

**Interreg
Danube Region**



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Country report Romania

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List of abbreviations

DRP	Danube Region Programme
Jems	Joint electronic monitoring system
LFS	Labor Force Survey
LP	Lead partner
MAJS	Managing authority and Joint secretariat
NEET	Not in Education, Employment, or Training
PP	Project partner
PR	Partner report
PPR	Project Progress Report
INS	Institutul Național de Statistică (National Institute of Statistics) - Romania

1. Introduction

The purpose of this document is to validate and refine the needs and challenges identified during the proposal stage, while taking into account the local and national context of labour market integration for vulnerable young people.

The main objective of this report is to identify the challenges faced by young people (aged 15-29) in Romania, the Centru region and Harghita County between 2015 and 2024 alongside some well-established indicators.

As this report was produced as part of the Coopower Interreg Danube project, the country reports will also establish common ground among partners to facilitate subsequent project activities and enhance their localised knowledge and understanding of the challenges and opportunities within employment services through intersectoral cooperation. The primary research method employed is desk research, supplemented by additional interviews for validation.

This activity is essential for understanding local needs, informing evidence-based policymaking, and guiding strategic decision-making processes. Therefore, it serves as a cornerstone for the cooperative implementation of the project, contributing to O1.1 overall. The results will directly inform and be incorporated into the local strategies (O3.3) and the transnational strategy (O3.4).

2. Problem

For a better understanding, first of all, we will clarify the geographical levels of this country report. As the current report aims to provide a socio-economic context of our pilot intervention at a local level, each chapter and subchapter initially presents the situation in Romania. After that, our analysis focuses on the regional (Centru Region– RO12) and local (Harghita County – RO124) levels.

The analysis reveals in detail that the challenges in Harghita County are not merely cyclical unemployment but deeply entrenched structural issues that undermine youth potential and render current instruments, such as career guidance and apprenticeships, largely ineffective at scale. These issues stem directly from the cycle of economic underdevelopment and human capital depletion, aggravated by the absence of effective formal labour market mechanisms. In short, the problems can be concluded in three dimensions, as follows:

1. **Structural Exclusion and Chronic Youth Joblessness.** The primary challenge is the structural exclusion of young people in Harghita County, which becomes a major driver of out-migration. The county records one of the country's highest NEET rates (Not in Education, Employment, or Training), approaching 30% for the 20–34 age group, signifying a large and critical pool of youth disconnected from both education and work. This economic inactivity is compounded by chronic joblessness, where indicators are severe: 74% of registered unemployed young people lack insurance benefits, which strongly suggests long-term exclusion and a heavy reliance on minimal social assistance. Furthermore, high rates of youth unemployment and the scarcity of local jobs

lead to profound discouragement among young men, while structural inactivity is high among young women due to early family formation and the absence of adequate childcare facilities.

2. **Economic Constraints on Formal Career Pathways.** The analysis reveals, that even if high-quality career guidance were widely available, its impact would be severely limited by the local economic reality which lacks viable career pathways. Apprenticeships or formal flexible work arrangements (e.g. part time jobs) are practically non-existent, being described as "rare," "underdeveloped," and "socially marginal" in Harghita. This deficit is due to the predominance of small firms, high administrative burdens, and a lack of large industrial employers, meaning few companies conclude annual training contracts. The fundamental economic challenge—the low-wage trap—means that formal compensation provides minimal incentive for youth to stay in the region, effectively making out-migration for higher wages the most economically rational form of "career guidance." An added barrier is the local language issue, as the Hungarian-speaking majority faces limitations with regard to placement with national-scale companies, further reducing the effectiveness of centralized training models.

3. **The Education-Employment Disconnect.** The education system fails to adequately prepare youth for the labour market and is undermined by high rates of withdrawal. Dropout rates from primary and secondary schools, in Harghita County, significantly exceed the national average, directly contributing to a large pool of low-skilled, highly vulnerable youth. This educational deficit is exacerbated by the fact that the opportunities to apply skills in a formal environment are scarce locally, particularly for rural youth, even if they were to receive quality career guidance. The combined effect is that structural unemployment and precarity remain high, sustaining the vicious circle of entrenched youth joblessness, poverty, and out-migration.

3. Analysis

3.1. Population and demographic statistics

3.1.1. Population and age structure

TABLE 1
Main demographic data

	Country level	NUTS2 level
Total population	19 067 576	2 288 061
Proportion of 15-29-year-olds in the total population	16.0%	16.2%
Proportion of females in total population	51.4%	51.2%
Median age of population	43.7 years	43.2 years
Median age of population - females	45.8 years	45.2 years

Source: Eurostat. 2024 data or the latest available.

According to Eurostat data, Romania’s population declined over the past decade, from 19,870,647 in 2015 to 19,067,576 in 2024, representing a decline of 4.04%. Alongside this reduction, the population has been steadily ageing. The proportion of women increased from 51.1% in 2015 to 51.4% in 2024, while the median age rose from 41.1 years to 43.7 years over the same period. The demographic dependency ratio (defined as the ratio of the population aged 0–24 and 65 or over to those aged 25–64) also rose, from 79.1 in 2017 (the first year with available data) to 88.1 in 2024. The share of young people within the total population declined during the period: the proportion of individuals aged 15–29 fell from 18.2% in 2015 to 16.0% in 2024, a decrease of 2.2 percentage points. A similar downward trend is evident in the proportion of young women. In 2024, women aged 15–29 accounted for 15.1% of the total female population, a decrease of 2.1 percentage points from 2015 (Eurostat, 2025). In terms of spatial distribution, the majority of the population resided in urban areas, with an urbanisation rate of 55.6% in 2024 (INS, 2025).

The Central Region, which includes the area under review, is located in central Romania. According to Eurostat, Romania’s development regions are classified as NUTS 2-level territorial statistical units. The Central Region comprises six counties: Alba, Braşov, Covasna, Harghita, Mureş, and Sibiu. In 2024, the region’s population amounted to 2,288,061, accounting for approximately 12% of the country’s total population (Eurostat, 2025). Over the past decade, the population declined by 2.64%. Demographic trends during this period indicate population ageing, with the median age rising from 40.6 years in 2015 to 43.2 years in 2024 (Eurostat, 2025). The proportion of individuals aged 15–29 in the region declined at a rate similar to the national level: in 2024, young people accounted for 16.2% of the population, down from 18.1% in 2015 (Eurostat, 2025). The Central

Region is one of Romania’s most urbanised areas, with the urban population representing 58.5% of the total, exceeding the national average (INS, 2025).

The pilot programme is being implemented in Harghita County. The county’s population declined over the past decade, from 309,138 in 2015 to 292,148 in 2024, a decrease of 5.49% (Eurostat, 2025). At the same time, the population has been ageing, as reflected in the increase in median age from 39.8 years in 2015 to 42.9 years in 2024. The share of young people within the total population also declined during the period. The proportion of individuals aged 15–29 fell from 18.1% in 2015 to 16.6% in 2024, a decrease of 1.5 percentage points. A similar downward trend can be observed among young women, whose share in the total population declined by 1.3 percentage points over the same period (Eurostat, 2025). The degree of urbanisation in Harghita County is markedly lower than the national average, with 56.9% of the population residing in rural areas (INS, 2025).

Compared to national and regional trends, Harghita County has experienced a more pronounced population decline over the past decade. While the population decrease at the national level amounted to 4.04% and remained more moderate at the regional level (2.64%), the decline in Harghita County reached 5.49%, indicating stronger demographic pressure. At the same time, population ageing in the county broadly follows regional and national patterns, with a comparable increase in median age. The proportion of young people has declined in line with wider trends; however, the county’s demographic challenges are compounded by its predominantly rural settlement structure. With a markedly lower level of urbanisation than both the regional and national averages, Harghita County faces additional constraints in terms of demographic renewal and labour market dynamics.

3.1.2. Marriage and fertility

TABLE 2
Main socio-demographic data

	Country level
Mean age at first marriage - females	28.3 years
Mean age at first marriage - males	31.5 years
Mean age of women at childbirth	28.3 years
Proportion of live births outside marriage	33.9%
Proportion of live births from 15 to 29 years in the total live births	52.8%

Source: Eurostat. 2024 data or the latest available.

At the national level, marriages are occurring later and later. The average age at first marriage for men was 30.2 in 2014 and has since risen to 31.5. Meanwhile, for women, the average age at first marriage has increased from 26.7 to 28.3 (Eurostat, 2025). The average age of mothers at childbirth has increased, from 27.5 in 2014 to 28.3 in 2024 (Eurostat, 2025). At the same time, the proportion of births outside marriage has increased from 31.8% to 33.9% (Eurostat, 2025). Although the proportion of live births from mothers aged 15–19 has declined by 0.7 percentage points over the past decade, it still accounts for 7.7% of all live births (Eurostat, 2025). Notably, more than 9 out of 10 (90.1%) live births to mothers aged 15–19 occurred outside marriage in 2023 (Eurostat, 2025).

The proportion of children born outside marriage across the entire 15–29 age group is also relevant, at 44.3%, representing a 4.4 percentage-point increase over the past decade (Eurostat, 2025). The vast majority of mothers aged 15–19 (85.2%) have a low level of education, although this percentage is declining (-7.3 percentage points). More than half of live births (52.8%) are still attributed to mothers aged 15–29, although their share has decreased by 6.2 percentage points over the past decade. This is concerning because the proportion of live births to unemployed mothers is highest in this age group (70.1%) (Eurostat, 2025).

In line with national trends, the postponement of marriage is also characteristic of the Central Region, as is the postponement of having the first child, which was 27.9 years on average in 2023 (Eurostat, 2025). While the live birth rate among women aged 15–19 is declining nationally, it has increased in the Central Development Region from 10.7% to 12.5% (INS, 2025). The majority of live births (55.4%) in the region are also attributable to mothers aged 15–29, although their proportion has decreased by 3.5 percentage points over the past decade (INS, 2025). The fertility rate for the 15–19 age group has also declined, falling from 42.8 per thousand to 35.7 per thousand over the past decade, but it remains well above the national average (23.9 per thousand) (INS, 2025).

The postponement of marriage is also characteristic of Harghita County: over the past decade, the age of first marriage has increased by one year. The average age of first marriage for men rose from 31 to 32.5, while for women it rose from 27.4 to 28.4 (INS, 2025). Similar to national trends, the majority of live births (55%) occur in mothers aged 15–29; however, it is a cause for concern that a proportion of live births continue to occur at a young age, with 8.9% of live births to mothers aged 15–19 (INS, 2025). The fertility rate for the 15–19 age group is lower than in the central development region (35.7 per thousand), but slightly higher than the national average (25.8 per thousand vs. 23.9 per thousand) (INS, 2025).

3.1.3. Life expectancy and infant mortality

TABLE 3
Main life expectancy data

	Country level	NUTS2 level
Life expectancy at less than 1 year_Total	76.4 years	77.0 years
Life expectancy at less than 1 year_Males	72.6 years	73.4 years
Life expectancy at less than 1 year_Females	80.4 years	80.6 years
Infant mortality rate	5.6‰	5.9‰

Source: Eurostat. 2024 data or the latest available.

Although infant mortality has decreased by 2.6 percentage points, the current rate of 5.6 per thousand remains relatively high in Romania (Eurostat, 2025). A more positive development is that life expectancy at less than 1 year has increased: from 78.7 years to 80.4 years for women and from 71.3 years to 72.6 years for men. However, the gap between the two sexes has widened slightly (Eurostat, 2025). According to 2017 data, education level also influences life expectancy. A 30-year-old with a secondary education or higher can expect to live, on average, 46.1 more years, while those with a lower level of education can expect to live 44.1 more years – a difference of two years (Eurostat, 2025).

Infant mortality also declined in the Central Region, but its rate (7.9 per thousand) still surpasses the national average (INS, 2025). Life expectancy at birth increased in the Central Development Region for both men and women; however, the disparity between urban and rural areas persists, remaining over two years (INS, 2025).

Infant mortality in Harghita County demonstrated a positive trend, dropping below the national average (4.2 per thousand) (INS, 2025). Lower infant mortality rates are mainly found in urban settlements (3.5 per thousand), while rural areas experience higher rates (5.6 per thousand) (INS, 2025). Life expectancy at birth has also increased in the country, although further improvement is possible: in 2024, it stood at 76.8 years. Nonetheless, the disparity between urban and rural areas remains notable, with urban residents having a life expectancy of 78.5 years, compared to 75.6 years for rural residents (INS, 2025).

3.2. General economic accounts

3.2.1. National economic accounts

TABLE 4
Main national economic accounts data

	Country level	NUTS2 level
Gross domestic product (GDP) at current market prices (Euro per capita)	18 560	15 200
Euro per inhabitant in percentage of the EU27 (from 2020) average	78.4%	40.0%
Current prices, purchasing power standard (PPS, EU27 from 2020) per capita	31105	26 600

Source: Eurostat. 2024 data or the latest available.

Romania has achieved a remarkable feat of economic convergence, nearly doubling its GDP per capita from 55% to approximately 78% of the EU average (in PPS terms) between 2015 and 2024. This national success story, however, is severely complicated by deep and persistent territorial disparities. The country’s economy operates in two distinct tiers. A highly developed core, centred on Bucharest and dynamic western cities like Cluj and Timiș, drives the rapid national growth, benefiting from high value-added sectors and strong investment. By contrast, numerous regions in the east and south remain less diversified and lag significantly behind.

The Central Region encapsulates this national duality. Its overall performance is moderate, hovering just below the national average. This average is sustained by its western half, where counties like Brașov and Sibiu boast industrialized economies, attract substantial investment, and report strong GDP and wage figures. However, the region’s performance is simultaneously constrained by its eastern periphery, specifically the Székely counties (Harghita and Covasna), which function as less-developed margins.

Harghita county exemplifies the challenges of this dual economy, consistently ranking in the lower third for economic development. Its GDP per capita stood at only about 53% of the EU average in 2022, and strikingly, the county has historically recorded some of the lowest average wages in Romania. This paradox of low income despite a middling GDP ranking stems from a structural reliance on low value-added traditional sectors, such as wood processing and light industry, and a notable absence of high-technology manufacturing or large-scale, high-productivity employers.

This structural weakness is reinforced by a crippling investment deficit and a subsequent vicious cycle of outmigration. Low wages and limited career opportunities push young, educated workers to leave the county, further depleting its human capital and undermining its long-term potential for development. Breaking this cycle requires a substantial effort to attract capital and implement targeted policies aimed at diversifying the local economy and fostering higher value-added activities.

3.2.2. Business statistics

TABLE 5
Main business statistics – Tourism sector only

	Country level	NUTS2 level
Number of enterprises	1 024 472	127 441
Business churn - birth and death rate - percentage	18.9%	17.5%

Source: Eurostat. 2022 data

The Romanian enterprise structure is defined by the overwhelming dominance of micro-enterprises (fewer than 10 employees), which constitute over 90% of the active firms. This pervasive fragmentation results in a small average firm size, thereby imposing inherent limits on scaling, capital formation, and overall growth potential across the economy. Business demography is characterized by a high churn rate (approximately 19%), yet the majority of new employer firms commence operations as micro-enterprises with minimal staff, indicating a limited capacity for large-scale job creation from new ventures. Furthermore, the national economy suffers from a lack of dynamism, with less than 10% of firms achieving a high-growth (gazelle) status, and the national youth employment rate remains low (18.7% for the 15–24 cohort).

The Central Region holds approximately 12% of the national enterprise base and mirrors the national pattern with over 91% micro-enterprises. However, the region exhibits sharp internal heterogeneity in terms of business dynamism. The western counties of Braşov and Sibiu form a dynamic industrial axis, attracting the limited regional High-Growth Enterprise activity, particularly within the manufacturing and services sectors. Conversely, the eastern periphery, encompassing Harghita and Covasna, is characterized by a pervasive dominance of small, low-productivity firms. Despite the Central Region being a significant recipient of capital flows, the benefits are not distributed uniformly, leading to widening intra-regional disparities in firm size, investment, and ultimately, GDP performance.

Harghita county represents a clear case of structural deficiency and business inertia within the Central Region. The county displays a low enterprise density (26.5 per 1,000 inhabitants) and is overwhelmingly dominated by the smallest micro-enterprises, with an average firm size of only four employees. Crucially, the business base is actively contracting, indicated by a negative net firm growth rate in 2024 (1,470 closures versus 1,042 new registrations). This trend signals a fundamental inability to regenerate or expand its corporate sector. The county also suffers from a near-total absence of high-growth firms, even among its existing larger traditional entities. The lack of dynamism is directly correlated with poor labour market outcomes: new firm creation generates minimal employment, while low entrepreneurial activity, particularly among youth, amplifies human capital flight. The current enterprise structure in Harghita is thus structurally inadequate to foster competitive wages, generate scale, or effectively mitigate sustained outmigration pressures.

3.3. Labour market situation

3.3.1. Employment

TABLE 6
Main employment data

	Country level	NUTS2 level
Employed persons (total, 15 - 24 years old)	396 600	48 600
Employed persons (females, 15 - 24 years old)	147 600	17 600
Employed persons (total, 15 - 74 years old)	7 847 300	914 000
Employed persons (females, 15 - 74 years old)	3 354 600	391 700

Source: Eurostat. 2024 data or the latest available.

Romania's national employment rate (of 20–64-year-olds) stands at approximately 69–70%, positioning it below the EU average. The youth segment, specifically the 20–29 age group, records an employment rate of about 53%, signifying persistent difficulties in labour market entry. The structure is characterized by both structural rigidities and pervasive informality. Formal flexible work arrangements are exceptionally rare: part-time work constitutes only 3–4% of contracts, and temporary contracts stand at a mere 1–2%, figures among the lowest in the EU. This lack of formal flexibility is compensated by widespread undeclared employment, with the shadow economy accounting for about 27% of GDP and a significant share of labour input. A substantial gender gap is evident, particularly among youth, where the female employment rate (~50%) trails the male rate (~60%), reinforced by limited childcare services and traditional family roles that hinder women's labour market integration.

The Central Region's overall employment rate (e.g., 75.4% in 2022) surpasses the national average, but this performance is sustained by a pronounced internal dichotomy. The dynamic urban centres of Braşov and Sibiu offer relatively stable, formal contracts in industry and services, providing stable job environments and higher wages. In contrast, the rural periphery (Harghita and Covasna) is marked by weaker youth integration and a greater reliance on casual and informal work, particularly within small farms and forestry. While the region's overall self-employment rate (13%) is slightly elevated due to the rural presence, the stability and formal nature of employment vary drastically between the industrialized axis and the agricultural periphery.

Harghita County presents a fragile labour market, evidenced by an overall employment rate (69.7% in 2022) nearly six points below the regional average. The economy's dependence on the grey economy (forestry, farming, seasonal tourism) is high, resulting in pervasive informality where youth often work "cash in hand" with virtually no formal contracts, benefits, or social protection. This structural lack of formal employment is compounded by severe youth vulnerability: the county struggles with high youth unemployment and the strong outmigration of skilled young workers. Moreover, young women's employment is exceptionally low, a pattern reinforced by traditional gender roles and the absence of adequate childcare infrastructure. The minimal formal compensation is a major driver of this fragility: an estimated 30–40% of formal employees are paid

at or near the statutory minimum wage, a low incentive that actively fuels migration and severely limits the county's ability to retain its young human capital.

3.3.2. Trainees

At National level apprenticeships ("*Ucenicie*") were reintroduced in 2005 - after the lack of legal regulation in the 90s - but uptake was marginal until 2017. Numbers rose sharply after state subsidies doubled in 2018: from 167 contracts in 2016 to 6,163 in 2019 (cedefop.europa.eu; ec.europa.eu). The pandemic triggered a sharp decline: 3,088 in 2020, 2,655 in 2021, and only 1,067 in 2022. Overall, apprenticeships remain minor compared to ~200,000 vocational students annually (cedefop.europa.eu). Law 279/2005 (amended several times) regulates apprenticeships, requiring written contracts and minimum wage payments. Employers receive a subsidy of 2,250 RON/month (≈€460), regardless of sector (national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu; lege5.ro). Separate laws introduced traineeships for graduates (2013) and internships (2018). Administrative burdens and flat-rate subsidies discourage firms, particularly in high-cost industries. Apprenticeships are not embedded in VET, and most participants are adults: in 2019, ~90% of contracts were signed by workers aged 25+, with youth (16–25) making up only ~10% (cedefop.europa.eu). EU-backed projects under the Youth Guarantee provided ~€76 million between 2019–2023 to target NEETs, but awareness remains low. Employers still prefer experienced hires, while youth often seek direct wage employment or emigration.

The Central Region shows mixed outcomes. Braşov and Sibiu, with strong industrial bases, have attracted more apprenticeships and experimented with German-style dual VET since 2018–2019. In 2021, regional household incomes (5,944 RON/month; 4,186 from wages) were above the national average (adrcentru.ro). Yet peripheral counties such as Harghita and Covasna host few apprenticeships due to small firm size and reliance on agriculture. EU Youth Guarantee funds supported several hundred placements, but overall, the model remains marginal. Youth often emigrate rather than pursue local traineeships, and employers still tend to prioritise experienced workers.

Harghita is predominantly rural, with wages 20–30% below the national mean. Apprenticeships remain rare—only a handful of contracts are concluded annually. Despite a 2,250 RON subsidy, small firms report that training costs and administrative burdens outweigh benefits (anofm.ro). Large industrial employers are absent, so opportunities are typically in small craft or service firms. Efforts to promote dual VET in wood processing, tourism, and construction face challenges from high youth out-migration. Language adds another barrier: most youth are Hungarian-speaking, limiting placement with national-scale companies. Thus, apprenticeships remain underdeveloped and socially marginal in the county.

3.3.3. Unemployment

TABLE 7

Main unemployment data

	Country level	NUTS2 level
Unemployed persons (total, 15 - 74 years old, less than primary, primary and lower secondary education)	14.3%	22.4%
Unemployed persons (females, 15 - 74 years old, less than primary, primary and lower secondary education)	14.1%	26.5%
Unemployed persons (total, 15 - 74 years old, all ISCED 2011 level)	5.4%	4.3%
Unemployed persons (females, 15 - 74 years old, all ISCED 2011 level)	5.1%	3.1%

Source: Eurostat. 2024 data or the latest available.

Romania's national youth unemployment rate (15–24) has been volatile, spiking significantly after the pandemic to reach approximately 25.9% by late-2024, positioning it as the highest in the EU. This LFS rate dramatically contrasts with the low official registered unemployment rate, a divergence that signals widespread structural exclusion. Many unemployed youths are not registered because they are ineligible for benefits, have informally emigrated, or are engaged in informal work. Furthermore, long-term unemployment is entrenched: roughly 55% of the unemployed youth are long-term (out of work for at least 12 months), a figure significantly above the EU average. This fragility contributes to the country's high NEET rate (Not in Education, Employment, or Training), which stood at 19% in 2024, also an EU high. For inactive young women, family responsibilities constitute a major barrier, while discouragement is a leading driver for low-educated youth in rural areas.

The Central Region generally demonstrated greater resilience during economic downturns, outperforming the national average in youth employment due to its industrialized and urban centres like Braşov and Sibiu. By 2024, the LFS youth unemployment rate was lower than the national figure (approximately 18–20%), and the long-term unemployment rate remained comparatively better. However, this relative resilience is unevenly distributed. While the regional NEET rate is lower than the national average, a clear and growing disparity persists between the well-performing cities and the peripheral rural areas (Harghita and Covasna), which show higher rates of discouragement and family-related inactivity. Access to effective social safety nets and activation programs is also less effective in these rural pockets.

Harghita County consistently registers significantly worse labour market outcomes, reflecting its rural economic structure and limited formal job creation. The registered unemployment rate (5.45% at end-2024) is substantially above the national rate (3.28%). Indicators of chronic joblessness are severe: 74% of the registered unemployed lack insurance benefits, which is a strong proxy for long-term unemployment. This vulnerable group relies heavily on minimal social assistance, with the county demonstrating a high dependence on social aid compared to the national average. Furthermore, the NEET rate is exceptionally high (approaching 30% for the 20–34 age group), driven by elevated school dropout, early family formation among young women, and discouragement among young men who see few local job prospects. Structural constraints—including rurality, limited large employers, and skills deficits—sustain a vicious circle of entrenched youth joblessness, poverty, and out-migration.

3.4. Education system

3.4.1. Participation in education and training

TABLE 8
Main enrolment data

	Country level	NUTS2 level
Pupils enrolled in upper secondary education, total	691 515	79 667
Pupils enrolled in upper secondary education by programme orientation	301 521	39 067

Source: Eurostat. 2024 data or the latest available.

Over the past decade, in Romania, the number of students enrolled in upper secondary education has fallen by 111,594 people (Eurostat, 2025). Currently, 691,515 students are enrolled at this level, with just over half (56.4%) in vocational programmes (Eurostat, 2025). Ten years ago, general secondary education was more common among girls (51.3%), but now, this ratio has reversed, and most girls (50.6%) are in vocational programmes (Eurostat, 2025). In vocational education, the proportion of girls has also increased slightly (by 2.3 percentage points), but boys still make up the majority (55.7%) (Eurostat, 2025). After finishing secondary education, students can pursue post-secondary non-tertiary education, which is especially popular among girls, with their share exceeding 70% according to the latest data (Eurostat, 2025). At the secondary level, interest in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) has notably declined, with the proportion of students studying STEM decreasing by 12.4 percentage points to just over 40%. The decline is slower among girls (7.9 percentage points), yet only 33.3% of secondary school students studying STEM are girls (Eurostat, 2025). Only 30.6% of 20-24-year-olds participate in higher education. Although this figure has increased slightly (by 2.3 percentage points), it remains relatively low. There is a slight majority of women in higher education, making up 55.3% of students (Eurostat, 2025).

In the Central Region, the gender ratio among secondary education students is balanced, with nearly half (49.0%) of students being female (Eurostat, 2025). Similar to national trends, vocational education is the most common form of education in the region, with a proportion even higher than the national average: 60% of students attend such institutions (Eurostat, 2025). In terms of gender distribution, the majority of girls (55.0%) also opt for vocational education, whereas they participate in general education to a lesser extent (Eurostat, 2025).

In Harghita County, the number of students enrolled in secondary education has decreased by 1,005 over the past 10 years; currently, 11,106 students are enrolled at this level. Of these, 5,483 are boys, and 5,623 are girls (INS, 2025). Vocational and professional programmes dominate secondary education, with just over a third (36.3%) of students participating in theoretical programmes (INS, 2025). Participation in theoretical education is higher among girls (40.8%) than among boys (31.7%) (INS, 2025).

3.4.2. Out-of-school rate and early leavers from education and training

In Romania, over the past decade, dropout rates in primary education have decreased by half, to 1% (INS, 2025). A more remarkable decline is observed in secondary education, where the rate has fallen to nearly a quarter of its previous level, now at 0.9% (INS, 2025). The rate of early school leaving among 18–24-year-olds has been rising slightly since 2021, reaching 16.8% in 2024 (Eurostat, 2025). This trend is particularly worrying, as it falls well short of the European Union's 2030 target of 9%. Another challenge is that more than twice as many early school leavers are not employed (11.1%) as are employed (5.7%). Labour market participation intentions are low among early school leavers aged 18–24 who are currently not employed: only 3.4% wish to work, while the majority (7.8%) do not want to work (Eurostat, 2025). Broken down by gender, the rate of early school leaving is higher among women (18.3%) than among men (15.4%). This is particularly concerning, as nearly four-fifths (79.2%) of female early school leavers are not in employment, compared to 51.9% of male early school leavers (Eurostat, 2025). There are also notable regional differences: early school leaving is most prevalent in rural areas (16.3%), followed by towns and suburbs (11.8%), while the rate is lowest in cities (3.5%). It is especially troubling that in recent years—particularly over the last two to three years—the previously positive trend has reversed, and the rate of early school leaving has begun to rise across all three types of settlements (Eurostat, 2025).

In the Central Region, the primary education dropout rate has been declining since 2014, but at 1.6%, it remains above the national average of 1.0% (INS, 2025). In secondary education, the rate has improved to 1.0%, nearly matching the national average of 0.9%. Early school leaving is a more pronounced issue: 22.7% of women and 20.5% of men leave school early, well above the national average (Eurostat, 2025).

In Harghita County, the primary education dropout rate is 1.5%, and the secondary education dropout rate is 1.8%, almost twice the national average, highlighting a greater challenge at the local level (INS, 2025).

3.4.3. Access to information and obstacles to participation in education and training

In Romania, information-search behaviour also points to a stronger orientation towards formal education and training: a significantly higher proportion of 18–24-year-olds seek information on formal education and training opportunities than on non-formal ones. In this respect, no gender differences are observed (Eurostat, 2025). One-third (33.0%) of young people aged 18–24 would have liked to participate in some form of education and training but were unable to do so due to various difficulties. Personal factors did not primarily cause these obstacles; only a small proportion mentioned individual reasons (Eurostat, 2025). Less than one-tenth of respondents (9.2%) indicated that they did not want to participate in any education or training at all. The majority of this group (50.5%) stated that they did not see the need for further learning. In contrast, a smaller group of young people are more committed to learning: 17.9% are already participating in some form of education or training, and they also plan to continue their studies (Eurostat, 2025).

At the regional and county level, the patterns are similar to those presented at the country level.

Based on the interview conducted with the ASP, it can be concluded that the above described situation is a nationwide, systemic error, since according to the current procedure for continuing education at high school (students choose their school and professional profile based on their final exam results at the end of 8th grade), students are not always placed in a class whose profile matches their ideas, skills and abilities, and future plans. In most cases, this results in disinterest and demotivation, which inevitably leads to poor academic performance and, ultimately, early school leaving.

3.4.4. Education and training outcomes

At the national level, most young people aged 15–29 have secondary education (59.2%), which includes upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education (Eurostat, 2025). However, the high proportion of individuals with low educational attainment is concerning: 31.1% of this age group have less than primary, primary, or lower secondary education. Only 8.1% possess a tertiary qualification (Eurostat, 2025). Women's participation in higher education exceeds that of men at all levels: 57.3% at bachelor's level, 62.8% in master's programmes, and 56.8% in doctoral programmes (Eurostat, 2025). Low educational attainment is often associated with rural areas, where 28.0% of young people have attained primary education or less, compared to 17.6% in towns and suburbs and 6.0% in cities (Eurostat, 2025). The level of educational achievement is also a concern: according to PISA survey results, as reported by Eurostat, a substantial proportion of 15-year-olds do not reach basic proficiency levels. In mathematics, 48.6% of students performed at a low level, compared with 41.7% in reading and 44.0% in science (Eurostat, 2025).

In the Central Region, the distribution of young people aged 25–34 by educational attainment paints an unfavourable picture (Eurostat, 2025). 26.6% of this age group has primary education, while just over half have secondary education. Only 18.5% possess a higher education qualification (Eurostat, 2025). Time series data clearly show a negative trend: the proportion of individuals with higher education qualifications is declining, whereas the proportion with only primary education is increasing. There is no relevant difference between the sexes in terms of basic education; however, women have an advantage in higher education, with a proportion 3.5 percentage points higher than that of men (Eurostat, 2025). The level of educational attainment substantially affects employment. Among 15-34-year-olds, those with higher education qualifications are much more likely to be employed (94.1%) than those with secondary education (75.7%) or those with low qualifications (28.6%) (Eurostat, 2025). Among 15-29-year-olds, the proportion of NEETs (young people who are neither in education nor employment) has fallen slightly but remains exceptionally high at 24.8% (Eurostat, 2025). A notable gender gap exists within this group, with 32.7% of women and 17.2% of men falling into this category (Eurostat, 2025).

3.4.5. Adult learning

In Romania, four-fifths (62.8%) of young people aged 18-24 engage in some form of formal or non-formal education. This proportion is higher among women (65.0%) than men (60.6%) (Eurostat, 2025). Young adults' participation in education and training is primarily related to formal education, with half of 18–24-year-olds (50.6%) engaging in formal education. Non-formal

education and training are less common among this age group (29.4%), and there is no notable difference between the sexes in this regard (Eurostat, 2025). However, major differences are evident between settlement types for both formal and non-formal education and training. Participation in formal education is considerably higher among 18–24-year-olds living in cities (71.9%) compared to those residing in towns and suburbs (51.3%) or rural areas (35.5%) (Eurostat, 2025). A similar pattern is observed in non-formal education and training, with rates of 40.6% in cities, 30.8% in towns and suburbs, and 20.9% in rural areas. One-third of young adults (36.3%) continue to participate in some form of education and training beyond the age of 25, predominantly through non-formal methods. Specifically, 34.1% of those aged 25–34 learn in this way (Eurostat, 2025).

3.5. Health, poverty and social exclusion

3.5.1. Health issues

Generally, in Romania, the self-perceived bad health does not reach an alarming rate among the young population (16-29 years old). Overall, in the analysed period (2015-2024) in Romania the self-perceived bad health among the young cohort shows some fluctuations between the different years – interestingly the peak was before the COVID 19 pandemic, in 2018 – but at the end of the period a slight amelioration is detectable (from 0.4 to 0.3). Regarding the unemployed young people, the situation is worse, as in each year their self-perceived health shows a higher percentage as the general level. This disparity is even greater, if we take into account solely the least educated (0-2 level) young people, as the bad health ration among them usually doubles the average level of the youth in general. In this last case the average level was peaking in 2020 with a value of 1.9, but in 2024 it diminished to 0.5.

At NUTS 2 and pilot level the self-perceived health level data is not reachable, so we will solely concentrate on the infant mortality rate as a generalized and universally accepted indicator of the state of health and healthcare in each country. First, we can conclude, that according to the Eurostat, the region has higher infant mortality rate that the country, showing a greater problem.

Regarding the situation in Harghita county the situation is rather similar with the regional result. In the beginning of the analysed period, the results were even worse, but till 2024 the trend has switched and – even they are preliminary data – shows a significant improvement. But it must be mentioned, that the gap between urban and rural settlements consist in time, and in Harghita county the infant mortality rate in rural area is the double of those in urban areas, almost during the whole analysed period (pop209a database).

3.5.2. Disability - Access to education and training

Unfortunately, there is no available local level data regarding the access to education and training of the disabled people. The country level data shows that this is a major problem for those working age people (15-64 years old) who live with “some or severe” disability, as almost two fifth (39% in 2024) of them reached at maximum a lower secondary education. The available data also reveal that this situation has worsened in the past two years. The situation is even wors among the 15-34 years old NEET population in Romania, more than three quarter (75,8%) of them who lives with “some or severe” disability has attained a lover secondary education, at most.

At the moment we could not find any relevant data regarding this indicator in subnational level.

3.5.3. Disability - Access to the labour market

Living with a disability in Romania is a serious burden, as the gap of those who live with “some or severe” reached the highest level in the EU in the past year (44,8%). In Romania almost one-third (32.6%) of the people who have a disability are excluded from labour market. If we take into account only those who have “some or severe” disability, the results are even more alarming, as

71% in 2024 of them is not participating in the labour market, which is one of the highest percent in the EU.

According to the indicator on labour market slack by the level of disability, the labour force participation rate shows that the regional level participation is lower – at least in the past five years – than the country's average participation rate. This difference in 2024 was 2 percentage points, meaning that in Centru region 65.4% of the 15-74 years old citizens participated actively in the labour market.

At local level in Harghita county the general occupation rate was similar to the country's average, but the gender gap is significant, as in 2023 the male's activity rate was 71%, while the females reach only 56%.

3.5.4. Risk of poverty

The general tendency in Romania was a decrease, in the past ten years, of the persons living in the risk of poverty. Beside this decrease, there are still huge gaps between different segment of the population, as gender, education, degree of urbanization and employment status all influences the value of this risk.

At regional level, in some dimensions "Centru" region shows better results in comparison with Romania. For instance, the rate of the social exclusion and poverty risk was lower with almost 3 percentage point in this region, than in Romania, but if we take into account only the risk of poverty the rate was very similar in 2023 (19%).

Unfortunately, the officially available data try to hide the regional differences, but according to the local knowledge the situation in Harghita county does not differ significantly from the regional trends. Also, the differences mentioned at the state level are relevant at county level too.

3.5.5. Housing cost overburden rate

The housing cost overburden rate went through a serious improvement in Romania in the analysed period. This statement is relevant to the 15-29 years old population, as in 2015 16.3% and in 2024 6.4% of these people sees these burden. The decrease was even more remarkable in rural areas of Romania, and in the cases of the single person households.

At regional level the housing overburden rate, taking into account the whole population, is higher, as in region "Centru" this rate was 7.1%, while in Romania this rate was 4.7%, meaning that this issue also plays a more significant role in this area.

At local level the data is also missing but we can see a clear similarity with the general economic situation, meaning that in rural areas, and with lower degree the housing costs consist a real challenge.

3.5.6. Material and social deprivation

The material and social deprivation is a serious problem which affects a really large number of young people in Romania. Among the young (16-29 years old) unemployed population in Romania in 2015 75% was in this condition. Even if till 2021 this rate was reduced to 51% it still remains

alarming high. One of the possible explanations is the low level of education, as among these young peoples, those who possess solely a primary school degree or even less, 37% enter in this category.

At regional level, in this case the situation is ambiguous in comparison with the country. The severe deprivation rate in 2020 was 12%, while the country level rate was 15%, so in this case seems, that the result shows a bit better picture. But if we take into account some specific aspects, like facing unexpected financial problems, keeping home adequately warm or eating meal with meat – or equivalent – in two consecutive days, the regional rate is similar or a bit (one or two percentage points) than the country's average. This difference persists, if we take into account the rate of severe material and social deprivation. The regional average rate is 17%, while the country's average rate is 15%. Luckily in both cases the level of reduction of this rate is quite impressive in the past ten years.

In Harghita county there are no data available but if take into consideration that the average income is below the country and regional average, we can conclude that the rate of severe material and social deprivation shows, at least, similar patterns as in "Centru" region.

3.6. Digital economy and society

3.6.1. Personal and household access

Romania, in general is relatively well covered with Internet access, and because the building of Internet infrastructure happened relative late, in comparison with other European countries the initial connections were already broadband ones. The available data confirm these affirmations, as in 2024 95% of the Romanian households had access to the Internet. What's more, in 2021 88,74% of households had Internet access, and 88,2% had broadband Internet. The regional level data shows similar pattern, as in 2024 95% of the households had Internet access.

In Harghita County, even if we don't have local data, from our experience we can assume, that the situation described above is relevant for Harghita county too.

3.6.2. Information society

At national level, even if the internet infrastructure is given, the usage of this possibility is also important. In Romania, in 2024, 90,4% of the individuals used the Internet. From this perspective the region stays just a bit better, as in 2024 the individual internet usage reached 91,4%.

Once again, we don't have specific data regarding Harghita county but we can confirm that – in accordance with the ANCOM reports – the internet usage is really widespread, being much closer to the regional than the country's average rate.

3.6.3. Digital economy

The lack of data does not allow us to enter in details, but the available data suggest that in 2024 56% of the Romanian population realized at least one purchase through the internet. This practice was more widespread among the youngest (16-24years old) generation, as in 2024 71% of them has tried this type of transaction. On the other hand, the e-commerce sales of the enterprises, in Romania, reached 11,4% in 2023 and a very similar rate was characteristic to the region (11,8%).

3.6.4. Personal digital skills

There are a few indicators in this area too, but they are relevant only on country level. From these data we can conclude, that while the Internet infrastructure is well developed in Romania, the knowledge of using it has serious deficits.

4. Solutions

4.1 Strategic goals

As we concluded in the second chapter the strategical goals should be any solution which can deal with the listed problems.

1. Regarding the structural exclusion and chronic youth joblessness the primary could be a very early intervention in the career guidance which could counter the majority of the challenges which exists today in Harghita county. Meanwhile any apprenticeship or other subvention-based program which facilitates the entrance of the youth population to labour market and to employment would be more than welcome in the current situation. Beside this, in longer term there is an express need to facilitate information flows which helps the youth to a better general orientation among the challenges of the 21st century e.g. digital literacy.

2. The economic constraints on formal career pathways also plays a significant drawback for the local youth. The local opportunities usually do not offer significant a reliable and constant career path for the beginner; the majority of the employees work in the “secondary economy” which can be characterized with low wages and high instability. It must be also mentioned, that this situation can't be resolved solely form endogenous resources, but the majority of the different external financial resources, e.g. EU funds, are allocated at country or regional (NUTS 2) level, and thus the more developed counties have a much greater capacity to live with these opportunities.

3. The education-employment disconnect is a huge problem, not only in Harghita county but generally in Romania. As the different state-based institutions and agencies usually work separately, there is no real communication among the key factor which could facilitate the transition from education to work. In this case a young person can only rely to its personal resources (e.g. possibilities, accumulated work-related knowledge, personal and family-based social and material capital etc.) and if (s)he in in lack of these resources as they leave the school, they usually find themselves in a highly vulnerable situation. Another response to this situation is the high level of work-related migration. As in Romania the legal age to get a full-time job is 18 years, it often happens that a young person leaves the school even before they reach the formal end of the courses.

As a conclusion, in order to try to overcome the above presented situation our aim, through our proposed pilot program, is to alleviate some of aspect of the burdens of the local youth population. The details are presented in the next subchapter.

4.2. Proposed intervention (where it's applicable)

As it was presented in the previous chapters the vulnerability of the Harghita county youth is a complex, multifaced problem, which cannot be solved dealing only from one perspective, so a coherent, multidimensional and multi-institutional approach is a must.

Our intervention has two main aims: lower the dropout rate among the graduating students (12th grade in the Romanian school system, which usually have 17-19 years old) and to diminish non-presence rate in the final exam (which certifies the finalization of the high school and in vocational schools it also certifies a profession).

The target group will be those youth in Harghita county which, based on the currents study need mentoring because:

- are about to finish high school but feel uncertain
- often skip classes or perform poorly academically
- lack a clear vision for their future
- are drawn to quick money because of their environment
- have no nearby family members with a high school diploma

The effective will consist in two activities: with the help of our ASP's we will conduct carrier guidance workshops among our target group, and secondly, we will also conduct a near-peer type mentoring where the university students will mentor the high school graduates in achieving the above presented two goals.

5. Conclusions

In summary, the challenges facing young people in Harghita County represent a triple-layered crisis of structural exclusion, far exceeding the scope of simple cyclical unemployment. The analysis clearly demonstrates that policies like career guidance and apprenticeships are rendered largely inert against the powerful currents of economic underdevelopment and human capital depletion.

The core issue is a structural exclusion that manifests through three critical dimensions:

Chronic Joblessness and Discouragement: The exceptionally high NEET rate (approaching 30% for ages 20–34) and the near-total lack of insurance benefits for the registered unemployed (74%) confirm a deep, long-term detachment from the formal labour market. This is compounded by profound gender imbalances, where young men suffer from discouragement due to job scarcity and young women are structurally inactive due to inadequate childcare and early family formation.

A Crippled Economic Landscape: The local economy is defined by a low-wage trap and a predominance of small firms, which stifles the creation of formal career pathways. This economic reality means that formal apprenticeships are virtually non-existent and the local wage structure provides so little incentive that out-migration becomes the most economically rational decision for ambitious youth. The local language barrier further limits job mobility with national employers.

A Failing Educational Bridge: High rates of primary and secondary dropout, which significantly exceed the national average, feed a large pool of low-skilled youth into a labour market with few opportunities. This education-employment disconnect ensures that even if better skills were acquired, the lack of local jobs—especially for rural youth—sustains the vicious circle of precarity, poverty, and subsequent out-migration.

Ultimately, addressing Harghita’s youth crisis demands a fundamental shift: moving beyond single-point interventions and adopting a comprehensive strategy focused on structural economic renewal and building viable local career ecosystems. Without this foundation, the human capital drain will continue unabated.

As the current project does not aim to address the structural problems, our pilot project aims an activity which can be implemented by local level governmental and non-governmental institutions.

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