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The EU and the Western Balkans' response during the migrant crisis

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Abstract

Background: The European Green Deal does not consider the issue of migrant inclusion, nor are there specific data on the risk of migrants falling into energy poverty, social exclusion, and other data that could help create an effective policy that would be applied in this area. The main objective of this study is to assess the current status of the migrant population when it comes to risk from poverty (including energy poverty) and social exclusion in four (4) EU countries with the most significant influx of migrants.

Results: An analysis included two main indicators aimed to describe level of risk of migrants to fall into energy poverty: (a) persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion by group of citizenship (population aged 18 and over, male and female); and (b) Migrant Integration Policy Index. The results revealed that foreign-born citizens have greater poverty or social exclusion risk. In 2020, citizens of Sweden that were not born in the EU28 had more than 360% greater chance than national citizens of being at risk of poverty (including energy poverty) or social exclusion. In France, foreign citizens were 340% more likely to be exposed to poverty than national citizens, while Germany records the highest rate: 250% in 2020. The United Kingdom rates demonstrate an increased 10% (2014–2018) difference in the risk of poverty (including energy poverty) or social exclusion for foreign citizens. In addition, results obtained by using the Migrant Integration Policy Index showed highest level of Anti-discrimination score is highest in Sweden, and lowest in Albania. On the other hand, Labor market mobility score is highest in Sweden, and lowest in Slovenia.

Conclusions: Bearing in mind the results of the research, the primary recommendations elaborated in the paper are as follows: (a) up-to-date collection and innovation of data for the migrant population (including data on energy poverty); (b) creation of conditions for more efficient employment of migrants; (c) adoption of special measures to protect migrants from energy poverty, and (d) strengthening of cooperation between the EU and to non-EU countries on the migrant route.

Keywords: Energy poverty, Poverty, Migrant Integration Policy Index, Migrant population, Integration, Social exclusion

Background

Migrations of labor force and refugees to Europe is not a new process, as is usually perceived by a set of rich countries that have regulated living conditions with valuable social programs for their population, with Western Europe presenting the main recipient of all of the types

of migration [1]. Additionally, substantial migrant communities have already been formed among the countries such as Germany, Sweden, United Kingdom (UK), and France [2]. The differences visible in regard to the advantageous living conditions within countries of the EU in comparison with those in North and sub-Saharan Africa have caused compelling and perpetual migratory pressure towards Europe [3]. The leaders of EU member states had to manage this problem during the migrant/refugee crisis and presently share a collective

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responsibility to overcome the challenges imposed by the problem. In this paper, a comparative analysis of the EU and the Western Balkan migration route response to the crisis is conducted with the intent to determine the current socio-economic (risk of poverty, labor market mobility, anti-discrimination) position of the general migrant population in their host countries. The International Organization for Migration, in its Displacement Tracking Matrix Western Balkan Overview, defines the WB route as follows: two EU member countries (Croatia and Slovenia) and five (5) non-EU countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia) [4]. According to the data from the IOM Report 2015, this route was the third most important route for the influx of migrants to the Western European countries [5]. Along the WB migration route, the Republic of Serbia represented one of the main “springboards” for entering the progressive countries of the EU. The Republic of Serbia, like other countries in the Balkans amid the migrant crisis, was primarily a country of transit [6]. Since the countries of the WB region were not the final destination for most migrants, an emphasis in this paper is made on the four EU destination countries. In the past decade, several humanitarian crises have affected the EU, such as the 2014 Migrant crisis, the Global pandemic, and the Ukraine war. The global pandemic has impacted all facets of society, and the effects of the crisis are yet to be determined. The Ukraine war brought, *among other things*, new waves of migrants to the EU, which in turn sparked a second migrant crisis. All three crises are still ongoing, and it is difficult to say which one is receiving more attention. However, for a certain phenomenon to be the subject of a research, a certain time distance is required. Given that the migrant crisis reached its peak in 2015 (when the highest influx of migrants was recorded on the territory of the EU) [7], the author believes there is a sufficient timeframe that can provide an overview of the current position of migrants in society and thus define the direction in which their integration into society is moving. On the other hand, for the contextual understanding of the research subject, it is necessary to describe other pressing challenges faced by the EU.

Energy poverty is perhaps one of the biggest challenges the EU is facing, especially since 2021, as there has been an increase in the number of households with no access to basic energy services [8]. Although (energy) poverty could be associated with undeveloped and developing countries, it has become an assumed reality in all countries worldwide. There is a noticeably growing trend of energy poverty in EU countries, and according to Eurostat data, about 8% of the European population were deprived of normal heating in 2020 due to high energy prices [9]. Furthermore, the environment is being

negatively impacted by the current practices of using energy at unsustainable rates, and the EU has adopted the European Green Deal (EGD) to combat the shortage of nonrenewable energy supplies, particularly fossil fuels [10]. The EGD primary goal is to transform climate and environmental challenges into trade, development, and international cooperation opportunities while making the EU’s economy sustainable [11]. It is crucial to emphasize how ambitious and how complex the EGD is for the EU member states. This initiative proposes that all 27 nations within the EU meet bold goals, cutting the greenhouse gas emission by 50–55% by 2030 (which equates to a 40% reduction of emission levels in 1990) [12]. Moreover, the undertaking advocates that, by 2050, the entire EU reaches a no emit of climate-heating gases into the atmosphere at all [13].

It is not uncommon for researchers to describe the United Nations (UN) 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development of 2015, which aims to eradicate poverty in all forms, as one of the postulates of EU Green Deal Agenda [14]. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) address different aspects of poverty, but for the purposes of this paper, it is important to mention Goal 7 (SDG 7)—Access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all [15]. There are both direct and indirect interconnections between the SDG 7 and other SDGs because energy plays an assisting role in social and economic development [16]. Although recent research studies show that the benefits of these interconnections outweigh the negative effects, changes in energy systems will be necessary to meet migration-related goals [17]. For instance, there is an interconnection between energy systems and the SDG related to labor rights and working conditions of migrants [18], and under “[Discussion and recommendations](#)” section, the author will elaborate in more detail the interconnection between the SDG and migration.

The EU Green Deal document climaxes that the transition to green and sustainable economies relies on developing new knowledge and skills [19]. This process creates a lot of room for new jobs to emerge. Still, it also makes it necessary to think about how to acquire the skills, knowledge, and competencies the society will require more systematically in the future. This paper focuses on understanding how this transition impacts the migrant population and examines how institutions and policymakers have dealt with this problem. There is a proliferation of papers that elaborate on the Deal’s benefits. Still, researchers have not focused as much on the (un)just transition of the general migrant population to the green industry [20]. The current labor market in the EU will need to be transformed for the Deal to be successful [21]. Although the Deal has been eagerly awaited, the interconnection between migration, migrants and/

or displaced persons was mentioned only once, pointing to the conclusion that the Green Deal was made mainly for EU citizens as primary stakeholders and beneficiaries [22]. It appears that there is a gap between the Deal and one of its likely consequences: exclusion for (low-skilled) migrants.

As part of the EGD, the European Commission has also disclosed the Just Transition Mechanism. This tool guarantees workers in carbon-intensive sectors and communities that depend on those sectors the benefit from the transition to cleaner and more sustainable economies [23]. The Just Transition Mechanism highlights the importance of engaging affected groups and (non-) governmental organizations and providing financial support [24]. For example, in 2020 the Polish coal region provided the initiative to ensure that those affected by the transition are socially included, as well as repurposing post-industrial and post-mining regions with new environmental purposes [25]. The EGD envisages specific protection for particularly vulnerable groups, which are expected to be in a more difficult position during the transition. Still, even at this point, the EGD does not mention migrants [26].

In the International Labor Organization (ILO) publication entitled “Extending social protection to migrant workers, refugees and their families, a guide for policymakers and practitioners 2021”, an emphasis is made on the importance of providing unemployment compensation and other forms of governmental assistance (social protection) for migrants [27]. This document directly mentions the migrant population, stating that it is also necessary to extend social protection to this group of citizens in order to reduce poverty and inequality. The ILO established the Decent Work Agenda in 1999. The four pillars of the Decent Work Agenda are social protection, the possibility to find employment and adequate legal protection of workers [28]. The ILO adopted a resolution and a set of conclusions at its 102nd session (2013) regarding sustainable development, decent work, green jobs, and the development of regulatory documents for all of those mentioned above [29]. Despite the ILO’s support for a just transition, none of the recent publications address migrants in the green industry through the Decent Work Agenda. This demonstrates that the need for a more thorough and effective strategy for the migrant population is imperative. Due to the uneven nature of the transition, it is essential to address migrants as a significant component of economic prosperity, and to apply to them a specific, more thorough employment and social protection strategy. Academics have debated the causes of poor integration. The main reasons that have been highlighted are the educational and cultural milieu of migrants, failures in the integration

system’s development, and citizens’ resistance to accepting migrants on various grounds [30]. In 2010, Angela Merkel (German Chancellor at the time) said the concept of people from different cultural backgrounds coexisting amicably “side by side” did not work and that the burden of assimilating into German society fell on (im)migrants, adding that the [multicultural] approach failed [31]. After reviewing publications concerning migrant integration, the author noted that there is no consensus among academics regarding what constitutes successful integration. In the author’s opinion, the traditional assimilation theory is consistent with the reality of migrants in the EU today. Warner and Srole were the first to put forth the traditional assimilation theory in 1945. They held that immigrants were expected to change almost entirely to assimilate with the dominant (mainstream) culture and society [32]. Numerous researchers criticized their approach, but Blanca Garcés-Mascareñas and Rinus Peninx offer a brief critique of this theory in their publication “Integration Processes and Policies in Europe?”:

1. The definition of “mainstream culture” suggests the existence of social circumstances that are homogeneous and interconnected.
2. Discrimination and employment market inequality can delay or even prevent (im)migrants’ integration.
3. The integration processes are diverse and can be influenced by factors such as government integration policies, the public attitude concerning (im)migrants, various environmental factors, etc. [33].

The first indicator implies that the migrant population have the same values and beliefs and share a homogenous societal culture, but the diversity of migrants coming from countries and regions of North and sub-Saharan Africa, reported in the migrant influx 2014–2020, proves otherwise [34]. The second indicator shows (see “Results” section) that migrants are at greater risk of social poverty or exclusion, and thus provide the argument that the employment market is at a disadvantage to general migrant population.

In addition to the critical analysis of the traditional assimilation theory, the author expands the third indicator: the securitization of migration negatively affects successful integration of migrants into society. According to securitization theorists, any topic can be positioned on a non-politicized, politicized, or securitized spectrum [35]. A non-politicized issue is one that is not in the public interest if there is no public discourse, whereas politicized issues are part of public policies and require state activities and resource allocation, and less frequently some other form of state action [36]. Securitized issues, on the other hand, are presented as existential threats

that necessitate measures and actions beyond standard political procedures [36]. As a result, a problem, situation, or event (often already politicized) is securitized when its solution involves non-standard measures and procedures [36]. A turning point in the securitization of migration exemplifies the Report by the European Union to the Committee, established under paragraph 6 of Resolution 1373 and adopted by the Security Council at its 4385th meeting on 28 September 2001 [37]. This Report contributed to the alteration of the asylum systems in the EU, permitting its member states to deny the right to international protection and residence to all persons who are thought to be terrorists or pose a terrorist threat [38]. Correspondingly, it specifies that foreigners who do not meet certain conditions are obliged to leave the territory of the “Schengen States” [37].

During the crisis, there was no amalgamated humanitarian response [39]. According to the norms of the European law as well as the legal obligations imposed by the Public International Law, all EU member states must allow safe passage for migrants and provide them with protection [40]. In reality, this was not the case with several EU countries. Due to the lack of general policy and binding EU directions, and in order to maintain a controllable, orderly influx of migrants, many EU countries have taken “self-directed” sporadic measures in response to the migration crisis. Moreover, in June 2015, the Hungarian government decided to build a 175-km-long fence along the border with Serbia [41]. The justification which the Hungarian government offered in support of their decision was that this action was necessary in order to stop the irregular (illegal) entry of migrants [41]. Furthermore, the justification offered to the public extended to explain that by building the fence Hungary purportedly prevented the erection of a hypothetical barrier by Austria along the border with Hungary [42]. Consequently, on October 2015 at a conference in Brussels, the EU member states acknowledged Hungary’s right to build a barrier along the border with Croatia, and thus the idea of “railing” EU borders was intensified [42]. Subsequently, the EU declared that all refugees who did not originate from Syria, Iraq, or Afghanistan are considered to be economic migrants [43]. By doing so, the EU discriminated against migrants, violating basic human rights in asylum procedures, which resulted in the UNHCR criticism of this decision [43]. The migration crisis has triggered numerous alterations to the existing asylum regulations. Importantly and unsurprisingly, the crisis promulgated discussions and stirred clashes in all political spheres. As a result, numerous governments in Europe have proposed policies to limit immigrants’ eligibility for welfare benefits, while the claim that immigrants are “abusers” or “an unjustifiable burden” on social protection systems of

host countries, has frequently become more prominent in political discussions [44].

Methods

Data on energy poverty exist and are tracked in the Eurostat database. However, the only accessible data are those pertaining to energy poverty within the whole population, with no consideration of the specificity and special vulnerability of the certain groups, in this case, the migrant population. Since studies on energy poverty of the migrant population are very limited (most often included in poverty studies in general), the selection of indicators for this study was made based on the goal of the research: to review the values of the available indicators that can significantly contribute to the assessment of the migrant population’s exposure to poverty, energy poverty and social exclusion. The research was carried out by analyzing two groups of data:

1. Persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion by a group of citizenship (population aged 18 and over, male and female), and
2. Migrant Integration Policy Index.

The European Commission statistical database (EUROSTAT) was used to generate a statistical overview of the “Persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion by a group of citizenship (population aged 18 and over, male and female)” dated 2014–2020. The Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) reports were used to measure the success of migrant integration policies (i.e., labor market mobility and anti-discrimination) in the EU and the Western Balkan countries.

The research was limited to the EU countries with the highest number of migrants (i.e., Germany, France, Sweden, and the United Kingdom) from 2014 to 2020. This timeframe was selected because the global pandemic of 2019–2020, which has led to lockdowns, significantly impacted the increased influx of migrants to the EU. Refugees and migrants from the Middle East, West and South Asia, and Africa en route to Western and Northern Europe, used the Western Balkans as a transit region during this period. The Western Balkans remains one of the essential regions along the migration routes towards the EU. Since there is no separate data on energy poverty in the migrant population, for the purpose of the research it was assumed that migrants who are in the category of poor would also be in the category of energy poor.

Migrant Integration Policy Index provides data based on a comprehensive analysis of policies towards migrants in 56 countries of the world. Eight data groups are available: access to nationality, Anti-discrimination, Education, Family reunion, Health, Labor market mobility,

Permanent residence, and Political participation [45]. It is noticeable that there is not a single indicator that can directly describe poverty (along with the energy poverty of migrants), so the indicators that can indirectly describe the abovementioned were selected for the research. Therefore, a detailed analysis of all eight groups of indicators was performed, with the aim of selecting the most acceptable ones. By analyzing the methodology for obtaining the results of the mentioned data groups and, above all, by finding the interconnection with the goal of this study, the data on two phenomena were chosen: (a) Labor market mobility; and (b) Anti-discrimination score.

Labor market mobility was chosen because it analyses many characteristics of the labor market and its openness to migrants, employment, education, and advancement. Adequate access to the labor market is one of the best securities for migrants to stay safe from poverty and energy poverty.

Anti-discrimination score can be considered adequate for the needs of this research because it deals with readiness of permanent citizens to accept migrants, and therefore the availability of information and opportunities they need on the long path to integration, with the aim of improving the quality of life of migrants and their long-term contribution to the development of society. Research with exact data on this issue is not available, but it is reasonable to believe that the increased degree of discrimination directly affects the increased risk of poverty in every sense.

Results

The risk of poverty, energy poverty, and social exclusion

According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's detailed report from 2015, statistical analysis of unemployment rates shows that in most EU countries unemployment rates are higher among the foreign-born than among the native-born, whether men or women [46]. This report argues that, in the EU member states observed, foreign-born immigrants who have attained a tertiary education face a high level of unemployment. Furthermore, it is concluded that unemployment and inactivity in the labor market can result in social exclusion if they persist over time [46]. The available EUROSTAT data from 2020 on migrants residing in the most "favorable" European destinations show as follows:

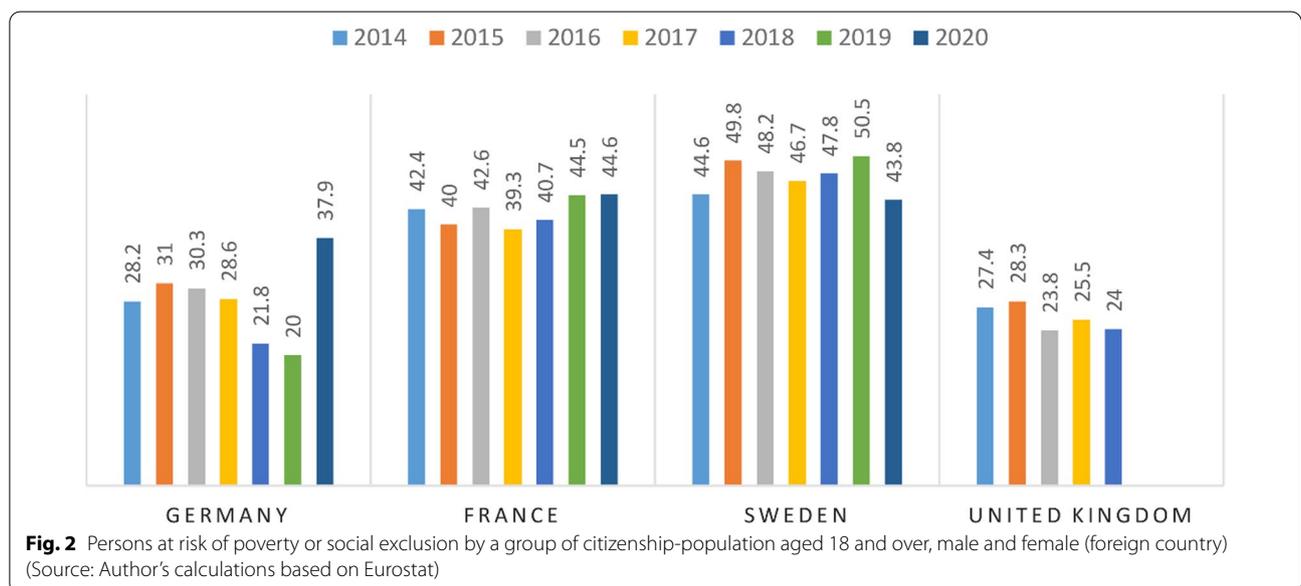
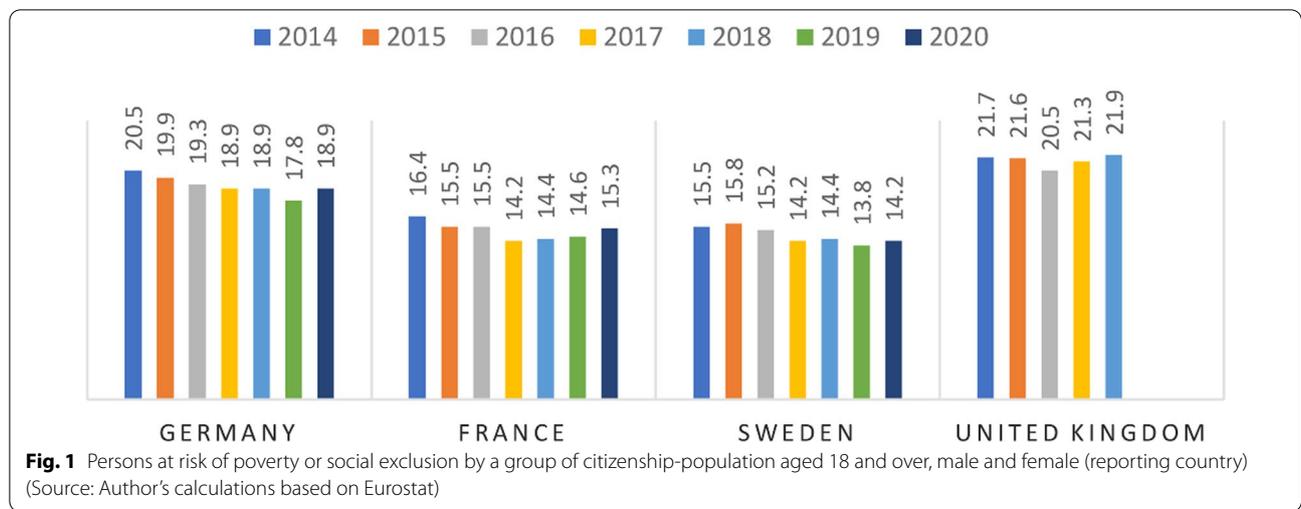
- 16% of national citizens,
- 42% of citizens of other EU Member States,
- and 49% of non-EU citizens were at risk of poverty or social exclusion.

The high percentage of non-EU citizens who were at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2019, led the author to conduct a comparative analysis with an extended timeframe; from 2014 (the beginning of a high influx of migrants) to 2020 (the beginning of the world pandemic) to determine whether the influx of (im)migrants has affected the risk of poverty or social exclusion rate.

The goal of this analysis is to determine the current position of the migrant population in the EU labor market. The author selected the EU countries which are perceived as favorable destinations by migrants, and extracted data from the EUROSTAT database regarding the "Persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion by a group of citizenship (population aged 18 and over, male and female)" dated 2014–2020. The data were divided into three categories: EU28 countries (2013–2020) reporting countries, foreign countries, and non-EU28 countries (2013–2020) with the exception of reporting countries. In Figs. 1, 2, and 3 below, the combined statistical data are presented.

The research results in the group of reporting countries (see Fig. 1 for details) show that the highest risk of poverty or social exclusion in the observed period was in the United Kingdom, with an increased risk. It is followed by Germany, with a gradual decline in risk. The lowest risks were recorded in France and Sweden, with relatively stable values. Figure 1 shows that a number of persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion in the category "aged 18 and over", that were born in the observed country, has remained relatively stable from 2014 to 2020. All of the countries subjected to the analysis (Germany, France, Sweden and the UK) have reported similar results: a slow, statistically insignificant multi-year drop followed by a rebound and stabilization in the last year of the time series. With the 7-year average of 14.72% of non-minor population at risk of poverty, Sweden presented the best result/model for societal integration of domicile population. France reported similar result, with a 7-year average of 15.12% of population at risk. The worst result on record was in the UK, even though results for this country were presented just for the period 2014–2018. On average, more than a fifth of all adults born in this country were at risk of poverty or social exclusion.

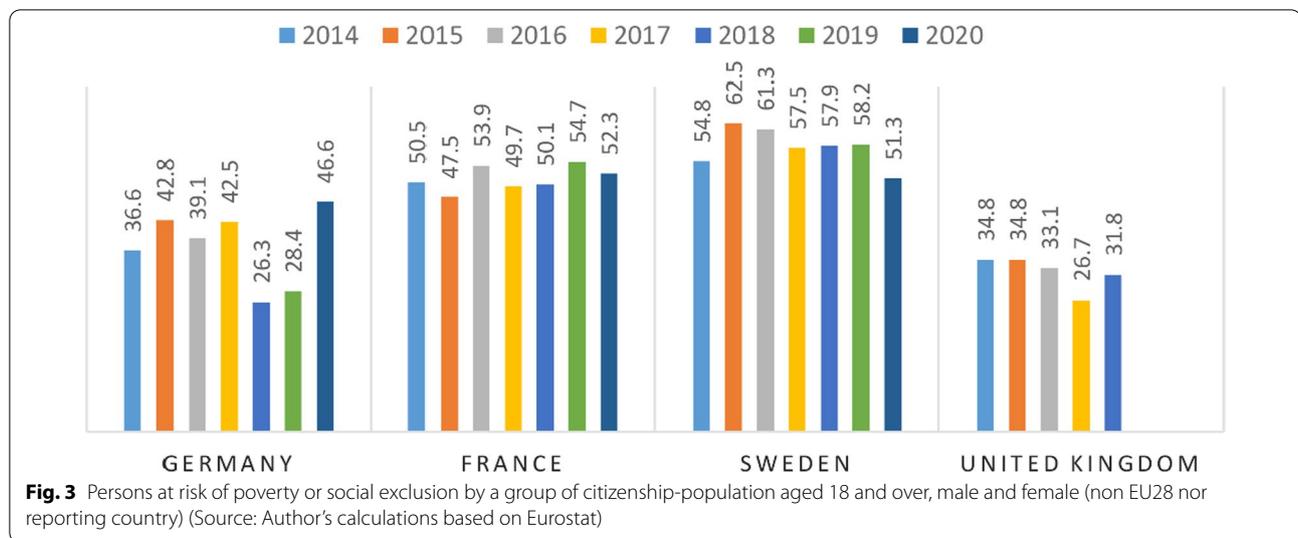
The risks of poverty, energy poverty and social exclusion are much higher for foreign nationals (see Fig. 2 for details). Foreign nationals are most at risk of poverty, energy poverty, and social exclusion in Sweden and France, and significantly less in Germany and the United Kingdom, with noticeable fluctuations in values. Moreover, Fig. 2 shows a number of persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion, but if they were originally born in a foreign country. In the same short time series there is no relevant statistical change through time. It can be observed



that Sweden and France, who have great success in alleviating the societal problems of their own domicile citizens, have less success in integrating foreign citizens: in Sweden, nearly half of all foreign-born people are at risk of poverty or societal exclusion. The UK, on the other hand, has greater success in this segment, with foreign-born citizens being at risk of poverty at “only” 25.8%. Germany has recorded the only undoubted downward trend in this segment, with a sharp rise in the percentage of at-risk population in 2020.

The most significant risks are recorded for citizens from non-EU countries (see Fig. 3 for details). The highest values of risk of poverty, energy poverty, and social exclusion in selected countries were recorded in the case

of non-EU citizens. The values change similarly to those for the previous group, but the absolute values are higher. The results in Fig. 3 should be, in theory, the most relevant to the research, as it shows the at-risk rate of citizens originating from countries outside the EU. Trends seen in Fig. 2 are even more pronounced: the UK has the best result, that is still more unfavorable compared to previous chart; Germany marks a great reduction of at-risk poverty rate in 2018 and 2019, nearly halving it compared to the previous years, with a sharp rebound in the last year of the time series. Sweden has the worst results in this demographics bracket, with average non-EU born citizen that is not at risk being a minority consistently between 2014 and 2020.



Migrant Integration Policy Index

The MIPEX conducted the most unified approach to assessing successful migrant integration policies. This platform is used to measure policy-level concerning the integration of migrants (MIPEX 2020). An overall score was set for all countries based on their success in implementing the corresponding laws and policies based on several areas about labor market participation, levels of education, access to healthcare and overall health, access to institutes of nationality and permanent residence, exposure to discrimination, etc. [45]. For the purpose of this research, the Labor market mobility and Anti-discrimination policies are compared within the EU countries and in the Western Balkan countries. The scores are rated as follows: 1–20 unfavorable (immigration without integration), 21–40 slightly unfavorable (equality on paper), 41–59 halfway favorable (equality on paper), 60–79 slightly favorable (temporary integration), and 80–100 favorable (comprehensive integration) [45]. According to the MIPEX reports, Serbia is considered a regional leader, with more improved working policies compared to Albania, Croatia, and North Macedonia [47]. The Labor market mobility is scored halfway favorable (57/100) [46]. The report suggests that permanent residents have no discrimination regarding access to the labor market, including self-employment [47]. However, citizens from other countries do not have specially organized support to help them find and keep employment [47]. The MIPEX (Labor Market score) in 9 selected countries (on the Balkans migration route and in the EU countries as the desired destination for most migrants) is shown in Fig. 4.

Slovenia ranks slightly unfavorable (26/100), where non-EU workers are not in a favorable position in terms

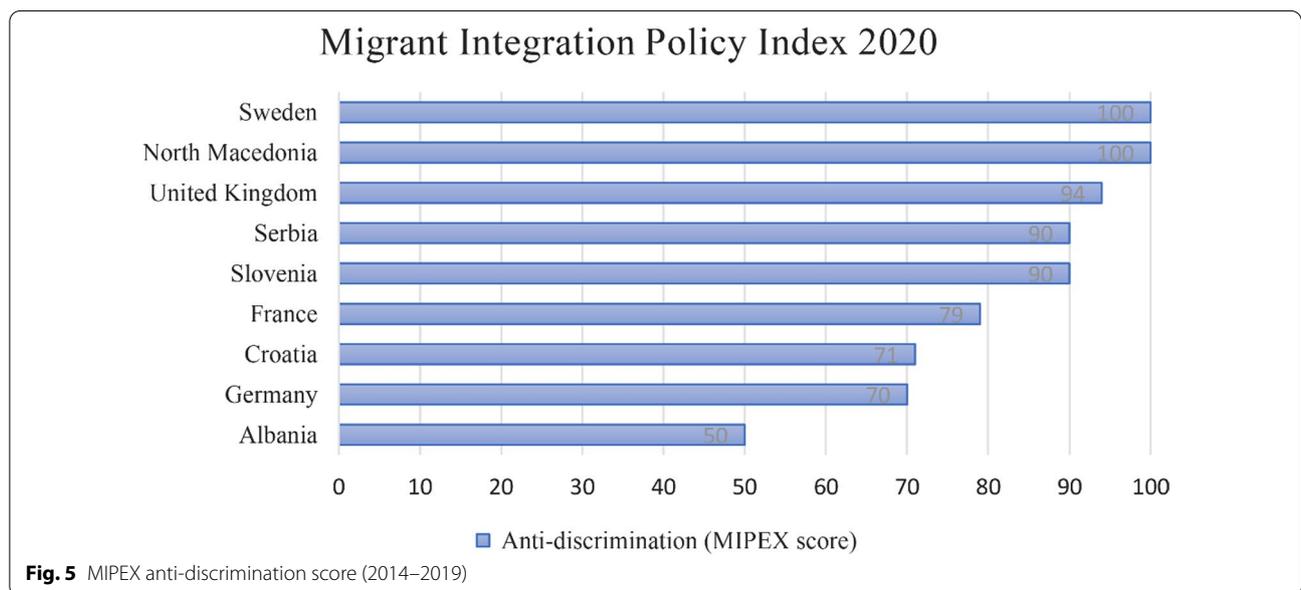
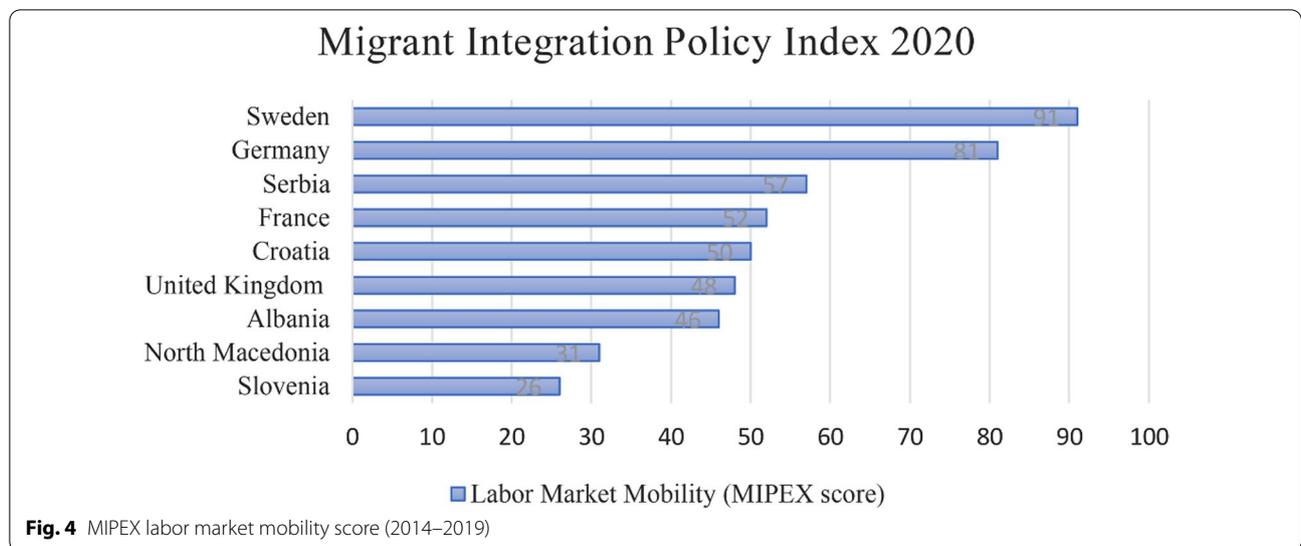
of employment following their qualifications, nor can they use the mechanisms available to Slovenian citizens, which enable improvement in terms of job security and the reduction of inequality [48]. According to the MIPEX report, France has been delaying and discouraging the labor market mobility of non-EU immigrants, while Sweden is ranked with the highest score [49]. Non-EU citizens in Sweden have the same employment and social protection opportunities as Swedish citizens [50].

Anti-discrimination score values in the same group of countries are presented in Fig. 5.

The MIPEX reports reveal that the Anti-discriminatory mechanisms are sufficiently developed in most countries within the Western Balkans and in the EU countries. However, the Anti-discrimination scores in Albania indicate that people are more often discriminated against based on nationality rather than religion [51]. According to the MIPEX reports, Germany's anti-discrimination policies also require significant improvements in public awareness, acceptance, and equal opportunities [52].

Discussion and recommendations

This research paper is one of the first studies that examine the position of the migrant population in detail within the framework of the Green Deal in a specific geographical region consisting of five (5) countries on the Western Balkan migration route (Serbia, North Macedonia, Albania, Croatia, and Slovenia) and four (4) EU traditional destination countries (Sweden, Germany, France, and the United Kingdom). Existing research on this subject is limited to theoretical studies, while studies of this kind for the Western Balkan countries do not exist. Therefore, this study has the potential to advance current scientific discoveries about the observed issue and to open space



for further similar research because the issue of energy poverty is becoming one of the most critical problems faced by the EU and Europe as a whole.

Precise data (i.e., scientifically based research and/or official databases) cannot be considered reliable because the energy crisis occurred in the second half of 2022, with the predictions that it will intensify. These circumstances can result in a worsening of the risks faced by the general migrant population. With the additional vast influx of refugees (caused by the Ukraine war), the territory of the EU is now home to several million people who are particularly sensitive to energy poverty. The results of this paper provide the first insight into the risks of poverty or

social exclusion of the migrant population in the EU destination countries. The collected data can undoubtedly be used for further academic analysis, conceptualization, and adoption of specific policies toward energy poverty mitigation, especially in the Western Balkans region.

Energy and migration are interlinked, and despite the fact that it is challenging to determine their connection, research shows that the “predisposing factor” that may encourage migration is the availability of energy services, or the absence thereof [53]. Most societies with a large migratory population also have ubiquitous access to electricity, whereas in societies with low levels of electrification, migrant populations are much smaller [54]. The

effects of transit migration on the migrants themselves, the families they leave behind, and the countries of origin, transit, and destination are not explored in recent academic literature, and there is no or little data on how migrants use energy services or how their energy usage impacts their destination [55]. Yet, the lack of information does not imply that migrants (in transit) do not have a need for energy services, therefore new policies concerning this issue should be included in migration regulations [53]. This is an issue that could be improved by the use of the SDGs. Under “Background” section, the author has mentioned the SDG 7.1 and the importance of providing universal access to modern energy services for all (including the migrant population). It is imperative to mention that the objectives SDG 7.2–7.3 strive to increase substantially the share of renewable energy in the global energy mix and double the global rate of improvement in energy efficiency by 2030 [56]. When addressing migration and impact on energy services in the countries and regions of origin some researchers define remittances, household energy consumption, and the transmission of knowledge about green technologies relevant [57]. However, in relation to host countries and energy access for the general migrant population, the first step in achieving the SDG recommendations is via *whole-of-society approach* [58] in both the EU and the Western Balkans region. More precisely, by creating and executing mediations that address migration within the context of the SDGs, government institutions should include migration into regional or national development planning. However, since the harmonization and implementation of all SDGs in national strategies are a time-consuming process, it could present a great challenge for both the EU and the WB to achieve these goals by 2030.

The EGD does not address the issue of migrants, nor does it specifically define their position in the EU strategy development. The EGD is the initial strategic document, but the action plans that derive from it also fail to include the general migrant population. The existence of a substantial migrant population on the territory of the EU cannot be ignored, especially on matters such as the quality of life and their integration into society. The migrant population is vulnerable to many risks. Research shows that the general migrant population is at a high risk of poverty due to a significantly less favorable position in the labor market [59]. In such circumstances, the migrant population is exposed to energy poverty, social exclusion, and other negative phenomena that make their position difficult and present a constant problem for both the migrant population and the EU countries they live in. Energy poverty has become a fundamental and pressing issue with the growing energy crisis and it requires adequate and rapid solutions.

The MIPLEX results portray the Republic of Serbia as a regional (WB) leader. The response of Serbia during the crisis, being the last country on the WB migration route, has been appraised by the European Parliament in terms of its successful migration management [60]. Serbia’s approach is presented as a balance in observing migration in the context of state-centric approach and human rights-based policies, more specifically human security (person-centric approach), which focuses on the position, protection of migrants, and their rights [61]. On the other hand, Serbia’s response during the crisis could only be considered (semi)successful since it was only a country of transit, and the number of requests for asylum were too marginal [62]. However, if Serbia were to become a final destination, a prerequisite for successful migrant integration is the formulation of a clear strategy and the creation of a legal and institutional framework, which Serbia lacks. Namely, Serbia did not ratify the Zaragoza Declaration agreed upon at the European Ministerial Conference on Integration in Zaragoza of 15 and 16 April 2010, which led to the realization of the Common Basic Principles for Immigrant Integration Policy in the EU [63]. Although these principles are non-binding, they provide guidelines on how to achieve the integration of migrants into society [63]. Serbia does not have the legal framework to support imperative principles, such as enabling education in preparing (im)migrants to be more successful and more active participants in society (principle 5), access for (im)migrants to institutions, as well as to public and private goods and services, on a basis equal to national citizens and in a non-discriminatory way (principle 6) [63]. To be precise, the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration of the Republic of Serbia (KIRS) defines refugees specifically as persons who, due to the events in the period from 1991 to 1998 and their consequences, fled or were expelled from the former Yugoslav republics to the territory of Serbia [64], whereas the legal term “migrant” is used in official government reports as a generic term for the population consisting of asylum seekers, economic migrants, and refugees from sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia [64]. Therefore, migrants’ rights concerning their integration in Serbia fall under various laws and decrees but none are specifically intended for the migrant population [65–67], which raises the issue of the protection of migrants from possible (energy) poverty.

This paper aimed to present some of the challenges that the crisis generated and purported to exemplify the response of the EU which reinforced rigorous border controls, causing even more problems within the Union. The author has previously indicated that several EU countries expressed their nationalistic approach in dealing with the influx of migrants. Numerous publications

demonstrate that these nationalistic countries (within the EU) have politicians that label migrants as a threat [68, 69]. On October 10th 2022, a controversial speech of the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign and Security Policy Josep Borrell at the EU Ambassadors Annual Conference 2022 described Europe as a “garden” in contrast to most of the world which he labeled a “jungle” [70]. His speech deliberates that “the garden can be invaded by the jungle” [70], and by implying so confirms that the securitizing discourse of migrants is still present. Although this paper does not address the indicators of the securitization of migration, but merely suggests that it could negatively impact the successful integration of migrants into society, further research should be conducted that address the securitizing discourse of the Migrant Crisis.

The Green Agenda for the Western Balkan countries is a comprehensive strategic roadmap against the climate crisis. It points the way to new energy and mobility solutions, sustainable economies, environmentally friendly agriculture, and the preservation of biodiversity [71]. The Green Agenda is an initiative that originated from the Green Deal. It mimics its structure with an emphasis on helping the Western Balkan countries better prepare to integrate into the EU. However, it is important to accentuate that only Croatia and Slovenia (EU member states) have adopted the necessary normative framework regarding climate change mitigation, and as recent research shows, the execution of definite actions within the remaining WB countries is inadequate due to poor commitment to make meaningful improvements [72]. Having in mind that the WB countries are in socio-economic transitions with energy poverty problems faced by certain groups of their populations, the question arises as to whether the WB countries will be able to provide migrants with energy considering the problems they are facing internally. The national governments of the WB region will have to reassess their responsibilities for fulfilling the objectives of the Green Agenda, and this paper indirectly calls upon the governments of the WB to enhance their strategies that concern the Green Agenda.

The main limitations of the study are primarily reflected in insufficiently reliable data that are used. There is currently no accurate data on the number of migrants who live on the EU territory or who have come there in the observed research period. No database or methodology census of the migrant population has been developed. A certain number of migrants reside in EU countries without a specific status, which is not recorded in their host countries. Thus, any analysis involving the general migrant population cannot be considered entirely accurate [73]. It is important to emphasize that the data concerning the general migrant population and

its integration in the Western Balkans region is vague or non-existent [74]. Another limitation of this research is the fact that two WB countries—Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro—were not analyzed because the data for these countries are not available. The author intended to analyze the Labor market mobility and Anti-discrimination of all countries on the migration route, but due to the lack of data this study fails to analyze all of them. There is no reliable data concerning the integration of migrants in these two countries, therefore the author suggests that the academic community should conduct research that could provide an expanded insight in the migrant integration in the WB region. It is important to note that Migrant crisis, as a recent phenomenon, has not yet been sufficiently researched in current practice, nor has its impact on the countries of the mentioned transit region been examined [75].

Furthermore, a significant methodological limitation exists due to the use of the MIPEX, and within it, two indicators: (a) Labor market mobility score and (b) Anti-discrimination score. Both indicators are composite indexes, meaning they are composed of aggregating individual input indicators. Still, the indicators that make up the mentioned indexes, if the aggregation method is considered, are not available, so one cannot rule out that the error was caused by the methodological inaccuracy of the composite index itself. These two indicators are composite indexes aggregated based on the input indicators, but the number of input indicators, categories, or aggregation methods is not publicly available. Instead, the values result from an expert opinion on the subject matter in each observed country. In addition, the indicator “Persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion” includes only persons over 18 years of age. This indicator in no way covers children and young people under the age of 18, whose future, education to be acquired, readiness for integration and the like are greatly impacted by poverty at their early age. The development and updating of databases on the migrant population must be one of the priority tasks, because only on the basis of sufficiently reliable data is it possible to plan further activities. The problem is further aggravated by the lack of data on exposure to poverty and energy poverty in the countries of the Western Balkans, which are located on the migration route.

Conclusions

The EU, like the whole world, faces a great number of complex challenges. The economic and energy crises, the increase in energy prices, energy supply problems, and the increase in the number of migrants and refugees open up numerous issues that require quick and effective solutions. The main objective of this study was to provide

insight into the position of migrants who came to the EU via the Western Balkan migration route, as well as their risk of poverty, energy poverty, and social exclusion.

The data on high risk of poverty or social exclusion of migrants in the EU and the MIPEX scores depict the inequality and entrenched disadvantage experienced by migrants. Therefore, it is necessary to acknowledge the essential role migrants will play in the sectors to bear the brunt of the transition envisaged by the Deal. The inclusion of migration as a relevant point of contention in the EGD would guarantee that a relevant and growing portion of citizens of Europe would be incorporated in this process. As it progresses, the decision-makers should make sure that said issues are topical during the transition of EGD's abstract concepts into measurable impact and should ensure that migrant populations are participating in all processes leading to its implementation. Further research on energy poverty and the migrant population should be carried out in several directions. First, it is necessary to develop and regularly update a database on the migrant population and its socio-demographic characteristics, which will include people of all ages. It is necessary to study in more detail the willingness of migrants to join society and to improve the ways to strengthen said willingness. In this sense, special emphasis should be placed on education of young migrants and children, who from an early age should receive information and knowledge about ways to avoid energy poverty, to use energy more efficiently and thereby contribute to quality of their own lives and sustainable energy future in the community in which they chose to live.

The main limitations of the research are reflected in the limited selection of available variables and the use of indices for which the methodology by which they are aggregated is not clear. Therefore, it is necessary to further analyze the mentioned indices, more thoroughly in terms of their reliability and comprehensiveness. Namely, the index can be considered acceptable only if it accurately describes the observed phenomenon. The indices used in this research are the only ones that are available. There is no doubt that the obtained results are important, but the fact that the improvements in the indicators are necessary should not be ignored.

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Author contributions

MK is the sole author of this manuscript. MK prepared the concept of the study and participated in data collection, analysis, and interpretation of the results. MK completed manuscript editing. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

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