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**EXPERIENCE OF ENSURING SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT IN RURAL
AREAS OF EU COUNTRIES**

Postupna Olena

Doctor of Science in Public Administration, Professor, Associate Professor of the
Department of Management of Training Research and Production Center,
National University of Civil Defence of Ukraine
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-0622-0966

Husarov Kyrylo

“Global Scientific Trends” publishing center, Technical Editor
ORCID ID: 0000-0001-7509-8063

***Abstract.** The article summarizes the experience in ensuring the social development of rural areas in EU member states and candidate countries; it identifies measures to ensure the social development of rural areas and outlines the main problems that the EU's efforts to ensure the social development of rural areas are aimed at addressing.*

It is found that one of the theoretical and methodological problems in the world is the identification of the typology of territories (for example, there is no unified approach to defining rural areas), which negatively affects the collection of statistical information about their development.

Among the main problems of EU member states in the social development of rural areas, which the EU's efforts (policies, programs, measures) are aimed at addressing, are: depopulation in remote areas; a sufficiently high level of rural poverty; a low level of access to components of social infrastructure in rural areas (especially to educational, cultural, sports, and household services institutions); a low level of access to internet services, digital technologies; a low level of transportation provision and road quality, and so on.

Keywords: *public administration, european experience, rural territories, rural population, social development, social stratification, social sphere, social protection, social infrastructure.*

Introduction. One of the key challenges in the development of rural areas worldwide is the decline in rural population, high aging rates, and low levels of working-age population within the country's overall population. This is evidenced by the gradual decrease in the share of rural population worldwide, which today is relatively small. For instance, in 2022 compared to 1991, the share of rural population decreased by 13% and amounted to 43% of the total Earth's population. The majority of peasants (over 80%) reside in countries such as Papua New Guinea, Burundi, Liechtenstein, Niger, Samoa, Rwanda, Malawi, Sri Lanka, and Saint Lucia; whereas peasants are completely absent in countries and territories such as Bermuda, Gibraltar, Hong Kong, Monaco, Macau (China), Nauru, Sint Maarten, Kuwait, Cayman Islands, and Singapore.

Likely, the uneven distribution between rural and urban populations has evolved worldwide due to climatic and natural-economic factors. Certainly, traditional agricultural practices play a significant role in this process. Moreover, such distribution is associated with natural and mechanical population movement, which manifests in high mortality rates and migration levels driven by the need to seek employment, desire for better education, political oppression in one's own country, religious and other humanitarian reasons.

These highlighted issues demonstrate the changes occurring in global society, leading primarily to changes in social structure (the increasing proportion of urban population due to urbanization and metropolization), emergence of new norms and values (including the spread of urban lifestyles, more comfortable than rural ones; prosperity; ensuring constitutional values, etc.), social relations and institutions, etc.

Thus, social development is occurring worldwide, characterized by structural shifts in population quality and its transformation. In this development,

representatives of rural areas experience the most significant changes, therefore, rural population requires greater attention, support, and social security from the state and relevant public authorities.

The analysis of research and problem definition. The comparative analysis of the world's countries' experiences regarding rural development as a whole and social welfare provision for rural populations in particular has been conducted by scholars such as V. Bulba, L. Hazuda, V. Hertseg, M. Hylka, N. Hotko, I. Dunaev, O. Dudziak, I. Zalutsky, T. Zayats, V. Ivanishin, E. Kireeva, K. Kravets, D. Kostyuchenko, M. Lalakulich, M. Latinin, M. Lesiv, O. Nedbalyuk, O. Nechai, V. Orobei, Kh. Patytska, N. Stativka, I. Storonyanska, Yu. Ulyanchenko, K. Shaptala, and others.

The authors primarily focus their research on the development of economic growth in agricultural production, the effectiveness of measures to stimulate the agricultural sector and farming. Unfortunately, less attention has been given in scholarly works to the issues of social development in rural areas, studying foreign experiences in improving the lives of peasants considering the specificity of local development, expanding their rights and opportunities to enhance their own well-being.

The aim of the article is to summarize the experience of ensuring the social development of rural areas in EU member states, identify measures to ensure the social development of rural areas (common policies, programs, etc.), and outline the main problems that the EU's efforts are aimed at addressing regarding the social development of rural areas.

The results of the research. Before delving into the issues outlined in the article, it's important to note that there is no unified approach to the term "rural areas" worldwide. Researchers define them differently in terms of territorial boundaries, often using synonymous terms such as village, rural territories, rural settlements. When defining rural areas, authors may be attempting to represent a certain space located outside urban boundaries and occupying a significantly larger territory than a

village. In this case, rural territories do not have specifically defined boundaries, such as administrative district or regional borders, but they share identifiable characteristics (geographical distance from cities, population density, employment rates, level of prosperity, income levels, housing availability, environmental conditions, etc.). These characteristics are conditional, as rural territories develop differently and undergo shifts in their positions and roles due to globalization and changes in technological paradigms. Some rural areas gain competitive advantages in economic development, particularly in renewable energy sources, innovative agricultural practices, and food production, while others lack the opportunities and potential to adapt to the new demands of global economic development.

To gather statistical data on the development of rural territories, various methodological approaches to territorial identification have been developed at the international level (based on indicators, established standards of territorial division in countries, etc.). However, the most commonly used criterion is the population size indicator. For example, in the UK, settlements with populations of less than 3,000 people in Scotland, less than 10,000 people in Wales, and less than 5,000 people in Northern Ireland are considered rural. Population counts for rural settlements are calculated in thousands. Nevertheless, some countries have even lower thresholds, including those for defining urban settlements (up to 200 people). Such countries as Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, despite their territorial size, are sparsely populated.

Another indicator used internationally to determine settlement types (urban, rural) is related to the economy, particularly the percentage of the population employed in certain economic sectors (e.g., agriculture). Thus, the proportion of the population engaged in agriculture defines rural population.

Let's now examine the situation regarding the development of rural territories in EU countries. First, it's worth noting that the EU consists of 27 European countries, with 8 additional countries being candidates for EU accession. They are united not only by membership in the union but also by similarities in changes and

problems they face at the national level (annual decrease in rural population, migration processes from rural to urban areas, weakening of the agricultural sector, irrational land use, environmental pollution, and consequent decrease in biodiversity). The main population indicators for these countries are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Population figures for EU countries, EU accession candidate countries, and the percentage of rural residents in them, as of 2023.

Place in the world ranking by population size	Countries	Population size, in millions of people	Percentage of rural population
82	Belgium	11,7	1
72	Netherlands	17,6	8
115	Denmark	6,0	12
168	Luxembourg	0,6	12
118	Finland	5,5	13
91	Greece	10,3	14
87	Sweden	10,6	14
23	France	64,8	16
32	Spain	47,5	20
110	Bulgaria	6,7	22
174	Malta	0,5	22
19	Germany	83,3	23
89	Czech Republic	10,5	25
25	Italy	58,9	28
142	Lithuania	2,7	29
152	Latvia	1,8	31
156	Estonia	1,3	32
94	Hungary	10,2	32
93	Portugal	10,2	33
158	Cyprus	1,3	35
125	Ireland	5,1	36
100	Austria	9,0	41
130	Croatia	4,0	41
37	Poland	41,0	45

149	Slovenia	2,1	45
64	Romania	19,9	47
116	Slovakia	5,8	49
Країни-кандидати на вступ до ЄС			
41	Ukraine	36,7	28
105	Serbia	7,1	31
169	Montenegro	0,6	31
138	Albania	2,8	33
132	Georgia	3,7	37
150	North Macedonia	2,1	40
137	Bosnia and Herzegovina	3,2	46
134	Moldavia	3,4	50

Compiled from the source [6]

As evident from the data presented in the table, Belgium has the smallest share of rural population to the total population of the country, with only 1%, while Slovakia has the largest at 49%. Meanwhile, in the world population ranking, Belgium ranks 82nd, while Slovakia ranks 149th in terms of population size. On average among EU countries, the share of rural population is 25.1%. Within this indicator, countries such as Spain, Bulgaria, Malta, Germany, Czech Republic, Italy, and Lithuania are notable. Undoubtedly, the majority of rural populations (40% to 49%) are found in countries where agricultural traditions are still prevalent.

Regarding EU accession candidate countries, the average share of rural population among them is 37%. These are countries where agricultural production has historically outweighed industry. It is believed that these countries, upon accession to the Union, could significantly influence the social development of the EU, strengthen agricultural production, and qualitatively change the social structure by increasing the number of people employed in agriculture.

Overall, it should be noted that while the share of rural population in EU countries constitutes a quarter of the total population, in many countries, the percentage of those employed in agriculture is low, ranging from 5% to 15%. Often, this indicates a relatively high level of unemployment in rural areas of European

countries. Moreover, Eastern and Southern European countries, which are still experiencing crises in all spheres of societal life, are characterized by phenomena such as poverty, low levels of production/business activity, often alcoholism, and others. These negative trends have increasingly drawn the attention of national governments, prompting them to implement various reforms – land, healthcare, education, social security, etc. These reforms aim to address issues such as creating new jobs in rural areas, improving the quality of life for rural residents, and creating opportunities to attract young specialists and support their initiatives in developing agricultural enterprises and farming.

Since humans are not only products of social relations but also the main source and creator of society, the preservation of their well-being brings to the forefront such human needs as life expectancy and health, access to necessary knowledge, and free access to resources that ensure a decent standard of living. To meet these needs, each country establishes a system of social protection at the national level, consisting of economic, social, and organizational measures that concern not only the support of vulnerable social groups but also the population as a whole. These measures are implemented through "material support for economically active populations (through social insurance); pension provision; social assistance to the most vulnerable categories; material assistance to families with children; compensation, indexing, and benefits for the population; social services, etc." Additionally, countries make efforts to improve the social infrastructure of rural areas (which is insufficient in many countries, such as lack of paved roads between villages, absence of transportation links and communication, sports facilities, etc.), aiming to make life in rural areas more comfortable for its residents and attractive for young people.

In EU countries, to address agrarian issues, which are a key component of the social development of rural areas, a Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has been implemented since 1958. Its main task is to establish a common internal European market, define the requirements and opportunities for countries. At the EU level, rules

are established to support national strategic plans, ensure the quality of agricultural and food products, and finance, manage, and monitor the implementation of the CAP.

Throughout its history, the policy has evolved, and in the 21st century, cohesion policy is integrated with the EU's most important policies and is considered the main investment policy of the European Community. Today, EU cohesion policy uses effective tools such as programming. For the period 2021-2027, 379 new programs have been developed, one-third of the EU budget has been allocated for their implementation. These programs are developed according to the main objectives of cohesion policy: overcoming the digital divide, innovation; adaptation to climate change, energy, European Green Deal; digital and green transition in transport; social and inclusive growth according to the European Pillar of Social Rights (right to education, health care, inclusion, work, etc.); expansion of European territorial cooperation, and so on. As for the prospects, EU efforts until 2030 are aimed at achieving such indicators as: increasing the quality employment rate to 78%; encouraging the participation of at least 60% of adults in education annually; reducing the poverty level by 15 million people, including at least 5 million children. Among the key goals is the mitigation of the consequences of demographic transformation, leading to a reduction in the working-age population. Special attention is, of course, paid to remote and underdeveloped regions of the EU.

At the joint communicative events of the EU, issues of social development are addressed, including the need to provide rural areas with public transport, raise the level of culture among local residents, improve living conditions, household services, as well as find ways to address demographic issues – such as reducing the rural population, aging, migration, and so on. Measures aimed at addressing the main problems of social development in rural areas are defined in key legal documents, including the European Climate Pact, which is part of the European Green Deal (includes strategies for sustainable, clean, safe, and healthy Europe); the European Cancer Plan (supports new approaches to cancer prevention, treatment, and care); the European Health Insurance Card (provides access to medical services if a person falls

ill while traveling in EU countries); the European digital platform Europeana (provides access to various exhibits from collections of over 4,000 cultural institutions); the Erasmus Program (provides opportunities for education or training courses in any EU country), and many others.

Among the EU's union initiatives programs that have equalizing significance for regions, we can mention the LIDER+ program. This program, aimed at supporting joint projects in rural areas, initiates active participation at the local level – supporting officials and active citizens in their desire for the long-term use of the potential of their territories. Therefore, the main directions of the LIDER+ program are: support for local producers, adding value to local products; improving the quality of life in rural areas; integrating information technologies into rural areas; assisting underdeveloped regions, and more.

Research into the main aspects of EU cohesion policy, relevant measures, and programs, provides grounds for the conclusion that the main problems of EU member states in the social development of rural areas include: depopulation in remote areas; the poverty level of rural residents is significantly higher than in cities; access to components of social infrastructure in rural areas is significantly lower than in cities; in rural areas, access to internet services, digital technologies/skills is lower than in cities; low level of transportation provision and road quality, and so on.

Conclusions. It has been established that one of the theoretical and methodological problems in the world is the identification of territorial typologies (for example, there is no unified approach to defining rural areas), which negatively affects the collection of statistical information about their development. Most often, criteria such as population size and economic activity are used to collect statistical data.

Research into population indicators of EU countries and countries aspiring to join the EU provides grounds for the assumption that after accession to the EU, the composition of rural areas may qualitatively change (candidate countries have a higher share of rural population compared to EU member countries; their accession to

the EU will increase the share of rural population in the community); on the other hand, the low level of social protection of the population in candidate countries for EU accession requires greater financial, organizational, and managerial efforts from the EU and may negatively affect funding for underdeveloped regions of EU member countries.

It has been determined that joint (cohesive) policies are being implemented in EU countries to address the social development of rural areas, which vary depending on the current needs of the regions and are aimed at addressing the main problems of the territories (including rural ones), including those of a social nature.

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