

# Analysis of the policy context addressing 25+ NEETs

COUNTRY REPORT – BULGARIA

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**IN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE PROJECT ‘LOST  
MILLENNIALS – TRANSNATIONAL RESEARCH  
NETWORK FOR THE EVALUATION OF INITIATIVES  
TARGETING 25+ NEETS’**

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## Project summary:

*The project 'Lost Millennials' focuses on a regularly neglected group of the generation of Millennials: young people aged 25-29 neither in employment or education and training (25+ NEETs). This generation started their working life shortly after the economic crisis of 2008, perceiving uncertainty and lack of security for work and well-being, they are more likely to be inactive or in precarious jobs. The main objective of the project is to contribute to the successful integration of 25+ NEETs to the labour market through increasing knowledge on the effects of employment initiatives on 25+ NEETs, building capacity of stakeholders to perform impact studies and thus improving the quality of labour market interventions. This objective will be achieved through the creation of the transnational research network which will share know-how and good practices, the evaluations of governmental and community-based initiatives targeting 25+ NEETs, as well as the engagement of stakeholders to increase the policy-relevance of project results.*

For more information, please visit our [website](#), contact us on [lm.leadpartner@hetfa.hu](mailto:lm.leadpartner@hetfa.hu) and follow our [social media](#).

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## Implemented by:



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## 1. Introduction

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The analysis in the present report focuses on national- and regional-level policies in Bulgaria that are of relevance to NEETs/25+ NEETs. The policy areas considered include, among others, education and qualification, employment and entrepreneurship, work-life reconciliation, health and social insurance, social security and taxation. A key characteristic of the Bulgarian context is that, despite the strong initial impetus by the EU for the design of policies targeting NEETs, there are no national legislative or policy instruments that are specifically intended to address the situation of this group. What is more, the regulatory provisions laid down in other policies which target young people more generally but also apply to NEETs are quite generic and foresee the implementation of few specific policy actions and measures that could effectively tackle existing issues.

## 2. Overall policy context

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Bulgaria does not have a national strategy or legislation addressing the situation of NEETs more generally, and 25+ NEETs more specifically. Bulgaria also does not have a youth employment strategy or a strategy targeting the employment of 25+ NEETs. Issues related to NEET youth and their employment situation are largely referred to in the National Youth Strategy (2021-2030) and the National Employment Strategy (2021 – 2030). Even though NEETs are mentioned in these two documents, these target groups are still not the main focus of these policies. 25+ NEETs are not mentioned in either of the documents and rather the overall NEET group is considered. Regional-level strategies addressing the needs of young people are present, but again, they do not specifically target the problems of 25+ NEETs. Bulgaria has developed a Plan of Action 'Entrepreneurship 2020' (2015-2022) the objective of which is to inspire changes in the curricula of elementary, secondary, professional and higher education institutions, and training programmes for adults in the direction of integrating entrepreneurship as a core professional skill. It can be assumed that this Plan encompasses 25+ NEETs granted that it targets a wide range of education institutions.

In Bulgaria, there is a range of institutions with competences regarding the legal frameworks and policies targeting NEETs/25+ NEETs, the major of which is the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP). In the case of Bulgaria, the European level of policymaking is instrumental for the creation of regulations and instruments addressing NEETs/25+ NEETs. The key policy of the EU tackling the situation of NEETs/25+ NEETs, which is also of high importance to Bulgaria, is the Youth Guarantee (including the reinforced version of 2021) and related policies. In Bulgaria, the Youth Guarantee has been activated through the National Plan for the Implementation of the Youth Guarantee (2014-2020). When it comes to the European Employment Strategy, Bulgaria has been implementing it through the European

Semester, more specifically through the European Semester National Reform Programme. It is not fully clear how 25+ NEETs figure in the policies under this programme.

### 3. Institutional framework

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From an institutional perspective, the policy framework related to NEETs (including 25+ NEETs) in Bulgaria is centralised. Strategies, policies and laws which target NEETs (including 25+ NEETs) are designed at the central government level. It is important to note that the push for the design of policies targeting NEETs initially comes from the EU, whereas the national government institutions are the national actors who design the policies and tailor them to the specific context of Bulgaria. Some of the major policies targeting NEETs (including 25+ NEETs) originate with the MLSP which is tasked with following up the Europe 2020 Strategy, the National Reform Programme (2017-2020), the Council Recommendation of 0/07/2017, the Stability/Convergence Programme, and the Government Programme to 2021 (Institute for Market Economics, 2019). In designing the policies, the MLSP relies on expert groups from other national institutions, social partners and the NGO sector (National Action Plan for Employment in the Year 2022, 2021). However, inter-institutional coordination is more obvious not at the policy-making stage, but at the policy implementation stage. At this stage, of high importance become the regional- and local-level branches of the Employment Agency (EA) which is the executive agency of the MLSP. The EA collaborates with other ministries, such as the Ministry of Education and Science, to more effectively implement the policies (Yakova, 2019).

### 4. Supply-side policies

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#### 4.1. Education and qualification

##### 4.1.1. Compulsory education

The national-level policy documents that address the issues of promoting equal access to compulsory education, providing educational and career orientation to pupils/students and tackling early school leaving – while focusing on more generally-defined target groups (such as pupils/students) – also foresee the implementation of policy measures for the benefit of children/adolescents from vulnerable and disadvantaged groups. Furthermore, education is one of the four ‘horizontal pillars’ of the Draft National Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria for Equality, Inclusion and Participation of the Roma (2020-2030). It is notable, however, that the problems of gender inequality and gender stereotyping in education are not dealt with in any of these policy documents.

The goal of promoting equal access to compulsory education is laid down in three key national policies: the Pre-school and School Education Act, the Strategic Framework for the Development of Education, Training and Learning in Bulgaria (2021-2030) (Strategic Framework for Education) and the National Development Programme BULGARIA 2030. Of these three policy instruments, it is the Strategic Framework for Education that offers the most comprehensive approach to this issue. The Pre-school and School Education Act regulates the financial aspects of the promotion of universal access to compulsory education. The National Development Programme BULGARIA 2030 and the National Strategy for People with Disabilities (2021-2030) also address the issue of access to compulsory education, albeit in more general terms. The main policy orientations in relation to the provision of educational and career guidance and counselling in compulsory education are outlined in the Pre-school and School Education Act and the Strategic Framework for Education. In addition, the National Strategy for People with Disabilities calls for students with disabilities to be provided with '*professional consultation and orientation*' (p. 21). There is no current national policy focusing on the problem of early school leaving. There are some policies related to prevention of early school leaving, namely the Pre-school and School Education Act, the National Development Programme BULGARIA 2030 and the Strategic Framework for Education, but these make very generic (though ambitious) commitments and merely touch upon the issue of prevention.

#### 4.1.2. Vocational education and training

National-level policy documents in the area of vocational education and training (VET) propose what appear to be reasonable policy solutions concerning several major aspects of the provision of VET. Nevertheless, the existing policy instruments fall short of sufficiently emphasising the importance of promoting universal access to VET, including among vulnerable groups (NEETs/25+ NEETS are not mentioned), and identifying adequate policy actions in this regard. There are three national policies that relate to the promotion of universal access to VET: the Pre-school and School Education Act, the Vocational Education and Training Act and the Strategic Framework for Education. Although these documents commit to ensuring access to VET, they propose very few specific policy measures in this regard. One of the most significant recent developments is the introduction by the Pre-school and School Education Act of a new structure of the system of secondary education which aims to promote universal access to VET (Gospodinov, 2015, p. 47). While there is some regulation of the provision of VET to certain vulnerable groups of students (Vocational Education and Training Act, ch. IV, § IV; Strategy for Equality, p. 26), there are no legal or policy prescriptions regarding access to VET of NEETs/25+ NEETS and students/young people of Roma origin or migrant, refugee or socially disadvantaged background. In relation to the policy goal of raising awareness among young people about VET opportunities, the Vocational Education and Training Act and the Strategic Framework for Education foresee the implementation of policy measures to that end. These two national policy documents also stipulate that

the provision of practical training in a real work environment is to constitute a central aspect of VET courses. With a view to ensuring congruence between supply of skilled professionals and labour market demand for VET jobs, the Vocational Education and Training Act, the Strategic Framework for Education and the National Development Programme BULGARIA 2030 provide for a number of policy measures.

#### 4.1.3. Higher education

While there are several policy documents that make commitments regarding promoting access to higher education, including among vulnerable and/or disadvantaged groups, namely the Higher Education Act, the National Development Programme BULGARIA 2030, the Strategy for the Development of Higher Education in Bulgaria 2021-2030, the Strategic Framework for Education and the National Strategy for People with Disabilities, none of these policies make any mention of NEETs/25+ NEETS. Furthermore, the issue of access is typically addressed in very general terms and very few specific measures are proposed. On a more positive note, key higher education policies, such as the Higher Education Act and the Strategy for the Development of Higher Education in Bulgaria 2021-2030, contain provisions aimed at bringing the system of higher education in line with labour market opportunities. The proposed policy actions are quite versatile and also include measures related to funding. However, no policies that address the problem of overqualification have been identified.

#### 4.2. Labour market policies

The Employment Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria 2021 – 2030 has set as an objective the provision of support to the youth exiting education and entering the labour market. The Strategy establishes the provision of support on an individual basis, where the problems that each young jobseeker faces are taken into account. The Strategy particularly has outlines policy steps for the benefit of NEETs. When NEETs lack motivation to enter the job market, they will be encouraged to participate actively in the labour market by being enrolled in a job searching atelier, internships, and apprenticeships, as well as receiving case manager support and access to child and adult care services. With long-term unemployed NEETs an agreement on integration into employment is established, in which the young person also agrees to work toward the eventual objective of primary market or subsidised employment.

The Strategy also explicitly states that, as part of its strategic objective of increasing the labour supply through stimulating inactive, unequal groups in the labour market, it aims to provide skills to NEETs in order to foster their employability. Jobcentres, among other institutions, are set up by the Strategy to promote NEETs to return to the educational system to obtain a (higher) degree or a qualification in a new specialty or profession. Jobcentres will also provide for the inclusion of NEETs in vocational training courses. In case of insufficient or lack of skills for a particular form of employment, NEETs will be offered on-the-job training with a mentor or targeted non-formal learning and inclusion in skills acquisition courses. Of particular relevance to NEETs, Section V of the Employment Promotion Act establishes the

rules for training programmes and measures provided by employers to workers or recently unemployed persons.

There are no special forms of contracts beyond internship and apprenticeship contracts and no specific policies towards long-term unemployment. The minimum wage is the lowest wage for time worked or for work carried out in Bulgaria. It is determined on an annual basis by the Council of Ministers (Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria, 2020). There are no special policies directed at setting a different minimum wage for NEETs.

### 4.3. Entrepreneurship

Multiple strategic documents determine the policies that the Bulgarian government and institutions have in relation to entrepreneurship. Some of these include: Digital Transformation of Bulgaria for the period 2020-2030 – the main strategic document towards the digitalisation policy in Bulgaria for the 2020-2030 period; the Innovation Strategy for Smart Specialisation of the Republic of Bulgaria 2014 – 2020; and the Small and Medium-sized Enterprises Act. None of these three documents explicitly prioritises entrepreneurship among young people or NEETs, although the importance of youth education in digital skills has been mentioned as a key aspect of the future needs of employers in the Bulgarian economy. The National Strategy for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises 2021-2027 is the main policy in Bulgaria towards development of entrepreneurship in small and medium enterprises in the country. The Strategy is based on the Small and Medium-sized Enterprises Act, however, it sets concrete policy objectives for the Bulgarian government and institutions for the 2021-2027 period. The vision of the strategic document is to support Bulgarian small and medium enterprises in their efforts to be more competitive, digitalised, sustainable and export-oriented enterprises that produce goods and services with high added value. It particularly promotes youth entrepreneurship with the objective of increasing the share of youth entrepreneurial activity. Support towards entrepreneurship among NEETs is not explicitly stated in a policy document, although the Employment Promotion Act regulates the promotion and size of government support for entrepreneurship among unemployed persons (Art. 47). Particularly noteworthy is the possibility to provide one-time subsidies to unemployed individuals upon approval of a business project by the competent division of the National Employment Agency.

### 4.4. Work-life reconciliation policies

Bulgaria has some policies concerning maternity and paternity leaves. However, these are general policies and they do not specifically address the situation of 25+ NEETs. The major policy which deals with maternity and paternity leave in Bulgaria is the Labour Code (updated in March 2022). The Code explains that the base salary for a parent upon return from pregnancy or during the raising up of children can be increased (p. 25). Additionally, the Code lays down the financial considerations to be taken in the case of maternity and paternity leaves. Financial support for maternity and paternity leave is provided



to parents who have contributed with social support benefits to the social support system out of their monthly income. Financial compensations are calculated on the basis of the average daily payrate for the period of the last 24 months before the birth of the child (European Commission, 2022a). When it comes to parental leave for men, the Code stipulates that when the father and the mother of a newborn child live together, the father has the right to use a 15-day paid leave from work after the birth of the child (p. 58).

The National Strategy for the Child (2008-2018) and the Child Protection Act (2000 – 2020) are the main policies regarding childcare and care services. Neither of these pieces of legislation speak of availability and affordability of care services, but more of the general principles of how childcare would be provided. The National Strategy for the Child aims to ensure conditions for an effective practicing of the rights of children and improvement of their quality of life. The Child Protection Act is somewhat similar to the National Strategy for the Child as it ensures the rights and protection of children in cases they are threatened. There is a policy regarding kindergarten/pre-compulsory education – the Pre-school and School Education Act (last updated in May 2022). This law renders pre-school education compulsory starting the school year when a child turns 4 years of age.

All policies regarding working arrangements are included in the Bulgarian Labour Code. The Code covers matters related to the working hours, days off and home-based work. The Code also gives provisions for remote work, including rules regarding safety during tele-working periods, as well as provisions for temporary work. Overall, the Labour Code contains provisions for work arrangements on various relevant topics, including work arrangements of younger/junior specialists, employee selection, work conditions, working hours and time off, and overtime work. All these work arrangements are put in general terms and speak neither of NEETs as a whole nor of 25+ NEETs in particular.

#### 4.5. Health/Social insurance policies

One of the main policies concerning health/social insurance in Bulgaria is the Code for Social Security (last updated in 2022). The Code arranges the matters associated with social security in the case of illness, work-related accidents, maternity, unemployment, retirement and death. The Code also regulates the rules associated with supplemental social security including additional retirement support, supplemental voluntary retirement support through retirement funds as well as supplemental voluntary support in the case of unemployment or/and the acquisition of extra employment qualifications. Another policy which is relevant to the intersection between health and employment is the Law on Health Insurance (last updated in 2020). The Law contains a special section which regulates different aspects of health insurance. It is stipulated that the size of the monthly health insurance is 8 percent of an individual's monthly salary and the ratio between the contribution of the employer and the employee is 60:40. Health insurance for children, retired individuals, socially marginalised people and similar

groups is fully covered by the state (Ministry of Health, 2015). Neither the Code nor the Law contain clauses specifically targeting NEETs more generally and 25+ NEETs specifically.

Rules and regulations concerning disability and employment are included again in the Code for Social Security. The Code regulates the rules concerning disability and employment among individuals with specific occupations. It also outlines the rights of employees who have experienced employment-related accidents or professional illness through monetary compensations, financial support for prophylactic examinations and rehabilitation, disability pension as well as other financial support. The Code also gives provisions regarding financial support for the families of employees who have passed away in work-related accidents. The Code also describes the obligations of the employer and the employee in the case of employee disability, especially when the disability is caused at the workplace. The Code mentions disability and health issues of psychological nature only once in Article 283 concerning the ban on discrimination in the cases when the employer is banned from providing additional social security to employees with various identity markers, including psychological and physical disability.

The Law on Health (in force since 2005 and last updated in 2022) is another policy which has implications for citizens' health and their employment. The Law sets the arrangements of public relations related to the protection of the health of Bulgarian citizens. When it comes to the connection to employment, the Law specifies rules and procedures for establishing employment incapacity, such as who can assess a person for employment incapacity, as well as data management concerning individuals who were provided with certain employment exemptions due to a disability. Another policy which is relevant to health issues and employment is the Law on the Integration of People with Disabilities (in force since 2005 and last updated in 2018). Among the objectives of this law is the creation of rules for the integration of people with disabilities at the workplace. The law contains various aspects of this objective, among which are the assessment for disability and related possibilities for integration into the labour market, the reductions in social security contributions employers can take advantage of if they employ people with disabilities, as well as penalties imposed on employers who have exhibited discrimination against people with disabilities during the hiring process. The NEET concept is used in none of these policies.

#### 4.6. Other supply-side policies

The Employment Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria for 2021-2030 includes the Council of Europe Recommendations to continue its efforts to integrate the long-term unemployed population in general. The labour authorities conclude agreements with long-term unemployed clients in which they define their responsibilities as well as the specific services to help them overcome the burdens that hinder them from employment. According to the Strategy, the integration of ethnic minorities into the labour market coincides with the strategy for integrating underqualified people or people with low level of education.

Integrational services in the area of education, employment, social security, health insurance, housing will continue and will be developed further based on individual approaches considering the particular needs of people at local level. The Strategy will update the methodology for resource allocation according to the level of unemployment in the regions. The regional programmes within the National Action Plan for Employment will increase and focus on partnership with the private sector to achieve long-term employment.

The National Recovery and Resilience Plan (2022), as part of its pillar for digital transformation, introduces a reform that will create a national platform for digital skills and training for people over 16 years of age. This platform and the related digital clubs are going to be free and accessible while people of unequal circumstances will have a preferential access to these services. In each of its components, the Plan tackles the development and integration of the country's rural population. The development of rural areas is postulated under pillar 'Connected Bulgaria' that aims to improve transport and digital connectivity, as well as fostering local economic potential. Mobility is a priority concern in order to even out the unequal unemployment levels across the country.

## 5. Demand-side policies

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### 4.7. Incentives

The Employment Promotion Act establishes the regulations of programmes and measures for transition from joblessness to active employment, including the size of government support during unemployment and support during the transition to long-term employment. Of particular relevance to NEETs, Section V of the Act establishes the rules for training programmes and measures provided by employers to workers or recently unemployed persons. The Act also regulates the promotion and size of government support for entrepreneurship among unemployed persons and supports business development and entrepreneurship among unemployed people, through the introduced one-time subsidies upon approval of a business project by the competent division of the National Employment Agency.

### 4.8. Social security policies

Generally speaking, social security contributions by employers are outlined in the Code for Social Security (last updated in 2022). However, the Code provides a general framework of social security and does not talk about social security reduction for employers specifically hiring NEET youth. Despite the lack of such provisions in the Code for Social Security, there is indeed a reduction in social security expenses for employers who provide apprenticeships and temporary employment in regions with high unemployment rates for NEETs up to 24. This is outlined in the National Plan for the Implementation of the Youth Guarantee (2014 – 2020). In 2020, the Council of the European Union created a Reinforced

Youth Guarantee which expanded the age group benefitting from its measures to encompass NEET youth up to 30 (Council of the European Union, 2020). Consequently, the reductions on social security contributions for employers hiring NEET youth up to 30 are in force. The Plan does not make it clear what the amount of these reductions is, though. The initial national plan allows for such provisions for NEET youth between 15-24 doing an apprenticeship.

## 4.9. Taxes

There are no tax deductions for hiring young people besides financial incentives and reductions in social security contributions. Please refer to sections 4.7, Incentives and 4.8, Social security policies.

## 6. Orientation

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There is a National Programme for Career Orientation financed by the European Programme ‘Science and Education for Smart Development’ which focuses on school students. The programme has established regional career orientation centres. Career orientation and counselling for people outside education is present only in sporadic initiatives (European Commission, 2022b). The territorial divisions of the Employment Agency are dedicated institutions for offering information and career counselling to people who are out of employment, as well as support for finding new jobs. There are no specific policies on employment paths and counselling. The Employment Agency and its territorial subdivisions engage in career guidance according to the Employment Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria for 2021-2030 with those who are registered unemployed and in search for work.

## 7. Conclusions

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In conclusion, Bulgaria does not have any pieces of legislation or strategic policy documents that are specifically crafted with a view to addressing issues of relevance to NEETs. The policies that refer to the target group of NEET youth are the National Youth Strategy (2021-2030) and the National Employment Strategy (2021 – 2030). However, the particular group of 25+ NEETs is not mentioned in any policy instruments. While there are a number of positive developments concerning policies aimed at improving the situation of young people in Bulgaria, most notably in the areas of education and employment, there is a notable shortage of specifically-formulated policy measures. Most policy documents make generic (though quite ambitious) commitments and propose very few practical policy actions. Another challenge is that after the expiration of a number of key strategic documents, notably concerning education and qualification, the national government institutions have not yet proposed or put in place new policies. Therefore, the Bulgarian authorities ought to focus on developing national- and regional-level policies

that specifically target NEETs, including 25+ NEETs, and address the gaps in existing policy instruments relating to young people more generally.

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