



Back on Track

**STRATEGY AND REGIONAL ACTION
PLANS**

**to foster sustainable outreach to rural
NEETs**

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INTRODUCTION

The **Back on Track (BoT)** project represents a landmark initiative under the Interreg Danube Region Programme, co-funded by the European Union. This strategic endeavor aims to address the pressing issue of NEETs (young people not in employment, education, or training) in rural areas across the Danube region. By fostering sustainable outreach and creating pathways for integration, the project aspires to transform NEETs into active contributors to their communities and the regional economy.

The BoT project builds on the shared commitment of Danube region countries to tackle socio-economic inequalities and youth exclusion. It aligns with global frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), as well as European Union policies like the Youth Guarantee and European Social Fund initiatives.

This document, encompassing the BoT Strategy and Regional Action Plans, serves as a comprehensive guide for realizing this ambitious vision.

The strategy reflects the collaborative efforts of ten Danube region countries: **Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Slovenia.**

These countries have shared their expertise, resources, and innovative practices to craft a cohesive framework addressing the NEET challenge. Their collaboration underscores the region's commitment to fostering inclusive growth and leveraging collective strengths.

The preparation of this document involved a rigorous, multi-phase methodological approach designed to ensure inclusivity, evidence-based planning, and actionable outcomes:

1. **Data Collection and Analysis:** National-level data on NEET demographics, socio-economic trends, and policy environments were collected and analyzed to identify regional patterns and disparities. In this process, key deliverables within BoT project were consulted, such as: D.1.2.1 Secondary data collection and analysis of macro-level data on key characteristics of rural NEETs, D1.2.2. Country report: NEET in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Primary data collection from NEETs), D.1.3.1. Overview of the correlating regional and national strategies towards NEETs, D.1.3.2 Collection of best practices in Danube Region, D.1.3.3. Comparative analysis of national and regional strategic documents,
2. **Stakeholder Consultations:** engaging with peer review groups, government institutions, NGOs, private sector representatives, and NEETs themselves provided critical insights into barriers and opportunities. All their inputs are

summarized in the document D.1.3.4 Collection of recommendations, experiences of stakeholders, and (former) NEETs from the field.

3. **Comparative Policy Analysis:** National and regional strategies were reviewed to align BoT objectives with existing frameworks such as the EU's Youth Guarantee and SDG targets.
4. **SWOT Analysis:** Identifying strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats helped shape the strategy's direction and focus.
5. **Validation Workshops:** Iterative feedback sessions with peer review groups ensured that the proposed measures were feasible, relevant, and supported by stakeholders.

This participatory and iterative process has culminated in a robust strategy that reflects the region's diversity and shared aspirations.

The Strategy and regional action plans to foster sustainable outreach to rural NEETs is structured to provide a clear and actionable roadmap:

1. **Situation Analysis:** Offers an in-depth examination of demographic trends, policy frameworks, and NEET-specific challenges across participating countries. It lays the groundwork for understanding the regional context.
2. **Strategic Focuses, Vision, and Objectives:** Outlines the long-term vision, supported by five core focuses—enhancing professional and social skills, digital literacy, access to public services, employment and self-employment opportunities, and improving living conditions.
3. **Strategic Priorities and Measures:** Details specific priorities and corresponding measures designed to address NEET challenges, foster inclusion, and achieve defined objectives.
4. **Action Plan:** Presents a detailed implementation framework, including timelines, responsible institutions, and key performance indicators (KPIs) for monitoring progress.

The vision of the BoT Strategy is to create an inclusive Danube region, place where empowered NEETs reach their full potential, through equal opportunities for education, employment, and social integration. This vision is supported by three overarching strategic goals:

1. **Increase Economic Opportunities for NEETs:** Foster employability and entrepreneurship to enhance their participation in the labor market.
2. **Improve Quality of Life and Social Security for NEETs:** Ensure access to housing, healthcare, and social services to reduce exclusion.
3. **Enhance Access to Education and Development Opportunities:** Strengthen professional, digital, and social skills to build resilience and adaptability.

To achieve these goals, the strategy identifies **12 priorities** and formulates **36 measures** that address specific challenges and leverage regional strengths. These measures provide actionable steps to realize the strategic vision and goals, and gives framework for defining

specific programmes, projects and actions to be delivered in order to achieve priorities and strategic objectives.

The Danube region faces several interconnected challenges in addressing NEET issues:

- **High Youth Unemployment:** Persistent unemployment among NEETs limits their economic independence and social mobility.
- **Skill Mismatches:** Education and training programs often fail to align with labor market demands, leaving NEETs underqualified or unemployable.
- **Digital Divide:** Limited access to digital infrastructure and skills in rural areas exacerbates inequalities and hinders opportunities for modern employment.
- **Policy Gaps:** Inconsistent implementation and coordination of policies across countries weaken efforts to address NEET-specific needs.
- **Socio-Cultural Barriers:** Traditional norms and stigmas in rural areas restrict NEET participation, particularly among women and marginalized groups.

Effective implementation of the BoT Strategy relies on a robust institutional framework for monitoring and evaluation. Key components include:

1. **EUSDR (EU Strategy for the Danube Region):** Establishing a body within EUSDR to oversee strategy implementation and ensure accountability.
2. **National Stakeholder Networks:** Use existing or establish a new formal or informal stakeholder network to monitor implementation of the Strategy and Action plan on the country level.
3. **Local BoT project implementation teams:** Implementation teams should be tasked to implement specific and project related strategic actions at the community level. These teams should closely work with social workers, educators, and representatives from local businesses and NGOs
4. **Standardized Reporting Systems:** Developing harmonized tools and processes to collect data, track progress, and evaluate outcomes.
5. **Feedback Mechanisms:** Incorporating feedback from NEETs and other stakeholders to refine programs and ensure they remain relevant and impactful.
6. **Public-Private Partnerships:** Leveraging resources and expertise from diverse sectors to sustain initiatives and expand their reach.

By addressing these elements systematically, the Strategy aims to create a resilient framework for reducing youth exclusion, fostering socio-economic development, and achieving regional cohesion. This document not only serves as a roadmap but also as a testament to the collective resolve of the Danube region countries to empower their youth and secure a sustainable future.

1. SITUATION ANALYSIS-BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1.1. POLICY FRAMEWORK

The Danube region (Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, and Slovenia) faces significant challenges related to the inclusion of NEETs (young people not in employment, education, or training). Addressing these challenges requires a coherent strategy that is aligned with international frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), European Union policies, and national-level strategies. This section outlines the key legal and normative frameworks that should guide the development of strategies targeting NEETs in the Danube region.

1.1.1. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The Sustainable Development Goals, adopted by the United Nations in 2015, provide a global blueprint for reducing inequalities, enhancing education, and ensuring decent work and economic growth. Several SDGs are particularly relevant for the inclusion of NEETs:

- **SDG 4: Quality Education**
This goal emphasizes inclusive and equitable quality education and the promotion of lifelong learning opportunities for all. Target 4.4 aims to increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills for employment, decent jobs, and entrepreneurship, which is crucial for reintegrating NEETs into the labor market.
- **SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth**
Target 8.6 specifically addresses the need to reduce the proportion of youth not in employment, education, or training by 2020. Although the target date has passed, it remains an important benchmark for evaluating progress in integrating NEETs.
- **SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities**
This goal focuses on reducing inequality within and among countries. By targeting disadvantaged groups such as NEETs, strategies contribute to ensuring equal opportunities and reducing youth marginalization.

These global targets serve as guiding principles for developing national and regional strategies, emphasizing education, skills development, and decent work for young people.

1.1.2. European Union Policies and Strategies

The European Union has developed comprehensive policy frameworks and strategic documents to address youth unemployment and the inclusion of NEETs. Key EU policies include:

- **EU Youth Strategy (2019-2027)**
The EU Youth Strategy promotes youth engagement, education, and employment through a rights-based approach. It is designed around three main pillars: Engage, Connect, and Empower. It emphasizes the need to reduce youth exclusion and increase participation in the labor market.
- **Youth Guarantee (2013-2020, Extended to 2027)**
The Youth Guarantee is a flagship EU initiative that ensures young people under 30 receive a good-quality offer of employment, continued education, apprenticeship, or traineeship within four months of becoming unemployed or leaving formal education. The Youth Guarantee has been extended and revised to incorporate the needs of marginalized youth, including NEETs.
- **European Pillar of Social Rights**
This document outlines 20 principles, including the right to quality and inclusive education, training, and lifelong learning (Principle 1), and the promotion of equal opportunities in employment (Principle 4). These principles guide national and regional efforts to provide better support for NEETs.
- **EU Cohesion Policy and European Social Fund Plus**
The European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) supports employment and social inclusion programs, focusing on disadvantaged groups such as NEETs. It aims to promote social cohesion, reduce disparities, and create equal opportunities across the EU, including in the Danube region.
- **Danube Region Strategy**
The Danube Region Strategy (EUSDR) addresses economic, social, and territorial cohesion in the Danube region. It includes specific targets for enhancing labor market participation and reducing youth unemployment, making it a critical framework for addressing NEETs.

1.1.3. National Policies in the Danube Region

National strategies and policies vary widely across the Danube region, reflecting different economic, social, and political contexts.

One of the main findings of the *Strategic policy comparative analysis* is that all Danube region countries (10 countries participating in the BoT project) share a high degree of alignment with European policies and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Austria, Germany, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania, Hungary, and Slovenia are particularly aligned with EU strategies, while Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia are still in the process of developing their strategies to achieve full alignment. The national

strategies of these countries largely follow the EU Youth Guarantee Scheme and the Erasmus+ program, emphasizing goals related to quality education, decent work, and reducing inequalities.

All countries identify the NEET population as a key target group in their youth and employment strategies. Main objectives include reducing unemployment, improving educational outcomes, and enhancing social inclusion. Although the objectives are similar, methods and approaches vary significantly. While Austria and Germany have implemented national programs, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and Serbia are still in the process of developing their strategies.

Key actions and measures to support the NEET population include training programs, requalification, and social inclusion initiatives. Austria and Germany utilize dual education systems¹, while Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, and Slovenia employ the Youth Guarantee Scheme. Specific measures vary among countries, with Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia emphasizing partnerships with the private sector, and Hungary and Czech Republic supporting self-employment and entrepreneurship.

Major stakeholders in the implementation of strategies include ministries of education, labor, and social policies, non-governmental organizations, and local authorities. All countries have developed monitoring systems that include national statistics, regular reports, and evaluation studies. However, approaches differ; Austria and Germany have comprehensive evaluation systems, while Bosnia and Herzegovina rely on localized approaches.

Financial allocations for implementing strategies for the NEET population come from a combination of national budgets and European funds. All countries utilize the European Social Fund, while the organization and specific methods of funding differ. Bulgaria, Romania, Czech Republic, and Slovakia integrate regional initiatives, while Serbia uses additional donor funds and international grants. The participation of the NEET population is recognized as a key component in all countries, with varying methods of youth inclusion.

Specific characteristics of strategies and action plans by each country are presented below

1. Austria:

- Emphasizes vocational training and apprenticeship programs.
- Strong coordination between federal and regional governments.
- Focus on digital skills and entrepreneurial training for NEETs.

2. Bosnia and Herzegovina:

¹ System of vocational training that combines theoretical education at vocational schools with practical, on-the-job training in companies.

- Strategies include improving access to labor market, education and vocational training.
 - Emphasis on addressing socio-economic barriers such as poverty and social exclusion.
 - Focus on collaboration with NGOs and international organizations.
3. **Bulgaria:**
- Focus on educational reforms to reduce dropouts.
 - Programs to enhance digital literacy and vocational skills.
 - Efforts to improve coordination between education and employment sectors.
4. **Czech Republic:**
- Strong focus on career counseling and mentorship programs.
 - Vocational training tailored to market needs.
 - Integration of NEETs into community services and volunteer programs.
5. **Germany:**
- One of the lowest NEET rates in Europe.
 - Comprehensive support through education and social inclusion initiatives.
 - Significant funding from the European Social Fund.
 - Emphasis on monitoring and evaluation of NEET-related programs.
6. **Hungary:**
- Policies aimed at increasing the employment rate among young people.
 - Vocational education and training (VET) programs.
 - Emphasis on reducing regional disparities.
7. **Romania:**
- Focus on reducing early school leaving.
 - Integration of NEETs into vocational training and employment programs.
 - Support from European funding mechanisms.
8. **Serbia:**
- National Youth Strategy addressing education, employment, and social inclusion.
 - Programs to improve vocational training and digital skills.
 - Collaboration with international organizations for program implementation.
9. **Slovakia:**
- Strategies focused on vocational education and entrepreneurship.
 - Initiatives to reduce regional disparities in education and employment.
 - Support for disadvantaged groups including NEETs.
10. **Slovenia:**
- Emphasis on lifelong learning and vocational training.
 - Programs aimed at social inclusion and reducing youth unemployment.
 - Funding from both national and European sources.

In order to enhance policy framework, countries of Danube region will need to:

- **Enhance Coordination:** Improve coordination between national and regional authorities to ensure cohesive implementation of NEET strategies.
- **Increase Funding:** Secure additional funding from both national sources and European programs to sustain and expand NEET initiatives.
- **Focus on Digital Skills:** Strengthen programs aimed at improving digital literacy among NEETs to enhance their employability in the modern labor market.
- **Monitor and Evaluate:** Establish robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of NEET programs and make necessary adjustments.
- **Promote Best Practices:** Share best practices and successful strategies across countries to replicate effective programs and interventions.

More specifically, the *Comparative analysis of national and regional strategic documents*² provides recommendations for specific countries, such as:

- Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia should work on further alignment of their strategies with EU policies and SDG objectives. Adopting the approach of Austria and Germany, where national strategies are deeply integrated with EU policies, could enhance their strategies, especially in the areas of education and youth employment.
- Countries should follow the example of Austria and Germany in developing specific programs for different subgroups of the NEET population, such as young people with health issues or family responsibilities. Creating specialized training and social support programs for these groups can significantly improve their prospects for labor market integration.
- All countries should adopt comprehensive monitoring and evaluation systems that include feedback from program beneficiaries. Austria and Germany can serve as examples of best practices with their evaluation studies and field feedback, ensuring the effective implementation of strategies.
- All countries need to increase national budget allocations and efficiently utilize EU funds to support the NEET population. Bulgaria, Romania, and Hungary can be examples of best practices in using EU funds for implementing training and social inclusion programs. Integrating regional initiatives can also enhance the effectiveness of funding.
- It is recommended that all countries establish formal structures for youth participation, such as youth councils in Austria and Germany. These structures enable continuous participation of the NEET population in the creation and implementation of strategies, ensuring that their needs and interests are adequately represented.

By addressing these recommendations, the Danube region countries (BoT participating countries) can make significant progress in integrating NEETs into the education and labor markets, thereby enhancing their socio-economic prospects and overall well-being.

² Analysis conducted as one of the deliverables of Back on Track project, BoT, June 2024

1.2. OVERVIEW OF DEMOGRAPHIC AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC TRENDS RELATED TO NEETS IN PARTNERING COUNTRIES

The structured analysis in this section enables an understanding of the challenges and opportunities shaping the social and economic perspectives of young people in rural areas in 10 Danube countries participating in the BoT project, offering potential guidance for adapting new and adjusting existing policies that promote their social and economic integration.

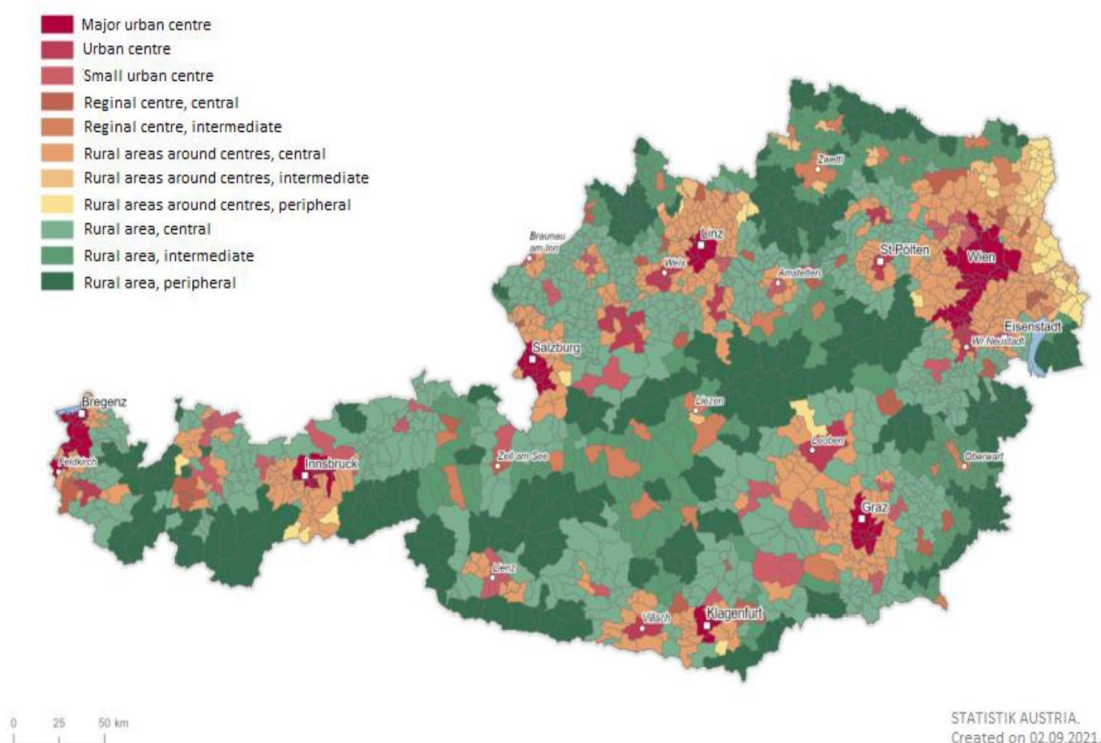
1.2.1. Austria

The concept of NEET young people has been an integral part of social policy reporting at the Austrian and European level since its first reception.

According to statistics in Austria, in 2022, the **proportion of youth aged 15 to 24 classified as NEET averaged 8.1%**³. Regional differences were apparent, with Vienna exhibiting a significantly higher NEET rate compared to other federal states except for Vorarlberg. For example, Upper Austria had a NEET rate of 6.1%, while lower rates were observed in Styria, Tyrol, and Lower Austria. In contrast, Vienna and Burgenland had notably higher NEET rates.

³ Statistik Austria (2022). Arbeitsmarktstatistiken 2022, Ergebnisse der MikrozensusArbeitskräfteerhebung und der Offene-Stellen-Erhebung. https://www.statistik.at/fileadmin/user_upload/Arbeitsmarktstatistiken-2022_Web-barrierefrei.pdf

Figure 1. Urban-Rural-Typology in Austria according to municipalities⁴.



Of the 64,000 NEETs in 2018, nearly half (46.3%) were actively seeking employment, while the remaining 53.7% were inactive, not available to the labor market. There is the assumption that during an economic downturn, the duration of staying in the active and inactive NEET status will increase, requiring much more intensive efforts to activate inactive NEET youth. This distribution suggests that economic downturns might significantly affect the active NEET population, potentially increasing their numbers, while the inactive NEETs would require more intensive efforts for activation. Tyrol and Vorarlberg had particularly high proportions of inactive NEETs at around 62%, although the reasons for this remain unclear. Other states had similar proportions of inactive NEETs, ranging between 53% and 56%, highlighting a need for future research to understand these variations better.

The young adults who are categorized as **NEETs represent a highly heterogeneous group with various possible reasons and risk factors**, which contributes to their categorization as NEETs. These reasons include, among others, dropping out of education, lack of family support structures, caregiving responsibilities, immigrant

⁴ Statistics Austria (2021). Urban-Rural-Typologie, p. 22.
<https://www.statistik.at/fileadmin/pages/453/urbanRuralTypologie.pdf>

background, disadvantages and disabilities, as well as increasingly prevalent psychosocial issues^{5, 6, 7}. In this regard, there are seven identified NEET subgroups.

Figure 2. Types of NEET young people in Austria⁸.

Cluster / Class	Percentage	Characteristics
Unemployed young early educational graduates	23%	autochthonous, 16-19 years old, male or female, maximum compulsory school leaving certificate, live with parents or parent, previous job loss is a common reason, illness is an important reason for inactivity (approx. 30%), no caring duties
Apprenticeship graduates in rural areas	19%	autochthonous, rather male, 20-24 years old, secondary education (apprenticeship qualification), live with parents or parent in communities of up to 5,000 residents, 25% already have a job offer, no caring responsibilities, probably looking for a job near their place of residence
Older unemployed persons	18%	autochthonous, 20-24 years, rather male, basic to secondary education, live with parents or parent or alone, inactive due to illness (approx. 18%), loss of a job is the most common reason
School leavers in waiting position	11%	autochthonous, often have a school-leaving certificate or at least a vocational school-leaving certificate, live with parents or parent, are in a waiting position for further education or training, a suitable job or military or civilian service
Young mothers with a migration background	14%	Migrant background, 20-24 years old, married, little education, sometimes secondary education and high school diploma (10%), caring responsibilities for one or more children, no active job search in the last three weeks
Young mothers without a migration background	9%	autochthonous, 20-24 years old, live with a partner, with parents or are a single parent, little or secondary education, have caring responsibilities for one or more children, but one in five has actively looked for a job in the last three weeks
Young married women with a migration background	6%	Migrant background, married, living with partner, little to secondary education, 10% with high school diploma, partially caring responsibilities, personal and family reasons for inactivity

While NEETs are present across urban and rural areas, rural youth face unique challenges. Limited access to educational institutions, training programs, and employment opportunities in rural areas can contribute to NEET rates among this population. Moreover, rural youth may encounter additional barriers such as transportation constraints and social isolation, further compounding their disengagement from education and employment.

The **NEET numbers** are low in Tyrol, Upper Austria and Salzburg and high in Vorarlberg and Vienna. Lower Austria is in the Austrian average. On the contrary to other European countries, NEET rates in Austria are higher in urban areas than in rural areas. Even though data on rural NEETs in Austria is limited but emerging, research suggests that they represent a significant proportion of the overall NEET population. Strategies to address

⁵ Boll, C., Kloss, A., Puckelwald, J., Schneider, J., Wilke, C. B., & Will, A.-K. (2013). Ungenutzte Arbeitskräftepotenziale in Deutschland: Maßnahmen und Effekte. Hamburgisches WeltWirtschaftsinstitut (HWWI).

⁶ Esch, P., Bocquet, V., Pull, C., Couffignal, S., Lehnert, T., Graas, M., Fond-Harmant, L., & Ansseau, M. (2014). The Downward Spiral of Mental Disorders and Educational Attainment: A Systematic Review on Early School Leaving. *BMC Psychiatry*, 14(1), 237. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-014-0237-4>.

⁷ Tamesberger, D., Leitgöb, H., & Bacher, J. (2014). How to Combat NEET? Evidence from Austria. *Intereconomics*, 49(4), 221–227. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10272-014-0503-1>.

⁸ Bacher, J. NEET-Jugendliche in Österreich: Problemausmaß, volkswirtschaftliche Kosten und Handlungsempfehlungen 9, Nr. 1 (2020), S. 24–26. <https://doi.org/10.15203/MOMENTUMQUARTERLY.VOL9.NO1.P18-34>.

rural NEETs must consider the specific needs and circumstances of these individuals, including targeted outreach efforts, investment in rural infrastructure, and tailored support programs.

The **main causes that can lead to becoming a NEET are early school leaving, illness and care responsibilities**⁹. Young people who do not have more than a compulsory school certificate are ten times more at risk than those with an intermediate level of education. Therefore, interventions and programmes in Austria focus on obtaining qualifications in the school system or in Vocational Education and Training (VET).

Due to the relatively low youth unemployment and NEET rates, Austria is increasingly discussed as a good example in political discourse and international literature. The law "Education until 18" and the "Youth guarantee"¹⁰ allow for targeted support mechanisms. The "Education until 18" law entitles schools and educational institutions to report young people who are dropping out of education under the age of 18. Those families will be addressed by qualified "Youth Coaches", to understand needs and identify possible perspectives for the young people to enter in education, employment or integration support programmes¹¹. An important element of youth coaching is cooperation at all levels of the process to provide the best possible support to the youth. The youth coaches work with a resource-oriented approach and involve the young people's environment. Data availability on the educational path of young people is very high and collected by the Statistics Austria in the Monitoring of education-related employment behaviour¹².

Youth coaches may also assign young people to a place within integration support programs. A good practice here is the "AFIT" program, short for "AusbildungsFit," which is a training program in Austria specifically designed for young people who are classified as NEETs. This program aims to support these individuals, typically aged between 15 and 24, by helping them to bridge the gap between leaving formal education and entering the workforce or further training. Other promising pathways for young people include the participation in an inter-company vocational trainings called apprenticeships (Überbetriebliche Lehrausbildung)¹³, production schools (Produktionsschulen)¹⁴, or others.

⁹ Bacher, J. NEET-Jugendliche in Österreich: Problemausmaß, volkswirtschaftliche Kosten und Handlungsempfehlungen 9, Nr. 1 (2020), S. 24–26.

<https://doi.org/10.15203/MOMENTUMQUARTERLY.VOL9.NO1.P18-34>

¹⁰ Scharle, A./Weber, T. (2011): Youth Guarantees: PES approaches and measures for low skilled young people. Thematic Synthesis Paper. The European Commission Mutual Learning Programme.

¹¹ Steiner, M., Pessl, G., Wagner, E. & Karaszek, J. (2013). Evaluierung „Jugendcoaching“ – Endbericht. Studie im Auftrag des BMASK. Institut für Höhere Studien.

¹² Statistik Austria (2023). Education-related career monitoring. Standard documentation – Meta information. https://www.statistik.at/fileadmin/shared/QM/Standarddokumentationen/B_en/engl_std_b_biber.pdf

¹³ Walther, A./Pohl, A. (2005): Thematic Study on Policy Measures Concerning Disadvantaged Youth. Study Commissioned by the European Commission – Final Report. Hrsg. v. Institute for Innovation and Social Research (IRIS), Tübingen, p. 13.

http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/social_inclusion/docs/youth_study_en.pdf, 20. 03. 2024

¹⁴ Duell, N./Vogler-Ludwig, K.: The Role of Public Employment Services in Youth Integration. A Review of European Good Practice. PES to PES Dialogue Programme: Analytical paper, p. 20. Online verfügbar unter <http://www.economix.org/Analytical%20paper%20youth.pdf>

Due to the continuously increasing participation in education in Austria since the 1970s, today, most of the population already holds a secondary school diploma. However, there is still evidence of disadvantage for individuals from formally educationally disadvantaged families. According to primary research among sampled NEETS in 2024, (research conducted within BoT project in 2024.) 30% of NEETs in rural areas lack access to adequate education and employment opportunities. This gap is more pronounced among NEETs with a migration background, who face higher risks of socio-economic exclusion due to language barriers and systemic inequalities. Among the NEET population surveyed, only 42% have completed secondary education, while the remaining 58% either have only primary education or have not completed formal schooling. The high rate of low educational attainment is a significant barrier to accessing the labor market and further training opportunities.

In Austria, as in many other countries, **gender roles and expectations** can have a significant impact on educational and occupational pathways for women and men. For young women, caregiving responsibilities, looking after a child or a sick relative are the main reason for the NEET status. Early school leavers, i.e. those with at most a compulsory school leaving certificate, have a risk of entering a NEET situation that is 10.4 times higher (40.7% versus 3.9%) than school leavers with at least an intermediate educational attainment (apprenticeship or vocational school). The gender distribution among rural NEETs in Austria shows a relatively balanced ratio, with 52% male and 48% female¹⁵. The majority of respondents fall within the 18-25 age group, highlighting a critical period for intervention during early adulthood. About 44% of the surveyed NEETs are young adults aged between 18 and 24, while 39% are aged 25-29. This indicates that many youths remain disengaged from the labor market or education system beyond the typical school-leaving age, necessitating targeted support for this age cohort.

Figure 3. Reasons of inactive NEETs who do not look for employment¹⁶.

Reasons for not looking for a job	Male	Female	Total
School education or vocational training	8,3%	3,1%	5,4%
Other personal or family circumstances (householder)	10,4%	23,4%	17,9%
Caring for children or adults in need of care	–	31,3%	17,9%
Illness or inability to work	43,8%	14,1%	26,8%
Already found a new job	2,1%	3,1%	2,7%
Waiting for results of early job search steps	4,2%	1,6%	2,7%
Return to the old workplace	10,4%	4,7%	7,1%
Other reasons	20,8%	18,8%	19,6%
Total	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%
n	48	64	112

¹⁵ Primary data analysis conducted within BoT project in 2024.

¹⁶ Bacher, J. (2020) NEET-Jugendliche in Österreich: Problemausmaß, volkswirtschaftliche Kosten und Handlungsempfehlungen 9, Nr. 1, p.26. <https://doi.org/10.15203/MOMENTUMQUARTERLY.VOL9.NO1.P18-34>

In rural areas, childcare support for under three-year-olds is often a challenge. To overcome the NEET status for this target group, an expansion of public childcare facilities can be particularly effective for better reconciliation of family and work or family and education. The emphasis on not only reconciling family and work but also aligning it with further education is crucial because approximately half of the young mothers in a NEET status have at most completed compulsory education.

The age factor plays a significant role in the percentage of NEETs in Austria, as it does in many other countries. In that respect, gender and age differences can be observed among NEET youths. Male youths aged between 15 and 19 years show higher NEET rates than females of the same age. Among those aged 20 to 24 years, the gender ratio reverses due to caregiving responsibilities.

Young adults with a refugee background live in a particularly difficult situation¹⁷. They face special challenges. Anyone who wants to build a future in the new country of residence must acquire new learning content, deal with a previously foreign culture and continue their education. However, refugees not only come from countries with completely different educational contexts, their “educational career” was interrupted by fleeing. Linguistic competence must first be acquired, sometimes from scratch, starting with the development of reading and writing skills.

Social background has a stronger influence on educational success, such as attending further education, than migrant background. However, this does not seem to apply to early school leaving. Here, social background is less important, and migrant background has a stronger effect¹⁸. The observable bivariate relationships between the socio-demographic characteristics and the NEET status can be attributed to the fact that these variables are associated with belonging to the first immigrant generation. For example, first-generation immigrants more frequently reside in cities, leading to a higher NEET risk in urban areas.

Despite the widespread use of technology for social interaction, only 35% of NEETs in rural Austria have basic digital competencies, and just 12% have advanced digital skills.¹⁹ This gap in digital literacy is a critical barrier to accessing modern employment opportunities in sectors such as digital marketing, e-commerce and remote work in general. Limited access to digital infrastructure in rural areas further exacerbates the digital divide, with only 50% of respondents reporting reliable internet connectivity in their homes. This has a direct impact on their ability to engage in online education or job search activities.

¹⁷ Steiner, M., Pessl, G., Wagner, E. & Karaszek, J. (2013). Evaluierung „Jugendcoaching“ – Endbericht. Studie im Auftrag des BMASK. Institut für Höhere Studien.

¹⁸ Steiner, M., Pessl, G., Wagner, E. & Karaszek, J. (2013). Evaluierung „Jugendcoaching“ – Endbericht. Studie im Auftrag des BMASK. Institut für Höhere Studien.

¹⁹ Primary data analysis conducted within BoT project in 2024.

The primary barriers reported by NEETs include a lack of vocational training opportunities (cited by 67% of respondents) and the perceived irrelevance of existing programs to their career aspirations (reported by 44%). These findings suggest a mismatch between youth expectations and the available educational resources.

Additionally, 53% of NEETs express dissatisfaction with the support services provided, citing inadequate career counseling and a lack of tailored guidance for navigating employment pathways.

The situation of NEETs in rural areas encompasses a range of multifaceted and interconnected challenges that necessitate a comprehensive and multi-pronged strategic approach, such as:

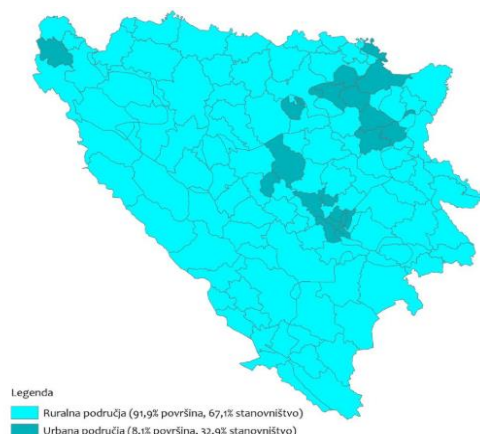
- **Enhance Vocational Training Accessibility:** Develop targeted vocational training and apprenticeship programs that are better aligned with the skills and aspirations of NEET youth.
- **Promote Digital Literacy Initiatives:** Establish community-based digital literacy programs to bridge the skill gap, particularly focusing on advanced digital competencies.
- **Improve Outreach and Information Accessibility:** Implement accessible information platforms and strengthen community outreach to ensure NEETs are aware of the opportunities and resources available to them.
- **Expand Support Networks and Mentorship Programs:** Strengthen family and community support structures, and create mentorship initiatives that provide continuous guidance and emotional support.

1.2.2. Bosnia and Herzegovina

According to the latest census (conducted in 2013), the total population of Bosnia and Herzegovina was 3.53 million. Additionally, according to the mentioned census, approximately 770,000 young people in BiH fall within the age range of 15 to 30 years old. Putting this number of young people into the context of the total population of Bosnia and Herzegovina, we come to the conclusion that it represents about 20% of the total population. However, migration trends from rural to urban areas, as well as natural decline and significant emigration trends from the country to other EU countries, especially among young people, significantly affect the population number and its spatial distribution.

According to the Strategic Plan for Rural Development of BiH for the period 2023-2027, 91.9% of the territory of BiH belongs to rural areas, where 67.1% of the population lives.

Figure 4. Rural and urban areas at the local level in BiH



Analyzing the results of a study conducted by the Regional Cooperation Council in 2021, which estimates the share of NEETs in Bosnia and Herzegovina at 21.6% of the total number of young people (around 160,000 NEETs), with no significant difference in gender between males and females, we can say that around 108,000 NEETs in BiH live in rural areas. Most NEETs in this age group had a medium level of skills, while very few had higher education, which is characteristic of NEETs living in rural areas.

It is important to note that over the past 15 years there has been a trend of decreasing the share of NEETs in the general youth population across the country, although it is currently at an unacceptable level of around 22%. According to available research by the *Rural NEET Youth Network and European Cooperation in Science* in 2020, during the period from 2009 to 2019, there was a significant decrease in the share of NEETs in the general youth population. According to the following graph, the NEET rate in Bosnia and Herzegovina decreased from 25.52% in 2009 to 20.76% in 2019. A similar trend is observed for urban (20.62% in 2009 to 18.36% in 2019) and rural (28.57% in 2009 to 22.52% in 2019) areas.²⁰

Differences in the rate of youth in the total population, as well as the rate of NEETs in the total youth population in the given region, are quite small, or statistically insignificant, as can be seen in the following table.

Figure 5. Rate of the youth population in the total population according to entities (2013)

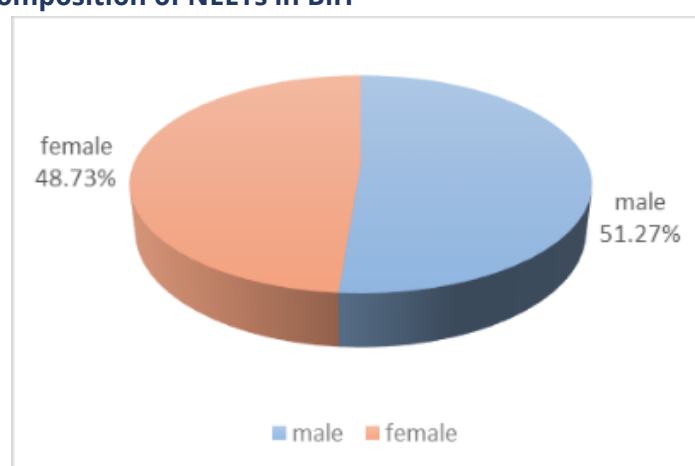
	Total population	15-19	20-24	25-29	Total Youth	% of Youth in Total population
FEDERACIJA BOSNE I HERCEGOVINE	2.219.220	161.881	150.902	164.203	476.986	21%
REPUBLIKA SRPSKA	1.170.342	70.815	65.363	76.753	212.931	18%
BRČKO DISTRIKT	83.516	5.323	4.936	5.729	15.988	19%

²⁰ RURAL NEETs IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA, A. Mujčinović, M. Emirhafizović, A. Nikolić, G. Đurić,, published by: COST Action CA 18213: Rural NEET Youth Network: Modeling the risks underlying rural NEETs social exclusion, December 2020.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, young people who are not engaged in education, employment, or training (NEET) face challenges arising from the country's complex economic, social, and educational situation. With economic difficulties, high unemployment rates, limited access to education and basic services, as well as social and psychological challenges, NEETs represent a vulnerable group with limited opportunities.

Analyses have shown that males, with a share of 51.3%, are more represented among NEETs compared to females (48.7%), which significantly differs from the EU-28 average of 57% in favor of young women.

Figure 6. Gender composition of NEETs in BiH



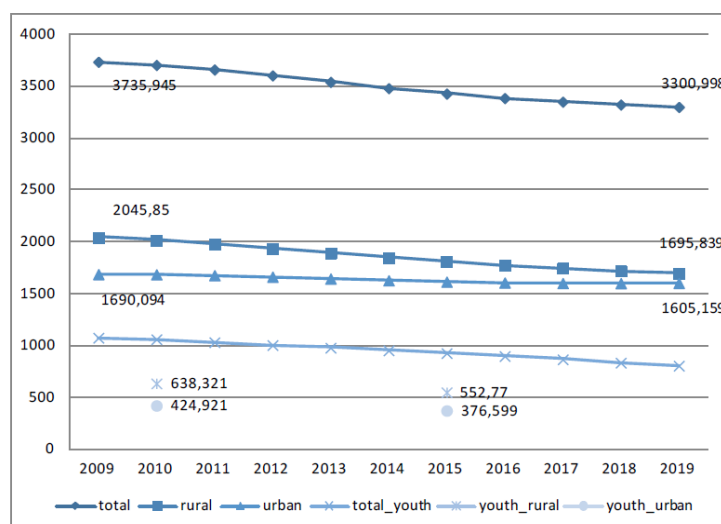
According to the youth research conducted by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in 2019, regarding the type of settlements, respondents more commonly live in cities (57.2%) than in rural areas (42.8%). This recorded difference of 14.4% in 2019 is larger compared to the previous five-year period when this difference was 9.6%, indicating an increase of 4.8% of young people living in cities, corresponding to the trend of accelerated urbanization or de-agrarianization of Bosnian society. Based on the size of settlements, the surveyed young people predominantly live in settlements with up to 2000 inhabitants (46.2%), while 7.0% of the surveyed live in cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants, as detailed in the following table.

Figure 7. Size of settlements where youth lives (in%)

Size of Settlements	
Ispod 2,000	46,4
2,000 – 5,000	9,1
5,000 – 10,000	8,5
10,000 – 20,000	11,1
20,000 – 50,000	8,0
50,000 – 100,000	9,9
100,000 – 500,000	7,0

Available data on the young population by the degree of urbanization show that from 2010 to 2015, the total young population decreased by 12.59%, in rural regions by 13.40%, and in urban regions by 11.37%. A similar trend is observed for both rural and urban regions across different age groups. Regarding rural regions, a significant negative trend is observed in the age group of 20 to 24 years (a decrease of 26.03%).²¹

Figure 8. The decline in the population and youth in urban and rural areas in BiH



From the previous graph, it can be concluded that there is a significant decline in the number of youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with the most pronounced decrease observed in rural areas and within the age group of 25-29 years. The decline in the number of youth can be linked to negative trends in demographic indicators, such as the negative natural population growth (notable in younger age groups), which has been consistent over the last 5 years and amounted to -9,193 in 2023²², or external migrations (notable in the age group 25-29 years).

Further analysis showed **predominance of NEETs with intermediate skills**. Namely, the majority of NEETs in Bosnia and Herzegovina possess intermediate-level skills, which often do not align with labor market demands. This mismatch leads to underemployment or unemployment and may discourage further educational pursuits. Very few NEETs hold higher education degrees, reflecting limited opportunities for academic advancement, especially in rural areas. Addressing this skill gap through targeted vocational training and lifelong learning opportunities is crucial for improving employment outcomes.

The NEET population over 15 years are decreasing but still high (22%). While the proportion of NEETs has been gradually decreasing, it remains twice as high as the EU-28 average, indicating the need for sustained efforts to reduce youth exclusion. The slow

²¹ RURAL NEETs IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA, A. Mujčinović, M. Emirhafizović, A. Nikolić, G. Đurić,, published by: COST Action CA 18213: Rural NEET Youth Network: Modeling the risks underlying rural NEETs social exclusion, December 2020.

²² Agency for statistics BiH, april 2024. <https://bhas.gov.ba/>

progress suggests that existing strategies may be insufficient or improperly implemented. Developing comprehensive national and local policies, improving cross-sectoral coordination, and increasing resource allocation are critical for accelerating the reduction of NEET rates.

Population decline among youth, especially in rural areas. The overall youth population is declining, with more significant reductions in rural areas. This trend is primarily driven by internal migration to urban centers and high levels of emigration abroad, particularly due to poor economic conditions and limited career prospects in rural regions. The loss of young people from rural areas exacerbates regional disparities and undermines local development. Addressing this requires the promotion of rural economic development, improved quality of life, and tailored support for young entrepreneurs in rural communities.

High proportion of NEETs living with parents (over 80%). A large share of NEETs in Bosnia and Herzegovina live with their parents, a figure much higher than the EU-28 average. This phenomenon is partly due to economic instability, low wages, and high unemployment rates, which hinder young people from achieving financial independence. Programs that support youth entrepreneurship, provide affordable housing options, and promote financial literacy could enable young people to transition more quickly to independent living.

Young people are close to the poverty line. Youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina are a vulnerable group, with a higher risk of poverty than the adult population. This vulnerability is particularly pronounced for young people who do not pursue education beyond primary school. With 57% of this group living in poverty, interventions must prioritize educational retention and re-engagement programs, coupled with social protection measures that reduce economic disparities.

Complex administrative structure hinders educational development in BiH. The decentralized administrative setup in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with multiple levels of governance responsible for education, complicates policy development and implementation. This fragmentation leads to inconsistencies in the quality and accessibility of education across the country, particularly affecting marginalized groups such as NEETs. Streamlining the administrative framework and enhancing coordination between government entities could improve the delivery of educational services. In addition, the educational system is not aligned with labour market needs, leading to a low employment rate among young people.

High youth unemployment rate (38%). The youth unemployment rate in Bosnia and Herzegovina is alarmingly high compared to EU standards, reflecting structural issues in the labor market and a lack of effective employment policies. This high rate is a critical driver of the NEET phenomenon, necessitating comprehensive labor market reforms, active employment measures, and stronger connections between educational institutions and the private sector.

The role of Career Information and Counseling Centers (CISO). CISO centers play a pivotal role in bridging the gap between NEETs and the labor market. They offer career guidance, counseling, and skills development opportunities that are crucial for young people who are otherwise "invisible" to employment agencies. Expanding the reach and services of CISO centers can improve the employability and integration of NEET youth, especially in remote or underserved areas.

Need for tailored prevention and integration programs. Prevention and integration programs should focus on enhancing specific skills needed for the labor market, such as job-seeking, motivation, and presentation skills, as well as simulating job interviews. These programs should be adapted to the varying needs of NEET subgroups, considering factors such as age, education level, and geographical location, to maximize their impact.

Over 50% of youth express interest in leaving the country. The high interest in emigration reflects a lack of confidence in local opportunities and a desire for better living standards. If left unaddressed, this trend will lead to a further depletion of the country's human capital. Creating attractive opportunities for youth within Bosnia and Herzegovina, such as business start-up support, better career prospects, and improved social services, is essential to curbing emigration.

Present low utilization of mental health services among youth. Research conducted in Bosnia and Herzegovina reveals that 15%-20% of young people have visited a psychologist, while 80% have not, mainly due to a perceived lack of need. However, about 15% of young people feel the need for psychological services but do not know where to seek help. This highlights the importance of informing young people about available psychological support services to reduce barriers to accessing help. Raising awareness about mental health care is crucial to combat societal stigmatization. Regular visits to psychologists within the educational system could familiarize young people with mental health services. Introducing regular psychological consultations as part of the educational curriculum, raising awareness of mental health benefits, and reducing stigma through public campaigns could encourage more young people to seek help.

High risk factors for becoming part of the NEET Category. Economic instability, lack of motivation, insufficient government programs, and poor social integration are key risk factors for young people becoming NEETs. Tackling these issues requires a multi-faceted approach that includes economic policies to stimulate job creation, youth engagement programs to boost motivation and skills, and targeted social inclusion measures to enhance community ties and reduce isolation.

1.2.3. Bulgaria

Despite Bulgaria's successes in reducing unemployment rates in recent decades, the country faces serious challenges affecting employment. According to an OECD report, Bulgaria is one of the countries with the fastest declining population in the world. In the

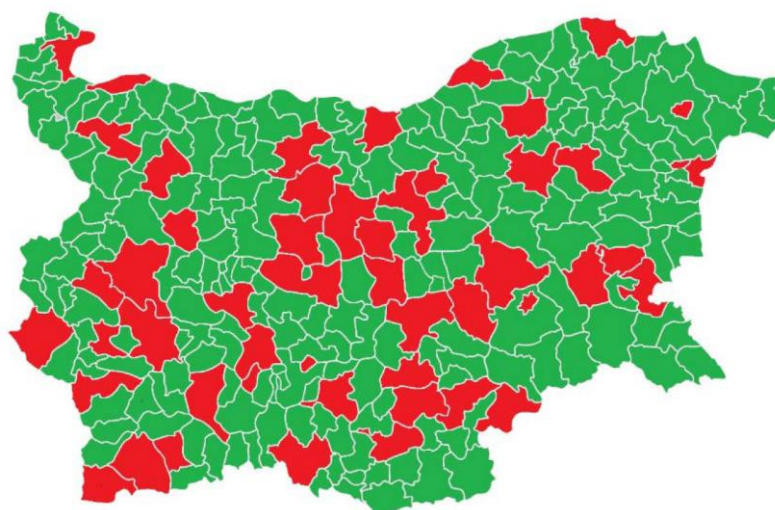
next three decades, the country is expected to lose a third of its working-age population, posing a significant risk of severe labor shortages.

The Bulgarian labour market offers good employment prospects for well-educated and urban people but is highly unequal in relation to the remaining 900,000 or so inactive and unemployed working-age adults in Bulgaria (excluding students). Some population groups are particularly at risk of inactivity and unemployment. These groups include young people who are not in education, employment, or training (NEETs), ethnic minorities, people who are not in work due to caring and family commitments, people who are not in work due to illness and disability and working-age adults who are not in work.

According to OECD data, the percentage of NEETs in Bulgaria in 2020 was among the highest in the EU at 18%, compared to a European average of 14%. Republic of Bulgaria is administratively divided into 28 districts and 265 municipalities. The number of settlements is 5 256 (including 257 towns and 4,999 villages). There are 8 municipalities with a population of over 100 000 people - Sofia, Plovdiv, Varna, Burgas, Stara Zagora, Ruse, Sliven, and Pleven, with 40.7% of the population living in these 8 municipalities.

In 2022, a new national definition of rural areas was introduced in Bulgaria, according to which rural areas are defined as municipalities in which there is no settlement with a population of more than 15,000. Under current legislation, 215 municipalities fall within the definition of rural municipalities.

Figure 9. Administrative division of the Republic of Bulgaria by municipalities. Rural municipalities are marked in green and urban municipalities in red.



Note: For the purposes of applying the Community-led Local Development (CLLD) approach for investment interventions in non-agricultural activities in rural areas, the definition of a rural municipality with no settlement with more than 30 000 inhabitants is used and the number of municipalities is 237.2

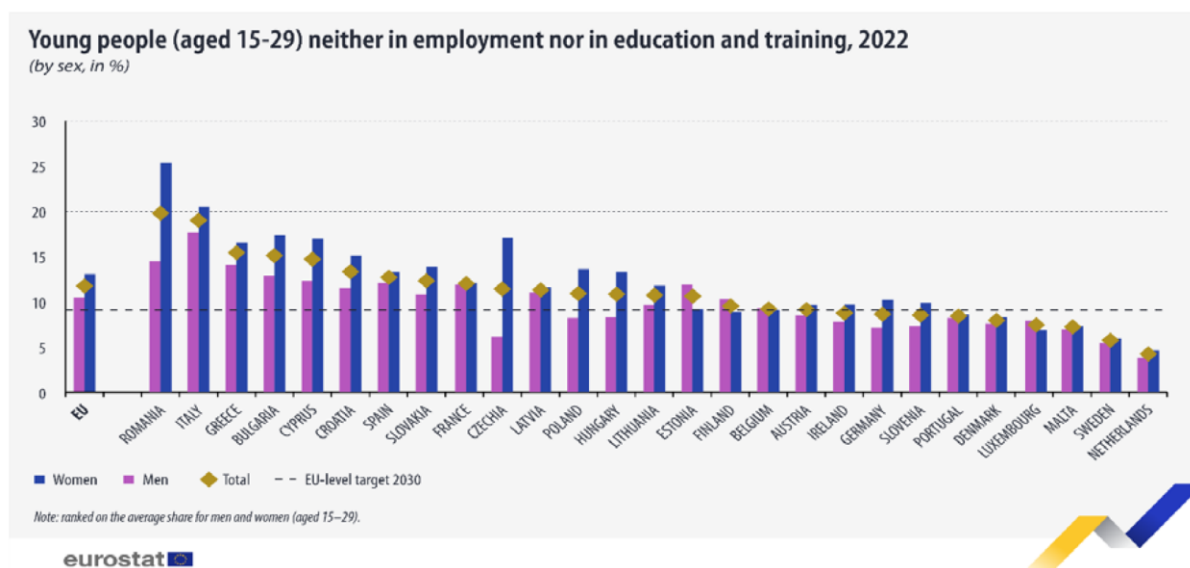
Rural areas represent 22% of the territory of Bulgaria and 13% of the population (900,963 people).

In 2019, Bulgaria's unemployment rate was among the lowest in the EU, at 4% among 15-64 years old, against 7% on average in the EU, and labour force participation had risen strongly within just a few years. From a rate of just 66% in 2011, it rose to its highest level in decades in 2019, at 73%. Employment gains had been strongest in urban areas and among older people, while rural areas and young people had benefited less. Bulgaria's labour market stabilized relatively quickly after the initial shock in spring 2020, and has improved since then, supported by rapidly implemented policy responses, including the new "60/40" wage subsidy scheme²³. The unemployment rate stabilized at about 5% in the second half of 2020, and the number of registered job seekers fell back to its 2019 level in summer 2021. According to the same source, despite the labour market improvements in the country, there are about 900,000 working-age adults who are unemployed or inactive (excluding students). Among this out of work population, 15% are available for employment and actively looking for a job, while remaining 85% are inactive (i.e. outside the labour force). While inactivity and unemployment span across many different groups, some population groups are particularly exposed and face a high risk of becoming or remaining inactive or unemployed. Most prominent of such groups are NEETs.

In 2019, in Bulgaria are registered 170,000 Youth not in employment education or training – NEETs. At the same year the country has one of the highest NEET rates in the EU, at 17%, against 13% in the EU. Further analysis of that group shows that about 42% of youth NEETs are with Roma origin.

²³ The government initiative designed to support employers during times of economic crisis. The government covers 60% of an employee's wages (including social security contributions), while the employer is responsible for the remaining 40%. This ensures that workers continue to receive their full salary despite economic challenges.

Figure 10. NEETs (young people aged 15-29) not in education, employment or training



Most inactive and unemployed people face multiple barriers to employment. The most common barriers to labour market participation for inactive and unemployed people in Bulgaria including NEETs are skills barriers such as limited education or work experience, family-related barriers, health impediments, and geographic barriers - e.g. living in remote settlements and rural areas without a vehicle. Some labour market obstacles concern certain groups of inactive and unemployed much more often than others. For example, 42% of out-of-work Roma face a geographic barrier compared to 21% of the overall inactive population.

According to the OECD report employment rates and wage levels differ markedly across educational groups, people living in different regions of the country and between men and women. However, there is not available specific statistical information about NEETs on regional and local level and we can draw some conclusions only on the basis of the regional unemployment rates as officially reported.

In 2019, the employment rate among 15-64 years old in Bulgaria's six planning regions ranged from below 60% (59.7% in Severozapaden) to over 75% (75.6% in Yugozapaden). According to the administrative statistics of the National Employment Agency, the unemployment rate by district for 2020 is lower than the national average (5.6%) in nine districts: Sofia-city (1.8%), Gabrovo (3.4%), Varna (3.5%), Stara Zagora (4.2%), Burgas and Plovdiv (4.3% each), Pernik (4.4%), Dobrich (5.0%), Veliko Tarnovo (5.3%). In the Ruse district, the level coincides with the national average (5.6%), while in the remaining 18 districts, it exceeds the national average, with a maximum of 13.5% in the Vidin district. Beyond employment rates, wage levels differ strongly across regions. In Sofia, the wage level lies 40% over the national average, while in Blagoevgrad, in Bulgaria's South-west, the average wage is less than half of that in Sofia.

Prolonged periods spent by young people out of the labour market can have serious effects on overcoming difficulties. In addition, young people were hit hardest by the labour market repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result of the pandemic NEET rates increased again and stood at 18% in 2020, against a European average of 14%.

To reduce high NEET rates, both the NEA (National Employment Agency) and municipalities employ activators/mediators who specifically focus on reaching out and activating NEETs. In 2019, close to 100 youth mediators were employed throughout Bulgaria. In addition, the NEA set up Family Labour Consultations, aiming to provide comprehensive services to all members of families confronted with unemployment and inactivity, with the potential to prevent teenagers and young adults from these families becoming NEETs. However, less than 15% of NEETs aged under 25 register with the NEA, limiting the support the NEA can provide.

An additional challenge in tracking the NEET population is the lack of sufficient data on NEETs in the country, their regional distribution, distribution by sex and other characteristics. It is very difficult to give an analysis directed at NEETs from rural areas, as we have not found any literature focusing exclusively on them. Therefore, throughout the report, we will write about young NEETs in Bulgaria in general and not specifically oriented towards rural NEETs.

Regarding the economic situation of NEETs, they receive government attention and access benefits similarly to other unemployed individuals.

Income-support for unemployed individuals in Bulgaria is provided primarily through a two-tiered system through the benefits of:

Contributory unemployment insurance is for persons who have paid or are due to pay contributions to the Unemployment Insurance Fund for at least 12 months in the last 18 months before the termination of the insurance and who:

- are registered as unemployed with the Employment Agency;
- are not entitled to a retirement pension in Bulgaria or an old-age pension in another country or are not receiving a reduced retirement pension or an occupational pension;
- are not engaged in an occupational activity for which they are subject to compulsory insurance under the Social Insurance Code or the legislation of another country, with the exception of persons who have concluded an employment contract for short-term seasonal agricultural work for one day.

Social assistance and the so called “heating allowance” usually for the winter months, which are targeted towards low-income families but are not dependent on social security contributions.

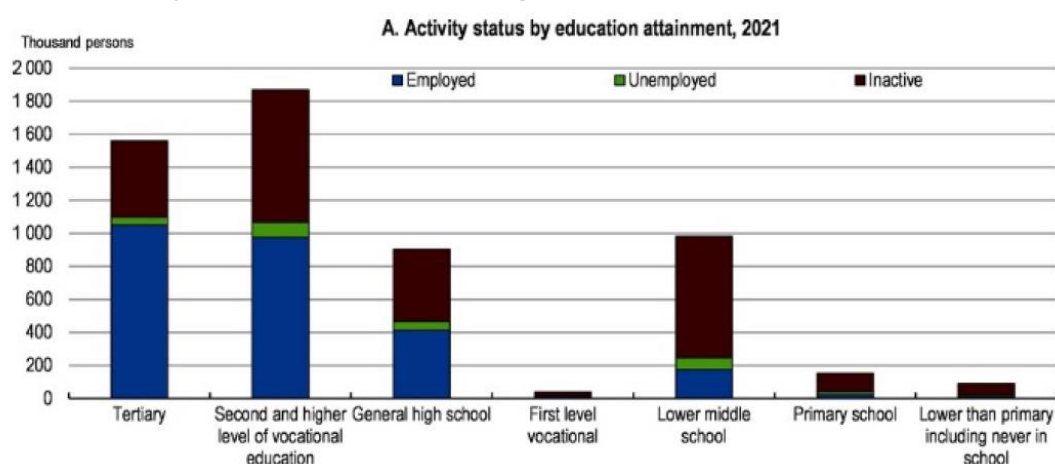
Child allowances: The conditions for granting family benefits for pregnancy, childbirth and child rearing are regulated in the Law on Family Benefits for Children and its

Implementing Rules. Family allowances are funds in cash or in kind that support low-income families in raising their children.

According to the OECD Report many inactive people in Bulgaria face strong employment barriers because they do not have any recent work experience. One-quarter (24.6%) of the inactive aged 25-64 have never worked before. This value is significantly higher than the EU average (18.3%) and it is higher than in all other EU countries except Belgium, Italy, Greece, and Romania. Among the inactive in Bulgaria who have worked before, half (49.3%) have been out of employment for at least 5 years. Taken together, these numbers imply that less than 40% of Bulgaria's inactive have any work experience dating back to less than five years.

Inactivity on labour market is more common among those with lower education attainment. Three-quarters of people with at lower secondary education are out of the workforce and many of those with only high school education are inactive. While inactivity is lower among people with tertiary education attainment, still more than one-quarter of this group is inactive.

Figure 11. Status by level of education in Bulgaria, 2021



One in two NEETs (47%) have dropped out of school. Every one in five (19%) had left school before completing their primary education. 86% of early school leavers are from minority ethnic groups, with 2/3 of them are Roma. The share of secondary school leavers who have no vocational qualifications is 48% - commensurate with the share of early school leavers. These are young people for whom the transition from education to the labour market has proved difficult. The reasons for this could be subjective, related to the young person himself or herself (lack of professional qualifications, skills and competences required in addition to the diploma; the presence of family problems or health problems, lack of motivation to work), as well as to individual objective (limited employment opportunities, especially in smaller settlements, lack of vacancies, etc.).

Figure 12. Early leavers from education by EU country, 2022



In research conducted as a part of BoT project in 2024, analyzing response from interviewed NEETs, the most common response that arises from **46.66% of respondents is a lack of work experience**, highlighting a **key barrier for young people in transition process from the education system into the workforce**. On other hand, **30% of respondents cited a lack of qualifications as the second most frequent barrier**, suggesting that the education system may not provide adequate skills required by the labor market. Other factors, such as the absence of personal documents or legal status, point to bureaucratic and social barriers that may hinder or prevent employment. Additionally, 10% of respondents pointed “personal lack of interest” as a barrier to employment, indicating the need for greater awareness of the importance of actively seeking employment and developing professional aspirations.

Most of the NEETs come from low-income families. The social and economic insecurity of their families often also affects their ability to seek and find a job. Social norms and expectations, especially among minority ethnic groups, related to early marriage and parenthood also play a role in excluding young people from the education system and the labor market. The analysis from NEETs need research conducted within BoT project in 2024., shows that the **90% of interviewed NEETs live in households with their mother, while 83.33% lives with their father**, thus highlighting the importance of parental support and the family household as a fundamental component of social capital. Furthermore, **56.66% NEETs live with their siblings**, and a **smaller number live with a partner (13.33%)** or live with their children (10%), indicating that the extended family and close relatives play an important role in support networks. These data underscore the significance of the family as a central pillar of social support, and the absence of responses indicating living with other relatives or homelessness reflects the traditional family model and socio-cultural norms of rural areas

Also, NEETs are at high risk of social exclusion, leading to marginalization and poverty. They are less likely to participate in social and civic activities, further aggravating their situation. At the same time, 64% NEETs live in small settlements - villages and small towns

(other than regional centers). NEETs who live in rural areas are three times more than those who live in the capital (ratio rural-capital = -36%:12%). One in four youth with NEETs status live in a district town (25%).

The results of the UNICEF national representative survey show that almost half of NEETs have experienced difficulties at school. 17% indicated that they had very serious problems (in the control group, only 5% had difficulties). Those from minority ethnic groups, especially Roma, have the greatest difficulties at school.

Young people who later faced issues with career realization commonly struggled with learning material (83%) and homework (60%).

Research in Bulgaria shows several risk factors that increase the likelihood of young people becoming NEET, such as:

Economic and employment factors - Poverty and low quality of life. Almost half of NEETs (46%) have parents or relatives who are permanently unemployed. Unemployment, especially when it is long-term, directly affects the quality of life of the family and can impose a certain behavioral pattern in which absence from education and employment can become the norm for several generations – for parents and their children and grandchildren. In addition, analysis on NEETs needs conducted as a part of BoT project in 2024, shows that 46% of NEETS indicate the absence of local companies where they can work, as one of key barriers to successfully get employed and improve economic situation. This is exacerbated by the seasonal and low-paying nature of available jobs, which do not provide stable income or career advancement. For NEETs, this economic environment fosters dependency on social benefits, which discourages the pursuit of formal employment due to the risk of losing these supports.

Educational factors - Young people with low levels of education, the lack of practical skills and qualifications that match the requirements of employers, lead to difficulties in finding work and make them more vulnerable to falling into NEET status. Some NEETs have only primary education or none at all, limiting their job prospects. Early marriages and economic necessity further contribute to high dropout rates among rural students. The lack of vocational training facilities and career counseling exacerbates this issue, leaving NEETs without the necessary skills to compete in the job market.

Social and cultural factors - Young people who grew up in families with a low socio-economic status are more likely to be NEET. Lack of family support and encouragement plays an important role. Early marriage and parenthood are socially acceptable and expected, which can lead to dropping out of school and falling into NEET status.

Parents and relatives with health problems and addictions. One in five families of NEETs (18%) have people with severe health problems – physical, mental or intellectual disabilities. Every tenth family (9%) has parents or close relatives addicted to alcohol, drugs or other addictions. Domestic violence and aggression. Nearly 60% of young people who are not in school, work or training have lived in families with violence, systemic

alcoholism, drug addiction, aggression or criminal behavior. Family and community networks play a dual role in the lives of NEETs. The survey data from 2024. indicates that family is the primary influence for 50% of NEETs, highlighting the importance of familial support in shaping career and educational paths.

Personal Aspirations and Resilience- Low self-esteem and lack of motivation can prevent young people from actively looking for work or continuing their education. The survey reveals a dichotomy in the personal adaptability and resilience of NEETs. While some actively seek change and improvement, others rely heavily on external support and exhibit a pessimistic outlook on their future. This split underscores the need for targeted interventions that foster self-efficacy and goal-oriented behaviors.

Institutional factors - Lack of access to quality social and educational services, especially in rural areas, increases the risk of falling into NEET status.

To address the identified challenges and improve the integration of NEETs into education, employment, and society, the following recommendations are proposed:

- **Implement targeted economic development programs** to attract businesses and create job opportunities in rural areas. This could include providing incentives for companies to establish operations locally and supporting entrepreneurship among NEETs.
- **Expand access to education and vocational training in rural areas.** This includes building more schools and training centers, offering scholarships, and implementing programs that keep students engaged. Career counseling services should be made widely available to help NEETs align their aspirations with realistic career paths.
- **Strengthen family and community support systems** through targeted interventions that promote positive parenting practices and cultural awareness. This includes addressing traditional practices that hinder education and personal development and fostering environments where NEETs can make autonomous decisions.
- **Invest in healthcare infrastructure and services in rural areas.** Telemedicine could be a viable solution to bridge the gap in healthcare access, especially for mental health services. Ensuring that NEETs have access to comprehensive healthcare will support their overall well-being and capacity to engage in education or employment.
- **Develop programs that enhance personal resilience and adaptability** among NEETs. This includes mentorship programs, life skills training, and peer support networks. Encouraging a proactive mindset and self-efficacy is crucial for empowering NEETs to navigate life's challenges effectively.
- **Advocate for policy reforms** that support the integration of NEETs into the workforce. This includes revising social benefit policies to encourage employment without penalizing individuals for temporary or low-wage work. Simplifying bureaucratic processes and reducing administrative burdens can also encourage businesses to participate in employment programs.

- **Implement digital literacy programs** tailored to the needs of NEETs. This includes basic computer skills, internet usage, and proficiency in common software applications. Partnering with NGOs and tech companies can provide the necessary resources and expertise. Enhancing digital skills can significantly expand the horizons for NEETs, providing them with the tools and flexibility needed to thrive in the modern economy.
- **Encourage remote work opportunities by providing NEETs with the skills and tools needed for virtual employment.** This includes training in remote work technologies such as video conferencing, project management software, and online collaboration tools. Develop and promote programs that facilitate remote work opportunities, such as remote job fairs, online employment platforms, and incentives for companies to hire remote workers from rural areas.
- **Improve access to digital infrastructure in rural areas**, such as high-speed internet and computer equipment. This can be achieved through government subsidies, public-private partnerships, and community initiatives.
- **Holistic approach** that encompasses economic development, educational access, healthcare improvements, and the strengthening of social and familial support networks.

1.2.4. Czech Republic

In the Czech Republic, the NEETs rate was 9.7% in 2020, below the EU average. However, this still represents a significant number of young people, 109,000 (Czech Statistical Office - CSO, 2021).

Figure 13. NEETs (males 15-29 years) in the EU according to data.oecd.org

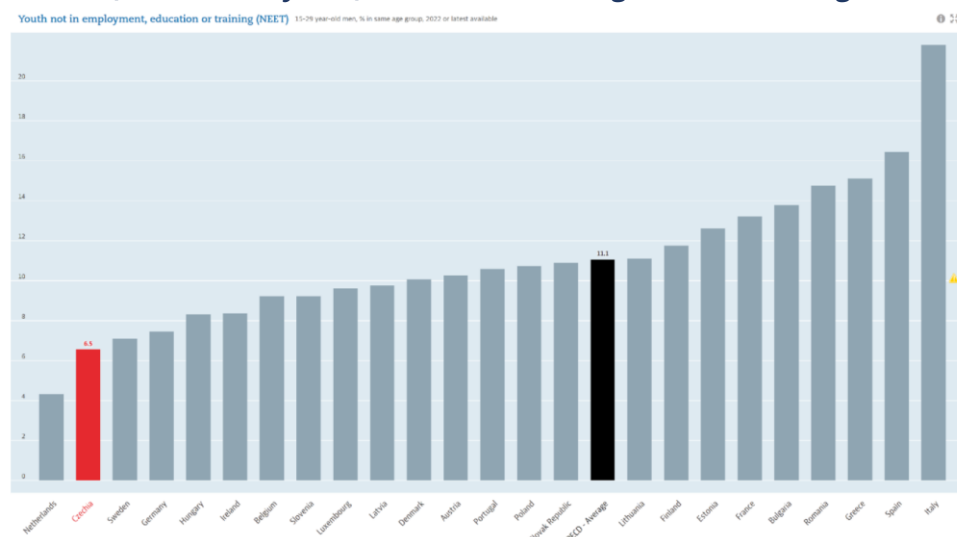
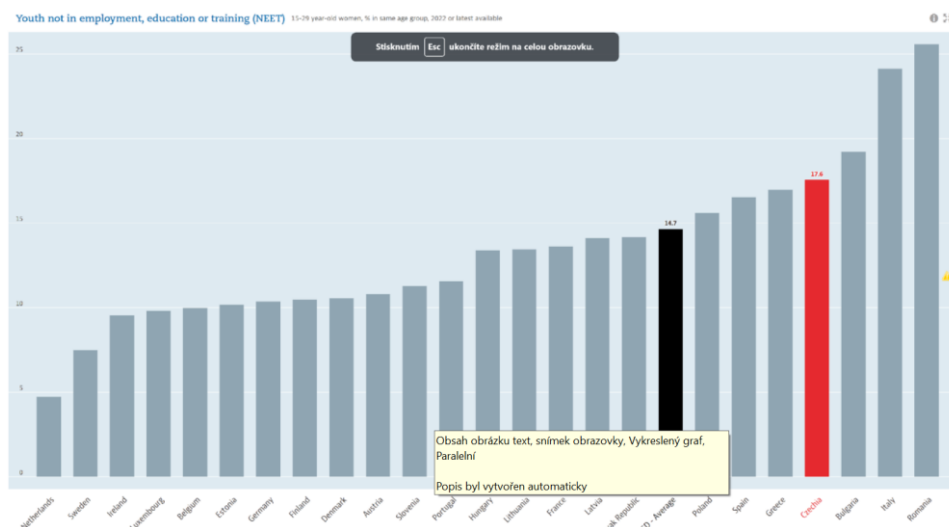


Figure 14. NEETs (females aged 15-29) in the EU according to data.oecd.org



The youth unemployment rate in the Czech Republic is at a record high. It reached 13.7% in June 2024, the highest since March 2015. Even more worrying is the fact that **this rate is significantly higher than the general population´ rate, which is around 3.5%.**

At first glance, it might seem that this is a consequence of the worsening economic situation. But the opposite is true. **The Czech economy is booming and companies are struggling with a shortage of workers.** The high level of youth unemployment is therefore more likely to have structural and complex causes.

The main reasons for such situation could be find in:

Lack of relevant skills and qualifications. Many young people lack the experience and knowledge that companies demand. This is due, among other things, to the non-ideal link between the education system and the needs of the labor market.

Unwillingness to accept low-wage and manual jobs. Young people are more demanding of working conditions and wages than in the past. They often reject unskilled and manual jobs that are available.

Unrealistic salary demands. Some young people demand unrealistic wages for their work that do not match their experience and skills.

Insufficient support for graduates. Young people who have just entered the labor market lack experience and often lack awareness of how to find a job. The state does not offer them sufficient support in this respect.

Regional disparities. Youth unemployment rates vary from region to region. The highest rates are in the Ústí and Moravian-Silesian regions, while the lowest are in Prague.

In addition, according to Czech Statistical Office, data from 2021, the main reasons for youth inactivity on labour market in the Czech Republic include (Czech Statistical Office, 2021):

- Study: 41.3%
- Looking for work: 18.4%
- Caring for family: 11.3%
- Health reasons: 8.8%
- Other reasons: 20.2%

Other factors contributing to the inactivity of young people in the Czech Republic include (Infoabsolvent, 2023; Czech Statistical Office, 2021):

- **Lack of relevant job offers:** job vacancies do not match the skills and interests of young people (Infoabsolvent, 2023).
- **Low wages:** young people often face low wages that do not match their expectations and do not allow them to live a decent life (Infoabsolvent, 2023).
- **Lack of motivation:** some young people lack motivation to work or study. This may be due to low self-esteem, loss of meaning in life or negative experiences at school or work (CSO, 2021).
- **Poor choice of study programme:** some young people choose a study programme that does not help them subsequently find a job in the labour market (Infoabsolvent, 2023).
- **Deficiencies in the education system:** the school system may not provide young people with sufficient practical skills and experience that employers demand (Infoabsolvent, 2023).
- **Discrimination:** some young people may face discrimination in the labour market because of their age, education or membership of a particular minority (Czech Statistical Office, 2021).

The impact of youth inactivity in the Czech Republic

The consequences of youth inactivity in the Czech Republic are very similar to the negative impacts observed across Europe (Eurostat, 2020). These include:

- **Economic impacts:** youth inactivity leads to lower labour productivity and loss of potential for the generation. This can have a negative impact on GDP growth and the overall development of society (Eurostat, 2020).
- **Social impacts:** NEETs are at risk of poverty, social exclusion and deterioration in mental and physical health (Eurostat, 2020).
- **Increase in state spending:** Youth inactivity leads to an increase in state spending on social benefits and health care (Eurostat, 2020).

The government and labour authorities are aware of the problem and are trying to address it. Various programmes are being implemented to support the young unemployed, focusing on retraining, education and job placement, in overall trying to activate young people to look for employment.

Young people's attitudes towards work are also changing. They are more aware of the importance of education and relevant skills and are willing to take an active part in the job search.

The issue of NEETs (Not in Education, Employment or Training) is a serious phenomenon in the Czech Republic with far-reaching impacts on individuals and society as a whole. In this section we will look in detail at the development of the situation from 1991 to the present day, using relevant statistics, sociological surveys, government documents and other Czech sources.

The rate of NEETs in the Czech Republic has fluctuated between 7% and 13% since 1991. In the 1990s, the NEETs rate fluctuated around 10%, with a slight increase at the end of the decade. In the first decade of the 21st century, the NEETs rate fell to 7% in 2008, but then rose to 13% in 2010 as a result of the global financial crisis. In recent years, the NEETs rate has been declining slightly, with the exception of 2020, when it reached 10.4% as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic

The development of the NEETs rate in the Czech Republic is influenced by a number of factors, including:

- **Economic situation:** the rate of NEETs typically rises in times of economic recession and falls in times of economic growth
- **Demographic factors:** NEETs rates tend to be higher among young people from lower socio-economic groups, Roma and people with disabilities
- **Education system:** Weaknesses in the education system, such as low quality of teaching and low attractiveness of vocational training, can lead to an increase in the rate of NEETs
- **Labour market:** Lack of relevant job offers and low wages may discourage young people from entering the labour market

The Government of the Czech Republic is aware of the issue of NEETs and tries to address it through various measures, such as:

- **Improving career guidance:** providing quality career guidance in schools and to young people looking for work.
- **Increasing the supply of apprenticeships:** Encouraging companies to offer more apprenticeships to make vocational training more attractive.
- **Dual training:** Expanding the range of dual training programmes that combine theoretical learning at school with practical learning with an employer (MoEYS).
- **Raising the minimum wage:** Raising the minimum wage can help improve wages for young people who often work in low-skilled occupations (MPsv).
- **Promote social entrepreneurship:** Support the creation of social enterprises that can offer employment opportunities to young people from disadvantaged backgrounds (MPsv).

In addition to government measures, the role of non-governmental organisations is also important. These organisations support young people from different target groups in their job search, help them with career guidance and skills development and offer social services.

Examples of projects aimed at supporting NEETs:

- Young Entrepreneurs Project: The project supports young people in developing their own business (MPsv).
- The programme Start: Program helps young people from unemployed families to find a job (ÚP ČR).
- Project "Career without Barriers": the project supports young people with disabilities in the labour market (MPsv).

Addressing the issue of NEETs is complex and requires the cooperation of all actors. The government, NGOs, employers and schools must work together to ensure that young people have the best possible conditions to enter the labour market or to continue their education. This is the only way to make youth inactivity a thing of the past in the Czech Republic.

Unemployment and the issue of NEETs are complex problems in the Czech Republic that have a number of negative impacts on individuals and society as a whole. As previously mentioned, synergy and cooperation between different stakeholders is needed to find solutions to these problems.

Although the share of unskilled NEETs has remained low compared to some EU countries, a worrying trend is evident among young people with tertiary education. The increase in this category of NEETs indicates a mismatch between education programs and labor market needs, low wages, and poor quality working conditions for graduates, as well as insufficient support for them.

Addressing the issue of NEETs with tertiary education requires a comprehensive approach that includes:

- **Improving the link between the education system and the labour market:** educational institutions should work closely with employers and respond to their current requirements..
- **Employers should offer graduates adequate salaries,** good working conditions and career development opportunities.
- **Strengthen support for graduates:** The state and non-profit organisations should provide graduates with information and guidance support in their job search.
- **Support for retraining and lifelong learning:** A system needs to be put in place to make it easier for people to access retraining programmes and to encourage them to pursue lifelong learning.

- **Raise awareness of available programmes:** People should have sufficient information about available training and retraining programmes, both through campaigns and career guidance.

Investing in education, linking it to the labor market, and supporting graduates and those interested in retraining are key factors that will lead to a reduction in the number of NEETs and their inclusion in society.

It is important to recognize that the issue of NEETs concerns not only young people but also society as a whole. Low levels of participation in the labor market and low levels of education lead to several negative consequences, such as an increase in poverty, social isolation, and crime. It is, therefore, necessary to make the issue of NEETs a priority for all actors - the state, educational institutions, employers, and non-profit organizations.

Key measures that could contribute to reducing unemployment and NEETs issues include:

- **Improving career guidance:** Young people and those returning to the labour market after a long break should have access to quality career guidance to help them choose a suitable career path and find a job.
- **Expanding the supply of apprenticeships:** Apprenticeships should be made more attractive to young people to help them acquire the skills and experience required in the labour market.
- **Promote dual training:** Dual training should be better promoted and developed to help young people combine theoretical learning at school with practical training with an employer.
- **Fight against discrimination:** It is important to fight discrimination in the labour market and to ensure that everyone has the same opportunities for employment.
- **Supporting young people with psychological and social problems:** Young people with mental and social problems should have access to the support they need to help them overcome barriers to finding and keeping a job.
- **Support for active labour market policies:** Active labour market policies should include retraining and up-skilling programmes, programmes to promote entrepreneurship and programmes aimed at the social integration of the unemployed.
- **Support programmes aimed at developing the skills and experience of young people:** These programmes could help young people to acquire the skills and experience that are in demand on the labour market and thus increase their chances of finding employment.
- **Promote an inclusive society:** It is important to create an inclusive society where young people feel welcome and respected. This can be achieved by campaigning against hate and intolerance and promoting diversity and inclusion.

Reducing unemployment and NEETs is a long-term process that requires a comprehensive approach. By implementing the above measures, we can create a more inclusive and prosperous society where everyone has a chance to succeed.

In addition to the above measures, it is important to stress that **the issue of NEETs varies depending on individual circumstances and regional specificities**. Therefore, it is essential that the **specific needs of individual NEETs in Czech Republic and its regions are taken into account** when finding solutions.

1.2.5. Germany

NEET stands for "Not in Employment, Education, or Training," referring to young adults who are not engaged in employment, education, or training. For this group of individuals, it can represent a vulnerable transition point in their lives, bringing forth many challenges.

In essence, NEETs are further categorized into four subcategories. There are those who are **not economically active**, such as due to illness or caregiving responsibilities. There are **economically active young people seeking employment**, for instance, after completing their education, **economically active youth seeking an apprenticeship** or higher education, for example, **after completing school**, and **economically active young adults not seeking employment**, for instance, due to taking a gap year. However, NEETs should be distinguished from young unemployed individuals, although there may be overlaps. Young unemployed individuals specifically refer to those who are capable of working, actively seeking employment but unable to find it. NEETs often have a broader range of risk factors hindering them from entering education or employment, such as lack of education, social or family issues, or health limitations. They are often seen as indicators of social and economic challenges. Young unemployed individuals are a more specific concern within labor market policies and programs.

Overall, NEETs and young unemployed individuals may be interconnected, but the terms differ in their definition, inclusion, and associated political and social implications.

It is important to note that NEETs and young unemployed individuals are not homogeneous groups. Within these categories, there may be different experiences, challenges, and needs. Identifying and supporting these groups, therefore, requires a differentiated approach and targeted interventions addressing the specific needs and barriers of those affected. Programs promoting employability, vocational training, or support for social integration can help NEETs and young unemployed individuals find their way into education or employment.

The definition of NEETs in Germany, however, must be interpreted in a broader sense and also include young people who are part of various support programs and continue to be at risk of becoming NEETs in the long term. This includes, for example, programs for career guidance and orientation, measures to promote vocational training or access to higher education, as well as programs for social integration and support for

disadvantaged youth. These programs are crucial to support young people in difficult life circumstances and provide them with opportunities to successfully integrate into society and the labor market. In this context, it is important to recognize that despite participating in such programs, some young people continue to be at risk of becoming NEETs in the long term and therefore require continuous support.

In Germany, NEETs, especially during the pandemic, have grown significantly. In 2021, nearly 850,000 young people were either in the transition sector, unemployed, or could not be assigned to any of the options in the micro census (Dohmen, Bayreuther, Sandau, 2023). Moreover, only a limited proportion of the over 230,000 young people entering the transition sector annually manage to later transition into a qualifying training in the dual or school-based sector.

As a result of various developments, the number of young people without completed vocational training has increased significantly in recent years. According to the Vocational Training Report of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF, 2023), at the beginning of the year, 2.63 million 20- to 34-year-olds were recorded without completed vocational training. This corresponds to approximately 175,000 young people per age cohort or about 17-18% - one out of six young people has not completed vocational training according to these figures.

According to data from the Federal Statistical Office and the micro census, the NEET rate in Germany for young people aged 15 to 24 was approximately 10.9 percent in 2020. This means that about one in ten young people in this age group was neither in education, employment, nor in vocational training. Training companies complain about a lack of applications, while the Federal Employment Agency recorded 228,000 unfilled training positions at the month's change from July to August 2023. However, many aspiring trainees still lack the opportunity to find a training position. The Apprenticeship Opportunities Monitor 2023 shows both a significant decrease in transition rates for young people with a first (secondary) school leaving certificate and, for the year 2021, that 850,000 young people were neither in education or (qualifying) training nor in employment (Dohmen, Bayreuther, Sandau, 2023, p.18). This figure also includes the almost 230,000 young people who were classified in the transition sector (ibid.).

However, it is important to note that the NEET rate in Germany is comparatively low in international comparison. This is often attributed to the dual education system and various programs to promote employability, which make it easier for young people to transition from school to work. Nevertheless, NEETs remain an important target group for policies and programs to combat youth unemployment and social exclusion. The government and various organizations continue to implement measures and initiatives to promote the integration of NEETs into the labor market and society and to improve their chances of a successful future.

In Germany, there is a gender imbalance among NEETs, with certain gender groups being more affected by the NEET situation than others. In many cases, young women tend to

be more affected by the NEET situation than young men. This can be attributed to various factors, including traditional gender roles that may encourage women to take on more family responsibilities and therefore may have less access to education and employment. The compatibility of family and work can also be a challenge for young women and prevent them from entering the workforce. However, there is also a significant number of young men classified as NEETs. This may be related to other factors, such as educational deficits, difficulties in job searching, or personal circumstances such as family problems or mental health issues (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, p.1).

People with disabilities are also at an increased risk of becoming NEETs. This group is almost 40% more likely to be affected than people without disabilities. Similarly, people with a migration background are even 70% more likely to be NEETs than domestic nationals. People with lower levels of education are three times more likely to be NEETs than academics. Based on these numbers, it becomes clear that education has a significant impact on further job search. Furthermore, living in rural areas increases the potential to become NEET by up to 50%. Young people with unemployed parents are 17% more likely to become NEETs. Thus, these statistics show that various influences on young people increase the risk of having difficulties entering the German job market (ibid., p.3).

In rural areas, the interpretation of the NEET phenomenon may pose some specific challenges and peculiarities. The context of these areas, often characterized by limited educational and employment opportunities as well as infrastructural challenges, may contribute to young people having an increased risk of falling into the NEET category.

Trends show that in some rural areas, young people may have less access to educational institutions, vocational training, or employment opportunities than their urban counterparts. This can lead to feelings of isolation and alienation, which in turn increases the likelihood that young people are not involved in education, employment, or training measures.

When considering this phenomenon in rural areas, it is important to take into account the specific needs and circumstances of these regions. This may require tailored approaches and programs aimed at improving access to education, training, and employment in rural communities.

In addition to education and employment opportunities, infrastructure investments and the creation of a supportive social environment can also help improve the prospects of young people in rural areas and unleash their potential.

Overall, the interpretation of the NEET phenomenon in rural areas requires a comprehensive analysis of local conditions in order to develop and implement effective strategies to support young people in these regions.

To better understand NEETs, it is important to understand the reasons for unemployment in Germany more closely. As mentioned in the above figures, there are a variety of reasons why young people and young adults can fall into the category of NEETs.

A significant factor is educational deficits, which can lead to young people not having the necessary skills and qualifications to find employment. This can be caused by difficulties in school, such as learning disabilities or social problems. Early school dropout can also significantly affect job market prospects, as those affected lack important foundations to start a successful career.

Additionally, a lack of career guidance and preparation can prevent young people from receiving the support they need to make informed decisions about their professional future. Many young people do not have clear ideas about their own strengths and interests or the requirements of the job market. This can lead to uncertainty and confusion, which in turn can reduce the chances of successfully integrating into the job market.

Structural problems in the labor market are also relevant factors. These include a mismatch between the qualifications of job seekers and the requirements of jobs. This can make it difficult for young people to find a suitable position that matches their skills and interests. Regional inequalities in employment situations can also affect the chances of employment, especially when jobs in rural or economically disadvantaged areas are limited.

Furthermore, social and family problems can affect the employability of young people. Financial difficulties, unstable housing conditions, family conflicts, or mental health problems can make it difficult for young people to focus on work or to act successfully in the job market. These personal challenges can impair the ability to build a stable career and achieve long-term success.

Finally, the lack of support systems plays a crucial role. If young people do not have access to appropriate support systems, such as counseling services, financial support, or psychosocial care, they may have difficulty stabilizing their life circumstances and pursuing a successful career. Comprehensive support tailored to the individual needs of those affected is therefore crucial to help NEETs find their way into education, employment, or further vocational training.

In addition to previously elaborated situation, and based on the primary research on NEET needs conducted in 2024. within BoT project, **we can conclude that the diverse and intricate social, cultural, and economic landscape surrounding NEETs in Germany paints a complex picture of the challenges they face in their pursuit of education, employment, and social inclusion.** From generational influences and migration backgrounds to living arrangements and health issues, a myriad of factors intersect to shape the experiences and opportunities of NEETs across the country.

Migration histories, particularly among refugees, present significant challenges related to language skills, educational qualifications, and job placement. Gender disparities further compound these challenges, highlighting systemic barriers that disproportionately affect young women's engagement in education and employment.

Additionally, caregiving responsibilities and family dynamics underscore the need for nuanced support tailored to the diverse circumstances of NEETs.

Living arrangements, whether in family-shared apartments or social welfare housing, **impact the dynamics within households and access to resources and opportunities**. Economic instability and precarious living conditions underscore the systemic barriers and economic disparities that contribute to the marginalization of NEETs. Health issues, including chronic diseases and substance misuse, further complicate their prospects, hindering their ability to maintain control over behavior and emotions.

Legal infractions and mandated social services present additional obstacles to employment reintegration, particularly in rural areas with limited job opportunities and transportation infrastructure. Addressing these multifaceted challenges requires tailored support systems and collaborative efforts from stakeholders across sectors. By recognizing the diverse needs and experiences of NEETs and implementing inclusive policies and support services to address these needs, NEETs may have better opportunities to thrive and contribute positively to their communities.

Moreover, the experiences and values of NEETs in Germany shed light on the multifaceted challenges they encounter in accessing education, employment, and social support. Despite facing feelings of frustration and disappointment due to systemic inadequacies, **NEETs demonstrate a sense of communal responsibility and resilience**.

The absence of adequate family support poses a significant obstacle for many NEETs, hindering their educational paths and transition into the job market. However, the influence of supportive relationships, such as partners or social workers, can serve as catalysts for personal growth and empowerment. Positive role models and collaborative efforts within communities play a vital role in inspiring NEETs to pursue meaningful opportunities for personal and professional development.

Furthermore, **NEETs prioritize personal well-being, individual interests, and societal welfare**, emphasizing the importance of access to fundamental services and a supportive societal infrastructure. Their shared values of community, solidarity, and ethical conduct underscore their commitment to navigating challenges effectively and contributing positively to their communities. Moving forward, addressing systemic barriers and fostering a supportive environment will be crucial in empowering NEETs to realize their potential and become valued members of society. By recognizing and nurturing the strengths and values of NEETs, stakeholders can work towards creating a more inclusive and equitable society.

The employability dimension of NEETs in Germany show a complex interplay of systemic barriers, regional disparities, and individual challenges. Despite efforts to facilitate vocational training and support services, **bureaucratic hurdles and limited outreach leave many NEETs underserved**, particularly vulnerable youth such as those

experiencing homelessness or disabilities. Rural NEETs face unique obstacles, including limited job opportunities, transportation challenges, and inadequate internet access, further complicating their access to meaningful employment. Additionally, **educational requirements, bureaucratic complexities, and language barriers pose significant challenges**, particularly for those with migration or refugee backgrounds. Addressing these systemic barriers requires collaborative efforts to streamline processes, increase flexibility from employers, and expand support services to ensure all NEETs have access to inclusive opportunities for education, training, and employment. By empowering NEETs to overcome these challenges, we can unlock their potential and foster their successful integration into the labour market, enhancing their social inclusion and economic empowerment.

Looking ahead, future expectations for NEETs encompass a range of priorities, including financial stability, work-life balance, taxation reform, flexible working arrangements, and support for caregivers. By addressing these needs comprehensively, a more inclusive and supportive environment can be created, empowering NEETs to thrive both personally and professionally. Through targeted interventions and collaborative initiatives, we can create pathways to success for NEETs, enabling them to realize their full potential and contribute positively to society.

1.2.6. Hungary

In Hungary, NEET is the most frequently used term in the literature when referring to a distinct, well-defined and statistically measurable group of young people aged 15-24 years (some studies discuss the 25-29 age group as well) who are currently not in employment, education or any form of training.

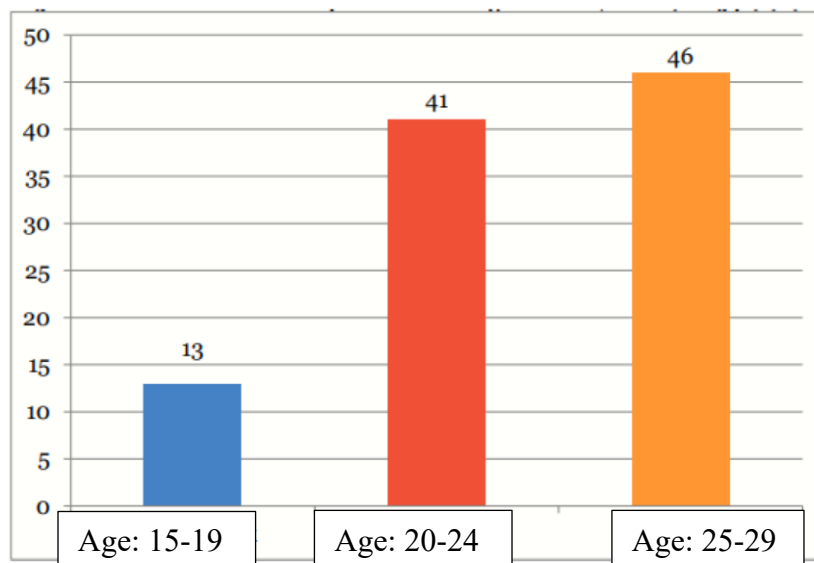
The NEET group is not a homogeneous community. It is usually referred to them as the non-vulnerable and particularly vulnerable NEETs. They can be classified into 7 groups based on their socio-economic situation. This grouping, which is also used in Hungary, was defined by the European Union, according to which NEETs can be:

1. Re-entrants into the labour market or education,
2. Short-term unemployed,
3. Long-term unemployed,
4. Discouraged/disengaged,
5. Young people with disabilities,
6. Young people with family responsibilities (care, nursing),
7. Other NEETS not classified in the above 6 categories

In Hungary, two further groups of NEETs are distinguished: PNEETs and KNEETS. The term PNEET, i.e. potential NEET, refers to youngsters who are at risk of becoming NEETS. This is particularly typical in rural areas and for young people whose parents have a low level of education and only one or neither parent has an official, declared job. PNEET also refers to young people nearing the completion of their education who do not plan to continue their studies or start working immediately, as well as to those whose fix-term

work contract is coming to an end. The PNEET group is quite difficult to define and therefore difficult to measure statistically.

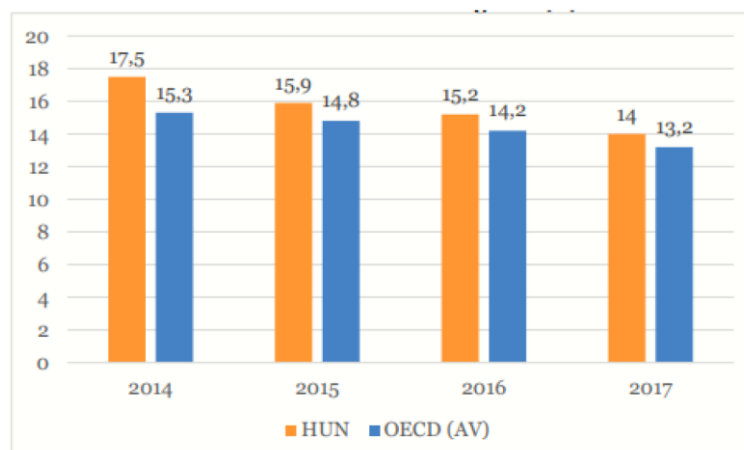
Figure 15. Distribution of NEETs by age, Hungary, 2013 (%)



In Hungary, the proportion of NEETs in the 15-24 age group was 14.6% in 2001, falling steadily until 2007 to 11.3%. After that, it peaked at 15.5% in 2013 then continued to decrease again until 2019 when it was 11%.

Following completes the above with data regarding the 25-29 age group, thus showing the proportion of NEETs in the 15-29 age group between 2014 and 2017 in Hungary and the OECD countries. In 2014, 17.5% of Hungarian young people aged 15-29 years were NEET, which decreased to 14% by 2017.

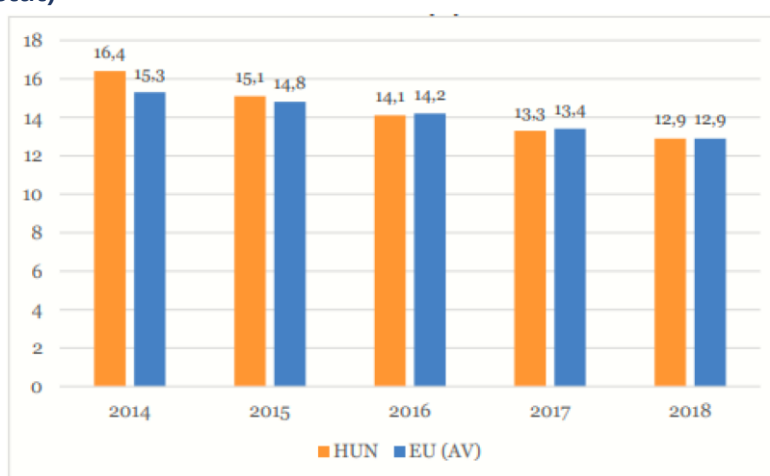
Figure 16. Rate of NEETs aged 15-29 between 2014 and 2017 compared to OECD average (OECD)



Although the proportion of NEETs in OECD countries, including Hungary, was steadily decreasing between 2014 and 2017, their share was higher in Hungary than the OECD average in each year.

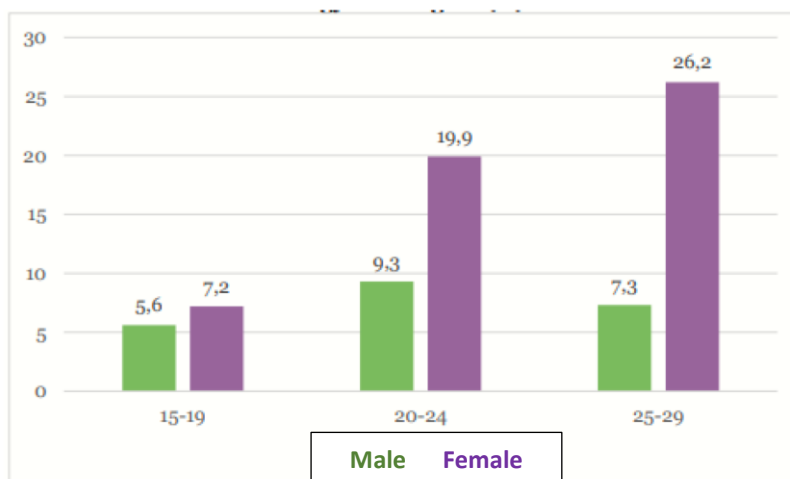
Next Figure also displays the age group of 15-29 youth between 2014 and 2018 and compares the share of NEETs in Hungary to the European Union average. In 2014 the share of NEETs in Hungary was 107.2% of the EU average. It can be observed, however, that the proportion of NEETs in Hungary in 2016 and after is rather close to the EU average. (The discrepancies between the data shown in previous Figure and next Figure result from the different measuring methods of the different official bodies).

Figure 17. Rate of NEETS (aged 15-29) in Hungary and the European Union between 2014 and 2018 (Eurostat)



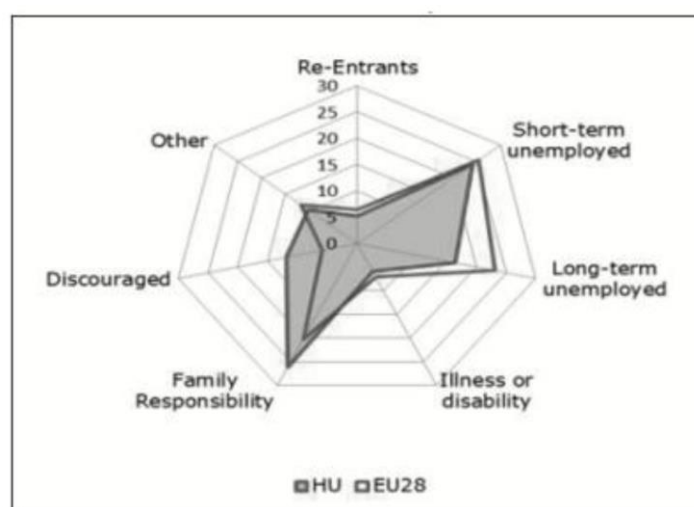
The following Figure shows the gender distribution of NEETs in Hungary in 2018. Although the number of females is higher in the 15-19 age group, both sexes are represented among NEETs with a similar share. This is not the case for the 20-24 age group with more than twice as many women as men. In the oldest age group (25-29 years) women outnumber men by 3.6 times. Interestingly, the number of men in this age group is lower than in the 20-24 age group. The high proportion of women is largely due to family responsibilities.

Figure 18. Gender distribution of NEETs in different age groups in 2018 in Hungary (Eurostat)



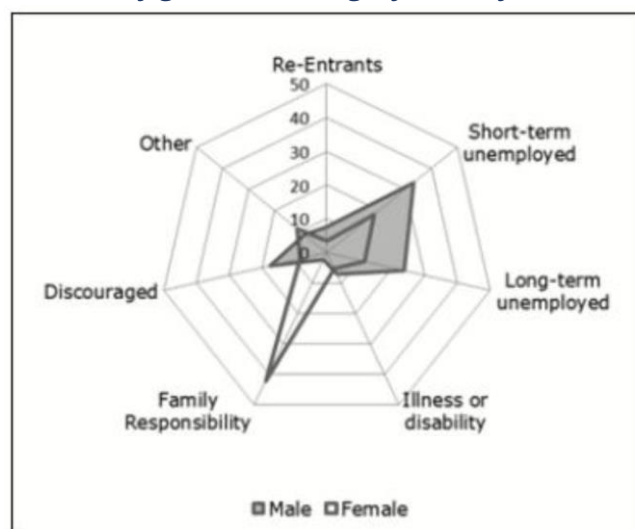
Next Figure shows the share of the previously presented 7 groups (distinguished on the basis of socio-economic status) in Hungary and in the European Union in 2013 among NEETs aged 15-29.

Figure 19. Composition of the NEET group in Hungary and in the European Union, 15-19 year olds (Eurofund)



One of the largest differences can be found for the group who falls into the NEET category due to family responsibilities, accounting for nearly 26.2% of NEETs in Hungary in 2013 (EU average: 20.3%). The deviation is similarly high for 'discouraged' NEETs, accounting for 11.9% in Hungary (EU average: 5.9%). It can also be seen that the share of long-term unemployed NEETs in Hungary is nearly 10% lower than in the European Union.

Figure 20. Structure of NEETs by gender in Hungary, 15-29 year olds (Eurofund)

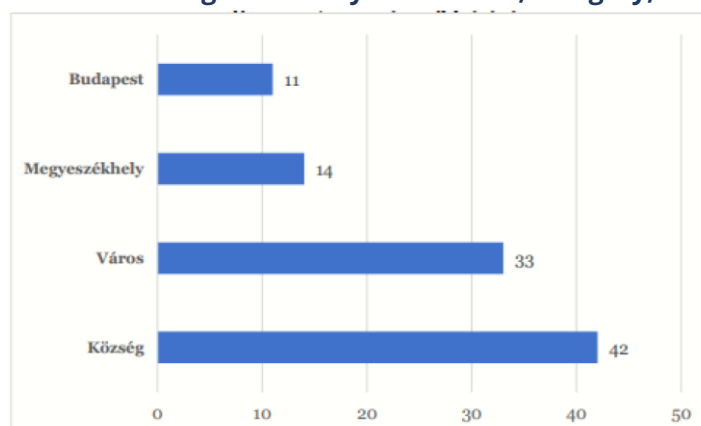


As discussed earlier, gender distribution reveals that the majority (nearly 42.2%) of women are NEET due to family responsibilities. In contrast, the majority of men are short-term or long term unemployed (together nearly 60% of them), though the discouraged group is also significant with 20% share.

Looking at the spatial distribution of NEETs in Hungary it can be observed that the size of settlements is inversely proportional to the share of NEETs. This implies that in smaller, rural settlements young people are more exposed to the risk of becoming NEET.

Next Figure displays the percentage distribution of NEETs in Hungary aged 15-29 by settlements. 42% of NEETs in Hungary live in villages, while only 11% of them live in Budapest. There are significantly more job opportunities in the capital than in the countryside, therefore young people in Budapest tend to be NEET for a shorter period and are less vulnerable. We should also take into consideration that young people in Budapest are more likely to come from wealthy families, so the share of voluntary NEETs is higher among them.

Figure 21. Distribution of NEETs aged 15-29 by settlement, Hungary, 2013



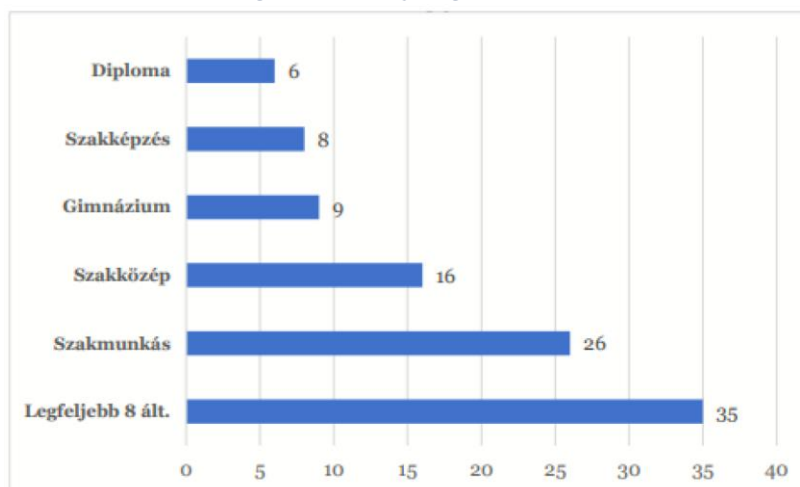
In Hungary, one of the most easily available job opportunities for NEETs is public employment by the state. As a result, the number of young people under the age of 25 in public employment is very significant; in 2014 it was 30.5 thousand, which accounted for nearly 17% of the total number of the workers in public employment. Further studies have shown that among young workers in public employment, the share of men (19.2%) is higher than that of women (14.4%) and almost half of them (49.2%) have only primary education or not even that.

The high proportion of young people under 25 working in public work schemes shed light on the current trend that more and more families in Hungary are forced to withdraw their children from education after they reach the compulsory school age and direct them towards local public work programmes, often out of financial necessity. In other words, at the moment it seems that public work programmes have become competitors to schools and education, especially in small villages.

Among NEETS in Hungary we can distinguish between those young people who are registered as job-seekers and those who are not. A prerequisite for the registration is the NEET status of the young person and registration with the employment service department nearest to their place of residence which again is a prerequisite for the reintegration programmes for NEETs. In 2013, only over one third of NEETs in Hungary were registered with the public employment service. Although at the moment there is no actual, comprehensive explanation for this low rate, partial explanations can be found.

NEETs in Hungary often live together with their parents who usually have low levels of education. As consequence, in many cases these parents are unable to exert proper influence on the educational performance and motivation of the young persons and the NEETs will also be characterized by low level of education.

Figure 22. Distribution of NEETs aged 15-29 by highest level of education



Previous Figure shows the percentage distribution of Hungarian NEETs aged 15-29 in 2012 by highest level of education. More than one third of them completed only primary education (8th grade) or have not even completed primary education. Another quarter had only vocational education. Although in significantly lower proportions, highly educated NEETs can also be found, but they tend to be less vulnerable, have more opportunities for finding a job and receive more support from their families.

In addition to the previously elaborated statistical trends for NEETs in Hungary, in 2024, as a part of BoT project, Primary research on NEETs needs in Hungary has been conducted. Based on the findings from this research, we can conclude that:

A significant proportion of those surveyed said that there is a lack of jobs (64.7%) in their local area, so it is not surprising that a significant number of people experience unemployment and the rural economy as a challenge (66.7%), but also a lack of opportunities for young people (38.9%) and the poor quality of teaching or education (33.3%).

The majority agree that the government should guarantee basic services such as education, health and transport (77.8%), and the related need for the individual to contribute to the well-being of the community (61.1%).

For 44.4% of those surveyed, the vision for the future is mainly in terms of further education, with a considerable number of people planning to move (27.8%), but unfortunately 22.2% are completely disillusioned.

More people are thinking about working abroad. In rural areas, a large proportion of young people drop out of education early because they want to get a job and earn money as soon as possible, and in many cases they go abroad to do so. During the focus group interviews, it was mentioned that they would prefer to work in big cities or the capital in order to get a higher salary.

At the same time, many cannot decide whether to stay at home or go abroad. Both in terms of work and study (university). Many are not sure whether they can or want to stay at home. Language skills, even in two languages, are therefore very important.

Finally, it is important to highlight that half of the respondents consider themselves to be the most influential factor in shaping their lives, while in other countries family (27.8%) is even more influential.

The NEETs surveyed in BoT (Back on Track project) in 2024 indicated that the changes they would like to see in the labour market over the next 3 years are:

Lowering the level of expectation of experience so that they are not disadvantaged;

Outline your career path, what one want to do and what one can do, what qualifications you need and where you can get a job. A good example is the websites of universities abroad, where, in addition to general information about courses, there is a clearly visible description of the sectors and jobs in which the qualification can be placed.

Making career guidance tools more practical, giving even more insight into what is beyond the entrance of a company, what the people sitting there do.

Make companies more open to hiring people and giving them a chance;

More competitive salaries in rural areas, other fringe benefits;

More job opportunities, both small and multinational companies, also more foreign investment (a good example in Győr is Audi and its supplier network)

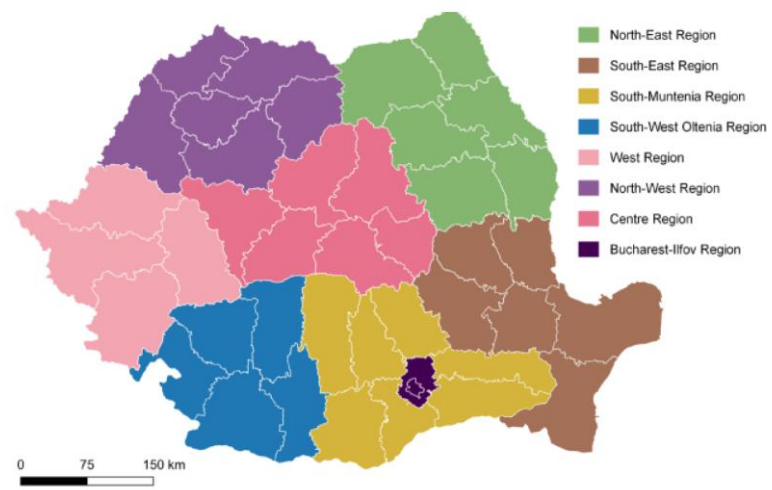
More experience at school instead of theoretical education. Launching an apprenticeship programme as mentioned earlier.

1.2.7. Romania

The analysis in the following sections refers specifically to the Danube Region, South Muntenia, in Romania. Therefore, the statistics presented are limited to this region, not to Romania as a whole.

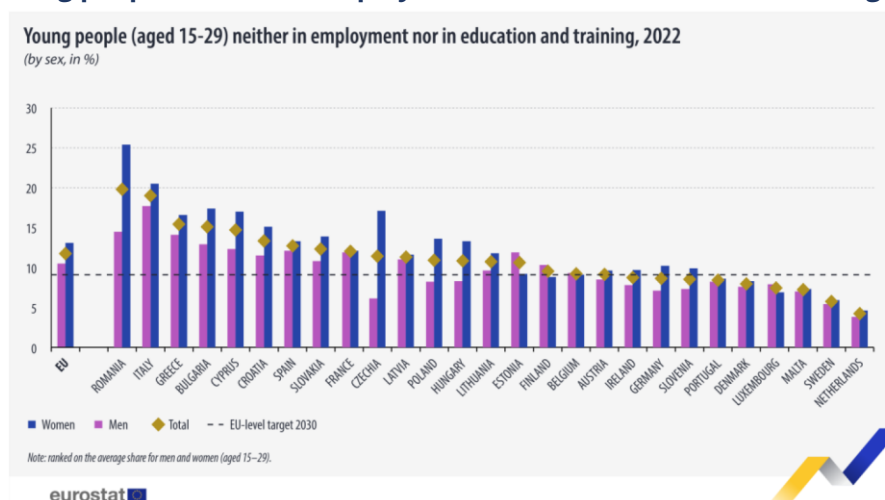
The South Muntenia region is the second largest in Romania by population (3,180,046) and the third largest by area. In 2021, the region faced one of the highest poverty rates in the country (23%), with 57.2% of the population living in rural areas and a significantly high NEET rate (youth neither in employment nor in education or training) of over 20%. Additionally, Romania has one of the largest urban-rural disparities in NEET rates within the EU (Eurostat, 2023).

Figure 23. Central European Journal of Geography and Sustainable Development, 2022.



In 2022, the NEET rate for 15-29-year-olds in Romania was 19.8%, compared to 4.2% in the Netherlands, meaning that Romania's NEET rate was 4.7 times higher (Fig. 1, Eurostat, 2023). Romania also has the highest total NEET population, with a significant gender disparity: a higher proportion of young women are NEETs compared to young men. The gender gap in Romania is influenced by social, religious, and cultural factors, with the share of young female NEETs at least 10 percentage points higher than that of young men, the second largest difference within the EU (10.9%).

Figure 24. Young people neither in employment nor in education and training, (Eurostat, 2023)



In terms of activity status, it is notable that a large proportion of NEET women in Romania are also outside the labor force. Young people who are unemployed maintain some connection to the labor market, whereas those outside the labor force are entirely disconnected, a concerning trend (Eurostat, 2023). In Romania, the unemployment rate is higher among men (6.8%) compared to women (4.4%), yet young people as a group have the highest unemployment rate (14.2%), with 21% of women vs. 7.7% of men. This disparity highlights an urgent need to reintegrate women into the workforce to close the gender gap.

Figure 25. Young people (15-29) neither in employment nor in education and training, by gender and activity status, 2022.

Young people (aged 15–29) neither in employment nor in education and training, by sex and activity status, 2022
(%)

	Unemployed			Outside the labour force		
	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women
EU	4.3	4.8	3.8	7.4	5.7	9.2
Belgium	4.1	5.2	3.0	5.1	4.2	6.1
Bulgaria	3.2	3.9	2.4	11.9	9.1	15.0
Czechia	1.7	1.7	1.7	9.8	4.4	15.5
Denmark	2.2	2.5	2.0	5.7	5.1	6.3
Germany	2.1	2.6	1.6	6.5	4.5	8.6
Estonia	3.8	4.9	2.6	6.8	7.0	6.5
Ireland	3.2	3.6	2.8	5.5	4.2	6.9
Greece	9.2	8.2	10.2	6.2	5.9	6.4
Spain	7.1	7.6	6.7	5.6	4.5	6.6
France	5.2	6.1	4.3	6.8	5.8	7.8
Croatia	6.2	5.3	7.2	7.1	6.3	7.9
Italy	6.4	6.9	5.9	12.7	10.8	14.6
Cyprus	7.4	7.5	7.3	7.3	4.7	9.6
Latvia	4.7	6.3	3.1	6.5	4.7	8.5
Lithuania	3.8	4.0	3.6	6.9	5.6	8.2
Luxembourg (*)	1.8	1.6	2.0	5.6	6.3	4.9
Hungary	3.3	3.8	2.7	7.5	4.5	10.6
Malta (*)	3.1	4.1	1.9	4.1	2.9	5.4
Netherlands	1.4	1.6	1.1	2.8	2.2	3.5
Austria	3.3	3.9	2.7	5.8	4.6	6.9
Poland	3.0	3.2	2.7	7.9	5.1	10.9
Portugal	4.7	4.7	4.7	3.7	3.5	3.9
Romania	5.6	6.8	4.4	14.2	7.7	21.0
Slovenia (*)	2.5	2.2	2.8	6.0	5.1	7.1
Slovakia	5.2	5.9	4.5	7.1	4.9	9.4
Finland	2.9	3.6	2.1	6.6	6.6	6.7
Sweden	2.6	2.9	2.4	3.0	2.5	3.6
Iceland	1.9	2.1	1.8	3.4	3.4	3.5
Norway (*)	1.6	2.1	1.1	5.2	4.7	5.7
Serbia	7.5	8.5	6.3	7.7	5.0	10.5

(*) Unemployed men: low reliability.

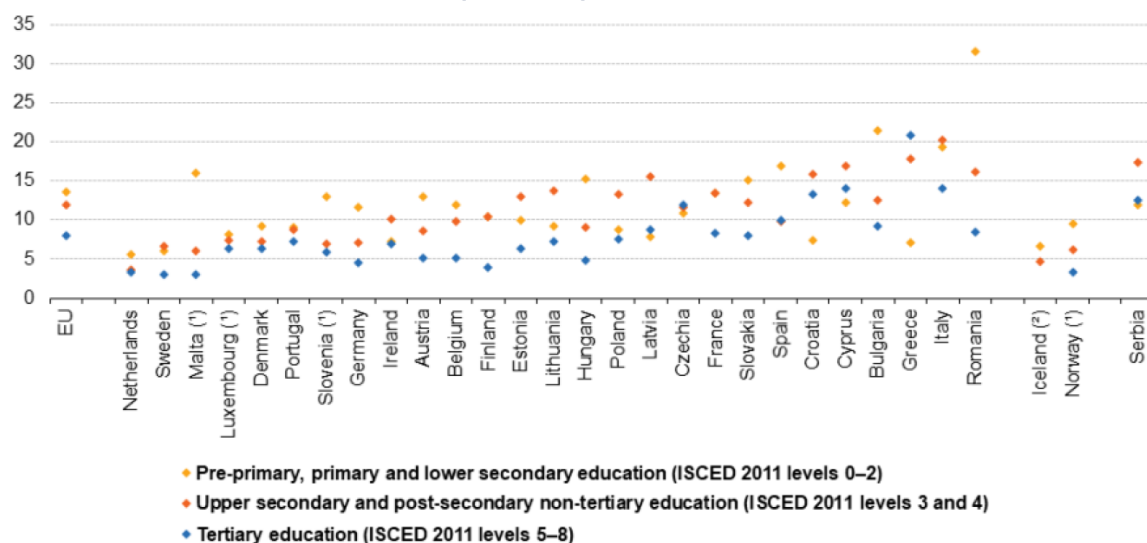
(*) Unemployed women: low reliability.

Source: Eurostat (online data code: edat_ifse_20)

Romania was one of only two EU member states that saw an increase in NEET rates since 2012, with a 0.5% rise. During the COVID-19 pandemic, NEET rates climbed as they were closely tied to the economic environment.

In 2022, Romania had the highest percentage of NEETs with a low level of education among EU states: 31.6% of young people aged 15-29 had low educational attainment (Eurostat, 2023).

Figure 26. Young people (aged 15–29) neither in employment nor in education and training, by educational attainment level, 2022 (Eurostat).



Low education levels are strongly linked to higher NEET rates, particularly in rural areas. Romania reported the largest rural-urban disparity in NEET rates, at 19.1 percentage points (Eurostat).

Additionally, in Romania, young people’s unemployment benefits are brief, minimal, and vary based on work experience—from six months for at least one year of contributions. Due to these limited benefits, many young people do not register for social assistance, resulting in higher unemployment rates than official statistics indicate.

In 2023, the National Employment Agency helped employ 54,761 young people under 30, of whom 42,065 were NEETs. Most of these NEETs were under 25 years old.

Another relevant initiative was the INTESPO Project (2017-2021), which aimed to register 200,000 inactive NEETs, especially those far from the labor market or with social integration challenges, into the Public Employment Service.

In order to benefit from active measures for integration into the labor market, young NEETs must first be identified and registered with the Public Employment Service. In Romania, from a statistical point of view (by crossing administrative databases) at that point it was estimated that there are approximately 400,000 NEET young people (in the SPO database there are between 40,000 and 70,000 young people, the number being higher after the graduation exam and then decreasing).

The funding of education in Romania is among the lowest in the EU, representing 2.8% of GDP in 2018, which contributes to a high school dropout rate of over 15%, the highest in the EU. Most dropouts occur in secondary education, resulting in students lacking any form of professional qualification by the age of 15. Rural areas are particularly affected, with one in ten school-age children not attending any educational institution (European

Commission, 2022). According to World Vision Romania, one-third of teenagers are absent from school due to household responsibilities.

In 2022, a study conducted by World Vision Romania showed that the disparities in the rate of early leaving from education and training between urban (4.5%) and rural areas (23.2%) are substantial and that 1 in 10 children of compulsory schooling age in rural areas currently does not attend any educational institution. The same study also highlighted that 1 in 3 teenagers (37%) is absent from school temporarily or permanently because they are working in the household (European Commission, 2022). For a broader perspective, it is also important to mention that the Council of Europe estimates that in Romania live approximately 1.85 million Roma population (8.32% of the population).

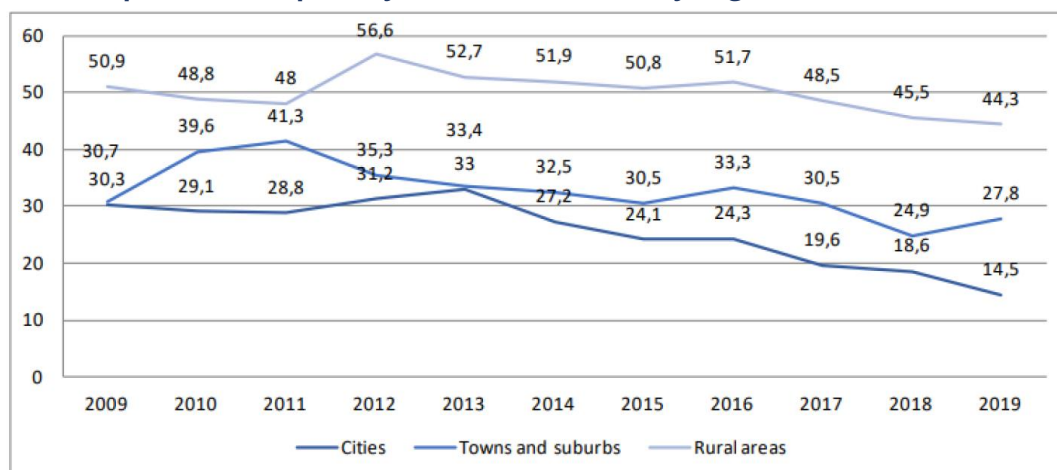
As per the last census organized in Romania in 2011, regarding Roma population the data show that the rate of ethnic Romanians who did not complete any school was 1 % while the share of ethnic Roma was 14 %. A significant impact on their integration on the labour market is also proved by the percentage of illiteracy in Roma minority: from a total of 229,721 people, almost 30 % belong to the Roma minority (67,480). Also, the share of ethnic Roma with tertiary education was below 1%.

As previously mentioned, the NEET rate is higher in rural areas compared to urban ones. Several factors contribute to the ongoing existence of this category in rural regions. Firstly, most rural areas in Romania have schools that only offer 8 grades, which means students can complete their education only until they are 14 or 15 years old. Some villages lack even basic educational institutions such as schools or kindergartens.

For those intending to continue their education in high school, additional expenses arise. NEETs in rural areas wishing to access jobs in urban centers face extra costs related to transportation or living expenses, especially if the job or employer is located far from their original rural area, and the income does not justify these expenses. Although urban environments provide more job opportunities than rural ones, the costs that a young person from a rural area incurs are generally higher. These impediments and difficulties explain the increase in the NEET rate in rural areas (Neagu, 2020).

The rural population of Romania faces significant poverty, primarily due to reliance on subsistence or semi-subsistence agriculture, which does not provide a decent standard of living for individuals and their families. Additionally, many young people take care of siblings or elderly family members, preventing them from actively seeking employment opportunities or returning to education. Although the legal age for employment in Romania is 16, many rural young people work without legal documentation.

Figure 27. People at risk of poverty or social exclusion by degree of urbanization, 15-29 years (%)



Poverty correlates closely with education level, occupation, and socio-cultural factors. In disadvantaged communities, young people are often discouraged by societal norms and expectations, which perpetuate poverty across generations.

The South Muntenia region has a population of nearly 3 million (14.3% of Romania's total population), with 57.2% living in rural areas.

As part of the Back on Track (BoT) project in 2024, primary research on NEET needs in South Muntenia identified several challenges. Reintegrating NEETs is essential for public welfare, as this group could perpetuate poverty and lack of education across generations if not actively supported.

The pandemic has further marginalized NEETs, who face heightened mental health challenges and lack digital skills critical to the modern job market. Support strategies must address the digital skills gap, migration pressures, and barriers to labor market reentry.

1.2.8. Serbia

In respect of NEETs situational analysis, Republic of Serbia is using a widely accepted indicator that represents the share of young people (aged 15-24) who are not enrolled in education, employment or training. Persons classified as NEETs are not employed (i.e. they are unemployed or inactive persons as defined by the International Labor Organization) and have not had any education or training (neither formal nor informal education) in the four weeks prior to the survey conducted by the Republic Statistical Office.

The Labor Force Survey (LFS) specifically monitors the position of young people on the labor market. According to the LFS for 2023, the contingent of the young population, aged

15 to 24, continues to decrease in 2023 and compared to 2022, it is smaller by 3,800 persons (1.9%). The youth population in 2023 was 672,500. The reduction of the contingent of employed young people amounted to - 3,100, so the number of employed persons in 2023 was 160,700. The employment rate in this age group was 23.9% (a decrease of 0.3 pp compared to 2022).

Observed according to the Nomenclature of Statistical Territorial Units (NSTJ) by region (NSTJ 1), the youth employment rate (15-24), as in 2022, was the highest in the Vojvodina Region (amounts to 26.8%). The lowest employment rate is normally recorded in the Region of Southern and Eastern Serbia (20.6%). The number of unemployed persons (15-24 years old) in 2023 increased slightly to 53,600 (by 1,000 persons more than in 2022). The youth unemployment rate (15-24) in 2023 is 25.0% (an increase of 0.7 pp compared to 2022). The rate of the young population outside the labor force in 2023 is 68.1% (a slight increase of 0.1 pp compared to 2022). The highest value of this rate was recorded in the Region of Šumadija and Western Serbia (70.1%), and the lowest rate of the population outside the labor force is, as in 2022, recorded in the Vojvodina Region (65.2%).

The NEET rate, which implies the participation of persons aged 15–24 who are not employed, are not in education or training, in the total population of a given age, in 2023 is 12.4% and has decreased by 0.9 percentage points (p.p), compared to 2022 (13,3%). The rate is higher for the older NEET group (15-29 years) and the highest for the female NEET category.

Figure 28. NEET rate in Serbia (%)

Territory - NSTJ	REPUBLIC OF SERBIA					
Age groups	15-24			15-29		
Pol	In total	M	Z	In total	M	Z
Period						
in 2014	20.4	21.0	19.9	25.3	23.7	27.0
in 2015	19.9	20.2	19.6	24.5	23.0	26.1
in 2016	17.7	17.2	18.3	22.3	20.3	24.5
in 2017	17.2	17.1	17.3	21.7	19.9	23.7
in 2018	16.5	16.0	17.0	20.1	17.8	22.5
in 2019	15.3	14.8	15.8	18.9	17.1	20.9
in 2020	15.9	17.0	14.8	20.0	18.4	21.6
in 2021	17.0 ^(b)	17.1 ^(b)	17.0 ^(b)	19.1 ^(b)	17.3 ^(b)	21.0 ^(b)
in 2022	13.3 ^(r)	13.4 ^(r)	13.3 ^(r)	15.4 ^(r)	13.4 ^(r)	17.5 ^(r)

The "Early school leaving" indicator, which represents the percentage of young people between the ages of 18 and 24, who at best completed primary school and did not continue further education (they were not in school or training in the last four weeks), in 2023. was 5.8% and is higher by 0.1 % p. p, compared to 2022.

Figure 29. Early school leavers among NEETs in Serbia

	In total	Active	Employed	Unemployed	Population outside the labor force
Persons (15–89 years)	5642.5	3137.8	2842.0	295.8	2504.7
Early school leavers (18–24 years) per thousand. ¹⁾	27.5	13.7	7.5	6.3	13.7
Early school leaving rate (18–24 years) % ²⁾	5.8	6.7	4.9	12.0	5.2
NEET - Persons aged 15–24 years. who are not employed and are not in education and training (thousands)	83.6	40.7	-	40.7	42.9
NEET rate (Participation of persons aged 15–24 who are not employed and not in education and training) (%) ³⁾	12.4	19.0	-	75.9	9.4
Men (15–89 years)	2719.1	1710.2	1555.9	154.4	1008.8
Early school leavers (18–24 years) per thousand. ¹⁾	13.9	9.8	5.6	4.2	4.1
Early school leaving rate (18–24 years) % ²⁾	5.8	7.7	5.8	14.0	3.6
NEET - Persons aged 15–24 years. who are not employed and are not in education and training (thousands)	43.7	24.8	-	24.8	18.9

In the context of the required work skills and for the NEET population, three segments are recognized: social skills (communication with people in the organization and outside the company/organization), manual skills (engaging in heavy physical work and performing precise tasks with the hands) and cognitive skills (reading instructions, technical documentation and relatively complicated calculations). The most frequently used and required work skill for work is communication with people at work (in the work environment, oral business communication with colleagues during working hours) as well as with people outside the organization with whom one communicates in different proportions of the work. time. The use of social skills is highlighted as important for

members of both sexes, while manual skills are more prevalent in men during most of their working hours. Cognitive skills are the least represented because in the age categories 15-24 years and 25-34 years, little working time was spent with relatively complicated calculations.

Young people who belong to the NEET category, due to unemployment, and because they do not go to school or improve their skills through the training system, have a greater risk of being socially and politically alienated in society. This group of young people is significantly less interested in any kind of engagement in society as well as in politics, because they have a lower level of confidence in all socio-economic topics. They often do not identify with the social and political actors in the country.

The young population aged 15-24 who is out of the labor force in urban areas reaches 295,000 persons, and in other types of settlements 163,200 persons. The youth unemployment rate is higher in urban types of settlements, while the activity rate and employment rate are higher in other types of settlements. The rate of the population outside the labor force in urban types of settlements is 71.9%, and in other types of settlements 62.2%.

Figure 30. Population aged 15-24 by employment status and type of settlement, 2023. (Statistical Agency Serbia)

	Type of settlement	
	urban	the rest
Young population (15–24) (in thousands)	410.0	262.5
Active	115.0	99.3
Employed	83.3	77.4
Unemployed	31.8	21.9
Population outside the labor force	295.0	163.2
Activity Rate (%)	28.1	37.8
Employment rate (%)	20.3	29.5
Unemployment rate (%)	27.6	22.0
Population rate not in the labor force (%)	71.9	62.2

According to the available data for the year 2023 on employed persons by sector of activity and age groups, the category of young people 15-34 is in the largest percentage, about a quarter (24%) employed in the industry sector (predominantly processing industry) and other services (health and social protection , administrative and) 23%, as

well as in the trade sector (16%). Observed in relation to other age categories, young people 15-34 are mostly employed in trade, tourism, the information and communication sector as well as professional, scientific and technical activities. Compared to the structure of older age groups, young people aged 15-34 are significantly less employed in the agriculture sector, state administration and defense, and the education sector.

Young employees earn less than employees from older categories of the population.

The share of young people aged 15-29 who are not covered by education, employment or training, the NEET rate (indicator COR 8.6.1.) in 2014 was 25.3% (23.7% men and 27% women), while in 2020, it decreased to 20% (18.4% men and 21.6% women), and in 2022 it was 15.4%. The share of informal employment (indicator COR 8.3.1.) is higher among young people than among older categories of employees: in 2020, among employees aged 15-24 there were 21.4% informally employed, among employees aged 25-54 11.6%, and among employees aged 55-64 19.8%.

The average hourly wage (indicator COR 8.5.1.) is lower for young people (15-29) than for older categories of employees in 2018 and amounted to RSD 343.08, which is significantly lower than the average for the total workforce (15+ years) of RSD 406.04. The average earnings of young women are lower than the average earnings of young men (RSD 333.97 versus RSD 350.18).

In addition to previously presented statistical data on NEETs in Serbia, in 2024. As a part of BoT project, primary research on NEETs needs has been conducted.

The analysis of primary data, including questionnaire responses, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews, illuminates the challenges encountered by the NEET population in rural areas of Serbia. This examination unveils the intricate web of obstacles hindering youth employment and socio-economic progress, with digital inequality emerging as a prominent barrier among them. The findings underscore a broad spectrum of challenges impeding youth employment, encompassing factors such as language proficiency, self-confidence, motivation, and skills gaps.

Unemployed youth lacking formal education or training face distinct hurdles, including a lack of motivation, limited job prospects, and societal pressures. This highlights the necessity for specialized support mechanisms to assist this subgroup in overcoming their unique barriers to employment. Despite these challenges, the analysis highlights the proactive role that youth can play in enhancing their economic status through self-improvement, education, and skill acquisition. However, navigating the complexities of the contemporary employment landscape remains challenging, with disparities in access to resources and opportunities persisting.

While some youth demonstrate awareness of promising sectors such as web design and entrepreneurship, others struggle due to a dearth of information and guidance regarding available employment avenues. Addressing this information gap and providing support

for youth employment projects is essential to ensure equal access to opportunities for all.

This analysis underscores the critical importance of developing key skills for success in the labor market, such as communication, motivation, and competence. Skill development initiatives that encompass these vital competencies are indispensable in preparing youth for sustainable employment. The significance of peer support, experience sharing, and mentoring in the employment process cannot be overstated. Community-based networks and collaborative endeavors play a pivotal role in fostering an environment conducive to youth empowerment and socio-economic advancement.

In summary, we can say that young people living in rural areas in Serbia, are more likely to be in the NEET category, especially when it comes to young women. This means that policy measures should especially take into account how to return young people from rural areas to the schooling process, the training system or the employment process.

Although the NEET rate is decreasing, it is still at a high level. It is of crucial importance that this is recognized within youth policies (including education and employment policies) and that adequate support measures are established accordingly.

Internal and external challenges include ensuring a stable income and business environment for farmers and entrepreneurs in rural areas, achieving the economic, ecological, and social goals of sustainable development in these areas, increasing the efficiency of the food supply chain, and enhancing the competitiveness of activities in rural regions. Additionally, addressing the lagging technological development compared to competing countries and mitigating the effects of climate change remain critical priorities.

The challenge in the work is the lack of accurate records of young people from socially sensitive categories, especially in the domain of official and recognized data, as well as the lack of analysis of their real needs (apart from partial sectoral analyses).

To increase the attractiveness of rural areas as attractive places for young people (and young families) to live, it is necessary to work on improving the infrastructure, availability of social services, improving the social structure and supporting the development of entrepreneurship.

Initiatives to be considered for the future development of a favorable environment for NEET empowerment include:

- **Clear recognition of the need for economic empowerment through decent employment**, whereby greater access of young people to decent and productive employment needs to be supported.

- **Monitor whether work practices are carried out in a quality manner** that enables the learning and development of young people's skills and thus positive effects on their employability in the coming years.
- **Reduce the differences in the rate of inclusion and completion of pre-university education** between the general population and vulnerable groups of young people and increase the percentage of highly educated among vulnerable groups.
- **Additional efforts to increase the inclusion of young people in informal education**, and in order to reduce the risk of poverty, it is necessary to provide special support to young people, especially in rural areas and those with a lower level of education.
- **Creating conditions for dignified work and greater self-employment** of young people.
- **Additional education and training programs** are particularly highlighted as needed for rural NEETs and when looking for work as a special type of incentive.
- **The employment of ex-convicts** is a special challenge, given that there are still numerous prejudices and stereotypes, which is important to include these persons as much as possible in the measures of active employment policy, so that resocialization can be carried out most effectively.
- **Invest additional efforts by all subjects of youth policy** in terms of reducing the risk of poverty and social exclusion for vulnerable groups. It is necessary to give special support to young people, especially in rural areas and those with a lower level of education. It is necessary to develop concrete social inclusion measures that prevent the segregation of young people with developmental disabilities and disabilities, i.e. to give special support to young people from vulnerable groups, with the aim of including them in the regular education system, the labor market, as well as measures to ensure independent living and active participation in life community.
- **Creating conditions for a healthy and safe environment and social well-being** of young people can be realized with the support of programs that contribute to the development of healthy lifestyles, sexual, reproductive and mental health of young people, support of existing and new programs to improve the safety of young people, support of the development of youth programs and for young people in the area environmental protection, support for housing independence of young people and support of programs that contribute to the improvement of social inclusion of young people.
- **Knowledge transfer and technical-technological progress**, sustainable management of resources, development of rural areas and strengthening of social structure in respect to external risk factors (climate change, regional and global integration and impact on the quality of life in rural areas).
- **Maintain support for civil society organizations dealing with specific youth issues** and various aspects of rural development. It is necessary to work systematically on the further development of these networks in rural areas, especially on increasing the number and types of civil society organizations that are present in these areas.

- **Strengthen the activities of organizations dealing with problems of poverty and vulnerable social groups in rural areas** (youth, women, persons with disabilities, Roma, refugees and displaced persons and other sensitive categories) as well as issues of environmental protection and preservation of cultural heritage is particularly emphasized.
- **Favorable conditions for the life and work of young people** and keeping them in rural areas, providing more attractive jobs and equal opportunities for their regional development.
- **Affirm entrepreneurship** among young people in rural areas is also emphasized.

1.2.9. Slovakia

In Slovakia, young people represent 34.17% of the total population. Slovakia does not face a lack of young people, however, the youth population in Slovakia is gradually decreasing. The highest decrease (between 2009-2019) was in age category 15-19 years old (-106.8%) and 20-24 years old (-119.6%). 43.0% of youth live in rural areas. There are more males than females living in Slovakia (15-34 years old). However, there are more females than males living in rural areas. In rural areas, 2009-2019 was a decade of decrease of youth living in rural areas (-76.9%) for those aged 15-19 years old and (-83.9%) for those aged 20-24 years old.

In Slovakia, the term NEET is commonly used and adapted according to Slovak language rules in the everyday speech of social workers, youth workers, and in some publications. The term is explained but not substituted with any Slovak term.

There are two main groups differentiated among NEETs in Slovakia - **active and inactive**.

Active NEETs – are understood as individuals who are registered at the Labour Office in their respective areas. This is also the only official database of NEETs by region, with no specific focus on rural or urban areas. The office monitors age, education level, and length of registration.

Inactive NEETs - are those individuals not registered at the Labour Office, making them often invisible in the official statistical data on NEETs available. Inactive NEET is not a jobseeker, is not employed, is not self-employed, nor is in continuous vocational training.

As of January 2024, the EU reported that 2,898 million young people under 25 were unemployed. That month, the youth unemployment rate stood at 14.9% in the EU and 14.5% in the euro area, reflecting stability from the previous month but an increase from the previous year. Specifically, in Slovakia, the youth unemployment rate was 19.1% in January 2023, with 27,000 young people unemployed. By January 2024, this figure slightly decreased to 26,000. The unemployment rate for young people not in education was 11.2% in Q4 2023. The unemployment rate of the youth in 2023 was five times higher than general unemployment rate in Slovakia (5.7%).

During 2024 the number of young people under 29 registered as jobseekers has decreased, reaching 38,981 at the end of March—the second lowest since April 2012. The lowest was in April 2019, with 38,234 young people out of work. The number of unemployed people aged under 29 reached its highest levels following the financial crisis, with the Job Centre recording a peak of 140,629 in January 2013.

Figure 31. Slovak youth unemployment rate.

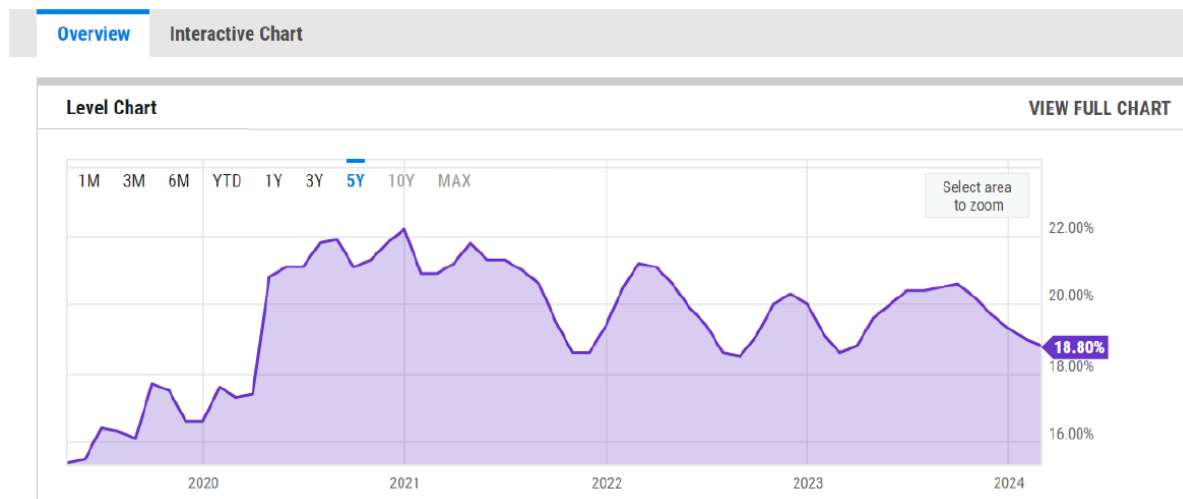


Figure . Age structure of the unemployed in Slovakia 2023



Slovak government focused its efforts during the program period 2014–2020 in mitigating the impact of financial and economic crisis of 2008–2009. One of the indicators was a rise in unemployment, which also affected young people under 29 years. According to Eurostat statistical findings, unemployment among young people under 29 in Slovakia reached 21.3% in 2014, which was well above the EU28 average of 17.7%. According to Eurostat findings, unemployment among young people up to and including 29 years of age in Slovakia reached 12.9% in 2021 (below the EU27 average of 13%). The share of young people in the NEET situation in 2021 was 14.2% (above the EU27 average of 13.1%). The share of young unemployed NEETs stood at 6% (above the EU27 average of 4.9%).

In the last two years we have observed a positive trend in the group of inactive NEETs, where their share in the population is decreasing - in 2021 it was 8.2% (EU27 level - 8.2%).

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 had a negative impact on the positive labour market developments in the following period. The economic impact of the pandemic was particularly evident in the rise in unemployment at national and European level and was not limited to the youth group.

According to the statistical data of the Labour, Social Affairs and Family Office, 178,655 Unemployed Persons were registered in the Office's register of Unemployed Persons as of 31 October 2022, of which 42,236 unemployed persons were under 30 years of age (23.64 %); in terms of gender comparison, the proportion was almost equal (50.29 % of women and 49.71 % of men).

In terms of individual regions, the highest number of unemployed persons under 30 was recorded in the Prešov region (11,573; 27.40% share) and the lowest in the Bratislava region (2,467; 5.84% share). In terms of education, the largest groups were young people with full secondary vocational education (13,986; 33.12% share) and with primary education (10,927; 25.87 % share).

The highest number of young people in the group of **citizens who had not had a regularly paid job for at least 12 consecutive calendar months** (31.5.2024 it was 27,367; 72.20%) falls under the group of disadvantaged people under the Employment Services Act. The second largest group in this category were young people with less than secondary vocational education (14,143; 37.31%). Of the total of 37,905,236 Unemployed Persons under 30 (as of 31.5.2024), 9,186 were long-term unemployed (LTU), representing a share of 24.23%.

In terms of length of registration, the largest number of Unemployed Persons was registered between 13 and 18 months – 3,304 persons with a share of 7.82 %. There were 1,115 young people under 30 with a registration period of over 48 months (2.64 % share).

The transition from education to employment is a crucial step for all young people, especially for those with **disabilities**. Although in theory these young people have the same opportunities to prepare for the labour market as others, in reality, they are often only offered positions within specialized schemes aimed at supporting employment for people with disabilities, such as sheltered workshops. Due to their limited scale compared to broader market actors, these programs rarely account for the individuals' skills and interests. Furthermore, vocational training for disabled youth typically occurs in the segregated settings of special schools rather than within real workplace environments. This disparity places them at a disadvantage relative to their peers as they exit the education system. The vocational training offered is often narrowly focused and misaligned with current labour market demands.

Post-graduation, many individuals with disabilities remain economically inactive. They do not register with labour offices, thereby missing out on opportunities to secure their first job using available employment tools. The unemployment costs for young people with disabilities are substantial. These challenges are prevalent across all European countries, including Slovakia, to varying degrees.

In terms of age-specific data, the under-20 group among jobseekers with disabilities (PWD) is notably underrepresented, making up only 3.4% compared to 11% in the general population. Conversely, the 25-30 age group is overrepresented at 59%, nearly 16% higher than in the general population. This suggests that even those young disabled individuals who register as unemployed face significant challenges in securing employment shortly after graduation. Notably, among jobseekers who are PWD, those with full secondary vocational education comprise the largest share at almost 40%. University graduates with disabilities also represent a considerable proportion, at almost 12.5%, which is comparable to that of non-disabled jobseekers.

Roma youth unemployment in Slovakia remains a significant issue, exacerbated by deep-seated discrimination and social exclusion. Roma from marginalized communities face disproportionately lower employment levels compared to the broader population, with significant gaps even among those with similar education levels. For instance, only 19% of low-educated Roma from these communities are employed compared to 38% in the overall population, and 42% with secondary-level education compared to 77% generally.

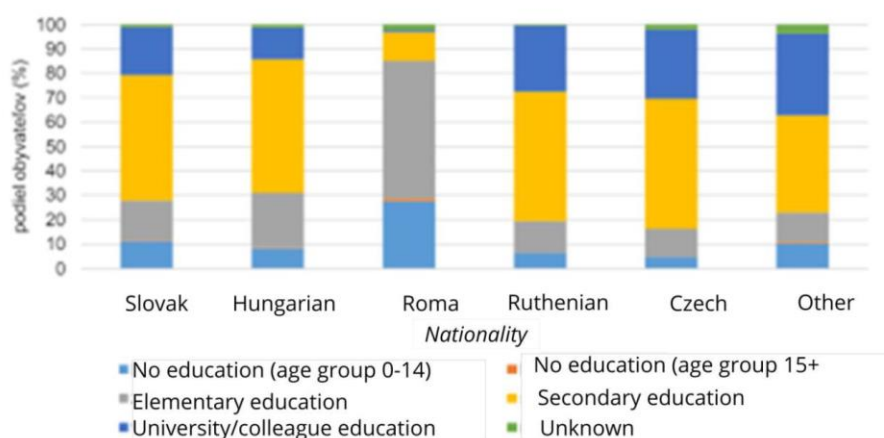
Further exacerbating this issue, the Roma Education Fund highlights the high unemployment rate among the Roma in Slovakia, which was reported to be 70% among the 15-64 age group in 2014, the highest rate in Central Europe. Despite efforts, Roma, particularly youth and women, continue to face significant hurdles in entering the labor market. This is largely due to a historical lack of skills necessary for employment and systemic discrimination.

Moreover, the geographical location of job opportunities in Slovakia adds another layer of difficulty for the Roma community, most of whom reside in the eastern part of the country, far from the central economic hub of Bratislava where most job opportunities are found. This geographical disparity necessitates long commutes, which poses additional barriers to employment.

In addition, the 2021 Slovak population census reveals a significant educational disparity within the Roma community. Census data indicate that among individuals aged 15 and older, the Roma have the highest proportion of those without any formal education—a statistical insignificance in other ethnicities such as Slovak, Hungarian, Ruthenian, or Czech. Additionally, over 50% of the educated Roma population have only attained primary education, in contrast to the majority population where a higher proportion completes secondary education. This significantly lower educational level subsequently

results in more challenging conditions for job seeking, successful employment, and competition in the labour market.

Figure 32. Nationalities based on the highest education in Slovakia, SODB 2021



An additional challenge confronting the Roma community is that approximately 70% reside in rural areas, where job opportunities are naturally scarcer than in urbanized regions, thus compounding their employment difficulties.

Young women in Slovakia tend to face higher unemployment rates compared to their male counterparts. This gap can be attributed to several factors, including sectoral employment differences, where industries predominantly employing women may offer fewer job opportunities or greater job insecurity. While there are more males than females living in Slovakia, there are more females living in rural areas which might be also a contributing factor to the higher unemployment rate.

Additionally, societal and cultural expectations about gender roles can also influence employment rates, with young women potentially facing greater challenges in balancing work and family responsibilities. In 2019, there was a significant gender imbalance among NEETs in Slovakia, with males at 9.8% and females at 25.0%. Efforts to address these disparities include various government and EU-funded initiatives aimed at supporting gender equality in the labour market. These measures aim to provide equal opportunities for both young men and women and to reduce the employment barriers that young women particularly face.

Although the unemployment rate peaked in 2012, it has been decreasing nearly every year since then. The most affected regions in Slovakia are the southeast and east. In 2019, the average unemployment rate was 4.92% across Slovakia, while in the Košice Region in eastern Slovakia, it was 7.57%. The highest employment rates were recorded in the Bratislava and Trnava Regions.

Regional disparities in unemployment in Slovakia can be observed by examining the economic impact of the country's least developed districts. **The least developed districts are defined on the basis of the unemployment rate. They define those**

districts in which unemployment is significantly worse than the Slovak average.

These districts account for 25% of the unemployed, 40% of material distress benefit recipients, and 35% of the long-term unemployed.

In addition to above elaborated statistical data regarding NEETs in Slovakia, as a part of the Back On Track Interreg Danube project, Primary research on NEETs needs has been conducted. Analysis of collected data provided a comprehensive exploration of the conditions affecting NEETs in Slovakia, with a specific focus on rural areas and marginalized communities such as the Roma.

The findings reveal significant disparities in access to education, employment opportunities, and social services, particularly pronounced among Roma communities and rural youths. These disparities are compounded by socio-economic factors and structural inequalities that persist across Slovakia, influencing NEETs' ability to integrate successfully into the labor market and educational systems.

Analysis also underscores the role of family and community support in shaping the opportunities available to young people, particularly in rural areas. However, while such support systems provide necessary resilience, they also reflect a broader need for systemic solutions that address the root causes of unemployment and educational disengagement among NEETs.

Policy implications drawn from this research suggest that targeted interventions are needed to improve access to quality education and employment opportunities. This includes enhancing digital literacy, expanding vocational training programs, and ensuring that educational curricula are aligned with labor market demands. Additionally, strategies to combat social exclusion and discrimination, particularly against the Roma, are essential for fostering inclusive growth and development.

Taking into consideration all analysed data, we can conclude that significant challenges remain in supporting young people in Slovakia. Presented is the list of most significant challenges youth is facing both in urban and rural areas in the region of Banska Bystrica (and beyond):

- There has been an **increase in early school leavers** over the past few years.
- A persistent **mismatch exists between the knowledge and skills acquired through study or apprenticeships** and the needs of the labour market, often leaving young people unemployed.
- A **high proportion of low-skilled young individuals** are registered as unemployed.
- There is an **insufficient level of skills** necessary for new sectors of the dynamically developing labor market, particularly digital, green, and entrepreneurial skills.
- A **lack of detailed information on the structure and number of NEETs** persists.

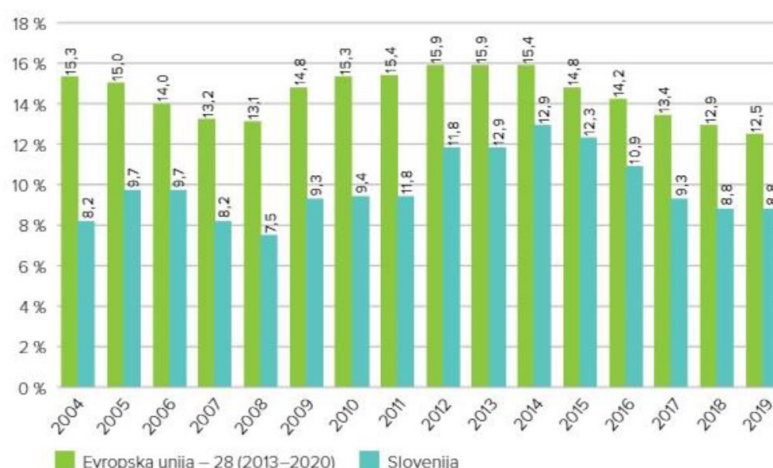
- Many **young people face multiple disadvantages** and require intensive, individualized approaches to overcome barriers to employment.
- **Information campaigns** on measures implemented through the Youth Guarantee in Slovakia **are insufficient**.
- The proportion of long-term unemployed young people remains above the EU27 level, despite a recent downward trend.
- The **absence of practical work experience** also hinders young people's entry into the labor market.
- **68% of young Roma in Slovakia are unemployed** and not in further education, compared to 10.3% of the general population aged 20-34.
- The **situation is particularly dire for young Roma women**, with 76% considered NEET compared to 52% of young Roma men.

1.2.10. *Slovenia*

Slovenia officially uses definition of NEETs defined by The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound, n.d.) who has conceptualised the NEET population to include **young people aged between 15 and 29 who are not in employment, education or training**.

According to the OECD report (2021), almost **one in ten young people in the Republic of Slovenia falls under the category of NEETs**. With around 29,500 NEETs and a rate of 9.5% among young people aged 15–29 in 2018, Slovenia ranks in the lower third of OECD member countries, where the average was 12.8%. **About half (53%) of young people who have been NEETs at any time in the last four years had long or repeated periods of inactivity; the same share (53%) was not registered at the Employment Services System - ESS (15,600 young people)**. At the height of the economic crisis, around 2014, the NEET rate in Slovenia reached 13.9%, which is a considerable number, but still relatively low compared to some other countries in the region, such as Italy and Greece, where NEET rates were twice as high as in Slovenia (OECD, 2021). Following Figure shows a comparison of the shares of NEETs between Slovenia and the EU-28 between 2004 and 2019.

Figure 33. Percentages of young people neither in employment, education or training (NEETs)



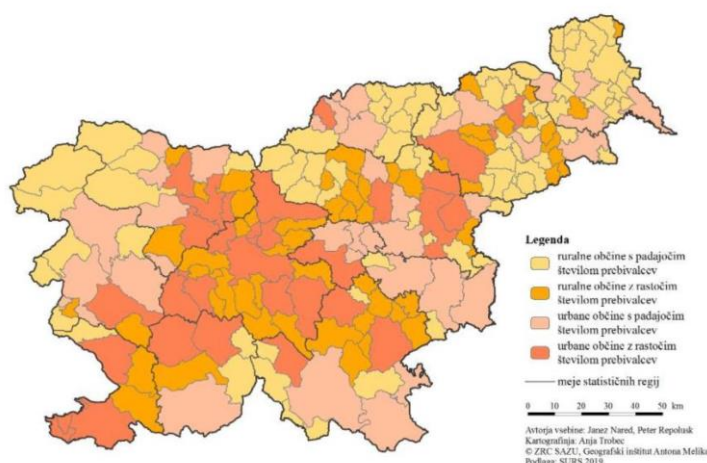
The Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, in cooperation with the ESS, merged several administrative databases. **In particular, selected parts of the records of all persons aged 15–29 for the 2011–18 period were obtained from the population register, socio-economic database, various education databases, the income database and several databases of the ESS (databases on the situation and trends of unemployment, on customer services and on active labour market programmes).** By merging these databases, it was possible to identify young people who were NEETs in January and to distinguish those who stayed full year (long-term NEETs) from those who declared income from work later (short-term NEETs). It was also possible to distinguish between young people who had ever registered with an employment service during the year (registered NEETs) and those who did not register (unregistered NEETs) (OECD, 2020). Currently Slovenia has one of the lowest percentages of registered youth NEETS in Europe – 27 (7,27 % in 2023 according to the World Development Indicators database (World Bank Group, 2024).

It was not easy to identify unregistered NEETs, as these young people are by definition not on the public employment services records. However, by combining these different administrative databases in Slovenia, it was possible to identify unregistered NEETs and study their profile. Calculations based on this anonymized aggregated dataset show that **less than half of all NEETs in Slovenia are reported to the ESS.** Between 2011 and 2018, 53% of 15–29 year olds classified as unemployed or inactive according to the once-a-year demographic data collection were never registered with the ESS in the same year. This number is surprisingly high and reveals the importance of a better understanding of the composition of this group. In addition, the share of unregistered NEETs remained more or less constant in the period 2011–2018 (OECD, 2020).

Most of the NEETS in Slovenia lives in rural Areas. Taking into account the size of the population and the equipment of municipal centers with central functions, Slovenian municipalities are divided into 69 urban municipalities and 143 rural municipalities. The population of 34 urban municipalities has been growing in the last ten years. They occupied almost a quarter of Slovenian territory and were home to as much as 43% of

Slovenia's population. The 35 urban municipalities with a decreasing population occupied just under 28% of the territory with 30.36% of the population. Among the rural municipalities, the population of the 61st municipality has increased over the last ten years, while the population of the 82nd municipality has decreased. The former occupy just under a fifth of the territory, with 14.02% of the population, while the latter occupy 29.18% of the territory and 12.56% of the population (next Figure).

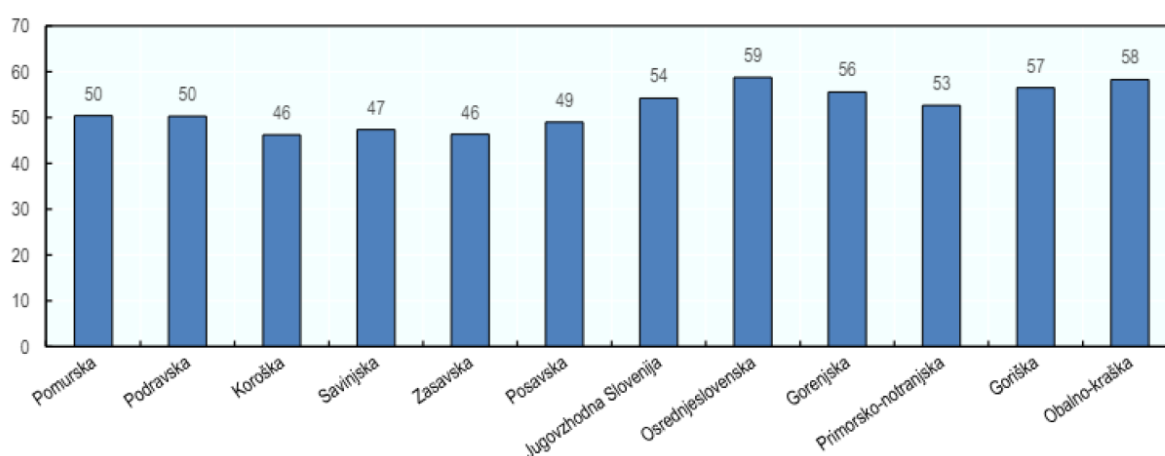
Figure 34. Classification of Slovenian municipalities into demographic-settlement types



**yellow color = rural municipalities with declining population; orange color = rural municipalities with growing population; pink color = urban municipalities with declining population; red color = urban municipalities with growing population*

Differences in the prevalence of unregistered NEETs between regions are rather small (next Figure). The regions with the highest share of unregistered NEETs among all NEETs are Central Slovenia (Osrednjeslovenska), Coastal-Karst (Obalno-kraška) and Gorizia (Goriška) regions with 57-59% of unregistered NEETs. The lowest shares are recorded in Carinthia (Koroška) and Central sava (Zasavska) region and the Savinja (Savinjska) region, where 46-47% of all NEETs are unregistered with the Employment Service of Slovenia. Overall, this proportion is significant in all regions and cannot be neglected anywhere (OECD, 2020).

Figure 35. Share of NEETs not registered with the Employment Service of Slovenia among all NEETs, by region, average in the period 2011-2018



However, differences can be observed when comparing eastern and western Slovenia. **Young people in East Slovenia are more often NEETs than in West Slovenia.** According to the register data from 2018, almost one fifth of young people in the north-eastern Mura (Pomurska) statistical region belonged to the category of NEETs. By contrast, only one in ten NEETs was in the northwestern Upper Carniola (Gorenjska) region, while in the Central Slovenia (Osrednjeslovenska) region the NEET rate is only slightly higher (OECD, 2021).

When it comes to the presentation of data regarding NEETs by gender analyses have shown that **women are more often represented than men** among NEETs. About 56% of Slovenian NEETs are women (left chart in Figure 4), which is close to the average among OECD countries of 58% and the EU-28 average of 57% (Naterer et al., 2023). About 44% of unregistered NEET women say they are inactive due to caring responsibilities. The analysis shows that the over-representation of young mothers among NEETs in Slovenia is largely due to weak financial incentives for parents of young children to enter the labour market. Among men, illness and participation in non-formal education or training are the two main reasons for inactivity among unregistered NEETs (OECD, 2020).

Regarding the age structure of NEETs, **older young people** have been found to be over-represented among NEETs (right graph in Figure 4). The NEET rate is also increasing with age: both in Slovenia and in the OECD average, the NEET rate in 15–19-year-olds is less than half of those in the 20–24 age group and about a third of those in the 25–29 age group (Naterer et al., 2023). Similarly, researchers within the project "PreseNEETi" found, i.e. that NEETs are most often between 25 and 29 years old (Naterer et al., 2022). The OECD (2020) made a comparison between registered and unregistered NEETs and found that the age composition between these two groups is similar, that is, most NEETs (both registered and unregistered) are between 25 and 29 years old.

If we consider results of analysis on the environment from which young NEETs in Slovenia come from, we can conclude that they **mostly come from the urban environment (50%)**, followed by those coming from a more rural environment (25%).

Calculations based on European Union statistics on income and living conditions show that **almost four out of five NEETs or their families receive some type of social assistance** (Figure 6). Although only one in five NEETs receive unemployment benefits, nearly one in two lives in a household receiving financial social assistance (45 %) and/or child benefits (48 %). The dependence on financial social assistance is particularly high compared to other OECD countries, where only 11% of NEETs live in a household receiving social assistance (OECD, 2021).

NEETs may receive benefits more often than other disadvantage groups because their needs are greater due to their inactivity or personal situation, such as having children or a disability, or because growing up in a socio-economically disadvantaged household increases the likelihood of being NEETs. A breakdown of recipient rates by whether or not

young people live with their parents reveals that the **higher rate of receiving financial social assistance among NEETs is particularly pronounced among NEETs living with their parents (56%)** compared to those who do not live with them (29%). Conversely, the **proportion of recipients of child benefit is much higher among those who no longer live with their parents (81%)** compared to those living with them (25%). Young people who live with their parents tend to be younger and less likely to have children. The high proportion of NEETs receiving social assistance suggests that **many of them come from households that are socially and economically disadvantaged**. The high proportion of NEETs who no longer live with parents receiving child benefit suggests that **many of them are young parents who are NEETs due to childcare responsibilities** (OECD, 2021).

Despite the high share of financial support, **one in four Slovenian NEETs is poor**. The measure of poverty is a balanced income below 60% of median income. The poverty rate among NEETs in Slovenia is 27.9% compared to other OECD countries, where the rate is 34.3%. The poverty rate is higher among young people who do not live with their parents compared to those living with their parents, as is the case for young NEETs in Slovenia and the OECD as a whole (OECD, 2021).

However, the results of the research within the project "PreseNEETi se" showed that NEETs **economic situation is solid**, with a significant share of those who can afford more expensive things (pre-test 17.4%, post-test 16.7%) and a good lifestyle (pre-test 30.4%, post-test 16.7%) and a relatively **low share of those who only have enough for basic accounts or neither that**, was 17.4% (compared to 0% in the post-test group) (Naterer et al., 2023).

According to the described financial assistance and the results of the research project PreseNEETi, we could conclude that Slovenia has a well-functioning social care system, which enables a stable economic situation for unemployed persons.

For all age groups, Slovenian NEET rates are significantly lower than the OECD and EU-28 averages, which is not surprising given the **high share of young people participating in education** (Naterer et al., 2023). Therefore, the official unemployment rate among Slovenian young people is significantly influenced by the high level of youth participation in the education system. According to Eurostat, 75.5% of the youth population (15–24) in Slovenia participated in formal forms of full-time education at secondary and tertiary level in 2018, with the EU-27 average being around 64% (Lavrič and Deželan, 2020).

As part of the project "PreseNEETi se", pre- and post-tests were carried out, where the results of the pre-test group of Slovenian NEETs show that the majority of respondents have a degree (32.1%), followed by completed upper secondary education, 28.6% have completed technical school and 14.3% have completed secondary school. In the post-test group, on the other hand, only 20% of respondents had undergraduate education, while as many as 64% had completed primary school or less. These differences can largely be attributed to the fact that respondents in the post-test group were significantly younger

than respondents in the pre-test group. There has been a particular **risk of slipping into NEET status among young people who have completed secondary education or less** (Naterer et al., 2022). A comparison of registered and unregistered NEETs showed that **unregistered NEETs are more often low-educated (32%)** than registered NEETs (18%) (OECD, 2020).

Eurostat statistics also show that **Slovenia has been quite successful in tackling early school leaving or the complete inactivity of young people in the field of education or employment.**²⁴

About **90% of unregistered NEETs have never worked before**, compared to only 53% of registered NEETs. Further analysis showed that around one in four unregistered NEETs are unemployed and actively looking for work, with 15% without work experience and 10% already working. Although they are looking for a job, they are not registered with public employment services and do not receive public support when looking for a job. Another 9% of unregistered NEETs receive social assistance and are thus in contact with the Centers for social work, as these centers manage financial social assistance benefits in Slovenia. Finally, around **two-thirds (65%) of unregistered NEETs are inactive and not looking for work.**

The journal Mladina (Lavrič and Deželan, 2020) wrote similarly – in the entire population of NEETs, 60% would like to work, and 40% would not want to work.

OECD data (2021) show that **young NEETs were more likely to have been born abroad or have one of their parents born abroad.** The NEET rate among the foreign-born is almost three times higher than among the Slovenian-born: 24.2% compared to 8.3%. This gap is larger than the OECD average (19.4% versus 12.0%) and even larger than the EU-28 average (17.6% versus 12.2%). The gap was even larger in 2013 and 2014, in line with the general pattern that economic crises have a stronger impact on foreigners' employment prospects compared to native-born citizens, especially among young workers (Chaloff et al., 2012; in OECD, 2021). While the NEET rate continued to decline between 2017 and 2018, the NEET rate for foreign nationals rose again. As a result, **the share of NEETs born abroad has steadily increased since 2015**, reaching 19.8% in 2018.

An analysis of the nationality of NEETs within the project "PreceNEETi se" revealed that 53.6% of immigrants and 46.4% of Slovenians were in the sample, so the distribution of Slovenians and non-Slovenians is approximately the same. However, since a much higher proportion of 15-29-year-old immigrants are born in the Balkans, **three quarters of NEET immigrants originate from Balkan countries** (Naterer et al., 2023). Among NEETs, 25% were Bosnians, 10.7% Roma, 7.1% were Albanians and 3.6% were Serbs.

²⁴ In 2019, Slovenia has registered 4.6% of early school leavers (18-24, which is less than the national target for this indicator (5%) set in the Europe 2020 strategy (Lavrič and Deželan, 2020).

Data on household composition show that **two thirds (64%) of NEETs live with their parents** (both registered and unregistered). Much less important categories, although not negligible, are unregistered NEETs who live with their children and partner (marriage or mutual agreement relationship - 13% in total), live alone (7%) or are single parents (5%). The household composition of unregistered NEETs is very similar to that of registered NEETs, 64% of them live with parents, 11% with children and partners, 10% live alone and 6% are single parents (OECD, 2020). The **majority of young NEETs (50%) live in an apartment or house bought by their parents**, followed by those living in a rented apartment (25%). 3.6% live with parents/friends.

Moreover, there is a particular risk of slipping into NEET status in young people with **mental health problems** (depression, anxiety) and those with **poor physical health**. As far as mental health is concerned, it is not yet entirely clear whether it predicts NEET status or whether NEET status has an impact on mental health. It has also been found that NEETs are more **pessimistic** about their future and are more **suspicious of** institutions and people. As far as social relationships are concerned, it has been observed that NEETs are somewhat **socially isolated** and have **worse relationships with family and friends**.

In addition to previously elaborated statistical data for NEETs in Slovenia, as a part of BoT project, in 2024.g Slovenia conducted primary Research on NEET's needs. From the presented results and general findings, we can summarize that the use of focus groups and an online questionnaire for selected members of the NEET population is effective.

By analyzing all the data obtained, following conclusions can be presented:

- There is no information on unregistered NEETs in Slovenia. Only records are kept of young people who were formerly joined, left or are currently part of the system.
 - The level of education plays an important role in protecting the individual from unemployment. The higher the level of education, the lower the likelihood of developing unemployment.
 - Most NEETs have completed only primary education.
 - Rural NEETs are in a worse economic situation than NEETs residing closer to centralized centers.
- Half of the NEETs included in the survey belonged to Roma minorities and other religions.
- Most NEETs are not in a partnership (single).
 - Most NEETs live with their parents.
 - More than half of the NEETs surveyed rate their health status as a general good, while mental health self-assessment is worse.

Considering of all statistical data and conclusions from conducted researches, we can summarize recommendation for future strategic approaches, as follows:

- **Ensure the rights and accessibility of services for young NEETs** is crucial for their success and well-being. This includes creating education, training and employment opportunities, as well as providing support in the areas of social care and health.
- It is very important that young **NEETs have access to programmes and services**, as these enable them to develop their skills, build confidence and support them in overcoming potential obstacles on their way to employment or further education.
- **Young people need to be approached in more depth, not just as members of the NEET population**, as alternative categories such as "volunteers", "young mothers" or "cannabis traders" should be considered before doing so in order to capture a more nuanced understanding of their experiences. This approach involves combining different research methods and openness to different strategies of reintegration into education or the labour market or other alternatives
- **Activation and integration of young people into the labour market** is crucial for the economic success and well-being of individuals, while contributing to social cohesion and economic growth.
- It is crucial that **NEETs receive support in the form of career guidance, quality training or job incentives** as soon as possible.
- **Rural NEETs in Slovenia is poorly researched** and it would make sense to focus on them in future research
- The **system needs to be flexible to deal effectively with the different needs** and circumstances of individuals.

1.3. INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR STRATEGY IMPLEMENTATION, MONITORING, EVALUATION AND REPORTING

Creating an effective institutional framework to implement, monitor, evaluate, and report on the Strategy requires a collaborative approach that brings together various stakeholders in Danube region. Here's an outline of the proposed framework, challenges, and recommendations for institutional development:

Suggested Implementation Structure

- **EUSDR (EU Strategy for the Danube Region):**
 - Identify a regional body within EUSDR that will be responsible for coordinating the implementation of the Strategy to foster sustainable outreach to rural NEETs across the Danube region.
 - This body should have a clear mandate, sufficient resources, and expertise to manage the strategy effectively.
- **National stakeholder networks:**
 - Use existing national formal or informal stakeholder networks that include representatives from local governments, NGOs, educational institutions, and business sectors.
 - These networks will facilitate the adaptation of the strategy to local contexts and ensure that actions align with regional needs.
- **Local BoT project implementation teams:**
 - Local BoT project implementation teams should be tasked with implementation specific and project related strategic actions at the community level. These teams should closely work with social workers, educators, and representatives from local businesses and NGOs.
 - They will be responsible for delivering programs and BoT related project activities, engaging with NEET individuals, and monitoring local outcomes.

Monitoring and Evaluation Framework

- **Key Performance Indicators (KPIs):**
 - Adjust SMART defined indicators to a National context and assess progress toward the strategy's goals.
 - Ensure that these indicators are tailored to reflect the unique challenges faced by NEET individuals in the region and they can be synthesized from National reports to aggregated Danube region report.

- **Monitoring Mechanism:**
 - Assign the responsibility for monitoring of Strategy implementation to the regional body within EUSDR and national stakeholder networks.
 - Utilize digital platforms and data collection tools to streamline the monitoring process, making it easier to gather and analyze data from various stakeholders.
 - The outreach model in the context of reaching out to NEETs describes 5 phases: understand NEETs, identify NEETs, contact and engage NEETs, deliver programs to NEETs, and monitor and adapt programs. According to the European Commission, "mapping" and "tracking" educational and employment pathways of young people is essential to implement educational integration support such as the Youth Guarantee. This needs collaboration of multiple national authorities in creating the legislation, implementation of programs for coaching and training, and statistical data analysis (EUROPEAN COMMISSION - Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (2018). Tracking and mapping young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs).
- **Evaluation Process:**
 - Conduct evaluation after 3-5 years of implementation. Evaluations should analyze both quantitative and qualitative data and consider Relevance, Effectiveness, Efficiency, Sustainability and Impact.
 - Engage external evaluators or research institutions to provide an objective assessment of the strategy's impact and recommend improvements.

Reporting Structure

- **Reporting:**
 - Defined national stakeholders networks and local implementation teams should compile annual reports on their activities, outcomes, and challenges. These reports will feed into the regional body defined within EUSDR that monitors Strategy implementation.
 - The regional body defined within EUSDR will consolidate these reports into a comprehensive annual overview of the strategy's progress in the Danube region.
 - Share these reports publicly to promote transparency and accountability.
- **Stakeholder Engagement:**
 - Organize annual stakeholder forums to discuss progress, share best practices, and identify areas for improvement.
 - Foster collaboration among stakeholders to address common challenges and leverage resources.
 - Incorporating feedback from NEETs and other stakeholders to refine programs and ensure they remain relevant and impactful.

Challenges to Address

- **Data Availability and Quality:**
 - Ensuring the availability of reliable data on NEET individuals can be challenging. Develop standardized data collection methods and build capacity among national stakeholder networks and local BoT implementation teams to gather accurate information.
- **Stakeholder Coordination:**
 - Ensuring effective coordination among diverse stakeholders can be complex. Establish clear communication channels and roles within the institutional framework for monitoring of Strategy implementation.
- **Resource Limitations:**
 - Limited financial and human resources may hinder the implementation of the strategy. Seek funding from EU, national and other international sources, and consider public-private partnerships.
- **Resistance to Change:**
 - There may be resistance to new initiatives or collaborations. Provide training and capacity-building opportunities to foster buy-in and commitment among stakeholders.

Institutional Development Options

- **Establishing a New Institution:**
 - Consider establishing a body within EUSDR focused on youth employment and social inclusion in the Danube region. This body should oversee the implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of the strategy in Danube region.
- **Developing a Regional Network:**
 - If national stakeholder networks does not exist, consider developing a network that connects existing institutions, organizations, NEETs (peer review groups) and stakeholders. This network should facilitate knowledge sharing, collaboration, and resource mobilization across the Danube region.
 - Regional development agencies and LEADER Region Coordinators of the European Union are suitable actors to connect all actors relevant for NEETs support (research institutes, municipalities, industries, social services, etc.)
 - The network could also serve as a platform for capacity building and best practice dissemination on addressing NEETs needs.

By establishing a robust institutional framework for the implementation, monitoring, evaluation, and reporting of the Strategy, stakeholders will foster collaboration, enhance accountability, and ultimately improve the social inclusion and employability of NEET populations in the region.

2. STRATEGIC FOCUSES, VISION AND OBJECTIVES

2.1. SWOT Analysis and Strategic Focuses

SWOT is an acronym that stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. It is a strategic planning tool used to analyze and evaluate internal and external factors in Danube region and affiliated countries, that have and would have impact on current and future development initiatives.

SWOT analysis will enable us to define **Strengths** (Internal attributes that are beneficial and give an advantage over others – e.g. subsidies for young people, self-employment programs for disadvantage groups etc.), **Weaknesses** (Internal attributes that can create disadvantages (e.g., lack of resources, outdated technology, lack of access to mental health etc.), **Opportunities** (External conditions or trends that the organization can capitalize on (e.g., Innovations, Green transition initiatives in EU, technological advancements, digitalization etc.) and **Threats** (External factors that could cause trouble for the organization (e.g., Lack of national regional strategies for NEET, regulatory changes).

The purpose of a SWOT analysis is to identify factors to help in strategic decision-making and focusing of future development initiatives toward NEETs in Danube region. Based on the detailed SWOT analysis (presented in the Annex) following synthesized analysis were defined.

Figure 36. Summary of SWOT analysis (detailed SWOT analysis is presented in the Annex)

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aligned National Policies: Alignment with SDGs and EU policies provides a framework for regional cooperation and funding opportunities. • Youth Guarantee Programs: Ensures the right to education and skill development for youth up to 30 years old. • Strong Social Welfare Systems: Offers unemployment benefits, social assistance, and training opportunities tailored for NEETs. • Dual Vocational Training System: Recognized qualifications enable integration into the labor market. • Available Public Universities: Provides access to tuition-free higher education. • NGO Sector and Volunteering Culture: Robust support system for community-based initiatives. • Existing Employment Programs: Foundational programs that can be expanded to meet NEET-specific needs. • Resilience and Community Responsibility: NEETs exhibit adaptability and engagement potential when provided with the right opportunities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High Unemployment Rate: Persistent challenge affecting NEET integration into the labor market. • Digital Divide: Lack of access to digital infrastructure and skills in rural areas exacerbates inequalities. • Limited Housing Support: Inadequate systems to secure housing for the most vulnerable NEET groups. • Insufficient Targeting in Programs: Employment and self-employment programs do not cater specifically to NEETs' needs. • Inadequate Data Systems: Lack of regular, reliable statistical data on NEETs hampers policy-making. • Social Exclusion: NEETs face barriers to participating in community activities and building social capital. • Mental Health Challenges: Increasing prevalence of mental health issues is a barrier to development and integration. • Transition Barriers: Critical challenges during transitions (e.g., school to vocational training) hinder long-term progress..
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Green and Digital Economy Growth: Emerging sectors provide pathways for skill development and employment. • EU-Targeted Programs: Funding opportunities through ESF, Erasmus+, and other EU initiatives. • Public-Private Partnerships: Potential collaborations to enhance infrastructure, training, and employment. • Innovative Education Methods: Opportunities to modernize education with digital and peer-learning models. • Rural Development Advocacy: Strong rural economies can support NEET integration through agriculture and tourism. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth Migration: Emigration of NEETs seeking better opportunities abroad undermines local strategies. • Economic Instability: Inflation and recession threaten funding for social programs and employment initiatives. • Negative Demographics: Aging population and low birth rates exacerbate labor market pressures. • Regional Disparities: Unequal social infrastructure and economic opportunities across regions widen the gap for NEETs. • Cultural Barriers: Traditional norms in rural areas limit opportunities for women and marginalized groups.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital Inclusion Initiatives: Programs to bridge the digital divide and upskill vulnerable populations. • Immigration of Skilled Workers: Opportunities for NEETs to fill gaps in the local labor market. • Moderate Upward Social Mobility: Potential for improved access to education and economic opportunities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mental Health Stigma: Social stigmas prevent adequate support for NEETs' psychological challenges. • Pandemics and Geopolitical Unrest: External crises disrupt progress in NEET integration efforts. • Limited Budget for Social Programs: Fiscal constraints restrict the implementation of comprehensive solutions for NEETs.
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By identifying Strengths to overcome Weaknesses and Opportunities to decrease Threats, following strategic focuses have been identified:

Strategic Focus 1: Enhancing Professional and Social Skills

Professional and social skills are essential for the long-term integration of the NEET population into the labor market. NEET category faces challenge of lacking skills necessary for employment and social integration. Investing in the development of these skills ensures greater flexibility and adaptability in a dynamic labor market.

In the Danube region, the need to develop professional and social competencies is becoming more pronounced due to specific regional economic demands. NEETs, especially those from rural and economically disadvantaged areas, often lack opportunities to acquire skills required for employment in modern industries, thus addressing poverty. This strategic focus aims to provide opportunities for acquiring competencies through educational programs, mentorship, and practical training.

Developing professional and social skills will not only enhance youth employability but also their ability to successfully integrate socially into communities. Strengthening their abilities in teamwork, leadership, communication, financial literacy and emotional intelligence will be key factors in boosting their self-confidence and capacity to adapt to various professional environments.

Strategic Focus 2: Digital Literacy as a Key to Development and Competitiveness

Digital literacy is a fundamental prerequisite for successfully integrating into the labor market in a modern society. As digitalization becomes increasingly prevalent across all sectors, the lack of digital skills can be a serious obstacle for the NEET population in finding employment. Improving digital literacy will enable NEETs to actively participate in the digital economy and tackle the challenges posed by modern technologies.

Developing digital skills provides young people with the opportunity to gain knowledge not only for work in the IT sector but also for daily life and social interaction. Digital

competencies, such as using the internet, online communication, and working with software, are becoming increasingly important across most industries, and digital literacy is crucial for promoting digital inclusion. In addition, it will enable NEETs with necessary skill to perform jobs in distance working environment

By increasing access to digital tools and programs, NEETs will have greater chances for economic advancement. This strategic focus emphasizes creating training programs that cover both basic digital skills and advanced technologies, thereby enabling youth to remain competitive in a dynamic labor market.

Strategic Focus 3: Access to Public Services

Access to quality public services is crucial for the long-term social and economic progress of the NEET population. Many are deprived of access to education, healthcare, social services, and public transportation due to socio-economic or geographic barriers. Improving access to these resources is essential for building equal opportunities for all young people in the Danube region.

Access to free public transportation, university education, mobile internet, and other basic public services reduces social exclusion and enables young people to actively participate in social and economic life. This focus emphasizes removing barriers that prevent NEETs from using key resources, allowing them to become equal members of society.

Establishing an effective and inclusive public service system will enable the NEET population to receive necessary support, thereby reducing their dependence on social assistance. Connecting youth with resources and services vital for their integration and advancement will strengthen their contribution to the community and create sustainable social networks.

Strategic Focus 4: Employment and Self-Employment Opportunities

Creating opportunities for employment and self-employment is a critical step in empowering the NEET population. Many young people in the Danube region face high unemployment and limited access to traditional forms of employment. Through the development of entrepreneurial initiatives and the promotion of self-employment, the NEET population can find alternatives and achieve economic independence.

Employment and self-employment offer young people the opportunity to take control of their own future and contribute to the local economy. Creating new jobs in the small and medium-sized enterprise sector, and strengthening the start-up culture, will enable NEETs to develop innovative business ideas and become drivers of economic change in the region.

Self-employment offers NEETs the possibility to build careers according to their interests and skills, thereby reducing pressure on the labor market. By developing appropriate support frameworks, such as education, mentorship, and access to capital, young people will be empowered to transform their business ideas into successful ventures.

Strategic Focus 5: Improving living conditions and access to housing solutions

Improving living conditions is a key factor for the stability and security of the NEET population. Young people without access to adequate housing solutions are often at risk of poverty and social exclusion. Improving access to affordable and safe housing solutions will give the NEET population a better chance for stability and independence.

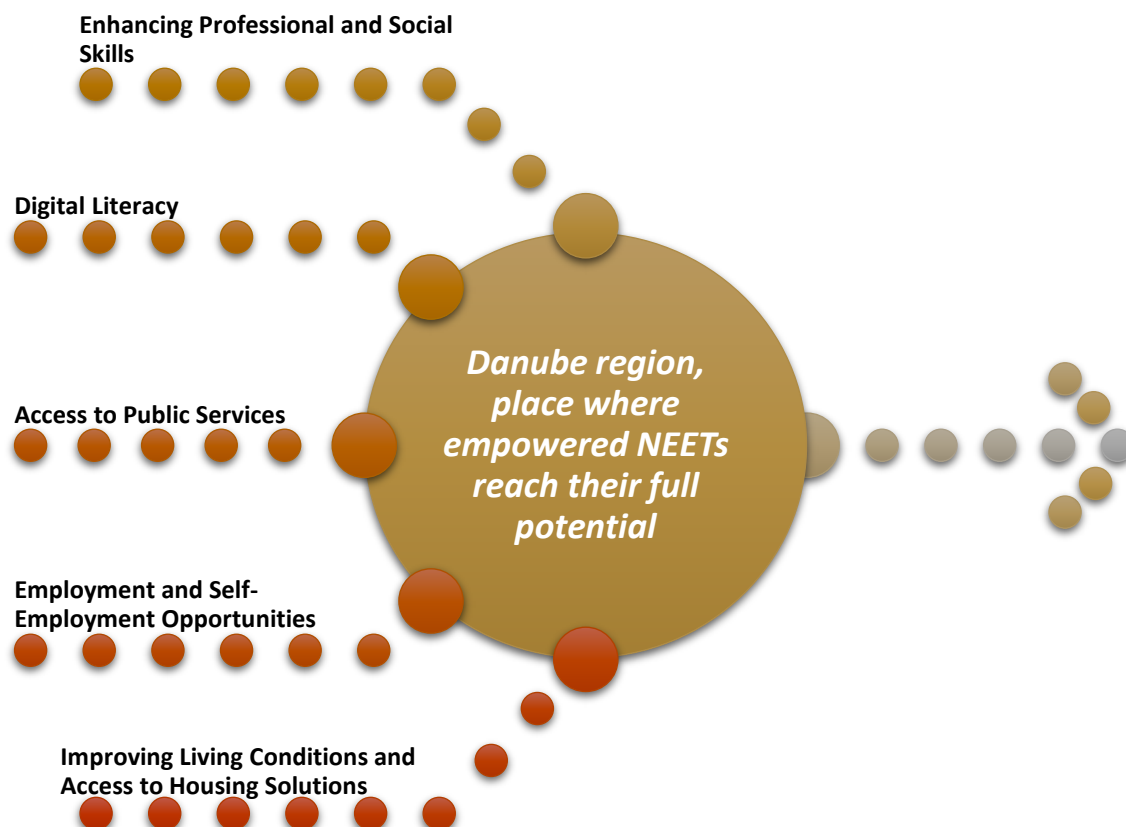
Providing subsidized housing options for young people who are unemployed or not engaged in education will help reduce social inequalities and enable them to achieve more stable living conditions. Access to safe and affordable accommodation directly contributes to their well-being and increases the chances for social and economic integration.

This focus recognizes the importance of secure living conditions for the comprehensive development of young people. In addition to housing solutions, attention is given to ensuring access to basic resources, such as water, electricity, and healthcare, thereby creating an environment in which young people can thrive and contribute to the community.

2.2. VISION

The Danube region is facing significant challenges in integrating the NEET population (young people who are not employed, nor engaged in the education system or training). The goal of regional policies must be to create sustainable opportunities for this vulnerable group in order to enhance their social and economic inclusion. Through a strategic approach that includes education, mentorship, access to financial resources, and the creation of job opportunities, the NEET population can become active participants in the development of the regional economy and contribute to social stability. The vision of this strategy must be clear and focused on fostering the full potential of young people in the Danube region.

Therefore, based on the situation analysis, SWOT analysis and defined strategic focuses following vision has been defined.



To achieve the Vision and create a better environment for the NEET population, it is necessary to adopt the following core values:

1. **Empowerment of Youth:** Emphasis on creating opportunities for the NEET population to develop the necessary skills and competencies for success in the labor market.
2. **Social inclusion:** Promotion of an inclusive society that ensures equal access to education, employment, and social services for all young people.
3. **Sustainable economic development:** Encouraging self-employment and entrepreneurial initiatives that contribute to the region's long-term economic growth.
4. **Public-Private Partnership:** Synergy between governmental institutions, non-governmental organizations, and the private sector for the effective implementation of support programs for the NEET population.
5. **Equality and Fairness:** Ensuring fair opportunities for all young people, regardless of their socio-economic background or geographical location.

2.3. STRATEGIC GOALS

In order to achieve Vision, following Strategic objectives have been defined:

Strategic Goal 1: Increase Economic Opportunities for NEETs in the Danube Region

- **Priority 1.1:** Improve opportunities for NEETs to engage in self-employment.
- **Priority 1.2:** Increase the number of employed NEETs.

Strategic Goal 2: Improve Quality of Life and Social Security for NEETs

- **Priority 2.1:** Enhance social inclusion and healthcare services of NEETs.
- **Priority 2.2.:** Improve housing conditions for NEETs

Strategic Goal 3: Enhance access to education, professional development and public services for the NEET population

- **Priority 3.1:** Develop professional, digital and social skills of the NEET population.
- **Priority 3.2:** Ensure access to public services for the NEET population.

Strategic Goal 1: Increase Economic Opportunities for NEETs in the Danube Region

The Danube region is facing the challenge of a growing number of young people who are not employed, in education, or training (NEET). The purpose of this goal is to create sustainable economic opportunities for young people to enhance their competitiveness in the labor market. With a high unemployment rate among youth, the need to develop new training programs and access to self-employment has become a priority. Through integrated economic measures, the focus will be on providing support for the development of new entrepreneurial initiatives and the creation of job opportunities for young people. These programs will offer the NEET population a chance to actively participate in the region's economic development.

Improving self-employment opportunities will be a key focus. Young people entering entrepreneurship face numerous challenges, ranging from access to capital to a lack of business management knowledge. Through this strategy, targeted support will be provided in the form of educational programs, mentorship, and financial assistance for starting their own businesses. It is expected that young people who establish their own businesses will not only reduce the pressure on the labor market but also contribute to increased economic activity in the region.

Increasing the employability of NEETs is also crucial. Programs for vocational training and employer engagement, tailored to the specific needs of the region, will enable young people to acquire the necessary skills and experience. This initiative includes creating new

opportunities through public-private partnerships, strengthening employment networks, and creating tailored work practices to help young people integrate into the labor market. The Danube region, facing specific demographic and economic challenges, must offer adapted employment models that ensure a long-term reduction in youth unemployment rates.

Key assumptions underlying Strategic Goal 1:

- NEETs represent a significant resource with untapped potential for regional economic development.
- There is a need for better access to the labor market through targeted training programs, mentorship, and entrepreneurial support.
- Public and private institutions will be able to provide the necessary resources and support for implementing these initiatives through public-private partnerships and existing support mechanisms.
- Training tailored to the needs of the regional labor market
- Financial awards for successfully completed courses and programs

Indicators of impact for Strategic objective 1:

- **NEET unemployment rate**
- **Self-Employment Rate Among the NEET Population**

Strategic Goal 2: Improve Quality of Life and Social Security for NEETs

The Danube region faces significant challenges in improving the quality of life and social security of young people who are neither employed nor involved in education or training programs (NEET). This vulnerable group is often marginalized, has limited access to basic social services, and many live in inadequate housing conditions. The strategic focus for this population aims to ensure long-term stability and improve their living conditions through social integration and easier access to key social resources. Interventions will focus on enhancing social security, ensuring access to adequate housing solutions, and providing comprehensive support for social inclusion. The goal is to achieve social integration of the NEET population, reduce their social exclusion, and create conditions for their independence and long-term stability.

Improving housing conditions is a crucial component of this strategic objective, as many young people from the NEET population live in substandard conditions. Limited access to subsidized housing programs and affordable loans further complicates their situation, deepening social exclusion. Therefore, targeted support will be provided through the strategy, including financial assistance for the housing needs of young people.

In addition increasing social inclusion of NEETs is essential for their successful integration into society. This population is often marginalized, and isolation prevents them from

developing social and professional skills, especially in strengthening their abilities in teamwork, leadership, communication, financial literacy and emotional intelligence. The focus will be on creating opportunities for active participation in social and cultural activities, which is a key step towards building confidence and a sense of belonging in the community. Programs will be tailored to the needs of young people from rural and socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and their success will be measured by an increase in the rate of social inclusion and a reduction in marginalization. It also consider Introduction of volunteering programs to create a sense of belonging and participation in the community. Courses on stress management, communication skills and personal development to prepare young people for successful integration

The involvement of Roma leaders in initiatives that encourage young people to complete their education or start work. Roma leaders are often respected figures in their communities and can motivate young people and their families to participate in initiatives. They understand the specific traditions, needs and challenges in the community, which allows for the creation of appropriate programs

Key assumptions underlying Strategic Goal 2:

- **NEETs as a social resource:** This group of young people, with adequate support, can significantly contribute to social cohesion and the economic stability of the region. They represent potential for social progress, but only if supported with social and housing services.
- **Access to social and housing services:** Quality of life and social security directly depend on access to basic services, which must be adapted to the specific needs of the NEET population. These services form the foundation for long-term social and economic stability.
- **Public-private partnerships and local initiatives:** Through the synergy between the public sector, non-governmental organizations, and the private sector, it will be possible to secure the necessary funds and support mechanisms for achieving this goal. These partnerships will enable the sustainable implementation of measures and long-term results.

Indicators of impact for Strategic objective 2:

- **Number of NEETs with improved housing conditions**
- **Number of NEETs participating in social support programs**

Strategic Goal 3: Enhance access to education, professional development and public services for the NEET Population

Digitalization is still in its early stages in rural areas of the pilot Danube region countries, creating significant challenges for NEETs in accessing digital tools and training. This highlights the limited access to digital infrastructure, including computers, stable internet,

and training facilities, which further exacerbates the gap in digital skills and opportunities, hindering NEETs from fully participating in the digital economy. It is at most importance to invest in affordable digital infrastructure for rural NEETs, and programs providing basic and advanced digital training to enhance employability. Considering the increasing importance of digital and other professional skills (particularly those related to the green economy) in the labor market and everyday life, improving the educational offerings and professional skills is essential to empower this vulnerable group. This strategic objective aims to provide NEETs not only with basic but also advanced professional and social competencies that will enable them to be competitive in the modern labor market and facilitate their access to vital services such as education, employment, and healthcare.

Digital literacy is crucial for improving the living conditions of the NEET population, as it enables access to various online platforms for learning, employment, and social interaction. This goal includes designing training programs that will encompass not only the technical aspects of using digital tools but also a broader understanding of their application in daily life and work. Moreover, improving digital competencies will increase NEETs' opportunities for self-employment, connecting with the labor market, and accessing the information and resources necessary for their economic and social advancement. Digital skills will also serve as a tool for enhancing social abilities, particularly in the digital world.

In addition to digital literacy, access to public services represents another key challenge for the NEET population. This strategic objective focuses on reducing barriers to accessing essential public services such as free public transportation, primary, secondary, and higher education, mobile internet, and quality health and social services. These interventions will enable the NEET population to fully utilize available resources, thereby reducing their risk of social exclusion and marginalization.

Key assumptions underlying Strategic Goal 3:

- **Adequate professional orientation, social skills, and digital literacy** are fundamental needs in modern society, and their improvement will significantly enhance the chances of NEETs for integration into the labor market.
- **Public institutions and the private sector can provide the necessary infrastructure and support** for the implementation of digital programs and ensure access to public services.
- **There is a need for strategic partnerships** between government bodies, non-governmental organizations, and educational institutions to provide comprehensive support for the NEET population in achieving digital inclusion.

Indicators of impact for Strategic objective 3:

- **Rate of NEETs who has finished secondary school**
- **Number of NEETs included in vocational and professional education**
- **Rate of NEETs who has access to digital tools or infrastructure**

- **Number of NEETs who have access to free public services (transportation, healthcare, secondary education and universities)**

3. STRATEGIC PRIORITIES AND MEASURES

3.1. PRIORITIES

Priorities represent the key areas and directions of action for achieving the vision and strategic goals, and as such, have the greatest impact on development of environment to empower NEETs to become employed, educated and skilled workforce. The defined priorities are grouped under the relevant strategic goals, as follows:

Strategic Goal 1: Increase Economic Opportunities for NEETs in the Danube Region

Priority 1.1: Improving Self-Employment Opportunities for NEETs

Improving self-employment opportunities for NEETs represents a developmental objective aimed at reducing this population's dependence on traditional forms of employment and providing them the chance to become economically independent. In the Danube region, a significant number of young people show interest in entrepreneurship, but they face numerous barriers such as a lack of initial capital, business knowledge, skills, and support and mentorship. This priority focuses on creating a favorable business environment through the development of targeted programs, training, and advisory services, enabling the NEET population to develop their entrepreneurial ideas and contribute to the region's economic progress. Increasing access to financial incentives and support through mentorship and counseling is vital for achieving this priority.

The goal of this priority is to create an environment where young people, especially the NEET population, have access to the resources and tools needed to start their own entrepreneurial ventures. Targeted interventions aimed at reducing barriers to entrepreneurship through improved access to financial resources and business knowledge will enable young people to take an active role in developing the local economy. Additionally, programs will encourage NEETs to formalize their business initiatives, thereby contributing to the reduction of unemployment and the growth of self-employment in the region.

The implementation of this priority will be achieved through measures that include subsidies for start-up businesses, training for acquiring business skills, and mentorship in running enterprises. The realization of this priority relies on the active role of public institutions and local communities, which will provide the necessary resources for conducting these activities, while the private sector will play an important role in offering advisory and mentoring services. Targeted measures aim for the long-term creation of a

sustainable business environment and ensuring that young entrepreneurs receive comprehensive support for developing their business initiatives.

Outcome Indicators for Priority 1.1:

- **Number of NEETs who started their own business with subsidy support**
- **Number of NEETs who completed business skills training**
- **Amount of financial aid allocated for start-up programs for NEETs**

Priority 1.2: Increasing the number of employed NEETs

Increasing the number of employed NEETs is the second priority of the strategic objective aimed at reducing unemployment among young people who are neither employed nor involved in the education system. In the Danube region, the NEET population faces challenges such as a lack of relevant skills, experience, and connections with employers, preventing them from finding employment. This priority focuses on implementing programs that will enable the acquisition of relevant competencies, work experience through internships and apprenticeships, and connections with the labor market. By creating efficient mechanisms for vocational training and generating job opportunities in collaboration with the private sector, the NEET population will be better integrated into the workforce, directly impacting the region's economic development.

The goal of this priority is to ensure that NEETs acquire the skills and experience necessary for successful entry into the labor market through tailored vocational training and internship programs. By connecting educational institutions, employers, and young people, the aim is to create an efficient system that enables long-term employability for NEETs. The objective is to increase the number of employed youth in the region through these programs, contributing to the reduction of social exclusion and ensuring economic growth. Through tailored vocational training, internship and job-shadowing programs, NEETs will gain skills that match the needs of the regional labor market, making them more competitive in the job market.

The implementation of this priority will be achieved through measures that include collaboration with employers on the development of job vocational training, internship programs and job shadowing programs, as well as providing employment opportunities within various industrial sectors. Public institutions, employment agencies, and educational institutions will ensure the infrastructure and support for implementing these programs, while employers will play an important role in providing opportunities for work experience. The realization of this priority relies on the creation of public-private partnerships to enable young people to acquire the concrete skills needed in the labor market. Targeted measures will also promote opportunities for vocational training in sectors crucial for regional development, such as digital and technical skills and skills acquired by green economy jobs.

Outcome Indicators for Priority 1.2:

- **Number of NEETs employed through on job vocational training and internships**
- **Number of jobs created for the NEET population through public-private partnerships**

Strategic Goal 2: Improve Quality of Life and Social Security for NEETs

Priority 2.1: Enhance social inclusion and healthcare services of NEETs.

Increasing the social inclusion of NEETs is a key developmental objective aimed at reducing the social isolation and marginalization of this vulnerable group. Young people who are neither employed nor involved in the education system face many barriers, including a lack of social connections, limited access to essential health services, and difficulties integrating into communities. This priority focuses on strengthening social cohesion through targeted mentorship programs, psychosocial support, and social activities that will enable the NEET population to acquire the social and emotional skills necessary for successful integration into society. Furthermore, these programs will promote the active participation of young people in social and cultural initiatives, healthcare services, thus contributing to their sense of belonging and reducing social exclusion.

The goal of this priority is to create an environment where young people from the NEET population have the opportunity to actively participate in social processes, strengthen their social skills, and build social networks. Targeted interventions, such as mentorship programs and psychosocial support, will provide NEETs with the assistance needed to develop the emotional and social capacities required for successful integration. These programs will be tailored to the needs of various subgroups within the NEET population, including young people from rural and socio-economically disadvantaged areas. It is expected that these programs will enhance the quality of life for young people by reducing marginalization and increasing their ability to contribute to the communities in which they live.

The implementation of this priority will take place through the implementation of measures that include social mentoring, the provision of psychosocial services, and the development of programs that enable young people to actively participate in social and cultural events. These activities will be conducted in partnership between the public sector, non-governmental organizations, and local communities. The implementation of this priority will focus on long-term strengthening of social cohesion and reducing social exclusion among young people, with an emphasis on individual support and group activities that help the NEET population integrate into social structures.

Outcome Indicators for Priority 2.1:

- **Number of NEETs who participated in social mentoring programs**

- **Number of NEETs who utilized psychosocial services**
- **Rate of social inclusion of NEETs in the region**

Priority 2.2.: Improve housing conditions for NEETs

In most of Danube region's countries, more than 80% of NEETs still live with their parents, no matter what age they are. Thus, improving the housing conditions and independence in accommodation of NEETs (young people not in employment, education, or training) is a critical priority that addresses one of the fundamental barriers to their social inclusion and economic independence. Many NEETs face unstable or inadequate living situations, which significantly impact their ability to pursue education, secure employment, and engage in community life. By enhancing their housing conditions, we can create a stable environment that fosters personal development and encourages active participation in society.

The goal of this priority is to ensure that NEETs have access to safe, affordable, and adequate housing. This objective aims to reduce housing insecurity among young people, providing them with a stable foundation from which they can improve their social and economic circumstances. By focusing on housing as a central component of social inclusion, this priority seeks to empower NEETs to build better futures for themselves, ultimately contributing to the overall well-being of communities in the region.

The implementation of this priority considers different types of housing assistance and development programs. This usually includes financial support for housing costs, including rent subsidies and utility assistance, to help NEETs secure stable housing. Create public-private partnerships to create affordable housing options specifically designed for young people, including shared housing and cooperative living arrangements. It would be of great assistance to NEETs to establish support services that provide NEETs with guidance on navigating the housing market, including legal advice, tenant rights education, and assistance with lease agreements. In addition, plan and conduct awareness campaigns to inform landlords and property owners about the potential of NEETs as reliable tenants, promoting their integration into the housing market.

Outcome Indicators for Priority 2.2:

- **Number of NEETs who buy their first living space**
- **Rate of NEETs who lives with their parents**

Strategic Goal 3: Enhance access to education, professional development and public services for the NEET population

Priority 3.1: Develop professional, digital and social skills of the NEET population.

Developing the professional, digital, and social skills of the NEET (Not in Employment, Education, or Training) population is a crucial priority that addresses the multifaceted barriers this vulnerable group faces in achieving economic independence and social inclusion. As the job market increasingly demands a combination of technical expertise (especially in green jobs and digital environment) and interpersonal skills, equipping NEETs with these competencies is essential for enhancing their employability and fostering their active participation in society.

The development of digital skills aims at integrating the NEET population into the modern technological and informational world. Faced with the challenges of the technological revolution and the rapid advancement of digital technologies and remote work, young people from the NEET group often lack the adequate digital competencies required for the labor market. This priority will also focus on providing targeted training programs and advisory services to strengthen their digital skills, ranging from basic computer literacy to advanced technological competencies that will enable them to successfully enter the labor market, increase their competitiveness and work remotely.

The goal of this priority is to provide NEET individuals with the necessary professional, digital, and social skills that will enable them to successfully integrate into the labor market and contribute positively to their communities. By focusing on skill development, this priority aims to reduce unemployment rates among NEETs, promote lifelong learning, and empower them to navigate the complexities of modern workplaces and social environments.

The implementation of this priority includes design and delivery of training programs that focus on specific professional skills relevant to the local job market, including vocational training, apprenticeships, and skill certification courses. Offer digital literacy workshops that teach essential digital skills, such as computer proficiency, internet navigation, and the use of online job search platforms. This will ensure NEETs are equipped to participate in a digitally-driven economy. Implement programs focused on enhancing social skills, including communication, financial literacy, building CV, teamwork, problem-solving, and emotional intelligence, which are vital for workplace success and community engagement. Establish mentorship schemes that connect NEETs with professionals in their fields of interest. Mentors can provide guidance, share experiences, and help NEETs build their professional networks. Develop projects that encourage NEETs to participate in community service and civic engagement activities, helping them build social networks and develop a sense of belonging. And promote lifelong learning by offering access to online courses, certifications, and other educational resources that NEETs can pursue at their own pace.

Outcome Indicators for Priority 3.1:

- **The number of NEETs who have participated in digital training programs**

- **The number of employers who provide apprenticeship programs**
- **Number of NEETs participated in vocational training**
- **Number of NEETs completed mentoring/coaching programs**

Priority 3.2: Ensuring access to public services for the NEET population

Access to essential public services is a fundamental requirement for the social and economic inclusion of the NEET (Not in Employment, Education, or Training) population, and it is a critical activity aimed at reducing inequalities in the utilization of basic social and infrastructural services. The NEET population often faces significant barriers to accessing public resources such as healthcare, education, social assistance, and transportation. This priority highlights the need to facilitate easier access to these services, ensuring that young people in this group have equal opportunities for development and social integration.

The goal of this priority is to guarantee that all NEET individuals can access public services regardless of their socio-economic status or geographic location. Special attention will be given to providing free or subsidized transportation, access to educational and healthcare institutions, and ensuring digital connectivity for accessing information and services. This goal aims to reduce the barriers that prevent NEET individuals from actively participating in economic and social processes.

The implementation of this priority will be achieved through the establishment of cooperation programs among local authorities, public institutions, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). These programs will include initiatives to subsidize public services for NEET individuals (such as transportation, education, and healthcare), enhance accessibility through digital platforms, and integrate information and services in one place. Local communities will play a key role in ensuring the availability of these services, while partnerships between state and NGO/private sector will enable effective implementation of these measures.

Outcome Indicators for Priority 3.2:

- **Number of NEET who have access to subsidized public services (transportation, education and healthcare)**
- **Number of NEETs with free access to the internet and digital public service platforms**

3.2. MEASURES

Measures represent actions and initiatives for achieving Priorities and Strategic goals. Under this section following information is provided: description of the measure with general areas of action, expected results of implementation of the measure with specifically defined

indicators, description of development effect and contribution of the measure to achieving the priorities, Indicative financial structure with sources of funding; specific target groups within NEET population, Period of implementation and Name of Institutions/organizations responsible for implementation of the Measure.

Strategic goal 1: Increase Economic Opportunities for NEETs in the Danube Region

Strategic goal	1. Increase Economic Opportunities for NEETs in the Danube Region
Priority	1.1. Improve opportunities for NEETs to engage in self-employment
Measure	1.1.1. Support for start-up ventures
Description	<p>This measure focuses on fostering youth entrepreneurship by providing essential resources and support for starting up businesses. It encompasses several key components aimed at facilitating young individuals' entry into the entrepreneurial landscape. In planning initiatives within this measure, we need to consider time and human resources that owners of small businesses need to dedicated for training of NEETs.</p> <p><u>Key projects/actions are:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide dedicated business spaces for young micro-entrepreneurs, facilitating a conducive environment for business operations (business incubators for NEETs). • Subsidies for Business Initiatives: Offer financial support through subsidies aimed at the initiation and sustainability of businesses for young individuals, including grants and incentives tailored to specific sectors such as agriculture, hospitality, tourism, and manufacturing. • Equipment Subsidies: Provide subsidies for equipment and materials required in production-based businesses to lower entry barriers for young entrepreneurs. • Interest and Loan Subsidies: Implement interest rate subsidies and favorable loan conditions to support young individuals in starting their businesses. • Practical Training Opportunities: Establish programs for practical experience in business management, including hands-on training in entrepreneurial firms to enhance skills and knowledge. • Education on Business Sustainability: Conduct educational sessions focused on the principles of self-sustainability in business, ensuring that young entrepreneurs have the necessary skills to maintain their ventures.

Implementation period	2024-2030.
Responsible for implementation:	Ministry for social Affairs and Youth, Municipalities,

Strategic goal	1. Increase Economic Opportunities for NEETs in the Danube Region
Priority	1.1. Improve opportunities for NEETs to engage in self-employment
Measure	1.1.2. Education of NEETs on entrepreneurship
Description	<p>This measure aims to enhance and strengthen the entrepreneurial competencies of young individuals while creating opportunities for them to launch their own business initiatives and pursue self-employment. The focus is on addressing the high unemployment rates among youth in Danube region countries.</p> <p>Key projects/actions are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practical Training Opportunities: Establish programs for practical experience in business management, including hands-on training in entrepreneurial firms to enhance skills and knowledge. • Education on Business Sustainability: Conduct educational sessions focused on the principles of self-sustainability in business, ensuring that young entrepreneurs have the necessary skills to maintain their ventures. • Development of a digital Toolkit for students and NEETs to support them in knowledge acquisition & management and starting a business.
Implementation period	2024-2030.
Responsible for implementation:	Ministry for social Affairs and Youth, Municipalities,

Strategic goal	1. Increase Economic Opportunities for NEETs in the Danube Region
Priority	1.2. Increase the number of employed NEETs
Measure	1.2.1. Support direct employment of NEETs
Description	This measure aims to facilitate the transition of NEET (Not in Employment, Education, or Training) individuals into the workforce by providing employment subsidies, opportunities for first working

	<p>experiences, internships, and volunteering options. Employment subsidies will reduce the financial burden on employers, encouraging them to hire NEETs. Additionally, structured internships will offer practical, hands-on experience in various fields, while volunteering programs will provide valuable soft skills and enhance employability.</p> <p>Key projects/actions are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employment Subsidies: Financial incentives will be offered to employers who hire NEET individuals, helping to offset the costs associated with onboarding and training. This encourages businesses to create job opportunities specifically for this marginalized group. • First Working Experience Programs: The measure will include initiatives for employers, designed to provide NEETs with their first working experience, equipping them with essential skills and enhancing their employability. These programs will focus on building confidence and work readiness. • Volunteering Opportunities: Structured volunteer programs will be established to offer NEET individuals hands-on experience in various industries. These programs will provide valuable exposure to the workplace, enabling participants to gain practical skills and develop professional networks on voluntary basis.
Implementation period	2024-2030.
Responsible for implementation:	Ministry for labour, Municipalities, National Youth Councils, NGOs, Volunteer Centers, Youth Cooperatives

Strategic goal	1. Increase Economic Opportunities for NEETs in the Danube Region
Priority	1.2. Increase the number of employed NEETs
Measure	1.2.2. Enhance employment competencies of NEETs
Description	<p>This strategic measure aims to enhance the employment competencies of NEETs by providing targeted skills development and practical work experiences. The initiative will focus on equipping young people with relevant skills that match labor market needs, thereby improving their employability and readiness for the workforce. The goal is to bridge the skills gap among NEET individuals by providing them with practical training opportunities, thereby increasing their employability and facilitating their integration into the labor market. This initiative aims to empower NEET individuals to gain the competencies required for successful careers and contribute to economic growth</p>

	<p><u>Key projects/actions are:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support apprenticeships programs for NEET: Develop partnerships with local businesses to create apprenticeship programs that provide NEET individuals with hands-on experience in various industries. • Job Shadowing: Implement job shadowing programs that allow NEET individuals to observe and learn from experienced professionals in their fields of interest. • On-the-Job Vocational Training: Collaborate with employers to establish on-the-job vocational training programs that provide NEET individuals with real-world skills tailored to specific job roles.
Implementation period	2024-2030.
Responsible for implementation:	Ministry for labour, Agency for employment, National Youth Councils

Strategic goal 2: Improve Quality of Life and Social Security for NEETs

Strategic goal	2. Improve Quality of Life and Social Security for NEETs
Priority	2.1. Enhance social inclusion and healthcare services of NEETs
Measure	2.1.1. Social inclusion of NEETs
Description	<p>This strategic measure aims to promote the social inclusion of NEET individuals by addressing barriers to participation in society and the labor market. The initiative will foster community engagement, support networks, and personal development opportunities, enabling NEET individuals to build social connections and enhance their overall well-being. The primary goal is to empower NEET individuals to overcome social isolation, develop a sense of belonging, and actively participate in their communities. By enhancing social inclusion, this measure seeks to improve the life skills, confidence, and employability of NEET individuals, ultimately leading to better economic and social outcomes.</p> <p><u>Key projects/actions are:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community Engagement Programs: Organize community events, workshops, and activities that encourage NEET individuals to interact with peers, mentors, and community leaders. • Promote cultural, artistic, and recreational activities that facilitate social connections and build community bonds.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer Support Networks: Establish peer support groups where NEET individuals can share experiences, challenges, and successes, fostering a sense of camaraderie and mutual support. • Train facilitators to lead discussions and provide guidance, ensuring a safe and inclusive environment for participants. • Support youth activism: Create partnerships with local organizations to offer different social volunteering opportunities that allow NEET individuals to contribute to their communities while gaining valuable skills and experiences. Highlight the benefits of volunteering, such as building social networks and enhancing employability. • Workshops for parents to provide tools for effectively supporting and encouraging NEETs
Implementation period	2024-2030.
Responsible for implementation:	National Youth Councils, NGOs

Strategic goal	2. Improve Quality of Life and Social Security for NEETs
Priority	2.1. Enhance social inclusion and healthcare services of NEETs
Measure	2.1.2. Improved access of NEETs to health care
Description	<p>This strategic measure aims to enhance the health and social well-being of NEETs by ensuring equitable access to healthcare services, including mental health and psychosocial support. Many NEETs face barriers to healthcare due to economic, social, or geographic challenges, which contribute to their social exclusion and limit their capacity for active participation in society.</p> <p><u>Key projects/actions are:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish community-based health support centers that provide comprehensive care, including general health services, mental health support, and social counseling tailored for NEETs. • Programs focusing on physical and mental health awareness, including guidance on seeking care, overcoming fear of engagement with healthcare providers, and addressing barriers to access • Organize psycho-social counseling support programs addressing issues such as stress, anxiety, social isolation, and trauma, which are prevalent among NEETs. Programs should include individual counseling, group therapy, and family

	<p>support. Programs should be tailored to specific need of NEETs.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish peer support groups and online platforms where NEETs can receive guidance from trained peers. This model can help reduce stigma, create a sense of community, and encourage NEETs to seek help when needed. • Organize mobile health units to reach NEETs in rural, remote, or underserved areas. • Organize sexual and reproductive health education
Implementation period	2024-2030.
Responsible for implementation:	Ministry of Health, National Youth Councils, NGOs

Strategic goal	2. Improve Quality of Life and Social Security for NEETs
Priority	2.2. Improve housing conditions for NEETs
Measure	2.2.1. Securing affordable access of NEETs to housing market
Description	<p>This measure addresses the barriers NEETs face in securing stable and affordable housing, which is a critical factor for social and economic integration. Access to housing can provide NEETs with a stable environment to pursue education, training, and employment opportunities.</p> <p><u>Key projects/actions are:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subsidies for NEET in buying first living settlements • Build apartment building (partnering with private sector) and allocate living space to NEETs. i.e. social living apartments • Introduce subsidized housing schemes for rental options and shared accommodation models specifically targeting young people and NEETs • Partner with private developers and local governments to create housing projects that offer lower rents and flexible tenancy terms for NEETs. • Provide housing vouchers or subsidies to NEETs to reduce rent burdens and make private rentals more affordable
Implementation period	2024-2030.
Responsible for implementation:	Ministry of Youth, Ministries for construction and spatial planning, National Youth Councils, NGOs

Strategic goal	2. Improve Quality of Life and Social Security for NEETs
Priority	2.2. Improve housing conditions for NEETs
Measure	2.2.2. Increasing access of NEETs to information on housing benefits
Description	<p>This strategic measure focuses on bridging the information gap for NEETs regarding available affordable housing options. Many NEETs struggle to find housing due to a lack of awareness of existing resources, rental support, and available programs. This measure aims to empower them by providing comprehensive, user-friendly information on housing opportunities and support services.</p> <p>Key projects/actions are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create an Online Housing Information Portal for NEETs: Develop a dedicated website or mobile application where NEETs can access up-to-date information on affordable housing options, rental subsidies, and housing programs in their region. • Establish Housing Support Information Centers: Set up community-based centers where NEETs can receive face-to-face guidance, counseling, and personalized advice on housing-related issues. • Organize Housing Information Workshops: Conduct workshops and outreach events to inform NEETs about their housing rights, tenancy laws, and support services available to them. • Create a Network of Housing Mentors and Advisors: Train and deploy housing advisors who can provide tailored support, help NEETs navigate the housing market, connect them to local resources and ensure NEETs can actively participate in housing programs.
Implementation period	2024-2030.
Responsible for implementation:	Ministry of Youth, National Youth Councils, NGOs

Strategic goal 3: Enhance access to education, professional development and public services for the NEET population

Strategic goal	3. Enhance access to education, professional development and public services for the NEET population
Priority	3.1. Develop professional, digital and social skills of the NEET population
Measure	3.1.1. Development of professional and social skills of the NEETs
Description	<p>This strategic measure focuses on developing the professional and social skills of the NEET population and address the multifaceted barriers that this vulnerable group faces in achieving economic independence and social inclusion. As the job market increasingly demands a combination of technical expertise (especially in green jobs and digital environment) and interpersonal skills (, equipping NEETs with these competencies is essential for enhancing their employability and fostering their active participation in society. It means to target programs focused on enhancing social skills, including communication, financial literacy, building CV, teamwork, problem-solving, and emotional intelligence, which are vital for workplace success and community engagement.</p> <p><u>Key projects/actions are:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organize vocational training programmes tailored to individual NEET needs (preferably for the emerging green jobs, and perspective sectors of industries specific for the country in Danube region) • Training of NEETs in using CNC machines • Create programs for enhancing social skills (communication, preparing CV, teamwork, problem solving and critical thinking, emotional intelligence, foreign languages etc.) • Establish mentorship and coaching schemes that connect NEETs with professionals in their fields of interest • Launch a mentorship program that connects NEETs with mentors to guide them through the process of using public services effectively. • Create the network of mentors for NEET • Develop projects that encourage NEETs to participate in community service and civic engagement activities • Promote lifelong learning by offering access to different online courses, certifications, and other educational resources • Create subsidies for NEETs to access University and High school education

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish Centers for professional orientation and create tailored programme for NEETs • Develop step-by-step guides that outline the benefits of public services and how to access them • Organize workshops and community events to demystify public services and encourage NEETs to engage with available resources
Implementation period	2024-2030.
Responsible for implementation:	Ministry of Youth, National Youth Councils, NGOs

Strategic goal	3. Enhance access to education, professional development and public services for the NEET population
Priority	3.1. Develop professional, digital and social skills of the NEET population
Measure	3.1.2. Development of digital skills of the NEETs
Description	<p>This strategic measure focuses on developing the digital skills, aiming at integrating the NEET population into the modern technological and informational world. Faced with the challenges of the technological revolution and the rapid advancement of digital technologies and remote work, young people from the NEET group often lack the adequate digital competencies required for the labor market. This measure will be <u>focused</u> on providing targeted training programs and advisory services to strengthen their digital skills, ranging from basic computer literacy to advanced technological competencies that will enable them to successfully enter the labor market, increase their competitiveness and work remotely.</p> <p><u>Key projects/actions are:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital literacy workshops for NEETs • Basic use of computers (aligned with ECDL certificate) • Education in advance use and development of specific software, IT hardware and networking. • Education of NEETs on how to become Free lance worker in a digital world and work remotely. • Education on how to use online job search platforms, advertise for a job and pursue freelance opportunities. • Train NEET to become peer support (mentors) for others in enhancing digital skills. • Subsidize digital infrastructure for rural areas, ensuring NEETs have access to essential tools like computers and internet connections.

Implementation period	2024-2030.
Responsible for implementation:	Ministry of Education, National Youth Councils, NGOs

Strategic goal	3. Enhance access to education, professional development and public services for the NEET population
Priority	3.2. Ensuring access to public services for the NEET population
Measure	3.2.1. Affordable access to transportation
Description	<p>Access to essential public services is a fundamental requirement for the social and economic inclusion of the NEET (Not in Employment, Education, or Training) population, and it is a critical activity aimed at reducing inequalities in the utilization of basic social and infrastructural services. Focus of this measure is to ensure free access to transportation, that is critical for NEETs as it facilitates mobility, enabling them to participate in education, training, and employment opportunities. Many NEETs face economic barriers that restrict their ability to commute, making it challenging to attend job interviews, vocational courses, or internships. By providing free or subsidized transport options, NEETs can broaden their opportunities and overcome isolation, ultimately supporting their social and economic inclusion.</p> <p><u>Key projects/actions are:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transportation Subsidies: Provide monthly or annual transport vouchers for NEETs, allowing free access to public transportation for commuting to training centers, workplaces, and educational institution • Establish Dedicated Shuttle Services: Implement free shuttle services connecting NEETs in remote areas to urban centers where more opportunities are available • Create Mobility Support Programs: Implement programs that include transportation assistance and travel planning to help NEETs attend events, interviews, and educational activities. • Create online platform to network for NEETs from rural area in order to commute together and decrease costs of transportation
Implementation period	2024-2030.
Responsible for implementation:	Ministry of Education, National Youth Councils, NGOs

Strategic goal	3. Enhance access to education, professional development and public services for the NEET population
Priority	3.2. Ensuring access to public services for the NEET population
Measure	3.2.2. Secure affordable access to education
Description	<p>Affordable access to education is vital for NEETs as it helps break the cycle of unemployment and inactivity. It enables them to gain qualifications, build skills, and increase their employability, thereby improving their social and economic integration. Without accessible education, NEETs remain at risk of long-term exclusion, reduced job prospects, and limited personal development.</p> <p>Key projects/actions are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide Tuition Fee Waivers or Scholarships: Offer fee reductions, scholarships, or grants for NEETs to access formal education (primary and secondary schools and University) or vocational training • Organize Career Development Services for NEET: Build individual development plan tailored to individual needs of NEET. • Implement part-time, evening, or online courses to accommodate NEETs' diverse needs and circumstances. • Partner with private companies to create sponsorship programme for enhancing educational opportunities and internships, making learning financially accessible. • Set up Mentorship and Coaching Programs: Establish mentorship services to guide NEETs through the education system, helping them choose suitable pathways • Implement Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL): Use RPL schemes to validate NEETs' informal learning and experience, helping them enter higher education without traditional qualifications
Implementation period	2024-2030.
Responsible for implementation:	Ministry of Education, National Youth Councils, NGOs

ANNEX

A.1. Detailed SWOT analysis

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Strategic planning capacity and support local communities.• Existing health care services for NEETS• National policies are aligned with SDGs and EU policies• Existing employment, self-employment and internship programs• All Danube region countries recognize NEET as vulnerable group• NEETs demonstrate a sense of communal responsibility and resilience• Strong social welfare system (unemployment benefits, social assistance, training opportunities)• Vocational Training and Education: a dual education system with highly recognized qualifications• Available state universities who offers education without tuitions• Strong NGO sector and high commitment to volunteering in the population• Education until 18 (education institutes need to flag drop outs, parents are obliged to have their children in training)• Youth Guarantee (right for education until 30)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• High unemployment rate among NEETs.• Accessibility of Healthcare services and Psycho-social support for NEETs in rural area• Access to free public services (transportation, education, taxes for administrative procedures, etc.)• Lack of systematic support for NEETS in securing adequate housing conditions, especially NEET from most vulnerable groups (Roma, people with disabilities, migrants, etc.)• Employment and internship programs do not specifically target NEET needs• Early school leaving• Underdeveloped professional skills of NEETs• Access to university education is limited for NEETs in rural areas• Self-employment programs are not designed to support NEETs needs• There are no statistical accurate and regularly collected data on NEETs in Danube region countries.• Lack of initiatives to activate NEETS in volunteer activities in community.• Insufficient participation in social networks and initiatives to build social capital• Accessibility to infrastructure in the rural area is difficult (transport barriers, proximity of specialized training centers)• Digital divide between generations and between young people from strong and weak social backgrounds (availability of infrastructure)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language difficulties faced by young migrants and refugees • Lack of diversity of job and training offers in the rural areas to elevate poverty, especially among Roma people. • Social stigmas that NEETs face • Mental health of young people is more and more often an obstacle in their development • Most vulnerable young people remain equally vulnerable young people, even when overall improvements are made • Difficulties and obstacle happen in transition moments (compulsory school -> secondary school, school -> vocational training, vocational training -> work force, specific support programs -> general VET training...) • No fully covering support systems for young people in need • No fully covering support systems for young people from minorities, (Roma, etc.) and vulnerable groups (Migrants, people with disabilities, young women in rural area, etc.) •
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complement labour market instruments with social, training or even psychological services • Learning how to communicate more effectively – applying contemporary/peer role model can be a motivation for NEETs • Green and digital economy as a growing economic sector • Digitalisation and up-skilling in new professions and with innovative new methods to reach more vulnerable people • Targeted EU programmes (ESF, Erasmus+, European Solidarity Corps, Rural development funds,...) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negative demographic trends and aging population • General economic instability caused by inflation and recession. • Limited budget for social programs. • Youth migration - NEET young people from the Eastern Danube region are emigrating abroad for early employment and money-earning opportunities • Outmigration of rural areas • Pandemics (such as COVID-19) • Unstable Geo-political situation • High Youth unemployment rates. • Remain unmotivated and the social gap widens

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Immigration and immigration of skilled workers • Strong advocacy of rural development and agricultural sectors, leading to strong rural economies in some regions • Digital infrastructure comparably available also on the countryside • Moderate upward social mobility in comparison; still rooms for improvement though. • Strong economic sectors in tourism and agriculture in rural areas • Industries in rural areas stronger than in rural areas, which is opportunity for vocational training in companies • Opportunities for Vocational Training in rural areas in companies better than in urban areas • Potential for public-private partnerships. • Innovations in education. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comparably strong economic development • Digitalization as a disrupter, to the disadvantage of more vulnerable groups • Only moderate tech-savviness • Cultural factors and traditional role models, especially on the countryside • Migration and integration pressure in the urban areas • Lower upward social mobility in education "Education is inherited" • High costs of living and regional discrepancies with some regions with low social infrastructure and other areas with a surplus in opportunities • Gender pay gaps and pay gaps across sectors (to the disadvantage of social sectors)
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A.2. ACTION PLAN

This is the crucial part for further implementation. Through action plan it will be presented how to set up activities to achieve the goals. We will need to make sure, that we have the conditions to achieve the goal and “stick and carrot” for people to start using it. Action plans is rooted within section “Key projects/actions”, defined under Strategic Measures. Each area of action, becomes activity within Action plan.

Example of Three year Action plan:

STRATEGIC GOAL: 2. Improving the quality of life and social security of NEETs

PRIORITY 2.2. Improved housing prospects for NEETs

MEASURE: 2.2.1 Government subvention programme to support housing for young people, including NEETs

Activity/project	Implementation period	Expected results	Responsible for implementation	Financial amount and sources (EUR)				Comments
				Source	Year 2025	Year 2026	Year 2027	
1.2.2.1. Loan Interest rate subsidies for housing young people when purchasing new residential spaces	2026-2030	By 2030 at least 1500 NEETs who have used subsidies to cover costs of Loan Interest	Ministry for social Affairs and Youth, Municipalities,	Government budget	0	150.000	150.000	Total amount anticipated for 5 years is 600.000 EUR
				Loan				
				EU funds				
				Other sources				
				TOTAL	0	150.000	150.000	
1.2.2.2. Support young people through subsidies for purchasing the first residential property	2025-2030	By 2030 at least 500 NEETs have used subsidies to purchase a new or used housing unit	Ministry for social Affairs and Youth, Municipalities,	Government budget	100.000	200.000	200.000	Total amount anticipated for 5 years is 1.000.000 EUR
				Loan				
				EU funds	100.000	100.000	100.000	
				Other sources				
				Ukupno	200.000	200.000	200.000	

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