neighbours from Ukraine and Germany.

In summary, it can be said that the experience of war is not an aspect of the past that refugees leave behind in their country of origin or while fleeing. This experience determines their emotional world, their subjectivity, and their values. What characterises this experience is its fragility. Gathering new experiences is a process that is initiated in a collective, institutionalised context such as school, but also in and through the neighbourhood.

*The experience of a total new beginning*

I called the second experiential pattern 'the experience of an absolute new beginning'. Two aspects define the absolute nature of a new beginning. First, the experience of a new beginning involves more or less hidden self-evident truths. They are hidden in the sense that they are not obvious to outsiders. In addition, there is no adequate guidance—and perhaps there can't be. Ali, who came to Germany as a 17-year-old, describes the experience of an absolute new beginning: "When you go to another country, you have no idea, including about integration and such. You have no idea. That's why I say, no matter how old you are, you simply grow up like

[3] The names of the interviewees were completely anonymized to preserve their anonymity.

a small child who has to learn everything." (WI 2, 1-2). With the phrase "no idea", Ali emphasises this lack of knowledge that characterises arriving in another country. Age and the associated experiences are also portrayed as insufficiently helpful. One is thrown back to the role of a toddler. Hakim describes this experience as follows: "We always start from scratch." (WI 4, 5). Starting from scratch or learning like a toddler signals these self-evident truths, which one must first track down and then decode for oneself.

This completely new beginning has four dimensions. The first dimension concerns material resources. Tarek describes this in the context of his first apartment in Germany: "I had the apartment, but it was empty. I had a blanket and a pillow. I also bought a kettle. I slept like that for two months." (WI 24, 20). Being in a new country, one cannot rely on a circle of friends and acquaintances who could support one. The second dimension describes knowledge of the institutions, authorities, and their responsibilities in Germany. The following state institutions and organisations were mentioned in the interviews: school, kindergarten, job centre, and immigration office. The interviewees who had a university degree or completed training in their country of origin did not work in their chosen profession. They took on unskilled jobs and pursued further training through various work programmes to at least be able to apply for a qualified position. Knowledge of institutions, authorities, and organisations in Germany implies knowledge of the education, employment, and welfare systems. Before knowledge of these systems can be acquired, the challenge lies in knowing that they exist in the first place. Language barriers also exist. Germany is a monolingual country, and its institutions are only just beginning to establish multilingualism in state institutional structures and cultures. Everyday life constitutes the third dimension. Shopping (WI 5), using public transportation such as taking the tram (WI 5), registering a child at school (WI 6), searching for a kindergarten place (WI 7), finding a doctor (WI 7), and communicating with the school when problems arise or when organizational issues arise such as participation in a school trip (WI 6) require not only language skills to gain access to the necessary information, but also knowledge of these access points. The fourth dimension addresses everyday rituals. Ali mentions greeting someone on the street as one ritual (WI 2, 22). He says that when he walked down the street in his hometown, it took him half an hour to walk 20 metres, because it's not appropriate to just walk past people and say "hello". He says one has to ask how they're doing. Dealing with noise or listening to music are discussed as everyday rules in connection with the midday rest period (WI 2, WI 4). Thus, the new beginning also affects everyday interaction and communication with neighbours.

Three obstacles can be reconstructed from the interviews with the refugees that make a completely new beginning difficult. The first is the lack of language skills – this affects both the refugees and the employees in the institutions or doctor's

offices. Although, for example, an app is available that can be used for translation, it was reported that the doctors did not always use it (WI 6). Instead, they requested that someone with German language skills accompany them to the doctor's appointment. This sometimes led to internal conflict, as there are topics/illnesses where they do not want a stranger present – even if only to interpret. The second obstacle concerns the role of women. Ikram, who speaks German and English, helps befriend families as an interpreter. She describes her wish regarding the role of women as follows: "Here in Bieblach, women are always at home. It is desirable to be able to see these women outside." (WI 6, 2). This means that female refugees have difficulty acquiring access to public spaces. A third obstacle is the distribution of refugees within the city of Gera. Since Bieblach-Ost is predominantly home to people from Syria, Afghanistan, Iran, or Somalia, the dissemination of information, for example, about the functioning of the school system, is problematic (WI 4).

From the analysis, it can be concluded that the experience of a completely new beginning indicates that the development of belonging is much more comprehensive and complex than the relationships between neighbours.

*The experience of racism*

The third reconstructed pattern of experience addresses experiences of racism. Two forms of racism can be reconstructed: the denial of access to social spheres and the seemingly unbridgeable, yet fragile, differentiation. Both forms constitute structural racism.

Denial of access to social areas includes, for example, access to the housing market or leisure activities. This denial of access in one area sometimes affects all family members and results in the impossibility of access to other areas. This creates a chain reaction in a sense. Mahdi describes his experience of racism as follows: "I have found many apartments, but the landlords don't want the foreigners. If the German woman spoke to the landlord, then there is no problem. If the landlord writes my name, then he says: 'I'm sorry. We don't have an apartment.'" (WI 1, 1.10-12). An acquaintance then gave him access to the housing market. But in his experience, this access is denied when his name comes into play as a tenant. Hakim tells a story about his experience visiting a club in Gera: "There's a bar near the main train station. I tried to get in, but security wouldn't let me in. I know, because I'm a foreigner. I bought a beer and drank it alone at home. That's good for me. I listened to a little music. It's okay." (WI 3, 57-58). Here, too, Hakim attributes his inability to get into the club to being perceived as a foreigner. This denial leads to segregation, to lost opportunities to develop a sense of belonging. For Hakim, this means long-term isolation and loneliness if no other spaces offer him the opportunity to connect with people. Hakim tries not to be discouraged by the experience. He buys a beer and listens to music at home. In doing so, he gives himself a piece

of what was denied him. This denial of access, in this case to a club, is a denial of access to a community. This seemingly unbridgeable, yet fragile, differentiation represents the second form of racism. During our walking interview with Umran, we pass a community garden run by a Diakonie organisation with residents from Bieblach. Umran shows me the garden and adds: "What you see here is the Diakonie garden. They built it so that German and foreign families could come together and talk. But there are no German families. They have their own gardens. But there are a few German volunteers." (WI 3, 32-33) This differentiation is there. It does take a material form, in that there are no encounters between German and newly arrived families, as intended by the Diakonie. At the same time, this differentiation is also fragile, since "a few German volunteers" are involved in the garden. By stating that the Germans have their own gardens, he mentions the possibility of leasing an allotment in Gera or the surrounding area. The differentiation is also fragile because Mahdi – reflecting on his experience in looking for an apartment – came to the conclusion: "There is no difference between Arab and German people. " (WI 1, 1.15).

The analysis has shown that experiences of racism determine the development of neighbourhoods and extend beyond the spatial aspect. In summary, it can be said that these three experiential patterns – the experience of war, the experience of a completely new beginning, and the experience of racism – relate to processes of power and, in some cases, violence. These three experiences form a framework for the interviewed refugees' understandings of belonging.

**Refugees' concepts of belonging in the context of the neighbourhood**

The refugees develop their own ideas of belonging. From the interviews, I identified four concepts of belonging: belonging as living in safety, belonging as not being able to forget, belonging as not feeling like a stranger, and belonging as a zone free from racist prejudice.

*Belonging as a life in security*

Belonging is conceptualised as living in security. Zayd describes it as follows: *"We came from the place that it's not safe. Belonging to means: safety. I'm feeling safe in Germany. I can walk free. I can talk to anyone freely. That word means it: It`s not the place. For me, it's not the place, it's the safety. How to be, how to keep your family safe. Why I'm here in Germany. It's like the other side of why I'm here. I did not just only came here for Europe. I had a job in my country. We came here because of the war. We are runaways from the killing. So when I feel safe here in Gera, I belong to this place. The place doesn't matter. Here is the law over all, and you have to respect me, and that's good for me. There is the law. It's for Germans and foreigners. I'm on the safe side. This is belonging to. I think most of the people came here because of the safety. They want to be safe*

*with the family". (WI 14, 26-32)*

For Zayd, belonging means a life of security. He feels safe in Germany. He defines belonging not in terms of a place – "It's not the place" – but in terms of security. War, violence, and terror are cited as reasons for fleeing. These all lead to a loss of security. The killing in his country and the resulting need to find protection for his family were his reasons for fleeing. In Germany, he can carry out everyday activities such as going for a walk or engaging in everyday conversation. He cites the laws in Germany as a basis for his feeling of security, as they emphasise respect for people. Location plays no role in this conception. To reinforce his understanding, he refers to the belief that other people also fled to Germany because they were no longer safe in their home countries.

A characteristic of this understanding of belonging is that it is conceptualised independently of a place: "The place doesn't matter." There must simply be no danger of the place becoming unsafe. Security becomes this transformative and transcendent moment in which belonging is restored when it has been lost somewhere else. The experience of security is based on the existence of legal foundations that guarantee respect for people and on security being experienced in everyday life. This is the case when everyday life can be lived without fear. Another characteristic of this understanding of belonging is the role of the family. The family is thought of as the one responsible for bringing them to safety. Belonging is viewed positively insofar as it is connoted with something desirable, such as security.

*Belonging as not being able to forget*

The second concept of belonging can be described as the inability to forget. Laith explains this as follows:

*"I belong to Iraq. Now I've forgotten a lot about my country. [...] I have to belong here because of my family and my children. You can't do something without belonging. That's a foundation. A house can't stand without a foundation. [...] My children belong to Germany. I can't say that about myself because I was born in my country and had many advantages. I had many disadvantages, but I also had advantages. I lived there for 40 years. I can't forget all that. That's terrible. [...] A person must not forget who they are. I am an Arab man." (WI 1, 24-33)*

Laith defines his belonging through his place of birth and the country, Iraq, where he grew up and spent 40 years. For Laith, belonging also includes the experiences he had in Iraq. He speaks of the disadvantages and advantages he experienced. Although he emphasises that there were many, the disadvantages do not deter him from longing for his country. For Laith, belonging is like a foundation and a condition for future action. For him, his children belong to Germany. He, on the other hand, wrestles with belonging, which moves between the experience in his homeland and the responsibility for his family. Laith describes the fact that he

cannot forget all this as terrible. At the same time, this inability to forget represents a value for him, as he says that one cannot forget who one is.

In the concept of belonging as the inability to forget, belonging is viewed as something fundamental. It is like a foundation upon which everything else stands. What that might be next is open: perhaps getting up anew every day and going to work, or perhaps experiencing joy in everyday life, or perhaps neither. This inability to forget describes belonging as an ambivalent pendulum movement between a place of birth, the experiences made there, and the question of identity. Belonging is the painful experience of memory and, at the same time, an anchor of stability and orientation. In this understanding of belonging, the family becomes the driving force behind being able to master these pendulum movements in everyday life.

*Belonging as a zone free from racist prejudice*

The topic of racism is a central point in the third conception of belonging. This concerns the absence of racist prejudices. Belal explains: "Belonging is simply remaining human and not having these racist prejudices." (WI 4, 15-22). For Belal, belonging represents a human characteristic. It consists of a person approaching others without racist prejudices.

The refugees report experiencing racist prejudices at school (WI 5), in clubs (WI 4), or on the street (WI 6). These prejudices are experienced "directly" (WI 4, 18).

In this understanding of belonging, two levels can be identified through which belonging takes place: a legal level and a relational level. The legal level concerns place of birth and nationality, while the relational level concerns experiences in everyday interactions. Belonging is understood as a relationship in which racist prejudices have no place, in which "you simply understand that you can just let go of where this other person comes from, that you are simply friends." (WI 25, 21-22). The relationship – here in the form of friendship – is given more importance than place of birth. It is through the relationship that belonging is established in everyday interactions.

*Belonging as not feeling foreign*

Not feeling like a stranger constitutes the fourth conception of belonging. Inaya presents this as follows: "It means not feeling like a stranger, talking to people. When there are events, when there are problems, people can meet and talk together, discuss things, for example, and find a solution." (WI 10, 12-16)

Inaya describes how she doesn't feel like a stranger when people talk to each other. She describes events as a place where a neighbourhood community can come together, where problems can be discussed, and solutions sought. Inaya sees organised meeting formats such as events as an opportunity to bring people closer together.

In this understanding of belonging, belonging is linked to a community. The sense of belonging is fostered through shared activities and by discussing a topic/problem together. Everyday interactions between people lead to a sense of togetherness on equal terms. Belonging is defined as the absence of a sense of alienation. Racism emerges as an experience that creates a sense of alienation.

In summary, it can be said that belonging is only conditionally conceptualised with a place. In the first concept, place is marked as an insecure place, which then allows belonging to be redefined, namely through the concept of security. The second concept links place of birth with identity. Place of birth is linked to nationality in the third concept of belonging and is viewed as a level of belonging. Belonging represents something fundamental (in the second and third concepts). Responsibility for the family becomes an indispensable part of the conceptualisation of belonging (the first and second concepts). Belonging implies the absence of racism (the third and fourth concepts). The third and fourth concepts highlight the relationships and everyday interactions between people as a distinctive feature of belonging. All concepts of belonging have two aspects in common: belonging is viewed as something positive. It can be experienced and felt in everyday life.

**Conclusion: Belonging as entering a neighbourly community?**

It can be seen that various experiences shape refugees' understandings of belonging in the context of their neighbourhood in East Germany. These are the experience of war, the experience of starting over, and the experience of racism. Refugees' understandings of belonging were identified as four concepts: belonging as living in safety, belonging as not being able to forget, belonging as not feeling like a stranger, and belonging as the experience of a zone free from racist prejudice.

A neighbourhood community I don't understand it as a more or less closed group to which refugees may or may not have access. I understand a neighbourhood community in the sense of a "third space" (Bhaba 2010), in which refugees possess sufficient political rights to negotiate what constitutes a neighbourhood community.

Racism prevents the development of a neighbourhood community. This goes hand in hand with the racialisation of identity. This fixation partially vanishes when, in neighbourly interaction, the fixation on only one facet of identity dissolves, thus allowing for other facets of identity, for example, as a mother, as a friend, or as a neighbour. From the perspective of refugees, the feeling of not being a stranger and the experience of a zone free from racist prejudice constitute a sense of belonging. The neighbourhood infrastructure consists of various state-run institutions such as kindergartens and schools and non-state-run institutions such as housing associations and nightclubs. The analysis shows that access to state-run institutions is significantly easier than to non-state-run ones. Here, too, racism acts as a gatekeeper. Access, or the lack of access, configures belonging insofar as it enables or prevents

refugees from entering into relationships with other people. Entering a neighbourly community would mean feeling at home in one's neighbourhood. Not having to fear being denied access to a new apartment or to pursue dancing or other hobbies.

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# SELF-DETERMINATION IN PATIENTS WITH INTENSIVE CARE NEEDS: CARE MANAGEMENT IMPLICATION

**Abstract:**

Highly vulnerable people, such as those on permanent ventilation, are heavily dependent on medical, nursing and social support. The aim of the treatment of these patients is to make them independent of the ventilators - insofar as there is a potential for weaning from ventilation. This requires a considerable amount of time, especially for people with multimorbid diseases. In a clinical setting, the necessary resources for this are not available.

In a newly created transitional living form for out-of-hospital ventilation weaning, patients are closely supervised and supported in the weaning process by a multidisciplinary team in a homely environment. The transitional housing form is supported by research carried out by the Ostbayerische Technische Hochschule Regensburg. The evaluation of self-determination in a complex disease situation is one aspect of this research.

This paper is based on a study that included 54 guideline-based, semi-standardised interviews which were conducted with the patients themselves and/or relatives covering the aspects of medical and therapeutic care as well as housing and self-determination. The interviews were evaluated using content analysis. In a first step, the categories of the analysis of self-determination are described. Furthermore, the results are exemplified with a case study.

Results of the study show that the perception of quality of life is closely linked to the possibilities for self-determination. The comprehensive medical, nursing and therapeutic support contributes to the well-being of the sick people, who should be informed about and involved in the treatment. The case study illustrates by way of example how self-determination can be achieved in the case of severely diseased patients (e.g. referring to their mobilisation, visits, spare time activities) and how compliance can be increased. It became evident that even in the case of lethal dis-

eases whose progression cannot be influenced, a self-determined life is still possible.

**Keywords:** ventilation, weaning, out-of-hospital transitional form of living for weaning, self-determination, Case and Care Management

## Introduction

In modern intensive care medicine, ventilation therapy is an essential and often indispensable component of many treatments (DGP 2019, p. 9; Windisch et. al. 2017, p. 726). Although this therapeutic intervention is life-saving, it is nevertheless associated with considerable risks for patients (Kabitz/Dembinski 2018, p. 10). Especially in the case of multimorbidity, there is an increasing risk that the termination of ventilation therapy or withdrawal from artificial ventilation (so-called weaning) will lead to complications (Karagiannidis et. al. 2019, p. 674; Dreher et. al. 2017, p. 56). These patients remain in hospital for a very long time to stabilise their state of health. If, despite all efforts, weaning did not succeed and the rehabilitation potential was also estimated to be low, there has so far been a transition to an out-of-hospital intensive care setting (e.g. in specialised residential communities) for status-preserving care (DGP 2019, p. 115; Karagiannidis et. al. 2019, p. 674). However, studies have shown that considerably more than 50% of these patients have a weaning potential which means that their health status could be improved (Schönhofer et al. 2016, e170; Bornitz et al. 2020, p. 208; Paul et al. 2022, p. 404 et seq.), provided that they get individualized treatment.

Patients who are in permanent intensive care perceive their quality of life as reduced even if sufficient care and medical equipment are available (Huttmann et. al. 2015, p. 316; Huttmann et. al. 2018, Schönhofer et. al. 2025, p. 141 et seq.). This is partly due to the fact that they are in a fragile, latently life-threatening condition and are, therefore, heavily dependent on permanent intensive care nursing (Ewers/Lehmann 2018, p. 418). Since the 1990ies, the concept of "quality of life" is understood as a multi-dimensional concept comprising among others the physical, psychological and social well-being (The WHOQOL Group 1995, p. 1.405).

Literature on people in care situations emphasizes that self-determination is an essential part of what patients consider a good quality of life (Dichter/Schmidbauer 2016, p. 125). The UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities[1] defines the concept of self-determination further, stipulating that basically every person, irrespective of his or her degree of impairment is capable of self-determination and has a capacity to act and make legal decisions (Lachwitz 2013, p. 69).

[1] Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) of 06.12.2006 and its Optional Protocol (A/RES/61/106) of 13.12.2006 (https://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/convention/convention_accessible_pdf.pdf, accessed on 01.07.2025).

In the Western political and moral tradition, individual freedom and the right to make one`s own choices in life and control one`s own destiny are of high significance (Beauchamp 2021, p. 74). This implies that in a care situation the decisions about the services to be given should be made without any organisational pressures (Miles-Paul 2006, p. 34 et seq.). In intensive care, the perception of quality of life is closely linked to the possibilities of self-determination. This, however, is principally endangered when communication is restricted (Nelißen et al. 2018, p. 520 f.). Before the Intensive Care and Rehabilitation Strengthening Act[2] was passed in Germany in 2019, a debate developed about the care needs of persons in intensive care. Looking at this debate, one got the impression that the self-determination and thus the quality of life of these patients was in danger (Richter 2022, p. 16).

In 2020, the Intensive Care and Rehabilitation Strengthening Act was finally passed establishing a right to having the weaning potential checked (Arndt 2020, p. 569; Jauernig et al. 2022, p. 267 f.; Biehler et al. 2025, p. 2 et seq.). This includes that according to §§ 8 f. of the intensive care guideline (AKI-RL)[3], a specialised physician has to examine the patient, determine the weaning potential and ensure that appropriate measures are taken (s.a. BT-Drs. 19/19368, p. 23).

Prior to the reform of the health insurance law, weaning was exclusively carried out in clinical settings. The greater flexibility which the new legal provisions opened up in 2021 made it possible that this is now also done in transitional living (s.a. Richter 2022, p. 25 et seq.). Adult patients that are ventilated or have been tracheotomised and are in need of prolonged weaning according to classification 3 of the guidelines for treatment are now accepted for individual and person-centred treatment (DGP 2019, p. 16; s.a. Boles et al. 2007, p. 1.036). The out-of-hospital setting offers accommodation in comfortable single rooms and includes a more flexible and extended time contingent for multidisciplinary rehabilitation than in a regular clinical environment. With a maximum of twelve treatment places, patients can be given appropriate individual care.

Since this out-of-hospital transitional form of living is a new concept in German social law, it was approved on a trial basis provided that scientific support was guaranteed (Art. 17 para. 3 of the Bavarian Care Housing Quality Act – PfleWoqG).[4] What is relevant for the living environment of ventilated people in the corresponding settings has not yet been researched much (similar to Ewers/Lehmann 2018, p.

[2] Law to Strengthen Intensive Care and Medical Rehabilitation in Statutory Health Insurance (Intensive Care and Rehabilitation Strengthening Act – GKV-IPReG) of 23.10.2020 – BGBl. I p. 2220.

[3] Guideline on the Prescription of out of Hospital Intensive Care (AKI RL) dated 19.11.2021, last amended on 18.06.2025.

[4] Act on the Regulation of Care, Care and Living Quality in Old Age and Disability (Bavarian Care and Housing Quality Act – PfleWoqG) of 08.07.2008 - GVBl. p. 346, last amended by § 1 of the Act of 24.07.2023, GVBl. p. 431.

421). Therefore, the quality of life and in particular the description and analysis of the possibilities of self-determination of sick people is one aspect of the accompanying research.

## Methods

According to relevant research in the specialist literature (scoping review), out-of-hospital weaning has so far been researched mainly from a medical and specialist nursing perspective (Schiegl/Schroll-Decker 2025). So far, there is little evidence of indicators that can be used as decisive for assessing self-determination. Therefore, it seemed appropriate to conduct exploratory research using qualitative methods (Döring 2023, p. 25 f.).

Between 2021 and 2024, 64 interviews have been conducted with patients in the transitional housing form and/or their relatives and family members referring to aspects of self-determination (e.g. inclusion of the patients in debates on treatment and care, the relevance of a room of one`s own, decisions on visits and contacts in the housing arrangement, a self-determined everyday life including watching TV, when to get up, etc.). These were analytical interviews that are methodologically characterised by the fact that they describe social issues, the results of which are compared with theoretical considerations and concepts (Lamnek/Krell 2016, p. 317). In addition, the interviews were guideline-based and semi-standardised. Partial standardisation was considered useful because that way special topics which emerged spontaneously in the course of the interviews could be detected and pursued further. Thus, in a field that has not yet been explored, narrative elements that emerged in the interviews could be included (for the narrative interview, see e.g. Przyborski/Wohlrab-Sahr 2021, p. 106 et seq.).

The evaluation was based on qualitative content analysis according to Mayring (Mayring 2023, p. 97 et seq.; Mayring 2022, p. 11 et seq.). In addition, the defined analysis phases of Lamnek and Krell were taken into account (Lamnek/Krell 2016, p. 379 et seq.). These phases mainly included transcription of the interviews, individual analysis, generalising analysis of all interviews, and a control phase during which reference was made to the original interview transcripts (Lamnek/Krell 2016, p. 379 et seq.). The MAXQDA software was used (Rädiker/Kuckartz 2019, p. 3 et seq.). The deductive evaluation codes referred to the research questions. Of the 54 evaluated interviews,1.045 codes were included in the definition of self-determination (as of July 1st, 2025).

Until the end of 2024, 133 patients were admitted to a transitional housing form. Based on this population, we got a participation of 48,12%. A special sampling method was therefore not necessary (for sampling, see Przyborski/Wohlrab-Sahr 2021, p. 231 et seq.). The patients were informed about the study in consultation with the team of the transitional housing form, they were fully informed

about the methods and aims of the study and were then free to decide for or against participation. Data was only collected and evaluated if the written consent of the interviewee or the legal representative had been obtained. However, the state of health of the patients had an impact on participation. In particular, if the patients had serious communicative problems or could not be interviewed due to the severity of the disease (on the communication barriers, Weber et al. 2014, p. 15), relatives and family members were interviewed. However, it was possible for the patients to be present at the interview if they wished and, if necessary, to be included in the evaluations by means of gestures (e.g. nodding their heads). Video recordings or the like were dispensed with to ensure integrity. If the patients were verbally restricted, but did not have serious cognitive problems, the questions could be answered in writing as an alternative. 84.4% of the participating patients were over 50 years old and 60.9% were male. The patients came from all over southern Germany. In most cases, there was no prior connection with the social environment of the transitional housing facility. Almost 80% of participants were transferred to the transitional housing from hospitals (intensive care units) where they had previously been medically treated.

Overall, emphasis was placed on an inclusive survey design, as the research was oriented towards the needs and requirements of those affected. However, the usual qualitative research methods reached their limits in view of our particular population. Even though it can be assumed that relatives or family members are most likely to be able to assess the needs and wishes of the patient (Salomon 2015, p. 332), their judgements may not always be in accordance with the patient's perception. However, the risk of misassessments could be kept as low as possible if the patients themselves were present. In principle, regular reflections were carried out in the team of researchers to ensure the quality of the research results, whereby Mayring's criteria (e.g. procedural documentation or rule-based nature of the research process) were - among other things - used as a guideline (Mayring 2023, p. 122 et seq.). During the collection and evaluation process, personal data were pseudonymised. Due to the vulnerability of the group of people, the research project obtained an ethics vote from the Joint Ethics Committee of the Universities of Applied Sciences in Bavaria (GEHBa) in 2021. Respect for dignity and integrity, as well as the protection of seriously ill people, was a priority at every stage of data collection and analysis. Personal data was therefore encrypted several times in close consultation with the university's data protection officer. Patients and their relatives were only interviewed once the patient's health had stabilised sufficiently.

## Results

*Summary analysis of all codes for self-determination*

Almost 250 codings illustrate a high restriction of self-determination (operationalised among others by patients`passiveness). When changing over into transitional living, patients are hardly capable of expressing their own needs and wishes due to considerable impairments resulting from their disease and are thus highly vulnerable. In the course of treatment or when individualised rehabilitation measures are taken (e.g. with regular physiotherapy), the possibilities for self-determination increase among patients (for the individualisation of rehabilitation, see Wade 2023, p. 875). However, this process is of a gradual nature and it is difficult to produce hard data. Basically, determination of progress is based on observation and subjective perceptions. In the interviews, self-determination was frequently associated with increasing self-sufficiency (e.g. regarding mobility) and decreasing dependence on medical devices. The use of a speaking valve also makes communication easier, which reduces misunderstandings, for example with the nursing staff. In addition, more and more activities can be taken over independently in personal hygiene (e.g. body care). These advances are correlated with the increasing possibilities for self-determination. In addition, more than 50 codes indicate an increasing self-determination of patients in everyday life: They can use the balcony or terrace when mobilised or run errands in the grocery store nearby. They also benefit from unlimited visiting hours. Ideally, self-determination can be understood as a process from the hospital to admission and treatment in the transitional form of housing, which can be represented as follows:

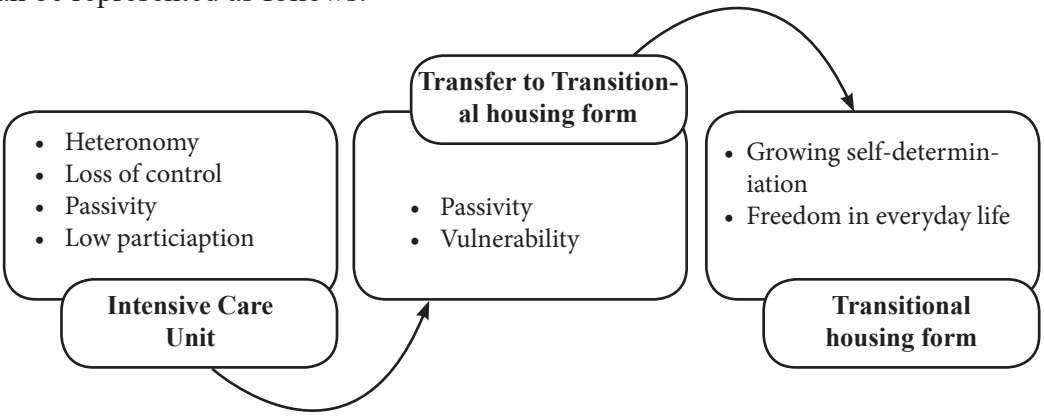


**Fig. 1:** Process to regain self-determination.

This process is only one characteristic of self-determination. The evaluation of the 1.045 codes shows further dimensions. In the case of intensive care, self-deter-

mination affects both the individual side and the systemic level, especially in the health care system.

*Individual level*

Due to the severity of the diseases, patients can also be so impaired during weaning treatment that infections profoundly worsen their state of health. This means that self-determination is fundamentally up for discussion, particularly if there is a continuing relationship of dependency (e.g. vis-à-vis nursing staff or medical technology). Self-determination does not always proceed in a linear and smooth way. In addition, in the case of severe cognitive impairments due to illness, patients can have an ambivalent understanding of self-determination and care (see Beauchamp/ Childress 2012, p. 101 et seq.). Considering the findings in the interviews (e.g. interview 073 or 060) the idea of self-determination can become contradictory. On the one handside restricting self-determination can be perceived as being given more security and affection; on the other hand, it can be perceived as paternalism and heteronomy (e.g. if a decision on medical measures is made without consulting the patient). Self-determination vacillates between heteronomy and autonomy and it depends on the subjective impression of a patient how certain measures are perceived.

However, the self-determination of patients is not only up for discussion because of complex diseases. Relatives and family members can also act in a paternalistic manner towards the sick people, for example by placing too high expectations of success or treatment on them, exerting pressure, for example with regard to rapid weaning from ventilation. We must acknowledge that patients are in a (not necessarily positive) social relationship with their relatives and family members and that decisions are made within the family unit. Self-determination thus does not describe a self-sufficient state, but must be defined in relation to the social environment.

*Systemic level*

In addition to the restrictions on a personal level, the self-determination of patients is also endangered by systemic constraints (especially resulting from the health care system). In particular, the high density of actors involved in the social services sector should be pointed out here. Due to specific social law requirements in Germany, not only an internal team of doctors and nurses is involved in the treatment in the transitional housing form. For adequate weaning treatment, expertise not directly employed in the transitional form of housing (such as physiotherapists or speech therapists) is consulted. Patients have little influence on scheduling appointments and therapy density, for example. There are also restrictions on self-determined decision-making options in the organisation of follow-up care after the stay in the out-of-hospital transitional form of living, as the choice of options for

continued care is limited, especially in the event of a weaning failure (s.a. Ewers/ Lehmann 2018, p. 421).

The explanations so far show how complex self-determination is in the transitional housing form and how many aspects are affected. Self-determination can thus be described as a term with several dimensions:

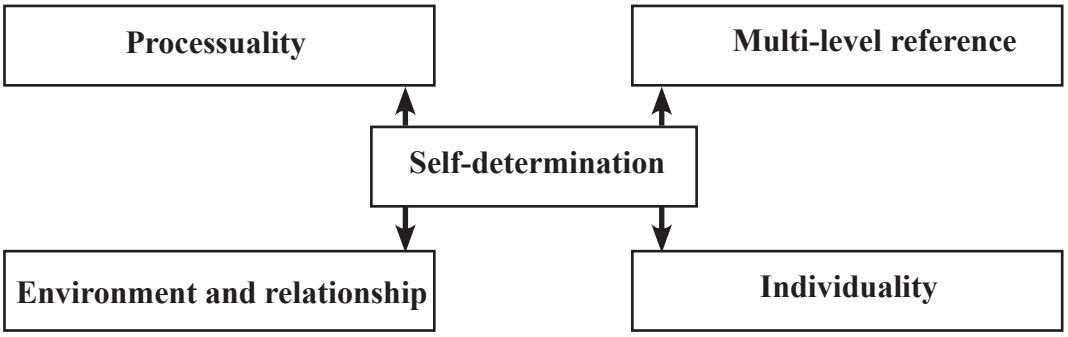


**Fig. 2:** Dimensions of self-determination.

**An exemplary case study illustrating the concept of self-determination**

A case study can be used to show what self-determination can mean in an individual case. It is to illustrate the dimensions of self-determination focusing a single social element (Lamnek/Krell 2016, p. 286). After the description of the particular case, the dimensions of self-determination that can be derived from the interview are explained.

*Sociodemographic and disease-related data*

We are dealing with a nearly 50 years old male patient (pseudonym: 080) who was admitted from a clinical setting to the transitional form of living. The underlying disease is amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), a degenerative muscle disease. The patient is already severely limited in his mobility and is therefore permanently dependent on the support of nurses and caregivers. At the time of the interview, there is non-invasive ventilation (NIV), which is medically supervised in the transitional living form. The patient rejects further invasive treatment measures (such as the insertion of a tracheostomy tube). To support him, the guardianship court appointed a professional guardian who must respect the wishes and will of the patient in all activities that require intervention of the guardian (on German guardianship law, see Beetz 2022, No. 42 para. 2 et seq.). Since there are no cognitive and communicative impairments of the patient, he is fully capable of making decisions and is undoubtedly capable of self-determination (with regard to the fundamental rejection of substitute decisions or the like or to (human) legal capacity, see Degener 2015, p. 59; Degener 2016, p. 17).

*Dimensions of self-determination*

In the interview, it first becomes clear that, due to his disease, the patient is dependent on multidisciplinary care by various qualified specialists. This includes close medical supervision, the continuous use of therapies and constant specialist care. With regard to medical care, it seems important to the patient that daily medical check-ups take place documenting potential changes in the degenerative underlying disease and ventilation. In view of his serious illness, the patient assumes that difficult decisions of a medical nature could be pending (not specified in more detail by the patient).[5] Therapeutically, the patient prioritizes physiotherapy (especially physiotherapeutic exercises). With regard to care, the patient states that the professionals in the transitional housing form are always available for him should he have any questions. The patient is free to decide on basic care as well as on mobilisation in the wheelchair (e.g. when and for how long). The patient apparently feels that his wishes and needs are sufficiently taken into account by the team of the transitional living arrangement, which speaks for a relationship of trust. In general, there is open and close communication between the multidisciplinary team and the patient with regard to the interventions. Thus, it can be assumed that the patient is granted space for self-determination and co-determination in his difficult situation. The transparency in the transitional housing form thus supports self-determination and gives the patient the opportunity to decide for himself about possible treatment alternatives after having been given sufficient information. In addition to these treatment aspects, it has been shown that everyday decisions can also be made by the patient himself in the transitional living form. For example, the housekeeping personal can get him personally important things (e.g. in the nearby grocery store):

> *"The housekeeping, [...] they go shopping [...] and all you have to do is say what [they] bring with them [...] [should] […]. And then they bring it with them." (Interview I-080, item 113)*

Likewise, the patient is free to decide on the morning wake-up times as well as on the television and streaming programs, as can be seen in the following original quote:

> *"[...] [J]a well, the basic care, so like today, for example, there was [I] think at 8 [o'clock] someone [from the care] had been there for the first time [...] and there [...] [I] then said, [...] because I was [...] still tired, give [...] [me] still [...] [a] hour or so [...] and then [...] [at] half past 10 someone came again." (Interview*

[5] In the event of an acute deterioration in health, for example, an emergency transfer to the intensive care unit would be considered. This can be rejected by the patient in advance (such as the invasive measures that were already refused at the time of the interview). He can also refuse resuscitation in an emergency, for example. These possibilities always raise complex ethical questions and make multidisciplinary support (e.g. by medicine or psychology) seem unavoidable.

*I-080, item 33)*

Accommodation in a single room, which also allows the use of entertainment media, is of central importance to him. The realisation of self-determination depends largely on the reliability of the nursing or support staff, as the patient needs help, e.g. when switching on the television. It is equally important to him that he can always receive visitors and that they are allowed to bring things that are personally relevant to him, as the following quote illustrates:

*"[They] (= the visitors) [...] [can] actually bring anything with them [...]. [A] Buddy [...] recently brought me cookies. Since [...] [they] have already baked cookies [...]. So [...] [that] everything is possible." (Interview I-080, item 81)*

Other aspects that could be associated with self-determination are considered less important by the patient. Thus, the personal design of the single room is largely irrelevant for him. Amenities that could be offered to him outside of the treatment (such as a wheelchair trip to the surrounding area or reading something to him aloud) are considered secondary. This shows that self-determination is a very individual and subjective factor. In other interviews the possibility of bringing and displaying personal photos was rated as essential for well-being (such as in interview I-087).

**Conclusions of the summary analysis and from the case study**

What has been described so far allows the conclusion (this correlation has been described in the introduction) that more self-determination and co-determination in treatment decisions as well as in everyday life contributes to the well-being of patients. The more patients see themselves as being able to influence and decide on certain aspects of their lives, the higher the quality of life they perceive (see Fig. 3):

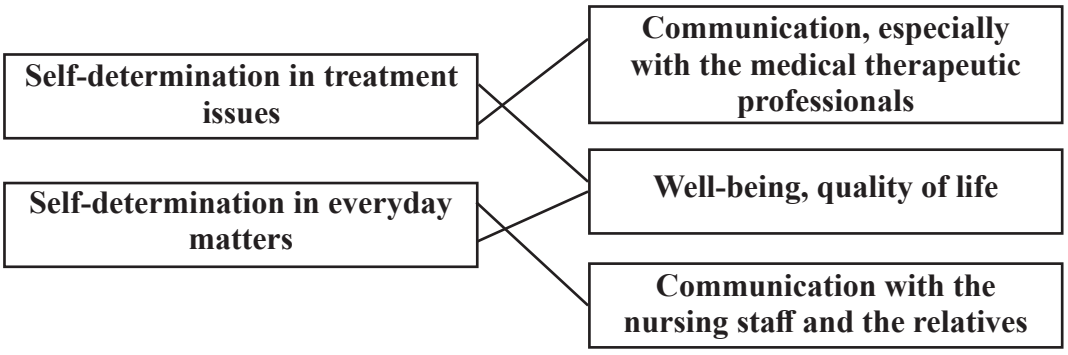


**Fig. 3:** Self-determination in treatment and in everyday life in the transitional housing form.

Thus, communication can be identified as the most essential factor determining the possibilities of self-determination as well as the resulting well-being and quality of life particularly in the case of people in intensive care or with weaning needs. While communication with doctors and the therapeutic professions (e.g. physiotherapists or speech therapists) is mainly important for basic treatment issues, when it comes to everyday aspects, it is primarily communication with the nursing staff, but also the communication with relatives and friends that is of importance. This classification results from the fact that planning of treatment is to be defined in principle as a medical and therapeutic task (s.a. Dreher et al. 2017, p. 57 et seq.). At the same time, the nursing staff and relatives are continuously active with the diseased persons and are therefore the contact persons for all questions regarding everyday life. Also, it is crucial for self-determination that patients are treated by professionals and relatives as being on an equal level. Thus, for patients to have a self-determined life, a number of diverse conditions have to be fulfilled.

**Discussion**

Both the empirical results of the summary analysis and the in-depth case study show how multidimensional the concept of self-determination is. Based on basic human rights assumptions, self-determination is a legal right (Beckmann 2017, p. 35; Teubert 2023, p. 29). These legal concepts imply not only that it should be avoided to patronise patients and restrict their ability of realising their legal rights; moreover, they have to be informed about their right of self-determination and what that means in actual practice (Teubert 2023, p. 29). Our evaluation confirms that self-determined living is only possible in relation to the social and ecological environment, i.e. the realisation of self-determination always depends on the support of other people. Accordingly, self-determination is to be defined as a "humane concept of relationship", which is particularly evident in situations of increased vulnerability, for example in the case of serious illnesses (similar to Bielefeldt 2017, p. 71). Flexibility in decision-making regarding medical treatment as well as in everyday life for the patient always requires the commitment of others (e.g. nurses) and the solidarity of others. However, restrictions in self-determination can also arise due to systemic requirements.

Open and honest communication with patients by the multidisciplinary treatment team is crucial for the feeling of self-determination in existential illness situations (similar to Lemm et al. 2018, p. 251). In the case of chronically progressive diseases, the early integration of palliative care should also be considered, as this allows planning for the future in the event of a worsening of the disease (Schlau 2021, p. 856). At the same time, dynamic or continuous communication with patients regarding their needs and requirements is recommended, as those affected should have the freedom to change opinions or previous decisions (Diaz de Teran et. al. 2019,

p. 562). Reciprocal intensive communication and interaction are therefore – as has already been worked out in the conclusions (see p. 12 f.) – essential for self-determination and quality of life.

Although a self-determined life in care practice is based on the interpersonal communication of equal partners, it is also embedded in a care concept that is determined by a complex social system. It is, so to speak, a managerial task to handle instead of to manage the dependencies of the individual patients who are moving in a complicated care system, to assert their rights and entitlements and to guide them through a labyrinthine social system (e.g. the social law). Caretakers of various descriptions carry out that task for the vulnerable patients. For this purpose, the concept of „Case Management“ was implemented in the transitional housing form.

**Inference: The action concept of Case Management as a structuring framework**

Case Management describes the needs-oriented control of an individual case and the handling of personal problems. It works within an organisation and in the regional care structure (Mennemann et. al. 2020a, p. 2). Case Management is only suitable for cases the handling of which is difficult and time-consuming (Monzer 2024, p. 2). It comes into consideration under the following circumstances: a) if there is a complex need situation with several interacting factors, b) if there is a high density of actors, c) when standard care pathways are not sufficiently effective and d) when the resources of the person concerned are not sufficient to compensate for the need for support (Mennemann et. al. 2020a, p. 5). With regard to the complex illnesses described here, it can be assumed that the defined prerequisites for the use of Case Management are in place: The situation is difficult due to the high personnel and technical demands and requires the coordination and cooperation of various stakeholders (Windisch et. al. 2017, p. 741). The number of actors usually to be taken into account can be illustrated as follows.

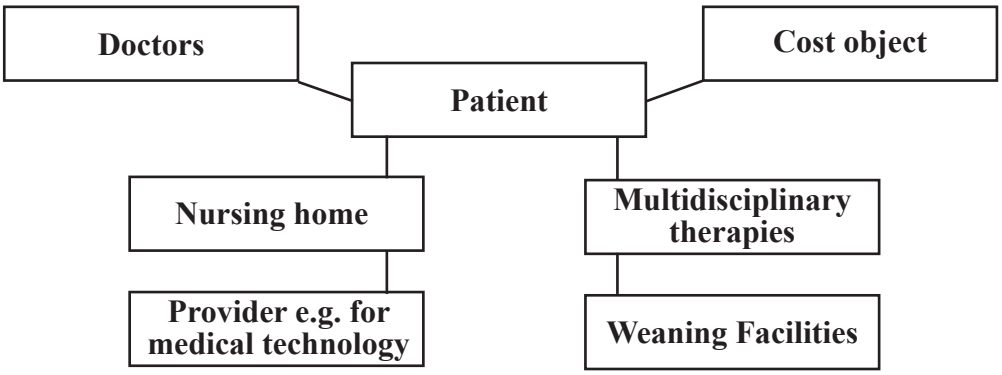


**Fig. 4:** Actors to be supervised.

The need for coordination becomes particularly virulent when a transition between institutions is imminent (s.a. Kippnich et al 2023, p. 274). If, for example, the patient from the case study leaves the transitional form of living after treatment has been completed, the need for support remains with regard to basic care, but also with regard to medical technology care. The transition to the subsequent care arrangement requires a high level of organisational effort which the staff of the transitional housing arrangement is largely responsible for. What is needed individually must be determined carefully and in communication with the patient and, if necessary, the relatives and family members (Köster-Steinebach 2018, p. 15). For example, it must be clarified whether care can be guaranteed by an outpatient intensive care service in the patient's original residential environment. Here, for example, architectural barriers that could previously be overcome by the patient can make home care impossible. Likewise, if there is a continuing need for intensive care or ventilation, an outpatient care service must be found that takes over the care in the patient's home environment. In view of the current shortage of specialist staff in nursing and the overburdening of nursing services, to organize this can be challenging under certain circumstances (Rebnitz/Sonntag 2018, p. 19). In order to protect the patient's self-determination despite these structural impairments, it seems appropriate to guide the patient through these at least partially separated sectors by means of Case Management. This implies that the patient is not left alone in contact with the stakeholders, but always has a contact person available for questions or problems (see similarly Riesner et. al. 2021, p. 140 et seq.), as the following graphic of the piloting process illustrates:

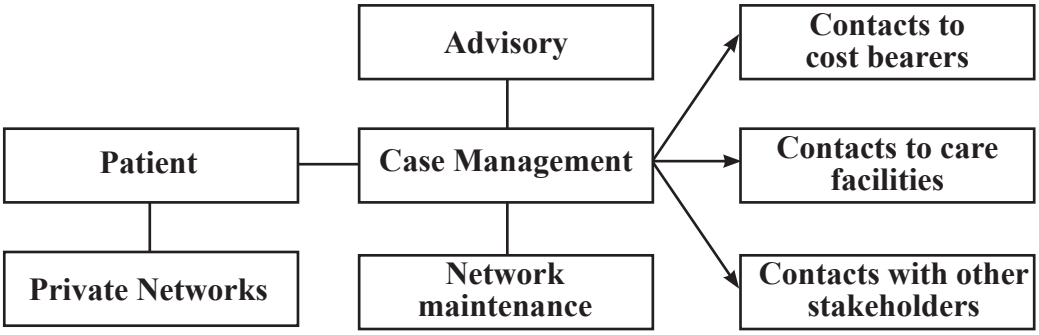


**Fig. 5:** Piloting process through Case Management in the case of intensive care.

In order to provide competent advice (even beyond the issues described in the case presented above), the supervising Case Managers need to have comprehensive knowledge, for example on social law issues (Wendt 2012, p. 13). At the same time, reliable networking is required, in which Case Management takes on a bridging function between the private networks of patients (e.g. supportive neighbour-

hoods) and professional networks (such as networks of care facilities or municipal networks for care provision) and establishes cooperation between people who offer individual assistance and professional services in addition to care counselling. (Löcherbach 2020, p. 55, s.a. Jauernig et. al. 2022, p. 268; Biehler et. al. 2025, p. 6). In order to meet the self-determined needs and wishes of patients, appreciative and empathetic communication is once again indispensable, which, depending on the situation of the patient, may also include alternative modes of communication (for example, written communication if verbal communication is not possible). The patient with his or her needs and requirements is at the center of all planning (Wendt/ Löcherbach 2023, p. 71). In the case of the most severe illness-related impairments, however, the involvement of relatives and family members is inevitable, even if decisions made by others are to be viewed critically if the principle of self-determination is to be respected (Degener 2016, p. 28). For Case Management, however, the most preferable version is that the sick person should express his or her wish directly or that there should be very good reasons to make assumptions about what the person would want so that self-determination can be respected as far as possible (Mennemann et. al. 2020b, p. 41).

In transition living form the setting itself offers the necessary preconditions for self-determination (e.g. providing a single room). Also, a qualified staff principally respects the self-determination of the patients and helps realizing that self-determination. In addition, it must be clarified what claims and entitlements the patient has towards the social and the health system and steps have to be taken to facilitate cooperation of service providers in order to create an adequate care arrangement. This means that the realisation of self-determination can only be realised within a complex support network. This confirms that human life always takes place in a "basic structure of interdependence", which underlines the fundamental vulnerability of humans (Maio 2024, p. 17).

People with intensive care or ventilation needs are particularly dependent on what a particular social and care system provides for (for example, social law requirements). Due to the sectoral structure of the social system in Germany, there are numerous limits that can be overcome by means of Case Management. In the most favourable case constellation, a „pilot" (a person who helps to navigate through the system) who knows what the wishes of a patient in a specific case are and who is also well informed about the legal and organisational situation in a particular field will show "paths" through the labyrinthine social security system. This makes it easier for patients to deal with this complex situation (Mennemann/Frommelt 2023, p. 1 et seq.). This can also create spaces for self-determination, as detailed information about what the health system offers and what health care regulations are in place will make it possible for the patient to make well-founded decisions (for example, choosing a care setting). In addition, since Case Management is always associated

with the extent of care offered by providers in a specific region, attention can be drawn to structural care deficits (for example, inadequate care services in a region) and working towards a care infrastructure in a given community can be facilitated (Wendt 2023, p. 113). We can venture to conclude that the facilitation of self-determination for people with intensive care or ventilation needs correlates positively with the nationwide implementation of Case and Care Management structures.

**Study limitations**

In order to avoid producing biased results, data collection was done with great caution, and the evaluation process went through several stages. One of the measures taken to avoid bias was to make a double coding per interview. Nevertheless, misinterpretations cannot be completely ruled out, as the interviews were conducted under difficult conditions due to the sometimes very pronounced communicative limitations of the patients and the noises associated with medical technology (e.g. ventilators). Statements that are difficult to understand and partly expressed in dialect require a level of understanding and interpretation, which does not exclude errors. However, if patients decided to participate in the research, the interviews were carried out, also in order to achieve the greatest possible inclusivity of research. In the case of the most severe impairments, interviews were conducted with their relatives and family members in the presence or absence of the patients. Here, again, it is conceivable that the needs and wishes of the patients were superimposed by those of relatives and family members (dealt with in more detail in the chapter on methodology).

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