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Community Enterprises: Snapshots from Italy

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Abstract

Community enterprises are not a new type of organisation, but in recent years they have attracted increasing interest for their role in various areas, particularly in depleted contexts. Numerous studies analysed these enterprises in their natural context, but national and international overviews are lacking. We, therefore, do not know how many community enterprises there are, in which sectors they predominantly operate, and so on. Due to the scarcity of data, it is very difficult to provide a picture of community enterprises at the international level, whereas it is more feasible to represent these realities at the national level. Although Italian community enterprises are organisations that are not easily identifiable in the available databases, this paper aims to provide some snapshots to sketch the phenomenon in Italy. The work has a heterogeneous audience because it is of interest to scholars, practitioners, and policymakers. It has implications from a research and practical point of view, as it develops a way to identify Italian community enterprises and provides valuable elements for understanding the efficacy of specific policies and actions, and a piece of knowledge to build a picture of community enterprises.

Keywords: community enterprise, community cooperative, Italy, active citizenship, secondary data analysis

Introduction

In recent decades, economic and energy crises, pandemic, reduced public spending, fewer job opportunities, a lack of services, the rising cost of living, etc., have worsened the living conditions of large sections of the population, even in developed countries

and cities (De Muro *et al.*, 2011; Dueilla and Turrini, 2014; Perez and Matsaganis, 2018; Harari *et al.*, 2022). Consequently, the rate of population at risk of poverty and social exclusion has increased in several countries. For example, in 2017, Eurostat (2019) estimated it to be around 113 million people in the EU-28 who lived in households at risk of poverty or social exclusion, equivalent to 22.4% of the population (Appendix A). As Bernaschi (2020) notes, Europe is facing serious inequalities and is struggling to preserve social cohesion, economic efficiency, and political freedoms.

Unfortunately, our institutions, which are often set up to deal with single issues (sometimes in limited scopes), are not always suited to address problems that need to be tackled from different angles (Linhart and Papp, 2010). Therefore, to reverse the deterioration in living conditions and revitalise depleted contexts, initiatives are developed where citizens and authorities work together as equal partners, as well as bottom-up initiatives inspired by the motivation of individuals, small collectives, or communities (active citizenship), and characterised by varying degrees of autonomy (Olsson *et al.*, 2004; Van der Jagt *et al.*, 20016). Active citizenship initiatives can take place at various levels (small and large-scale projects) and involve people in various modes and activities. The collective action of these initiatives (e.g., community enterprises, social cooperatives, or farmers' groups) plays an important role in improving living conditions. Therefore, it deserves the attention of scholars and practitioners.

In particular, small-scale projects include community enterprises (CEs), which are a peculiar entrepreneurial form of active citizenship providing jobs, services, and other benefits to the population of the target community (Somerville and McElwee, 2011; Bailey, 2012; Utaranakorn and Kiatmanaroach, 2021). As pointed out by Buratti *et al.* (2022b) community enterprises are a social phenomenon that can take different forms, depending on the community involvement, geographical area of origin, local culture, types of activities implemented, etc. Unfortunately, they are not easily identifiable by a specific type of enterprise (e.g., in Italy CEs take the form of cooperatives, but elsewhere this is not the case). For these reasons, CEs are difficult to analyse as a group of enterprises. In fact, as highlighted in a recent literature review (Buratti *et al.*, 2022b) quantitative studies are lacking and the readership has qualitative knowledge derived mainly from case studies.

The collection and processing of data on CEs and conversion into knowledge represent crucial tasks, as the use of this knowledge can support the decision-making processes of institutions and community entrepreneurs. Performing an analysis on an international level is almost impossible in a study developed by one or a few researchers. However, national scale analyses can represent a starting point or a piece of the puzzle and are therefore of interest, especially where there is a lack of overview on CEs, as in the Italian case. This is the goal of this paper, as it aims to provide a series of snapshots on Italian CEs, thus expanding the few data available today. The work is

organized as follows: the second section presents the literature background and focuses on some key elements. In the third section, I summarise the method of analysis. Then I provide and describe a series of snapshots of Italian community enterprises. Finally, I comment on the empirical evidence and conclude the paper.

Literature background

Community enterprises or community institutions do not represent a new type of organisation, neither in Italy nor abroad. In fact, studying the literature on the subject, several experiences emerge (Peredo and Chrisman, 2006; Del Baldo, 2014), such as the “Magnifica Comunità di Fiemme”¹, founded in the 12th century (Duinker and Pulkki, 1998), the electric cooperatives born in the Alps at the end of the 19th century, such as the “Società cooperativa per l’illuminazione elettrica”, founded in Chiavenna in 1894 (Mori, 2015; Mori and Sforzi, 2018), the “Mondragon Co-operative Corporation”, which was created in Spain in 1956 (Macleod *et al.*, 1997), the “Community of Chaquicocha Trade Fair” (Peredo, 2003) or “Floriculture Using Hotsprings Energy” (OECD, 1995), created in Peru and Japan respectively in the 1970s.

Although many studies on community enterprises are available, there is no broad convergence on the definition and the type of entrepreneurship that characterises them (Buratti *et al.*, 2022b). Frequently, CEs are intended as a particular category of social enterprise due to the social nature of their aims (Pearce, 2003; Tracey *et al.*, 2005). However, CEs may take various forms, depending on the type of stakeholder involvement, the features of the target area, and the type of activities carried out. Therefore, different definitions can be found in the literature. This leads to diversity in definitions to the extent that Albanese (2021) and Buratti *et al.* (2022b) view CE as a fuzzy concept. Johannisson and Nilsson (1989) described CEs as enterprises aimed at both business venturing and community revitalization. In defining CEs, Peredo and Chrisman (2006) focused on the community, which acts collectively as an entrepreneur and enterprise for the common good. This view of the community as a unified body of individuals has not always been shared, as there may be CEs that involve only part of the target community (Somerville and McElwee, 2011). Following the Development Trusts Association (2000), CEs work for sustainable regeneration in a specific community developing a mix of economic, environmental, cultural, and social activities. They are independent, not-for-profit organizations and involve local people. Considering this, some authors view CEs as hybrid organisations (Tracey *et al.*, 2011).

Following Buratti *et al.* (2022b), several distinguishing features are useful in identifying CEs. They are usually bottom-up collective entrepreneurial initiatives. CEs aim to achieve economic, social and environmental goals for the well-being of the target community and carry out a mixture of activities (economic, environmental,

¹ Details are available at the following link: <https://www.mcfiemme.eu/>.

cultural and social) (Albanese, 2021 and 2022). CEs, therefore, pursue multiple logics (profitability and social goals) and are locally accountable (Van Meerkerk *et al.*, 2018; Kleinhans *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, they usually grow in depleted contexts, namely in areas characterised by depopulation, low-income levels, lack of services, and job opportunities (Buratti *et al.*, 2021; Albanese, 2022). Given all this, a suitable definition is that provided by Buratti *et al.* (2022b, p.20), which consider CE as “*an organization established by people living and/or working in a spatially defined community, that engages in commercial activity. By leveraging local resources and social capital, it operates for the development of the local community, by bringing economic, social and/or environmental benefits. It is locally accountable and involves local people in its activities and governance*”.

In the vast majority of cases, Italian CEs are cooperatives (Mori and Sforzi, 2018; Buratti *et al.*, 2022a). This feature probably stems from the long cooperative tradition of Italy (Bernardi, 2007), the mutualism at the heart of these initiatives and the advantages that the cooperative form offers in terms of democratic governance and interrelations between the enterprise and the target community (Buratti *et al.*, 2022a). As shown in many studies (Euricse, 2016; IRECOOP, 2016; Me.Co., 2019), Italian community cooperatives (CCs) may differ, even considerably, and it is not easy to identify the determinants. However, the specificities of the areas where CCs are born (Buratti *et al.*, 2022a), such as inner areas (UVAL, 2014), and the regulatory variable play an important role. In particular, Italian CCs may differ as there are different regional laws governing community cooperatives in Italian regions¹. In addition, at the national level, there is no law recognising CCs as a type of enterprise or a cooperative category. Therefore, the label community cooperative indicates status and is not a recognised type of enterprise (Alleanza delle Cooperative Italiane, 2018).

As pointed out by Interreg Me.Co. Project (2019) and Buratti *et al.* (2022b), the literature essentially offers qualitative knowledge on CEs and a mapping of these companies and quantitative analyses would be necessary. In the Italian case, no consolidated data on CCs are available. A survey was recently conducted by Venturi and Miccolis (2021), but only an executive summary is available (released after filling in a form). The purpose of this paper is to support the development of an overview of Italian CCs and to identify a method to map and regularly analyse these organisations.

Methodology

As pointed out in previous work (Albanese, 2022), Italian CCs are elusive organisations as they are difficult to detect in databases as community enterprises. This is an obstacle and prevents the development of periodic analyses. To this end, the only certainty available is that Italian CEs are cooperatives in the vast majority of

¹ An overview of the main features of the laws of some Italian regions can be found at the following link: <https://www.legacoop.coop/cooperativedicomunita/sintesi-delle-leggi-regionali/>.

cases (Euricse, 2016; IRECOOP, 2016; Me.Co., 2019). To tackle the most challenging task, namely the identification of Italian CEs, I relied on this feature. In Italy, there is in fact a register of cooperatives¹ in which active cooperatives and winding up cooperatives (not those that have been discontinued) are listed. Therefore, this register contains the Italian CEs. The problem is that the register permanently contains more than 100,000 records. Since the community cooperative is not a recognised category of enterprise, it is not possible to filter the register and identify Italian CCs. However, by applying a few keyword queries, it was possible to considerably reduce the number of database records. After this, searches were conducted on all cooperatives in the subset to recognise Italian CCs. In particular, searches were conducted on the web and the main social networks (Facebook and Instagram). This demanding activity allowed for not only the exclusion of enterprises that are not CCs but also the identification of cooperatives that were excluded from the filters initially applied. A typical case is when, while searching for information on community cooperative A, it was discovered that the latter received funding together with community cooperatives B and C. Furthermore, by searching the web and literature analysis, additional CCs and some discontinued CCs were identified. The latter are few in number, but their study can be very interesting in understanding the weaknesses of Italian CCs. This time-consuming activity was completed in early 2021 and resulted in the selection of 229 Italian CCs founded before 2021. Based on this sample, I developed a secondary data analysis (Johnston, 2014) by exploiting data available in different databases such as Bureau van Dijk's AIDA and MISE's database on cooperative companies.

Main results

In Italy, the phenomenon of community cooperation has accelerated significantly since 2015. In fact, considering the year of the foundation of the selected CCs, one can see that the areas assigned to the last years fill a large part of the treemap visualisation (see Figure 1). As noted by Buratti *et al.* (2021) through the analysis of an exemplary case, among Italian community cooperatives some enterprises were not born as community cooperatives but have become CCs. This trend is difficult to analyse by studying such a large sample since specific in-depth studies and interviews would have to be conducted. However, some signs may come from the cooperatives in the sample that changed their name by including the term “community”. In about 4% of the cases, this modification occurred, and it is interesting to note that these companies were established before 2012. Therefore, this seems to be a way for existing enterprises to identify themselves as community cooperatives.

But where are community cooperatives located? Figure 2 shows how the sample is spread across the Italian regions. The highest density is in Tuscany and Emilia Romagna, followed by Abruzzo, Apulia, Liguria, and Campania. Taking into account

¹ The register can be consulted at the following link: <https://dati.mise.gov.it/index.php/lista-cooperative>.

the year of foundation and location, Figure 3 offers some heatmaps showing where community cooperatives have grown in Italy. Until 2010 these enterprises were mainly present in specific areas of northern and central Italy. Subsequently, the number of CCs grew in neighbouring areas, probably in the wake of some successful experiences. In the last five years, the phenomenon has grown noticeably and has affected a large part of Italy.

However, it should be noted that, while there are many positive experiences, there are also community cooperatives that have faced difficulties and have gone out of business. These cooperatives account for almost 10% of the sample (Figure 4). CCs operate in most cases (more than 80%) in economic sectors related to the service macro sector, namely social assistance, commerce, landscape maintenance and care, tourism and cultural heritage management. The form of the social cooperative is quite widespread (about 23% of the sample), although other categories of cooperatives are very common among Italian CCs (Figure 4), such as production and work cooperatives or cooperatives belonging to the residual class of “other cooperatives”. The latter class assumes a significant weight within the sample.



Figure 1 – Italian community cooperatives by year of foundation
 Source: elaboration on AIDA data (Bureau van Dijk)

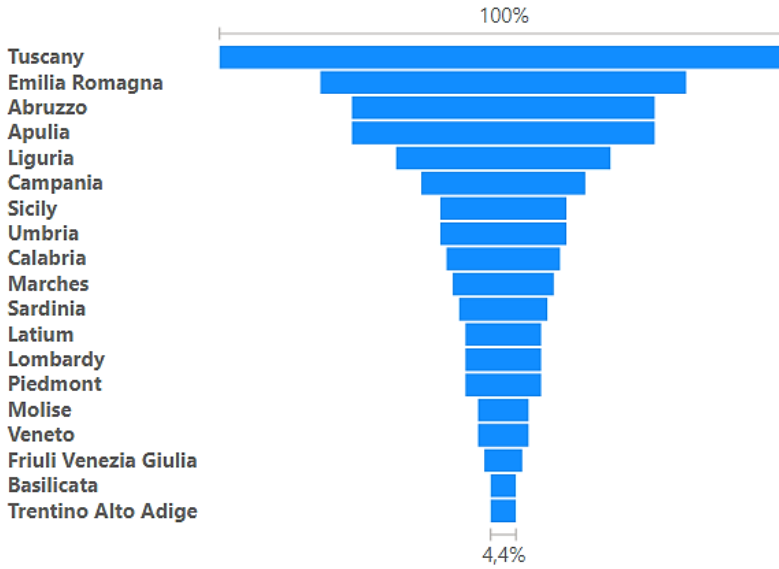
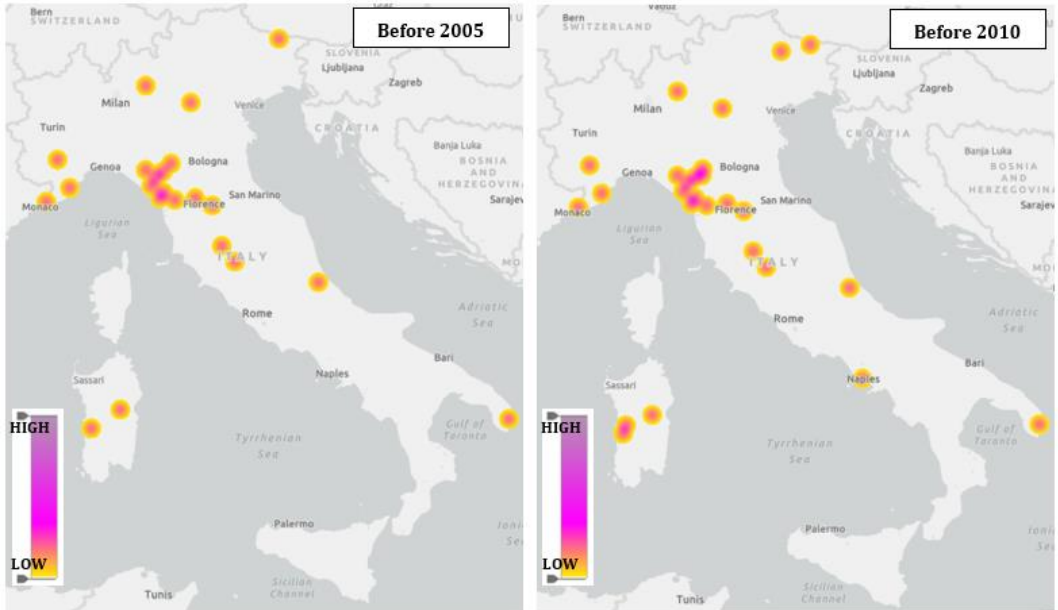


Figure 2 – Italian community cooperatives by region. Source: elaboration on AIDA data (Bureau van Dijk)



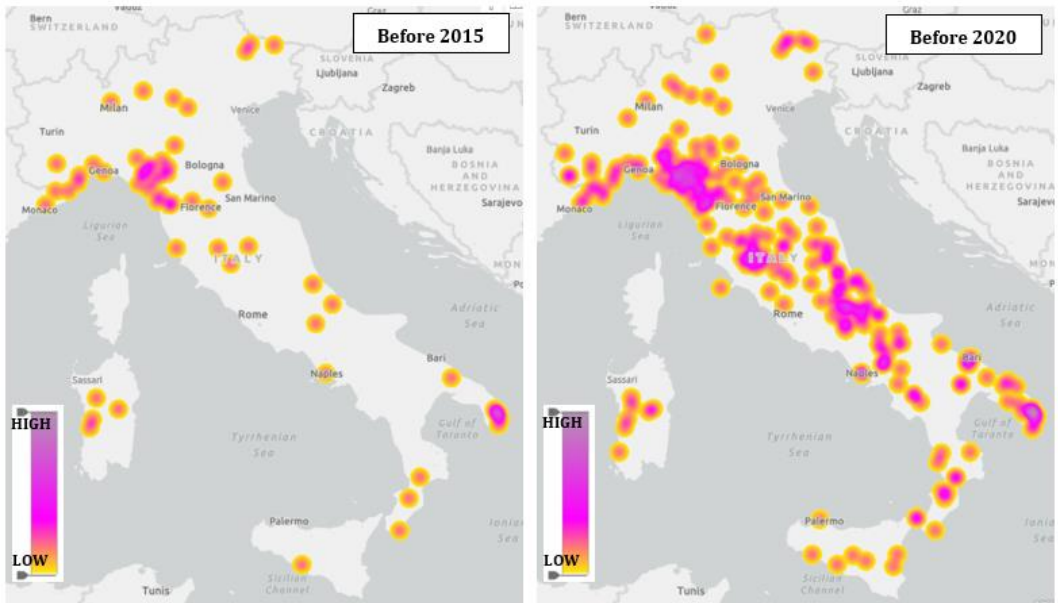


Figure 3 – Locations of Italian community cooperatives

Notes: the heatmaps consider enterprises born as CC and become CC and include some discontinued CCs.

Source: elaboration on AIDA data (Bureau van Dijk)

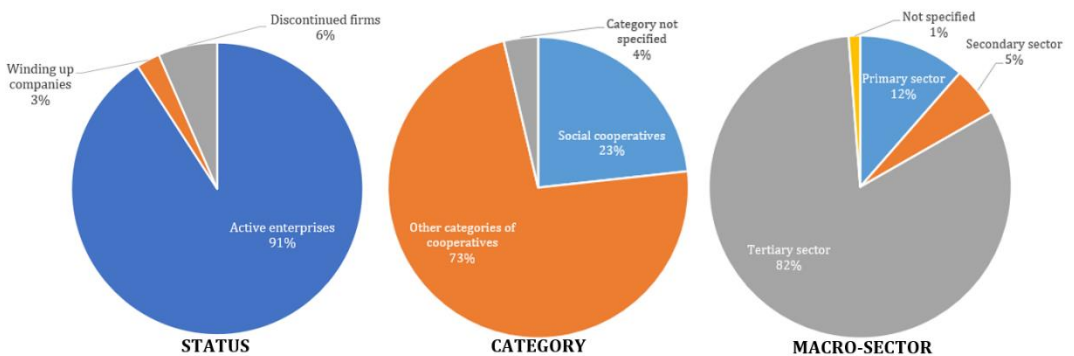


Figure 4 - The status, category, and macro-sectors of the selected CCs

Notes: The class “Other categories of cooperatives” includes the categories of cooperatives that are not social enterprises. The class “Category not specified” includes cooperatives with missing data.

Source: elaboration on AIDA data (Bureau van Dijk)

Discussion

The method used to identify the sample appears to be effective, as the number of CCs identified is higher than the sample of the analysis developed by Venturi and Miccolis (2021), who mapped 188 CCs at the end of June 2021. Since no one can currently be certain about the total number of Italian CCs, it is not possible to indicate the level of representativeness of the sample. However, considering the only analysis available to date, I believe that the level of representativeness of this work is good and that its results expand knowledge of Italian CCs. Unfortunately, the method used has some limitations in terms of efficiency, since the activities for the identification of CCs started in June 2019. However, the heaviest work has been done, and updates can now be carried out on a six-monthly or annual basis to have an up-to-date picture.

As Figures 1 and 2 as well as Venturi and Miccolis (2021) show, community cooperation is growing in Italy and some Italian regions include a high number of CCs. Different factors may have contributed to this feature. Certainly, the presence of disadvantaged areas is an important factor. However, inner areas exist in many Italian regions. Therefore, other determinants are proposed. Regions with a high ranking have issued regional laws defining community cooperatives and recognising their role in terms of economic and social development and territorial cohesion. In particular, some regions have implemented policies and actions and provided funding to support community cooperatives. For example, Tuscany went on to offer new funding and in 2022 published a call aimed at facilitating the creation, development, and consolidation of CCs. Through this call, nonrepayable contributions are provided equally to 80% of the amount of the admitted project (for a value from a minimum of 20,000 euros to a maximum of 100,000 euros). Therefore, to support community entrepreneurship, it is not enough to issue a law, but financial support must also be provided since in most cases community enterprises operate where traditional enterprises have previously failed. Another factor that seems to favour the birth of community enterprises is the attitude towards cooperation. Emilia Romagna has long traditions in cooperative enterprises (Degl'Innocenti, 1990; Bartlett and Pridham, 1991), so there is *humus* in this region that favours the creation of CCs. This is combined with the imitation effect (Santarelli and Tran, 2021) since Emilia Romagna has two of the most famous Italian CCs, which are internationally successful cases, namely "Valle dei Cavalieri" and "I Briganti di Cerreto" (Buratti *et al.*, 2022a). These considerations are confirmed by some evidence from a case study developed in Interreg Me.Co. Project (2019). In an interview, in fact, one of the representatives of the community cooperative "Impossible" (located in Reggio Emilia) stated that the cooperative was born in the wake of the successful experiences of the CCs "Valle dei Cavalieri" and "I Briganti di Cerreto". Consistent results come from Figure 3, which shows that the areas with the highest density of CCs are located on the border between Tuscany and Emilia Romagna, especially in the province of Reggio Emilia and neighbouring areas.

Although the literature emphasises the resilience of CEs (Somerville and McElwee, 2011; Depedri and Turri, 2015), they are often small organisations that may encounter difficulties that jeopardise the enterprise lifecycle. In the sample, the mortality rate of CCs is around 10% (Figure 4). However, this percentage is expected to increase due to the impact of the pandemic on a large part of Italian companies, especially SMEs. In fact, looking at the 2019 annual reports of the sample, the average size in terms of employees is less than 6 and the average revenue is around 240,000 euros. The literature analysed qualifies CEs as a sub-species of social enterprises. The available evidence partly confirms this, as around 23% of the sample takes the form of social cooperatives (Figure 4). However, it would be interesting to understand why numerous CCs fall into the residual class “other cooperatives”.

Finally, given the places where CCs are usually born and their purposes, it is not surprising that the sectors where they operate are predominantly the tertiary and primary macro sectors. In this regard, it must be specified that the data refer to the sector in which CC mainly operates, but since CCs are in most cases multibusiness (Buratti *et al.*, 2021), the results of Figure 4 have some limitations.

Conclusion

Community enterprises are important because they generate social, environmental, and economic benefits. Therefore, having an overview of these organisations (places of birth, activities, main issues, etc.) is useful for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners. In terms of suggestions for future research, the study calls for more in-depth and updated analyses. From this perspective, it is recommended that quantitative research be advanced on a national and international scale. Whether on a national level, these projects can be carried out by small groups of researchers. However, as Buratti *et al.* (2022b) note, the development of an international picture must necessarily involve institutional actors (e.g., the European Social Enterprise Network or EMES).

This paper seeks to expand knowledge of Italian CCs. The empirical results partly confirm and partly complement the findings of the only available survey on Italian CCs (Venturi and Miccolis, 2021). The study defined a method for the identification of Italian CCs that will allow the picture to be updated periodically. This is a significant achievement considering that CCs are companies that are difficult to identify in the available databases.

In addition, considering that CEs are multipurpose enterprises (Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 1982), they should invest in reporting and disclosing their achievements to different stakeholders. This is not an easy task because CEs are often small enterprises, which may therefore lack suitable expertise. However, support could come from future studies which should develop a flexible and easily applicable approach to periodically communicate the results of these organisations.

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Appendix A

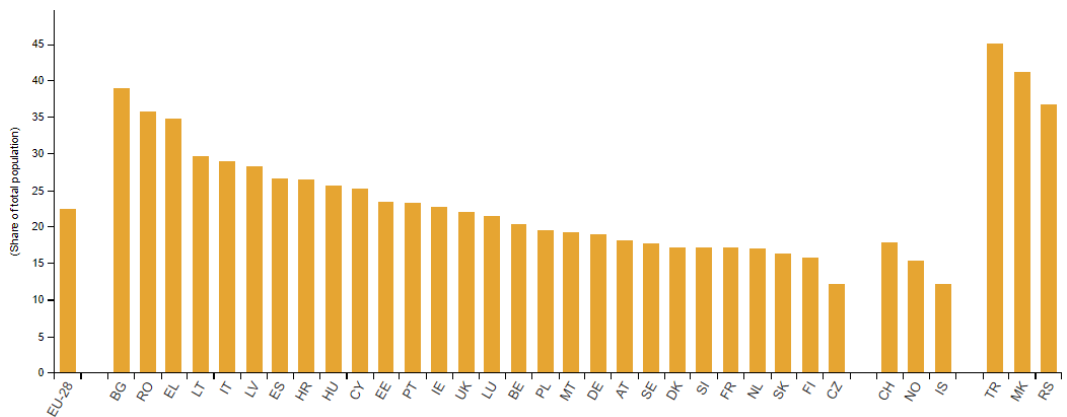


Figure A1 – EU population at risk of poverty of social exclusion (rate, 2017)

Notes: Switzerland, Norway, Iceland, Turkey, North Macedonia: 2016 data instead of 2017

Source: Eurostat (2019)