Perceptions Concerning Poverty and Social Protection: a Comparative Approach

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Abstract: The article aims to present, in a comparative manner, the perceptions of older persons from Central and Est European Countries (CEE) concerning poverty and specific areas related to social protection (e.g. the healthcare system, the pension system). Due to transformations associated with the growth in the number of older persons and the increase of life expectancy, research on elderly and socio-economic aspects related to them are of great interest across Europe. The capacity of an old person to live an independent and autonomous life is affected by the prevalence of pathologies associated with the old age, with direct effects regarding the need for social and socio-medical services. The data reflecting the perceptions are collected under the Special Eurobarometer 81.5 (2014) and the analysis indicates some dissimilarities between the perceptions expressed by the respondents of the countries under assessment in this article. Countries included in this analysis are: Romania, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Croatia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, and Slovakia.

Keywords: *Older persons; pension system; healthcare system; social exclusion.*

How to cite: Ghenta, M., Matei, A., & Mladen-Macovei, L. (2019). Perceptions Concerning Poverty and Social Protection: a Comparative Approach. *Revista Romaneasca pentru Educatie Multidimensionala*, 11(4), 30-39. doi:10.18662/rrem/155

1. Introduction

This article aims to offer an image with regard to the perceptions of population aged 65 years and over, concerning important aspects related to the following areas: poverty, healthcare system and pensions. The paper presents the incidence of the inequalities and poverty, as well as the importance of healthcare and pension systems among older persons and continues with an analysis of the views expressed by persons 65+ from CEE countries, in a comparative manner.

2. Objectives

The central objective of our research is to identify differences and similarities between countries in terms of opinions expressed by older persons and thus, to gain a better understanding on how different national social protection systems could contribute to social inclusion.

3. Methods

The data reflecting the perceptions are collected under the Special Eurobarometer 81.5 (2014), conducted by European Commission. The countries included in this analysis are: Romania (RO), Bulgaria (BG), Czech Republic (CZ), Estonia (EE), Croatia (HR), Latvia (LV), Lithuania (LT), Hungary (HU), Poland (PL), Slovenia (SI), and Slovakia (SK). We present bellow the sample's structure, which indicates a higher share of older persons (65+) in Latvia and Estonia, while the lowest share in Slovakia and Romania.

Table 1. The structure of the sample

Country	65+	65-74 years	75+
CZ	19.7	78.8	21.2
EE	21.3	53.5	46.5
HU	20.1	61.0	39.0
LV	21.9	98.7	1.3
PL	16.7	67.6	32.4
SK	15.5	69.6	30.1
SI	20.0	62.6	37.4
BG	22.2	70.7	29.3
RO	19.3	67.0	33.0
HR	21.3	66.0	34.0

4. Poverty

Among the countries considered, the least satisfied with life in general are Bulgarians and Romanians, while the greater satisfaction regarding life is expressed by the Slovenian respondents. Situation is similar among the older respondents (65 years and above), Bulgarians, Romanians and Latvians being the most unhappy respondents when they are thinking about their life in general. In most of the cases, the financial situation of persons aged 65 years and over is appreciated by the respondents as being very bad (almost a third of the Bulgarians and one in five Croats).

Research reports in the field (AGE Platform Europe, 2018; UNDESA, 2016; CEB, 2014) indicate that the elderly presents an additional possibility of getting to be or continuing to stay in poverty (due to limited retirement options, health issues). The risk of old age poverty is considered more pronounced in countries where many older persons rely only on family support (UNDESA, 2016). Statistical data from 2014 showed that, at the level of this year, the Bulgarian elderly were most affected by the risk of poverty and social exclusion (47.8%) (Eurostat, 2019), followed by the elderly from Latvia (39.3%) and the elderly from Estonia and Romania (35%).

The least affected were the elderly from Poland (18.2%) and Slovakia (13.4%). The latest available Eurostat statistical data (from the level of 2017 year) indicate maintenance of the 2014 ranking of the countries from Central and Eastern European countries with slight variations and a small percentage increase in the values recorded for the percentage of the elderly people at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

4.1. Situation regarding inequalities and poverty issues in 2014

The elderly in the countries under analysis in this article were quite skeptical about how the problem of inequalities and poverty was managed in 2014, only 17.7% of them considering that this approach was in a “*very good*” or “*rather good way*” addressed. The most optimistic were the Poles (23.5%), followed by the Hungarians (22.4%), Slovenes (22.2%) and Croats (21.5%). The Romanians were the least optimistic about the issue (10%).

Figure 1. Perceptions concerning inequalities and poverty issues (65+, “very good” and “rather good”)
Source: Eurobarometer 81.5 (2014).

4.2. Expectations for the next 12 months concerning the approach of inequalities and poverty issues

In terms of expectations for the next 12 months cannot be identified a tendency for optimism, only 10.5% of the elderly in the Central and Eastern European countries under analysis considering that things will improve on how inequalities and poverty will be addressed. The most optimistic were the Romanians (22.1%), but the elderly from Romania were also in the most pessimistic group (32.6%), along with Slovenes (41.6%) and the Czechs (32.7%). The most conservative about expectations for the next 12 months concerning the approach of inequalities and poverty were Poles (77.1%).

4.3. Assessments of the situation from 2014 compared with five years before

The perception of the elderly from Central and East European countries regarding how inequality and poverty were address at the time of 2014 compared with five years ago indicate a stagnation of how poverty is tackled at the policy level, half of the respondents indicating the answer “*stay about the same*” (50.2%). The percentage of those who indicated that the situation has worsened it should not be neglected, the registered value being 44.0%.

The elderly from Hungary and Estonia were the most optimistic about this aspect, considering in 10.4% percentage that the approach at national level of the problems of poverty and inequalities has improved now compared to the situation of 5 years ago. The least optimistic are Croats, Romanians and Slovenians.

Figure 2. Perceptions in terms of situation improved (2014 vs. five years before, 65+)

Source: Eurobarometer 81.5 (2014).

5. The healthcare provision

In most of the analysed countries, the healthcare systems are financed based on the contributions of the active population. Considering the ageing process, the number of contributors to healthcare services will decline and less financing will be injected into these services (Sănduleasa, 2016). Old age is associated with greater medical costs and an intense usage of different types of medical investigations. According to some authors (Gray, 2005), it is difficult to forecast the level of public expenditures, due to the socio-demographic variables that could have an impact: the old age, the health status, the disability or the proximity to death.

5.1. Situation regarding the healthcare system

Most of the older persons (65+) from the CEE countries have a “very good” and “rather good” opinions concerning the healthcare provision in their countries. Over a half of the persons of this age from CZ (63.7%), EE (60.2%), SI (59.3%) and HR (52.4%) are convinced that their national healthcare system is appropriate for them. In the same time, Latvian older

persons are having an opposite opinion, with less than 20% of those aged 65+ that have a “*very good*” and “*rather good*” view on this matter. Surprisingly, almost a third of the Romanian older persons had a positive perception (29.8%) and 23.1% of the total Romanian population expressed the same appreciation.

Figure 3. Perceptions concerning the healthcare system (65+, “very good” and “rather good”)

Source: Eurobarometer 81.5 (2014).

5.2. Expectations for the next 12 months concerning the approach of the healthcare system

In terms of expectations for the next 12 months, older persons from the majority of the analyzed countries, considered that the healthcare systems will remain the “*same*” or will become “*worse*” – 87.4% of the total 65+ persons from CEE countries. The same trend was registered for the total population of the CEE countries. The most optimistic were the Romanians, Estonian and Hungarian elderly (26.7%, 15.6%, respectively 14.6%). In case of the Romanians, the distribution of the respondents 65+ who considered, at the time of the survey that the healthcare system will be worse for the next 12 months is quite similar to those that had an optimistic opinion (28.9%). It is to be noticed that over a third of the Slovenians considered that the healthcare system in their country will become worse during the year following the survey (36.5%).

5.3. Assessments of the situation from 2014 compared with five years before

Almost 20% of the respondents from Estonia and from the Czech Republic pointed an improvement of the healthcare provision in their countries. The elderly from Latvia and Slovenia were less appreciative in terms of progress of the healthcare system in their countries during the last five years, before the survey.

Figure 4. Perceptions in terms of situation improved (2014 vs. five years before, 65+)

Source: Eurobarometer 81.5 (2014).

6. Pension system

In most European countries, including Romania, the public pension system is the main guarantor of income security for the elderly, as the vulnerability of older persons is related mostly to the level of income. Insuring an adequate level of income after retirement allows the older persons to cover the costs necessary to maintain their living standard, in the spirit of solidarity and fairness between and within generations (Mladen, 2012).

6.1. Situation regarding the pension system

Almost a half (47.3%) of the total population from the CEE countries considered (in 2014) that the pension system is “*rather bad*” and a third (34%) considered it “*very bad*”. This is an expression of a pessimistic perception, especially in case of older Romanians and Bulgarians, as only 9.1% of total Romanians and 6.8% of Bulgarians appreciated the pension system as being “*rather good*” and “*very good*”. People aged 65+ tend to be more optimistic about the situation of pensions in their countries, as 42.6%

of the Slovenians and 38.9% of the Hungarians shared this perception. Older Romanians and Bulgarians people are also the most pessimist respondents with regard to the pension system.

Figure 5. Perceptions concerning the pension system (65+, “very good” and “rather good”)

Source: Eurobarometer 81.5 (2014).

6.2. Expectations for the next 12 months concerning the approach of the healthcare system

Over a half (61.7%) of the respondents from CEE countries considered, at the time of the survey that the situation of the pension system will remain unchanged during the next 12 months. A similar proportion of the respondents aged 65+ (64.1%) had the same perception. The most optimist older persons are Romanians – a third of them considered that the system will be “*better*” in the next 12 month, while the least optimists were respondents from Poland (6.4%) and Slovakia (6.1%).

6.3. Assessments of the situation from 2014 compared with five years before

Most of the older persons, irrespectively of the country, appreciated that the pension systems remained the same or became worse during the last five years before the survey. The most optimistic in terms of pension systems that improved during the last years before the survey, are the Hungarians and Estonians.

Figure 6. Perceptions in terms of situation improved (2014 vs. five years before, 65+)

Source: Eurobarometer 81.5 (2014).

7. Conclusion

This paper aimed to contribute to the understanding of the perceptions of people aged 65 years and over concerning specific areas related to social protection. For this analysis, the data collected by special Eurobarometer 81.5, run by the European Commission in 2014, were used.

The elderly in the countries under analysis in this article were quite skeptical about how the problem of inequalities and poverty was managed in 2014, and their perception regarding how inequality and poverty were address at the time of 2014 compared with five years before indicate a stagnation of how poverty is tackled at the policy level (50.2% of the respondents). Most of the older persons (65+) from the CEE countries have a “*very good*” and “*rather good*” opinion concerning the healthcare provision in their countries. The expectations are less optimistic, as for the next 12 months, older persons from the majority of the analyzed countries considered that the healthcare systems will remain the “*same*” or will become “*worse*”. The most pessimist perception was expressed with regard to the pension system, as almost a half of the total population from the CEE countries considered (in 2014) that the pension system is “*rather bad*” and a third considered it “*very bad*”.

Acknowledgement

This work was published under the Nucleu Programme, supported by the Ministry of Research and Innovation (MCI), project number PN 19130401. (Această lucrare a fost realizată prin Programul-nucleu, derulat cu sprijinul MCI, proiect nr. PN 19130401).

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