

## NEETs in Europe

The Youth and European Social Work Forum (YES Forum) is a network aiming to promote social participation among all young people in Europe. One of the main goals of the YES Forum is to involve young people affected by exclusion and stigmatisation, giving them the opportunity to share their perspectives and be heard.

### YES Forum

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The YES Forum was established in 2002<sup>1</sup> and brings together 42 member organisations of youth work and youth social work from across Europe<sup>2</sup>. The network's activities are coordinated by the secretariat in Stuttgart. What unites us is empowerment and the enhancement of the existing potential of young people. Young people as experts in their own lives are at the centre of the YES Forum and significantly shape its work. We follow the approach: "What can we do together with, and not just for, young people?" This participatory approach encourages young people to advocate for their interests, contribute their voices, and get involved politically to participate as active citizens in social life. The YES Forum particularly emphasises connecting young people who otherwise lack the opportunity or motivation to meet new people, countries, and cultures. Furthermore, the YES Forum provides a platform for dialogue on equal terms between young people, policymakers, youth work professionals, civil society representatives, and other stakeholders, thus bringing disadvantaged youth closer to Europe.

### NEETs and the European Pillar of Social Rights

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The young people we work with are particularly affected by social exclusion. Often, they are not employed, not in school, and not in vocational training, thus belonging to the so-called NEETs (Not in Education, Employment, or Training). They are at higher risk of long-term social disconnection.

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<sup>1</sup> Further information about the YES Forum members is available on the YES Forum website <https://www.yes-forum.eu/members/>

<sup>2</sup> The separation between youth work and youth social work, which is common in Germany and is also reflected in SGB VIII, does not exist in other European countries (cf. Naddaf/Thimmel 2018, p. 19; JUGEND für Europa/SALTO Training & Cooperation 2016, p. 14).

The EU aims to reduce the NEET rate (15-29-year-olds) to 9% by 2030. To address the challenges facing young European workers and improve the employment prospects of NEETs, the EU has launched various political and financial initiatives in recent years (one of these is ALMA: Aim, Learn, Master, Achieve)<sup>3</sup>.

Reducing the NEET rate is also one of the goals of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR), an initiative launched by the European Commission in 2017. The Pillar is "our guide for a strong social Europe that is fair, inclusive, and provides opportunities for all"<sup>4</sup>. Twenty principles aim to strengthen the social rights of EU citizens in the areas of equal opportunities and access to the labour market, fair working conditions, and social protection and inclusion. In the context of youth, the fourth principle "Active support for employment" is particularly important, as it explicitly highlights the right of young people to qualified education, apprenticeships, internships, or job offers within four months of becoming unemployed or completing education<sup>5</sup>.

The implementation of these social rights into practice is not only a joint responsibility of EU institutions and member states but also part of the responsibility of social actors, such as civil society organisations, which can play a crucial role in the implementation process. Members of the YES Forum contribute on multiple levels - locally, nationally, regionally, and on a European level - to reducing the NEET rate, improving vocational and continuing education offers, and thus supporting the concrete implementation of the first chapter of the European Pillar of Social Rights, namely Chapter 1 "Equal Opportunities and Access to the Labour Market".

## Digital Inclusion of NEETs in Rural Areas of the Danube Countries

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An important contribution to the implementation of the EPSR is also made by our transnational projects, which the YES Forum leads or implements as a partner, such as the NEETs project "Back on Track." Funded by the Interreg Danube Programme<sup>6</sup>, the project addresses the challenges of young people without work or education in the Danube region in response to their alarming

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<sup>3</sup> Further information on the ALMA initiative is available on the European Commission's website <https://european-social-fund-plus.ec.europa.eu/en/how-to-make-alma-work>

<sup>4</sup> Further information on the European Pillar of Social Rights is available on the European Commission's website <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1606&langId=en>

<sup>5</sup> Further information on the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights is available on the European Commission's website <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1601&langId=en>

<sup>6</sup> Further information on the Danube Region Programme is available on the website of the Baden-Württemberg Ministry of Economic Affairs, Labour and Tourism <https://wm.baden-wuerttemberg.de/de/wirtschaft/wirtschaftsfoerderung/foerderpolitik-der-eu/europaeische-territoriale-zusammenarbeit-interreg/donauraum>

situation. In 2021, 13.1% of young people (aged 15 to 29) across the EU were classified as NEETs. While countries like Austria and Germany (age group 15-29) have already achieved the target NEET rate of under 9%, countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina (21%) and Bulgaria (17%) recorded very high NEET rates in 2021<sup>7</sup>.

This was a major concern, especially in rural regions. The situation negatively impacted the well-being and standard of living of young people and posed a threat to the social and economic sustainability of rural areas. To counter this urgent challenge, the EU set the goal of reducing the NEET rate to under 9% by 2030 and views the revitalisation of rural regions as a common European vision.

Specifically, Back on Track aims to promote the integration of NEETs in rural areas into society, education, and the labour market in the Danube region. By implementing tailored distance learning and mentoring programmes, NEETs in rural areas experience improved digital inclusion, leading to increased resilience, intellectual potential, and human capital. Moreover, their quality of life significantly improves through increased virtual mobility, paving the way for them to (re)connect with society.

This project, as an exemplary insight into the work of the YES Forum, shows that such transnational projects can raise greater awareness of the concerns of NEETs and their potential. The aim is to find practical solutions to enhance rural areas. Through digital integration and mobility, innovative project approaches are mobilised to reach a broad network of actors who can engage and motivate NEETs in rural regions of Southern and Eastern Europe. Improved social and professional integration enables young people to develop a positive perspective for their future.

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<sup>7</sup> European Commission, Fewer young people neither in employment nor in training <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/DDN-20230526-3>

## Article for DREIZEHN magazine

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This article was originally published in German on the 31st issue of the DREIZEHN magazine.

**To the original article:** [DREIZEHN – 31<sup>st</sup> issue, May 2024 p. 21-24](#)

**DREIZEHN** provides a forum for the concerns of young people with difficult circumstances in our society. The focus here is on raising public awareness and improving social and professional integration. Current topics in youth social work and youth welfare are addressed in the magazine and their social, political and educational relevance for practice is highlighted.

**More about DREIZEHN magazine:** [Fachzeitschrift DREIZEHN](#)



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VON DR. VIOLETA BAKIA UND ANNETT WIEDERMANN